
NATO's Rush to War in Yugoslavia

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The United States-led war against Yugoslavia continued for more than ten weeks despite the many ways it could have been avoided or ended sooner, and despite the opposition and uneasiness it generated even among its initial supporters. This essay outlines some of the reasons why the war was wrong from a moral, legal and utilitarian perspective.

Unfortunately, many of the objections raised against the war were spurious. Before examining the more valid reasons for an anti-war perspective, we must challenge some of the other arguments against the war. The first objection—most often voiced by conservative opponents—is that the war was “none of our business,” and that unless a clear (narrowly defined) U.S. economic, strategic or political interest is at risk, such interventions are wrong. This perspective challenges the liberal internationalism and collective security notions that have dominated the idealist school of international relations for most of the twentieth century. Yet while these idealist notions have been given a bad name because they have been used to rationalize imperialistic interventions—such as the U.S. war in Vietnam and Iraq’s occupation of Kuwait—the principle of liberal internationalism and collective security is legitimate. Such severe, widespread and systematic brutality as had been taking place in Kosovo by Serb forces should not go unchallenged.

A second dubious anti-war position is the fatalistic argument that the Balkan people have been “killing each other for years” and that efforts to end the bloodshed are therefore hopeless. While conflicts between various ethnic and national identities in the Balkans go back several centuries, these groups have been at peace more often than not, including all but the last decade since World War II. Germany and France fought each other for centuries and yet are now collaborating leaders of the European Union; one can now cross the border between the two as one can between states in the U.S.

Ethnic conflicts in Yugoslavia, as elsewhere, are elite constructs. The Balkan peoples do not have some genetic or even cultural predisposition to hate each other. They have been used by various overlapping empires to advance their aims in the region, as outside powers used one group against the other. Indeed, a major purpose behind the founding of Yugoslavia (“land of south Slavs”) following World War I was to prevent such manipulation, which makes its breakup earlier this decade such a tragedy.

While some allege a Western imperialist plot in the re-Balkanization of the Balkans, the roots of modern ethnonationalism among the Serbs, Croats and

others seemed to come more from a desperate attempt by various Yugoslav elites to find a unifying ideology to replace the discredited Marxist-Leninist system. And it should be noted that Serbian leader Slobodan Milosevic was not the only one to do so: U.S.-backed Croatian leader Franjo Tudjman has also manipulated ethnic hatred in his rise to power.

The use of the ethnic card also came, as such chauvinistic campaigns generally do, during times of great economic crisis. Yugoslavia, under heavy debt to Western banks, was under a draconian structural adjustment program imposed by the International Monetary Fund. More than two million people found themselves unemployed, largely from the forced denationalization of state industries, most of which were part of the socialist country's innovative system of worker self-management. In this way, the West does share some of the blame for Yugoslavia's tragedy. Indeed, the premature recognition by Western countries of moves for independence seemed to come from the mistaken belief that it was part of the process of democratization rather than a potentially reactionary trend that would threaten the rights of minorities within each of the republics. By contrast, it is doubtful the West would have been as willing to allow Belgium, for example, to split into separate countries for its constituent ethnic groups.

A third problematic objection to the war is the assertion that the Serbs were not the aggressors in Kosovo. Some on the far left in the United States even made a strange alliance with ultranationalists within the Serbian-American community, repeating highly dubious claims that the Serbs were actually victims of Albanian terror and oppression and that the reports of massacres and ethnic cleansing were simply NATO propaganda. As a result of the history of U.S. officials fabricating and exaggerating alleged atrocities by Sandinista Nicaraguans, Vietnamese communists and other governments and movements the United States has opposed, it's natural for those skeptical of U.S. foreign policy to question all such reports.

Like the little boy who cried wolf, however, this time—despite the understandable skepticism—the alarm was all too real. Although some exaggerations of Serb atrocities have no doubt been used to manipulate public support for the war, most of the Serbian transgressions in Kosovo cited by Western governments are well documented by reputable human rights monitoring groups such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, Doctors Without Borders and others. And the repression pre-dates the bombing and the earlier rise of the Kosovo Liberation Army; indeed, it had been going on for almost a decade, following the revocation of Kosovo's autonomy, with the 10% Serb minority essentially imposing an apartheid-style system on the country's ethnic Albanian minority. The majority of ethnic Albanians in the public sector and Serbian-owned enterprises were fired from their jobs, forbidden to use their language in schools or government, severely limited in their right to nonviolent dissent and subjected to widespread arrest, torture and extrajudicial killings.

Those on the left must realize that just because Serbia is ruled by a so-called Socialist Party, has rejected full incorporation into the Western market system and has challenged Western militarism and imperialism, that does not make the government progressive. Indeed, European history has demonstrated that not only socialist movements but also fascist movements have challenged Western liberalism. And the ideological underpinnings of the current Serbian government

are far closer to fascism than to any socialism with which most American progressives would identify.

Despite all the “wrong” reasons for opposing the war, there are nevertheless plenty of good reasons to do so. First, the war could have been prevented. Until the spring 1989, the Kosovars waged their struggle nonviolently, using strikes, boycotts, peaceful demonstrations, and alternative institutions. The Kosovar Albanians even set up a democratically elected parallel government to provide schooling and social services, and to press their cause to the outside world. Indeed, it was one of the most widespread, comprehensive and sustained nonviolent campaigns since Gandhi’s struggle for Indian independence earlier this century. This was the time for Western powers to have engaged in preventative diplomacy.

But the world instead chose to ignore the Kosovars’ nonviolent movement and resisted the consistent pleas by the moderate Kosovar Albanian leadership to take action. Only after a shadowy armed group known as the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) emerged in the spring 1998 did the world media, the Clinton administration and other Western governments finally take notice. By waiting for guerrilla warfare to emerge before seeking a solution, the West gave Milosevic the opportunity to crack down with even greater savagery than before.

The delay allowed the Kosovar movement to be taken over by armed ultranationalists who have been unwilling to compromise or to guarantee the rights of the Serbian minority in an autonomous or independent Kosovo. Indeed, the KLA has murdered Serb officials and ethnic Albanian moderates, destroyed Serbian villages, attacked other minority communities, and some among its leadership have called for ethnic cleansing in the other direction to create an ethnically pure Albanian state. Despite such practices, as well as ties to the international heroin trade, the KLA was able to capture the support of most Kosovar Albanians when the use of nonviolent methods was viewed as unsuccessful.

It is a tragedy that the West squandered a full eight years when preventative diplomacy could have worked. The U.S. rejected calls to bring Kosovar constituencies together for negotiations, and for expanding into Kosovo the missions in Macedonia that had already been set up by the United Nations and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). Waiting for a full-scale armed insurrection to break out before acting has also given oppressed people around the world a very bad message: to get the West to pay attention to your plight, you must take up arms.

Though many Kosovars and others expected that the 1995 Dayton accords would include an end to the Serbian occupation and oppression of Kosovo, the United States and other parties decided it did not merit attention. Indeed, in contrast to the recent demonization of Milosevic, the United States boosted the Serbian leader’s standing throughout the Bosnia peace process; U.S. special envoy Richard Holbrooke’s memoirs repeatedly praise Milosevic. Had the peace process instead included other forces in Serbian society than the government—such as the Serbian Orthodox Church, the democratic opposition and the Serbian minority in Kosovo—Milosevic would not likely have found himself in such a powerful position.

