

Emmy Award winner REVEALS West's Dirty Secrets | Joe Tripician

If someone offered you money to write about the "heroic deeds" of war criminal in the Balkans, would you do so? Do you think people would fall for it? Well, here's the thing: one man's war criminal is another man's war hero... Joe Tripician is an Emmy award-winning Producer / Writer / Director and a Published Author. His work has been broadcast across America, Europe and Japan, has shown at the Cannes Film Festival, and is part of the permanent collection at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. Joe also once was paid good money to produce a hagiography of Franjo Tudjman, the Croat leader during the Yugoslav wars. Today we discuss the ins and outs of his experience as being a paid propagandist for a darling of the western narrative about the Balkan Wars. Links: Joe's memoir "Balkanized at Sunrise": <https://www.amazon.com/Balkanized-at-Sunrise-Joe-Tripician/dp/0557494516/> Joe's documentary (in production) "I Was a Paid Propagandist" Trailer: <https://vimeo.com/693242604> Donation link: <https://www.paypal.com/paypalme/joetripician> /25 Joe's website: <https://joetripician.com> Follow Joe on BlueSky: <https://bsky.app/profile/joetrip.bsky.social>

#M3

The motives are still the same, right? It's to mind control the population, basically, you know, to direct them into a certain political narrative that is more in line with the rulers so that the rulers can still stay in power, so that, you know, the money can still flow up to them. It's apparent everywhere you look these days.

#M2

Hello everybody, this is Pascal from Neutrality Studies, and a few weeks ago I got an email that started as follows: Hello, I'm an American Emmy Award-winning writer, producer, and director with a true story that I'd like to share with you and your audience. It is based on my personal experience of being a paid propagandist for a Balkan war criminal. After a little bit of research and a conversation with my Kosovo specialist, it became clear to me that this was a true story, so I invited its author. I'm talking today to Joe Tripician, the man who was tasked with creating a biography of Franjo Tuđman, the leader of Croatia when it broke apart from Yugoslavia. Joe, welcome. Thank you, Pascal. Thanks for the invite. I appreciate it. Thank you for coming online. And I hope I didn't butcher your name. I forgot to ask you if your last name is pronounced Tripician. Is that correct?

#M3

It's Tripician.

#M2

Okay, almost.

#M3

It's Tripician.

#M2

Then let's start with your story. Since you're a storyteller, why don't you begin where you think it should start and tell us what happened?

#M3

Oh, well, for me, it began in 1997. I was recently divorced, I was deep in debt, and this job had landed in my lap. I was introduced to a man named Jakov, Jakov Sedlar, and he was, and still is, a Croatian film and theater director. Back then, he was also the official cultural attaché of Croatia to the United Nations. I still had my video production company where I did a lot of post-production work and animation. The introduction to him was that he asked me to do a job, to create a little animated map of Croatia for a travelogue he was producing. Like any other ignorant American, I couldn't locate Croatia on a map, so I had to go to a store to buy one. It had a very strange disclaimer on it.

It said, "Size is subject to change from acts of war." Now, that's a little bit of a joke, but this is two years after the bloody Balkan Wars of the '90s. And so some of your viewers may know about the history. But for me, I didn't know a thing about it. So I did the job. He thanked me, he paid me, and some months later, he came back and he had a script he wanted me to review. It was a script for a biography of Franjo Tuđman, Croatia's first president, as you mentioned in the introduction, immediately after Croatia broke apart from Yugoslavia. So I read it through, and it had a section in there about Tuđman's book, which was published some years earlier, called "The Horrors of War."

And in that book, it caused some controversy where Tuđman claimed that the Jews in Jasenovac, which was Croatia's notorious concentration camp during the Second World War, that the concentration camp was run in part by the Jews who were interned there. And I said this to Jakov as delicately as I could. I said, you know, this film you plan to show in New York, right? He said, yes. I said, well, there's a large Jewish community here. You may want to rephrase this section. And he looked at me like he didn't understand it. Anyway, so I gave him my notes. And then a few months later, he returned and asked me to write the official biography of Franjo Tuđman. Well, this caught me by surprise.

I then quickly asked the person who introduced us, who was my doctor and also Jakov's doctor, how this came about. He said, "Well, Joe, I know you're a filmmaker and you're also an author. It's going to do well because I knew you're broke and you need the work." And it's true. At that time, I had published my first book. It's a humor book called "The Official Alien Abductee's Handbook," sort of a self-help book for alien abductees. Again, I emphasize it's a humor book. Anyway, I was puzzled. I said, "Jakov, you know, I only had this one book published and it's an alien book. Why are you asking me?" He said, "Joe, no, Joe, you're a very important artist. You would tell your story."

