

Speech by the High Representative Paddy Ashdown At the Funeral of Alija Izetbegovic

The first time I met Alija Izetbegovic was in this city in August 1992.

The last was last Friday.

Between those two dates, he led his nation and prevailed in a war in which some sought annihilation.

He became the father of his people – the person who did more than any other to ensure the survival of the modern state of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

It is not given to many to achieve such things in a single life time.

And it is given to none who are ordinary.

Alija Izetbegovic was not ordinary.

He was born in the summer of 1925; he grew up in a world already scarred by the brutal conflicts that marked the 20th century; his life and personality reflected these conflicts – those trials.

The manner in which each of us responds to the circumstances of our lives is in God's gift. Alija Izetbegovic responded with determination and with principle.

Like so many of his countrymen he drew on his Islamic heritage and his European origin; he was enriched by both and he apologised for neither.

The Roman statesman and philosopher Cicero once said that 'It is the character of a brave and resolute man not to be ruffled by adversity and not to desert his post'.

Alija Izetbegovic met that definition in full.

He could have lived comfortably, accepting the dictates of history and sheltering behind a veneer of respectable conformity.

Instead, he spent years in prison for the sake of a political vision that was often caricatured – and just as often misunderstood.

Bringing that vision intact into the realm of practical politics, in the face of sometimes murderous opposition, required toughness and integrity.

Izetbegovic showed both.

He lived a simple life and was devoid of cynicism or vanity.

In the span of that life, Bosnia and Herzegovina endured two dreadful tragedies, separated by decades of totalitarian rule. It was impoverished by politicians whose tools were fear and force in place of tolerance and persuasion.

It is easier to rouse people – particularly frightened people – with crude ideologies and base ideas; it is harder to *persuade* people – especially in time of war – of the wisdom of moderation and the virtue of inclusiveness.

To choose tolerance, to choose restraint and inclusiveness you need courage.

Even Alija Izetbegovic's fiercest critics would not deny that he possessed that quality in great measure.

And because of that, there are men and women of goodwill in Bosnia and Herzegovina today who share that courage and who

genuinely want to champion the common good. Who will see his extraordinary life and the calm manner in which he faced death as an inspiration to hold fast to the values of their faith, and Bosnia's European destiny, so that all in this country, whatever their faith, whatever their origin, can feel comfortable and secure.

These are the people to build a future for this country that is better than its past. That is, I believe, the best memorial to the life of Alija Izetbegovic.

The thoughts and prayers of my wife and I – and, I am certain, of many far beyond the borders of Bosnia and Herzegovina – go out to his family.

This was a life of courage, lived to the full.

For this gift, let us thank God.

May he rest in peace.

Neka mu je vječiti rahmet.