When Western powers finally took decisive action towards the long-simmering crisis in the fall 1998, a ceasefire was arranged in which the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe sent in unarmed monitors. But they were given little support. They were largely untrained, they were too few in number and NATO refused to supply them with helicopters, night vision binoculars or other basic equipment that could have made them more effective. As Serb violations (including a number of atrocities) of the ceasefire increased, Western diplomatic efforts accelerated, producing the Rambouillet proposal, which called for the restoration of Kosovo's autonomous status within a greater Serbia. While such a political settlement was quite reasonable, and the Serbs appeared willing to seriously consider such an agreement, it was sabotaged by NATO's insistence that it be allowed to send a large armed occupation force into Kosovo and have the right to move freely without permission throughout the entire Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.

Also problematic was that the proposal was presented essentially as a final document with little room for negotiations. One of the fundamental principles of international conflict resolution is that all interested parties must be part of the peace process. Some outside pressure may be necessary—particularly against the stronger party—to secure an agreement, but it cannot be presented as a *fait accompli*. The “sign this or we'll bomb you” attitude also doomed the diplomatic initiative to failure. Few national leaders would sign an agreement under such terms, which amount to a treaty of surrender: allowing foreign forces free reign in your territory and issuing such a proposal as an ultimatum.

Finally, in comparing the Rambouillet proposals to the recently brokered plan, it is very unclear whether Yugoslavia actually compromised more than did NATO. While there are some minor provisions that appear less favorable to the Serbs, some of the key issues on which the Serbs balked back in March appear to have been dropped. There will be no guarantee of a referendum on the territory's future status. The peacekeeping force will not be exclusively a NATO operation and the United Nations Security Council will take an active role in the territory's post-war political make-up. Most crucially, the insistence at Rambouillet that NATO troops could move freely through the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia has been dropped, limiting their role to Kosovo. Had NATO presented this more modest plan back in March, quite possibly the Serbs would have accepted and the war could have been averted. Indeed, Serb counter-proposals paralleling the current peace plan were summarily dismissed. Smarter and earlier diplomacy could have prevented the war.

The bombing campaign clearly made things worse for the Kosovar Albanians. Not only were hundreds of ethnic Albanians accidentally killed by NATO bombing raids, but the Serbs—unable to respond to NATO air attacks—turned their wrath against the most vulnerable segments of the population: the very Kosovar Albanians NATO claimed it would be defending. While the Serbs may have indeed been planning some sort of large-scale forced removal of the population in areas of KLA infiltration, similar to what the United States did in South Vietnam in the 1960s and early 1970s, both the scale and savagery of the Serbian repression that came this spring was undoubtedly a direct consequence of NATO actions. By forcing the evacuation of the OSCE monitors, which—de-

spite their limitations—were playing something of a deterrent role against the worst Serbian atrocities, NATO gave the Serbs the opportunity. By bombing Yugoslavia, they gave the Serbs nothing to lose.

The bombing also retarded hopes for change in Yugoslavia itself. The root of the Kosovo crisis, as was the case with Bosnia, is the extreme ultranationalism that Milosevic has built around him. In recent years, the forces that have brought change against authoritarian regimes in East Europe have not come from NATO or from bombing campaigns but rather from sustained nonviolent action. Serbia had a large and active movement supporting democracy, political pluralism and an end to the repression in Kosovo and elsewhere. In the winter of 1996–1997, a mass nonviolent movement almost succeeded in overthrowing Milosevic, but it got no help or encouragement from Western governments.

Tragically, the NATO bombing gave the Serbian regime an excuse to kill, jail, drive underground or force into exile leading prodemocracy activists. Their independent media have been shut down and public activities seriously proscribed. The population, meanwhile, has rallied around the flag, as could be predicted when a country is under attack from the outside. Those who denounced Milosevic's autocratic rule now see him as the nation's defender. Serbian democrats and Serbs sympathetic with the Kosovar Albanians were uniformly opposed to the bombing, pointing out that it set back the prodemocracy movement by more than a decade.

Ironically, NATO bombs targeted urban areas, which were mostly anti-Milosevic. Air raids struck parts of northern Vojvodina, including areas where ethnic Serbs are a minority, as well as the Republic of Montenegro, the junior partner in Yugoslavia which had been at odds with the Serbs on Kosovo and other matters; Montenegro's bold efforts to become closer to the West and more independent from Serbia have been set back considerably.

Military force can impose a settlement, but it can never be a solution and never bring peace unless it comes from below. The best hope for a real peace in the Balkans must come from progressive Serbians willing to challenge the ethnic chauvinism of Milosevic and others. Unfortunately, NATO has seriously damaged that possibility.

The war against Yugoslavia was illegal. Any such use of force violates international law unless in self-defense or unless it is authorized by the United Nations as an act of collective security. Kosovo is internationally recognized as part of Serbia; it was, legally speaking, an internal conflict. In addition, the democratically elected president of the self-proclaimed, if unrecognized, Kosovar Albanian Republic, Ibrahim Rugova, did not request such intervention; indeed, he opposed it.

The war was also illegal under U.S. law. The Constitution places war-making authority under the responsibility of Congress. While the President, as commander-in-chief, has latitude in short-term emergencies, the 1973 War Powers Act prevents the executive branch from waging war without the express consent of Congress beyond a 60-day period. Only rarely has Congress formally declared war, but it has passed resolutions supporting the use of force, as with the 1964 Gulf of Tonkin resolution concerning Vietnam and the 1991 approval to use force to remove Iraqi occupation troops from Kuwait. President Clinton,

however, received no such approval from Congress. That he has gotten away with such a blatant abuse of authority marks a dangerous precedent of an executive being unaccountable to Congressional oversight, as called for in the Constitution.

Many of those who have traditionally opposed U.S. military intervention elsewhere, have recognized the strong humanitarian imperative in supporting the Kosovar Albanians and challenging Serbian ethnofascism, and thus they initially supported the war. Indeed, had a few days of bombing Yugoslav military positions really led to a Serbian withdrawal, one could make the moral case that such limited violence prevented far greater violence. This, however, as many of us knowledgeable about Yugoslavia predicted, was not the case.

More than ten weeks of bombing, producing the widespread destruction of Yugoslavia's civilian infrastructure, the killing of many hundreds of civilians, and severe environmental damage (by bombing chemical factories, using depleted uranium ammunition, and more), did not lead to substantially greater compromises than the Serbs originally entertained prior to the war. More Yugoslav civilians died weekly from NATO bombing than did Kosovar Albanian civilians each week at the hands of Serb forces prior to the bombings.

A number of human rights groups that have challenged the morality and legality of Serbian actions in Kosovo have also condemned the NATO attacks—which have endangered the health and safety of millions of people by disrupting water supplies, sewage treatment and hospitals. Despite the bombing, Serbian troop presence in Kosovo increased as the bombing continued and the repression of the Kosovar Albanians dramatically escalated. Those doing the killing in Kosovo were small paramilitary groups, death squads, and police units that were not effectively challenged by the high-altitude bombing of bridges or factories hundreds of miles to the north.

Milosevic's power has been based on the myth of Serbian victimhood and on the belief that the whole world is against them, resulting in a pathological fear and resentment toward non-Serbs. From the centuries-long conquest and occupation by Ottoman Turks, to the massacres of 300,000 Serbs by Croatian fascists in the 1940s, to the ethnic cleansing of more than 100,000 Serbs by U.S.-backed Croat forces in the Krajina region in 1995, Serbians have internalized within their culture a strong distrust and resentment toward outside forces wishing to conquer and control them. Their songs and epic poems imply that righteous martyrdom is better than victory.

Little evidence suggests that strategic bombing alone works in accomplishing political goals in most circumstances, but it would seem particularly difficult in the case of the Serbs. Having much of their society destroyed by a multinational force did not make them think more rationally. Though the U.S. had hoped bombing would encourage military defections, NATO refused to grant temporary asylum for draft resisters and deserters. While surrender under such circumstances can eventually happen, it will likely result in such bitterness that it will only pave the way for a dangerous political reaction, which may not be seen for some years to come, but will add to the sense of historical wrong that manifests itself in violent and chauvinistic ideologies.

Since they have not forgotten their defeat at the Battle of Kosovo in the fourteenth century, the Serbs will not likely forgive or forget the massive

destruction wrought against their country by NATO bombs. Despite Western efforts to personalize the war around Milosevic, the war was nevertheless waged against a nation of 11 million people. The war did not punish "him" or destroy "his" bridges, power stations, factories and water supply; it was a war against an entire people. Such a devastated country will remain fertile ground for extremist nationalism for many years to come.

There are serious questions about what actually prompted the NATO action. While Milosevic and his followers certainly have fascistic views and a willingness to implement them, he is certainly not another Hitler, in terms of anything comparable to the power of Nazi Germany and the threat it posed to neighboring countries. While the ethnic cleansing and massacres were horrific by any standard, they fall short of most definitions of genocide. There is ongoing civil strife in such African countries as Sudan and Sierra Leone that has produced more deaths and refugees than the war in Kosovo. As a result, the question of U.S. double standards has been raised: why didn't the United States intervene in such conflicts, particularly in Rwanda in 1994 where there was clearly a genocide in progress.

More salient than why the U.S. has not intervened in cases of widespread slaughter of ethnic minorities is the issue of why the U.S. has, in other cases, intervened but on the other side. In recent decades, the U.S. gave military, economic and diplomatic support for Indonesia's slaughter of the East Timorese and for Guatemala's slaughter of its indigenous population. While President Clinton has declared that repression and ethnic cleansing cannot be allowed "on NATO's doorstep," he has allowed comparable repression to take place within NATO itself, and actively defended it: Turkey's denial of the Kurds' linguistic and cultural rights, rejection of their demands for autonomy, destruction of thousands of villages, killing of thousands of civilians and forced removal of hundreds of thousands more bear a striking resemblance to Serbia's repression in Kosovo. The U.S. continues to rationalize its arming of the Turkish military. Clinton's demand for the right of Kosovar refugees to return contrasts with his administration being the first to vote against the annual U.N. General Assembly resolution calling for the right of Palestinian refugees to return to lands from which they were ethnically cleansed by the Israelis more than 50 years ago.

Such questions necessarily raise uncharitable speculation about what might actually have motivated the United States to lead such a military action. For some advocates of U.S. military intervention, there was no doubt some genuine humanitarian concern, which in this case did not conflict with overriding U.S. strategic or economic prerogatives. There may have been other forces at work, however, which saw the use of force as advantageous for other reasons than a sincere if misplaced hope of assuaging a humanitarian crisis.

For example, the war creates a *raison d'être* for NATO in a post-Cold-War world, as it desperately tries to justify its continued existence and desire for expansion. (This does produce a kind of circular logic, however: the assertion that NATO is needed to fight in wars like that in Yugoslavia, yet the war had to be continued in order to preserve NATO's credibility.) The war has benefited influential weapons manufacturers, leading to an increase in U.S. military spending by more than U.S.\$13 billion, the amount signed into law in May that

will be used largely for weapons systems that most strategic analysts, and even the Pentagon, said were not needed; this comes on top of an increase in military spending passed before the onset of the war. (By contrast, aid from the United States to help with the refugee crisis was very limited and efforts by the United Nations High Commission on Refugees were severely hampered by lack of funds, in large part because the U.S. still refuses to pay more than U.S.\$1 billion in dues it owes to the U.N., an amount equivalent to approximately one week of bombing.) Some have observed the frequent reference by administration officials to their desire to incorporate Yugoslavia further into the international free market system; Yugoslavia is the last European holdout to the new neoliberal economic order.

Whatever the actual motivations, perhaps the most dangerous legacy of this war would be the mistaken belief that the use of military force was necessary and justifiable, leading to more such interventions in the future. The challenge, then, is to develop such a clearer understanding of the war and the events that led to it.