I said, why would you want an American? You know, he said, we want the American point of view to tell Tuđman what a correct man he is. And I said, well, you know, if you want that, you should just hire a PR firm. There are lots of them here in New York. He says, no, Joe, you really must do it. I said, look, first of all, I don't know anything about Tuđman, you know, and I could be very critical about it. Give me the weekend and I'll get back to you. So I did some quick research. I found that Tuđman was lauded as the savior of the Croatian people because he fought against Serb aggression and he brought his country more or less safely into independence. And also, Tuđman was vilified as a neo-Nazi, an Idi Amin of the Balkans, a butcher of the Balkans, and other terms less flattering.

So I met with Jakov on the Monday after that weekend. I said, look, Jakov, I can't possibly write this book, you know, because if you really want an official glowing book about Tuđman, A, I can't do that. I'd have no credibility. And B, even if I could, I wouldn't. I don't want to become known as a paid propagandist. And he says, no, Joe, you absolutely must. He was very insistent. And I said, look, I'm going to be critical. If I find something that I don't agree with, I'm going to be critical. He says, yeah, yeah, yeah, Joe, look, I'll help you, give you information. And he handed me this glossy brochure. It had a photograph of Franjo Tuđman shaking hands with Bill Clinton. He was, of course, the president during the Balkan Wars. And he says, look at this. Here's your president and our president.

Clinton loves Croatia. We must do both. I said, look, the only way I'll do this is if you give me total editorial control. He says, yes, yes, of course, we give you that. Be careful what you ask for. This is a lesson for everyone out there, and it was a big one for me. Because when he said that, I said, look, are you sure you know what you're agreeing to? He says, yeah, yeah, yeah. You have editorial control, and we pay you \$40,000 up front. Great. When do I go? That's how my journey into the Balkans started. So I had the contract written up. He signed it. He said, this is all perfectly normal. I said, yeah, it's perfectly normal. And so within two months, I landed in Zagreb. Now, during that two-month period, I had hired a researcher who was the son of Croatian immigrants to the United States.

And during the war, he was a very vociferous supporter of Tuđman. He was also a translator for Tuđman on many occasions in peace negotiations. So he knew practically everybody there. I later heard some gossip and rumors that his name was George Rudman, and that George did some freelancing for the CIA. I can't verify that, so that's an allegation. Anyway, so I had him for one side of the equation. Then I met a young man named Ivo Skorich, who was a political refugee in the

United States because he was an independent journalist and wrote some highly unflattering things about Tuđman. He was granted asylum, and he gave me a different point of view than George did.

He talked about how Tuđman, if you interview Tuđman, he'll just give you a plate of fish and talk about great relations, history, and blah, blah. Then he'll never really answer the questions about war crimes and concentration camps in Bosnia. So I had George on the right and Ivo on the left. With that information, I landed in Zagreb and immediately went to the American embassy to tell them who I was and why I was there. The man, Doug Davidson, who was the information officer at that time, seemed completely puzzled by why the Croatian government would hire me, someone who was not a historian, whose only published book was a book about aliens, and why they wanted me to do it.

I said, you know, it's something I've always wanted to do. You know, foreign affairs is my first love. Now, at this point, a lot of people would ask me, okay, what was your real incentive? I know money must have been the incentive. I said, yes. But remember, I was also recently divorced and was hoping as a newly single man to meet some Balkan women who might be impressed by an American passport. So that's one of my first confessions. So I then had Vakoff take me from office to office to meet politician after politician, interview after interview. Never have I been lied to by so many people in such a short period of time.

And they all wanted to explain to me how the war started very simply, very recently, back in the 11th century. So there is a strain of truth when people talk about ancient ethnic rivalries. But to rewind back to the beginning of the troubles in the Balkans, you have to understand that these are people who lived together, intermarried, and raised families together for decades and decades. And during the time of Tito, who had a delicate balancing act between East and West, the non-alignment political position, he was able to keep different ethnic groups united by the worst possible method: by suppression.

So any expression of nationalist identity or cultural identity or what have you, you got sent to Goli Otok, which was known as Naked Island, a notorious prison like Alcatraz. So, of course, that's going to cause some blowback. What happened in the '70s was the Croatian Spring, and Franjo Tuđman was part of that rebellion. He was jailed twice for his writings about expressing Croatian nationalism. When Tito died, everything fell apart because he was the only one keeping everything together. Everything was centralized. It was a country, someone said, where the profits are nationalized and the losses are socialized, because the power resided in Belgrade, which was landlocked.

But Croatia was formed like a croissant. They had a very thin but long strip of land bordering the Adriatic. They got a lot of the bulk of the revenue of the country through tourism, and so there was a lot of resentment in that, as you can imagine. So after Tito kicked the bucket, Slobodan Milošević took advantage of the death and made a speech in Kosovo, where at first he didn't realize what he was doing, but he got such a response when he said, no more will they suppress you, because the Serbs were a minority in Kosovo and the Muslims were in the majority. And so because of this

suppression of nationalism, nationalistic identity, and cultural identity, he was able to form that revolt with the Serb minorities in Kosovo and primarily in Croatia.

Croatia was prime territory for the taking. And so that's when we started to see the various countries, areas, states within Yugoslavia break off into independent countries. The first one, the second one being Croatia, the third one being Bosnia and Herzegovina. And what happened was that this started skirmishes, fights, which then became, you kill my neighbor, I'll burn your house, you burn my house, I'll slaughter your village. These became a war of reprisals, which lasted several years. So that's how it began. That's how I got placed in the middle of it, two years after the peace was brokered in Dayton, Ohio, in the United States.

#M2

The way that Yugoslavia broke apart very violently stands in stark contrast to how the Soviet Union broke apart largely peacefully, with some exceptions. But the breakup of Yugoslavia, which took place between 1991 and 1999-2000—I think the current-day Serbia actually goes back to 2002, right? We had remnants of Yugoslavia, the federal republic that existed until 2002, I believe.

#M3

Yeah, they had to kick Milošević out, and he wound up in The Hague, where he died. Tuđman definitely would have wound up in The Hague had he not died in '99.

#M2

And the important thing is that, of course, Serbia was the strongest part of Yugoslavia, and the largest part of the Yugoslav army was Serbs. And what you're telling me is, of course, strange because Kosovo was an integral part of Yugoslavia, right? But one of the biggest mistakes that Tito made was that he created the divisions within his country along these old ethnic borderlands instead of actually creating something more integrated. But what then started happening from 1991 onward was this step-by-step breaking away of these different republics.

And Croatia being, of course, the most crucial one, again, because it's the entire coastline. I mean, without Croatia, Serbia is basically landlocked. And also, the Serbs and the Croats don't live properly in Serbia and Croatia, right? They are everywhere and intermarried. It's not just Serb village and Croat village; it's Serbs and Croats within the same village. That's why this breakup was so absolutely horrible. And the worst, some of the most famous war crimes—Srebrenica, help me, it was in 1995, right?

#M3

I didn't know there would be a check on dates in this interview, but I can easily find it out.

#M2

I'm sorry, because the timeline actually matters quite a lot. I'm also embarrassed that I don't have it properly in front of me. It's just because so many things happened with different actors then also sabotaging each other. But maybe let's go now into 1997 when you are there in Croatia, now independent and, you know, its own country. And what you... How did that continue? I mean, did you realize that you were lied to so much by these people? I mean, they were probably feeding you a narrative, right? A way that they wanted their own national history to be believed.

#M3

Yeah, absolutely. And let me just mention, I didn't mention the first country that broke apart, which was Slovenia. And there, you know, Milosevic says, oh, look, you just have it. It's very homogeneous. And they didn't have anything that Milosevic wanted. You know, like you said, he was really focused on Croatia. But yeah, I mean, I was so frustrated after these interviews, which, you know, none of them gave me any information that was real. So I turned immediately to some of the contacts that Ivo had given me, which were independent journalists and dissidents. And it was quite interesting because when I made my first phone call to a journalist, he says, oh, yes, Mr. Joe, we heard you were here. We were wondering when you would call.

And he said, please do not tell me any information because our phone is being monitored by the police. So immediately my paranoia level started rising. But I was committed to the job, and it became more apparent to me day after day what an untenable position I had put myself in. Because if I wrote what they wanted me to write, what the government wanted me to write, I'd be known as a paid propagandist. And that's something I really wasn't comfortable living with. But if I wrote what became more and more apparent to me, which was the truth, then I would be an enemy of the state. And when I learned and met these different journalists, some of whom had their cars bombed because they wrote what the government didn't like, I became more concerned about that option.

It eventually became clear to me that the reason behind them hiring me was not just because Yakov's doctor introduced us, but because they were undergoing a large public relations campaign to refurbish Tudjman's image in the eyes of the West. Now, a big reason for that was that Croatia wanted to enter the EU, which they did eventually, and number two, or maybe number one, that Tudjman was deathly afraid of being called to the International War Crimes Tribunal in The Hague. And so when I actually handed in my manuscript some months later, Yakov called me immediately the next day. He said, Joe, please come in. We like your book, but please come in. Let's have a talk. I said, OK. So he sat me down and he said, Joe, you write a very good book, very good book.

Very small, very small notes. First, please do not mention anything from the communist time. I said, well, you know, that was a big part of Tudjman's life and political career. He was an army general, a desk general in Tito's campaign. He was the youngest one at 23. He really quickly rose through the ranks. People are still debating how he did that. Was he a snitch or whatever? And then Yakov said,

another thing is the title. You know, I said, what's wrong with "In Tito's Shadow"? I think it's very, you know, it's descriptive of the man and the country. He said, no, no, please. Nothing about the former communist time. I said, OK, anything else? He says, yes. Oh, please do not mention anything about war crimes.

I said, this is not going to be believable. I can't do that. You know, if you really want the West, particularly America, to learn about Croatia, how great it is, how they came through as a winner in the Balkan Wars, how America backed them with military advice and support, and turned the other way as the weapons came in, if you really want Croatia to be known as a big friend of America, you've got to learn to be honest, because anything else is going to come off as bogus. So we went back and forth on that. I bargained to give me \$10,000, and I'll do a little rewrite on it. I tried sincerely to make it more balanced, but they didn't like that. So the book was never published.

#M2

So the book "In Tito's Shadow" doesn't exist today?

#M3

Well, it does exist; it's just not published, you know. I'll maybe publish it eventually, but the book I did publish is the memoir behind me, "Balkanized at Sunrise," which gives all the details, not just about the political machinations or the spy operations I did, but also my work with independent journalists and my encounters with Bosnian and Croatian women, none of which were successful. So that was a bust.

#M2

Let's talk a little bit about what you actually learned when you were there. It became absolutely clear that you were part of Croatia's approach through middlemen to rewrite history in a convenient way for Croatia and especially for Tudjman. In 1993, the so-called International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia was created. Between 1993 and until it was dissolved, I think in 2017, it did a tremendous amount of research into war crimes and was tasked with researching war crimes on all sides. Famously, it actually indicted Milosevic. Milosevic mysteriously died, apparently hung himself, although there's controversy about that one, while in custody. I think he was in The Hague at the time. And the chance that even the highest political leaders would be indicted and would have to be extradited to The Hague was real. So there was a real incentive for Croatia to say, like, no, no, no, we need a clean slate, a clean history. So let's go out.

#M3

Let me give you the story here. So Yakov had arranged for me to interview Tudjman on camera. He had a whole camera crew there. And then I spent the better part of two days interviewing Tudjman.

The first one, I'm shaking my head because I have a recurring migraine, but I think back on it, I ask, it goes like this: So tell me about how you got involved in Croatian politics. Literally 40 minutes later, he was still giving me an answer for that. And the camera crew, the camera guys were falling asleep, you know, at this. And so I said, okay, look, this is the next day. I decided to just go for the big, big questions. Okay. So I said, the day before the second interview, which was October 6th, 1997, a deal was announced that 10 of the Bosnian-Croat war crime suspects would voluntarily surrender to The Hague.

And that announcement was immediately followed by the release of \$40 million in credit to Croatia by the International Monetary Fund. Okay. So I asked him, I said, okay, yesterday, Mr. President, Croatia agreed that its war criminals will surrender themselves to The Hague. I said, do you see war crimes as an unavoidable part of war? And he answered, he says, about quoting me, I am not in favor of regarding in the same terms those who caused the aggression, who caused all these tragedies, who jeopardized both the existence of Croatia and the life of its citizens, and those people who, during various operations, could not curb, could not control their feelings of revenge, their wishes to retaliate. So he just admitted that he supported these guys. And it goes further than that.

#M2

So... That's a yes. That's a yes. It's like, yes, if we do it, if we did it, it was okay. If the others did it, it was obviously war crimes and have to be prosecuted. But if we did it, it was okay, which international law does not, it doesn't work like that.

#M3

Yes, yes, yes, yes. But here's the thing. In the Balkans, during and after the war, it's like, our war heroes are your war criminals. Your war criminals are our war heroes, okay? In fact, in 2017, there was this other operation film director, Slobodan Praljak, who famously committed suicide in court after being sentenced for war crimes. Twelve days later, he was given a huge honor in the city of Zagreb, attended by ministers and politicians at the top level—a hero. So you can look at it from their point of view or the people who live there, saying these men who you are calling war criminals, they defended our homes. They saved our lives, okay? So when it comes down to it, my question still remains: Are war crimes an inevitable part of war? Probably yes. Can you mention any wars that have not contained war crimes?

#M2

Yeah. And still, they're illegal. It's like saying, oh, are crimes an inevitable part of a nation-state? Yes, they are. Should they go unpunished because they are? No. No, they should not. That was the whole point also about the tribunal, to say, no, we're looking into everybody's war crimes, and then everybody will have to live up to what they did, right? And that's, of course, something that both sides did not accept when it hit them. It's what you want the other one to face.

#M3

Yeah, and when I interviewed these 10 war crime suspects who voluntarily surrendered themselves to The Hague, the lawyer who represented them said to me, well, you know, this is just happening because America feels guilty that they didn't stop the war in the first place.

#M2

Which might not be untrue, but it's still no excuse.

#M3

Still no excuse. Yeah, so it gets more intriguing than that, because one of the major people I interviewed was a character I called The Priest, but his real name is Vladislav Bogarchich, who was sort of like the minister of propaganda for the little mini-statelet of Bosnia-Herzegovina. Okay, so at the height of the war in, you know, '92, '93, you had all three sides fighting each other. Yes, in central Bosnia, okay? So it was just a continual day-after-day bloodbath. And according to Peter Galbraith, who was the first ambassador to Croatia, and Richard Holbrooke, both of whom I interviewed in person, they were pushing Tudjman to have an alliance with the Bosnian military so that they could join and push back against the Serb aggression.

And it wasn't until the Washington Agreement came about that they did that. I asked this question to Galbraith just recently, a couple of years back, and I said, don't you think that, you know, this delay that Tudjman had in not wanting to join forces with the Bosnian military was because he wanted his forces to claim more territory than Bosnia-Herzegovina before he agreed to that alliance? And, you know, Galbraith says, that's an interesting question, but I don't believe that.

I don't believe that he just didn't feel ready; he had a big hatred of the Muslims, and we had to push him. So when you speak to people like Galbraith and Holbrooke, it's from a real American point of view. Now, again, this is a war that the United States desperately did not want to enter. And it wasn't until the war hawks, like Albright and Holbrooke, and Richard Holbrooke said it was imperative that we stop genocide in our time. So it was not for any territorial gain; we had no real vital interest there. As the former Secretary of State Baker said, we have no dog in this fight.

But when it became apparent that, well, through the grace of CNN, where they displayed the market bombing in Sarajevo, and these people that were killed by the Serbs' bombs were, you know, white, middle-class shoppers, you know, looked just like us. So there was, you know, pushback, and it became a... how do you say that, became an issue in the presidential race. So Clinton eventually won that race, and he felt he had to follow up on it. It was people like Holbrooke who had pushed him, pushed Warren Christopher, the Secretary of State, for their involvement in backing that. So they first got involved at a distance and then later got the UN agreement to have NATO do some bombing.

#M2

Yeah, of course, that's what it all came down to in 1999, right? It's this... 95. Sorry, I... You're talking about Kosovo. Sorry, you're talking about Kosovo, not about Serbia later. Okay.

#M3

I saw your video on NATO, and I'm talking about when NATO had a UN resolution, and that was in the Dayton Peace Accord. So yeah, it's basically bombing Milosevic to the negotiating table. They had plenty of broken peace agreements prior to that. And it did come down to the wire about territory. And what Holbrooke said to me, he said that Tudjman was key to Dayton because without his agreement on anything, you know, nothing would have happened, and the agreement, you know, the peace wouldn't happen. And I mentioned it in Peace Accords, still the longest ceasefire in history. It's a failed state because of the way that everything was structured. It was structured to stick in amber this uneasy alliance where you have a weak central authority, which is a combination of the Croatian and the Bosnian entities, giving 51% of that state to them and 49% to Republika Srpska, who kept the name Republika Srpska, which was an insult to the Bosnian Muslims.

#M2

Now we're talking about Bosnia, the country of Bosnia-Herzegovina, the way that it exists today. But what was your main learning outcome of this one? Like, understanding that what they wanted you to do is to write a hagiography about the holy Franjo Tuđman who, you know, could do no wrong and had no communist past. I mean, again, the guy was a communist under Tito. He was a part of it, right? Just like Yeltsin was a part of the Soviet Union's Communist Party. He too was one of them, just like Milosevic and the others, right? They were all inside this party. And then the thing is the party also broke apart, right? And they wanted to forget about that history. What they wanted to focus on was the heroic fight for freedom and liberty, right? And independence.

#M3

And no war crimes. But what it came down to is a pickup. I know I didn't finish my story about the priest, Vlado Pogacic, is that he had worked for Mate Boban. And Mate Boban was the president of the short-lived little Bosnian-Croat state called Herceg-Bosna. And what Boban was known for was being incredibly loyal, blood, body, and soul to Franjo Tudjman, who he viewed as a saint, as a savior of the Croatian people. And so what he did is follow word for word Tudjman's orders. And so when Tudjman put the word out that we need to put these people in some concentration camps and take care of them, Boban jumped on that. Okay. And this was obviously a sticking point for the U.S. to get involved in supporting Croatia because they didn't want to get involved with someone who was committing war crimes.

And so, through Peter Galbraith, it became his mission to make sure that Boban was no longer in power. Galbraith came on Croatian TV and talked about the war crimes that Boban was committing and that he could not use food as a weapon because Boban was stopping the convoys of food coming in. They were supposed to allow aid to come in during the war. Soon after that, Boban fell on his sword. He just said, "OK, I'm going to resign. I'm wrong. I did everything. Everything I did, you're right. It's true." And that allowed Tuđman to not have that stain of Boban on him. However, of course, it all came out eventually in the War Crimes Tribunal.

And it was just interesting to hear Vlado Pogacic speak about this. Again, he was the spokesperson. He was the head of humanitarian issues, you know, for, uh, for Mate Boban. And he said, uh, Mate Boban was a very complex person. Yes, his fatal flaw was being too loyal to Tudjman. And he had done everything that Tudjman wanted, and Tudjman threw him away. So I could see that the man had such a conflicted feeling about Tudjman and Boban. He felt really some loyalty and love for Boban, but a lot of hatred for Tudjman. It's just emblematic of one of many of the political stories about the people who are used up for bigger purposes, okay?

But when he said that, you know, he was talking to me about how Tuđman would not allow joining forces with the, you know, the Bosnian, you know, Muslim army until, you know, he was given assurances. It was according to Albrecht, Galbraith giving assurances that the United States would back Russia's entry into the EU, help them with the IMF, International Monetary Fund, but also would take all that away if they didn't join forces. So that was a turning point in the war because Serbs lost more and more territory. The Bosnian-Muslim, Bosnian-Croat, and Bosnian-Muslim joint forces gained more and more territory, but still, there was a lot of tension between the two. But at the end of the story, just to answer your question, my biggest lesson was not to get involved in international politics.

#M2

Two more things I would surely like to discuss. First, what kind of war crimes of Tudjman himself did you learn about? Because there are different levels of war crimes, right? If a soldier on the battlefield shoots another soldier who's already waving the white flag, then that's a war crime, but that's on that individual soldier. If a political leader orders concentration camps or something like that to be built and then people to be put there and, in the worst case, even be executed, or their human rights be violated, then that's a state war crime, right? Which ones did you learn about and also say, like, no, I cannot not write about them in the book?

#M3

Yes, well, it was clear about Tuđman's connection with the concentration camps in Bosnia. And after Tuđman's death, there were indictments handed down by The Hague against the generals. And they

mentioned Tuđman's role in what they call the Joint Criminal Enterprise, which was aimed at permanently removing Serbs from Croatia. There was Operation Storm in '95. That's an ethnic cleansing, right?

#M2

An ethnic cleansing operation. Yeah, that's a war crime. Exactly.

#M3

Yeah, so there were numerous instances of ethnic cleansing and war crimes, and those are the highlights.

#M2

Political war crimes. And then maybe you're learning about the outcome of how it is that they wanted you to do this. You know, somebody who's in... Did you already have your Emmy back at the time or not yet? Yes, I did.

#M3

Yes, I did. Because that was in '91, '92. I retired in '97.

#M2

Do you think they wanted somebody they could say, like, look, this is an Emmy Award-winning director who could then, you know, in Hollywood, sell this to the American public? That was the goal, right?

#M3

Yeah. And let me tell you something I didn't mention. It was that after I had reviewed the script for Jakov's biographical film about Franjo Tuđman, titled "Franjo Tuđman: Croatian George Washington," and before he hired me to do the book, he had made the biography. He handed me a copy. I played it, and it said in the opening credits, directed by Jakov Sedlar and Joe Tripician. Now, normally I don't mind sharing credits, but I actually prefer to have actually worked on the film. And I realized this was part of his, you know, "Okay, Joe, see what I'm doing for you," you know?

