

FOREIGN AFFAIRS

SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 1999



A Perfect Failure: NATO's War Against Yugoslavia

Michael Mandelbaum

Volume 78 • Number 5

The contents of *Foreign Affairs* are copyrighted.
© 1999 Council on Foreign Relations, Inc. All rights reserved.

A Perfect Failure

NATO's War Against Yugoslavia

Michael Mandelbaum

On the night of May 7, 1999—the 45th day of NATO's air campaign against Yugoslavia—bombs struck the Chinese embassy in downtown Belgrade, crushing the building and killing three Chinese who were said to be journalists. An investigation revealed that American intelligence had misidentified the structure as the headquarters of the Yugoslav Bureau of Federal Supply and Procurement. On that basis, NATO planners had put it on the list of approved targets and, guided by satellite, an American B-2 bomber destroyed it.

The attack on the embassy was therefore a mistake. It was not, however, an aberration. It symbolized NATO's Yugoslav war, a conflict marked by military success and political failure. The alliance's air forces carried out their missions with dispatch; the assault forced the Serb military's withdrawal from the southern Yugoslav province of Kosovo. The wider political consequences of the war, however, were the opposite of what NATO's political leaders intended.

Every war has unanticipated consequences, but in this case virtually all the

major political effects were unplanned, unanticipated, and unwelcome. The war itself was the unintended consequence of a gross error in political judgment. Having begun it, Western political leaders declared that they were fighting for the sake of the people of the Balkans, who nevertheless emerged from the war considerably worse off than they had been before. The alliance also fought to establish a new principle governing the use of force in the post-Cold War world. But the war set precedents that it would be neither feasible nor desirable to follow. Finally, like all wars, this one affected the national interests of the countries that waged it. The effects were negative: relations with two large, important, and troublesome formerly communist countries, Russia and China, were set back by the military operations in the Balkans.

PAVED WITH GOOD INTENTIONS

At the outset of the bombing campaign, the Clinton administration said that it was acting to save lives. Before NATO

MICHAEL MANDELBAUM is the Whitney H. