In the early 1990s, the world watched at first uneasily, then with increasing concern, and finally in horror as the country once known as Yugoslavia went to war with itself. Atrocities were committed under the name of “ethnic cleansing” and rape was used as a so-called “instrument of rational policy.” In ironic complement to war, Olympic sites near the Banian city of Sarajevo that became famous during the Winter Games of 1984 were turned into strongholds for artillery and infantry and, in turn, themselves became the targets of shells and bombs.

For the moment, the fighting appears to be over. An uneasy peace holds under the terms of the Dayton Peace Accords, policed by occupying troops, including Americans. But some of the peacekeepers may leave this summer. What will — what should — happen then?

Old Dominion associate professor of history Lorraine Lees is an American foreign policy expert and author of the 1997 book “Keeping Tito Afloat: The United States, Yugoslavia and the Cold War.” Lees spoke to Quest editor James Schultz about Yugoslavia’s troubled past and its uncertain future.

Photos by Todd Spencer
It’s an old, old division between people whose heritage is different, who can’t compete but who have not been able to sustain periods of time that are refreshed every generation with more blood being spilled. It’s a perfect example of how peoples’ emotions can get the better of them. Yugoslavia was a country that worked, as an entity brought together under one umbrella without ethnic considerations being a major factor. [Yugoslav dictator Marshall Tito] Tito indeed had a central rule that ethnic affairs were not to be brought into the equation. And the country prospered.

As soon as he died, the nationalism was used to create the sense of nationalism to remind people of why they didn’t like the person they’d been getting. It’s as thought to forget what they have in common they focus on the few things that divide them. It’s almost a willful attempt to find out what’s different.

Where do matters stand today in the United States? A lot of kids on the block still standing. That’s why it’s our job ... Only eternal vigilance by the West will prevent a Fourth Balkan War.

What lessons are there for Americans? Disturbances far away can have an impact on the United States even now that the Cold War is over. In particular, the kind of category in the heart of Europe that the Yugoslav wars unleashed: it’s something the United States shouldn’t tolerate. I think what we have to do is realize ourselves what does it really mean to be the only remaining superpower. How are we going to use our power? What kind of commitments will we make? ... What is it in our interest to stop or to start?

As I explain in my book, during the Cold War, we measured everything in terms of communism and non-communism ... What yardstick do we use now? The collapse of Yugoslavia — the Third Balkan War, as some have called it — showed us that kinds of human rights violations, this kind of instability, this kind of aggression is something we need to be concerned about.

Unfortunately, there’s no American consensus. My students keep asking “Why do we have to go? Why do we have to do this? Why isn’t our job?” Because, I tell them, we’re the only kids on the block still standing. That’s why our job ... Only eternal vigilance by the West will prevent a Fourth Balkan War.