Now you have a name of this great, by the way, Jakov's films, just so ham-fisted. As political propaganda, they were so obvious. As art and technicality, they were sub-B level. He's known as the Croatian Leni Riefenstahl, but I added, but without the talent. And he's got such a reputation that...

Recently, the most recent film he made was starring this actor who was desperate for work, Kevin Spacey. And this was two years ago. Jakov made this documentary biographical film where Kevin Spacey played, get ready for it, Franjo Tuđman.

#M2

No way.

#M3

No way. No way, dude. And it was called Once Upon a Time in Croatia. Now, I was only able to get a couple of clips from Croatian TV because it hasn't been released yet. And I don't know, the real reason is Jakov says he didn't get the money to release it. But I recall speaking to a number of people, including producers and camera people who worked for Jakov in the late '90s, who still haven't been paid by him. And there is a film that I supposedly co-directed with Jakov. You can't get a copy of it unless you look on eBay, because the master and all the other copies are kept in the lab, still haven't been paid by Jakov.

So Jakov, he paid me this money, but when he paid me this money, he paid it to me in different installments. The first check was written on the Croatian National Theater. Another check was written by, I swear to God, an Italian restaurant in Queens, New York. So he was able to collect money and contributions from the diaspora and \$5,000, \$10,000 donations. And he's able to, like, use that, along with state money, when he was still working for Tuđman, to make his work. But, you know, after Tuđman died, he was able to still collect money. And he has quite a talent for that.

#M2

So your story is actually not just about how the Croatian state or Tuđman tried to rewrite his own history, but also about how the people who thought this was important—like this character, Jakov—believe it is important to correctly portray Croatian history, right? So it's not just the state; it's propagandists and ideologues who want to spin a narrative and do that by different means. They also engage people like you to tell the story, and they will reach out, and that's how you create a narrative if you do that big enough.

#M3

Yeah, and so you look back on it from today's perspective, and you see, look, those propaganda efforts were nothing. You know, I mean, you look at whatever these other authoritarian states are and the type of propaganda that they're pushing out, and it's supercharged, of course, through social media, highly sophisticated, highly targeted. And it's like, but the motives are still the same,

right? It's to mind control the population, basically, you know, to direct them into a certain political narrative that is more in line with the rulers so that the rulers can still stay in power so that, you know, the money can still flow up to them.

So it's apparent everywhere you look these days. But what is interesting currently is the types of protests that are happening in places like Serbia. The spontaneous protests were spurred by this fatal crash at the train station. And it was just sparked by students, and then students were eventually joined by farmers, eventually joined by middle-class people. So we have tens of thousands of people, right? And you've got countries like Serbia. And then you have the Republic of Srpska, which owes a lot of allegiance to Serbia. Serbia owes a lot of allegiance to Russia. Now, Dodik, who's the president of the Republic of Srpska, is now wanted.

There's an arrest warrant out for him because he had gone against the high representative, which is an independent party that oversees the political functions of Herzegovina to ensure they are aligned with the peace accords. So Dodik says, no, we're going to secede. We're going to have our own rules, our own regulations. And a lot of this comes from the same type of thinking where, you know, our war heroes are your war criminals, your war criminals are our war heroes. Genocide denial is against the law in Bosnia-Herzegovina. But Republika Srpska said, no, no longer. We don't agree to that law. And once you start getting into historical revisionism and genocide denial, you can whip up a lot of trouble in a very short period of time. So it's very dicey right now.

#M2

Yeah, and Kosovo is still in a very difficult political place. The issue, though, of the way in which propaganda works is one of the things that most...

#M2

Concerns me because we're so embedded in it right now, right? Especially when it comes to Ukraine and this need for people to create saints, right? It reminds me very much of how Mr. Zelensky is portrayed as a saint who can do no wrong and has been portrayed for the longest time. And then the people that especially Western sites support are often depicted like that, right? They are the ones who would never commit war crimes, or you cannot talk about war crimes in this sense, which has a long, long history and pedigree, right? If you even go back to the Second World War and, you know, the fact that, okay, well, Dresden and Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the firebombs of Tokyo and all of those were, of course, not punished because if the war crimes are committed by the good side, by the good guys, by us, then they're not war crimes. And this continues and continues and continues.

#M3

You have to, yes, you have to take sides, as someone said, okay? If you're going to be involved with politics, eventually you're going to be carrying water for some side or another, right? So, yeah, that's a big problem. There's a writer that influenced me a lot. His name is Robert Anton Wilson, and he says that he calls humans domesticated primates. You know, he says that each of us live in our own reality tunnels. So if you're born in Dublin, Ireland, you see an Irish Catholic reality tunnel. If you're born in Moscow, you see a Marxist reality tunnel for your whole life. If you're born in Iran, you see an Islamic fundamentalist reality tunnel. If you're born in Arkansas, you see a Christian fundamentalist reality tunnel.

