

**U.S Ambassador Joseph A. Mussumeli:**  
**Slovenia's War for Independence and Struggle for Unity**  
Op-Ed Delo, January 20, 2014

One of the best things about Slovenes is how united they are when they talk about their struggle for independence. Having finally gained their own country after a thousand years of foreign domination is a triumph that showed the best qualities of Slovenes: courage, tenacity, and self-confidence. At the start of that war there was no way to know how long it would continue or how bloody it might be. All Slovenes, but especially those who were in the military, were prepared for a long and difficult struggle; they did not flinch from the possibility of a horrific and unknowable future. The thought of finally holding their destiny in their own hands consumed them. That dream of independence and the willingness to sacrifice everything to attain brought the Slovene people together as nothing else had in their entire modern history.

And one of the best things about that struggle for independence was that, while Slovenes were prepared to make any sacrifice and suffer any burden, they succeeded after only a few days. With great courage and luck, they were able to avoid a truly catastrophic war. Some brave soldiers did lose their lives and the loss of even one life is a tragedy -- some families have had to endure the sorrow and know the pride of having lost sons and fathers and brothers who made the ultimate sacrifice for their country. But it must have seemed almost miraculous that the war ended so quickly, and with so much less blood and death than had been anticipated. Usually wars are the other way around: politicians stupidly drag their countries into war expecting a quick victory and then get bogged down for years in bloody, horrible battles. In Slovenia it was the opposite: the people prepared for a long, arduous war, but were able to triumph far more easily than expected. This quick, decisive victory was very welcomed. Slovenes were able to return to normal life and get on with the business of building a modern democracy and economy relatively unscathed from the horrors that beset some of the other former Yugoslav republics. But just as every tragedy has a silver lining, so too every success has a kernel of dross.

The euphoria of that time, I am told, was overwhelming. For a while Slovenes stood together, firmly united, all looking to the future, eager and determined to build a new country for themselves and their children. But too soon the old fissures in Slovene society returned and all the old historical animosities again began to fester. It was much the same in America after 9/11. I have written elsewhere that after 9/11 many of us thought our own country would remain united, but it did not last long—the event was too short, the response too controversial, the politics too cynical—and soon all the old divisions re-emerged in America—though the divisions in America are not as profound as in Slovenia. So, when a television journalist asked my opinion as to why Slovenes were still so divided, I offered three reasons: (1) the historical disputes dating back to World War II and its aftermath, (2) the inability during the Communist era to speak openly and debate objectively these same historical disputes, and (3) the inability of the struggle for independence to permanently weld the people together and mold them into a

new, homogenized society. This last point has raised a good deal of outrage among certain Slovenes, who rightly stand by the values and courage that underpinned Slovenia's quest for independence. It is unfortunate that some politicians have cynically characterized my words as being dismissive of the struggle of the Slovene people. In the three years I've served here, I learned from thousands of Slovenes from across the political spectrum about your country's heroic march toward independence. The soldiers and the people did their duty; the politicians did not.

The truth no Slovene I have met ever disagrees with: Slovenes had been divided ever since WW II, Slovenes came together during the struggle for independence, and Slovenes are now again divided. Who can dispute this? And who can dispute that sometimes, ironically, crises and suffering draw people closer together and build new and stronger bonds of allegiance? Sometimes war and disasters destroy and divide people; Bosnia is a clear example of that. But other wars and other crises can bring people together, and sometimes they suffer so greatly together in a new struggle that old divisions fade away. This happened in America after our Civil War, when 50 years later we entered WW I and our soldiers, suffering and bleeding together, finally began to forget the old divisions and started forming a new national consciousness. No one should doubt the rightful pride of every Slovene in their victory in 1991 and no one should doubt that it was great good fortune that Slovenia did not endure a more painful war. But no one should also doubt that while Slovenia achieved independence, it did not achieve permanent solidarity. That will be a longer struggle, also requiring great courage and considerable pain—because accepting the truths of the past and building a united future requires taking risks and a brave willingness to admit past mistakes.