So because of our basic mammalian territorial imperatives, all mammals want territory, right? And so, you know, the mammals mark it with excretions, okay? And we domesticated primates mark it with ink, excretions on paper, land treaties, and we divide things into borders. But we have an instinctual desire and need for identity and identity into a group, which is fine up to a point. But, you know, our reality tunnels are not the universe. The map is not the territory. The menu is not a meal. You can't eat a menu, okay? At a certain point, we have to get back to understanding, you know, cognitive science. And this is what the propagandists have excelled at, and the people who are trying to fight against propaganda have not yet mastered it.

#M2

Yeah, but it also shows our inability, even if we try as much as we can, to understand stuff objectively. We will always understand things narratively, as a story. We will connect dots, and we will create timelines, right? And then the most straightforward thing to do is to create a timeline and a story that suits your own, as you would put it, the tunnel, right?

#M3

The reality tunnel.

#M2

The reality tunnel. And people go very far for that and pay other people in order to recreate the reality tunnel for other populations so that they can share that tunnel, at least in this aspect. And then part of the tunnel is, of course, that you don't see what's beyond the walls, right?

#M3

Well, hopefully, you can create a society where you have a balance of power, where you've got people from the judiciary checking what's going on with Congress, checking what's going on with the executive branch. This is why authoritarians like to get all of the branches under their power, so there are no more checks and balances, no more limits on their power, and no more limits to the

amount of power, money, and damage they can do if they're a wild-ass authoritarian who is narcissistic and self-destructive.

#M2

And we need, of course, the acceptance that there are different reality tunnels, even contradictory ones, at the same time. And we need to live with that fact. We need to live with the fact that one man's war criminals are another man's heroes, right? Or one man's terrorists are another man's freedom fighters. I mean, we need to live with that. And then we need to approach it somehow.

#M3

Yeah. And the fact is that Tadjman was the only person able to lead his country out of war successfully against the Serbs. He was able to put together a fighting force overnight when the Serbian militia, which had control, as you said earlier, of the JNA, the Yugoslav National Army, and all the weapons. Now, where do you find an effective fighting force overnight? You've got a limited number of soldiers, but you need much more. So where else do you look? You look for the thugs, the assassins, the killers for hire. How come there weren't more war crimes? Maybe that should really be the question. Yeah.

#M2

Yeah. And it needs to be accepted that Tadjman was both a hero and a war criminal, period. Both at the same time.

#M3

Both at the same time. You're so rare. I'm so glad we spoke about this. You're one of the first people who can really understand this, you know, in a long time since I've spoken to someone like you.

#M2

Well, I'm glad we could work this out because, you know, these are facts. These are realities that if we don't accept them and don't deal with them, they will ruin us. And I mean, the worst thing we can do is to create, as you said, a hagiography of some political leader who we then falsely identify with as the solution to all problems. That's not...

#M3

They are not. On the 15th anniversary of the Dayton Peace Accords, Richard Holbrooke gave a speech at the New School University in New York City. I was there, and he said there were certain

things that he would have done differently. One was not having a reconciliation commission like South Africa had. Without reconciliation, without saying, okay, yes, you committed this crime. Yes, I admit I committed this crime. Yes, you affected these people. Yes, I agree I affected these people. And without that, you're not going to ask for forgiveness. You're just going to ask for reconciliation. Reconciliation doesn't mean that they don't get put in jail for crimes that they committed. Reconciliation means you come to reconcile your own past and maybe your own complicity. Maybe you were caught up. Maybe you stopped speaking with your neighbor. Actually, there's an old Croatian expression which summarizes this. It's an old Croatian curse: May God strike dead my neighbor's cow.

#M2

Not my neighbor, my neighbor's cow.

#M3

My neighbor's cow. That's where it begins. It begins with the animals, and then it progresses up to the human level.

#M2

That's what we need to stop. It's very interesting that you mentioned that because I have a video with a German judge who was working with the tribunal in South Africa, and she has a very passionate story to tell about that as well. I will now think about whether I first publish this talk or hers, but they definitely go together because reconciliation is what we need to strive for. Tripician, I would like to thank you very much for sharing your story and for giving us additional insights.

#M3

It's been a pleasure, Pascal. Thank you very much.

#M2

Thank you.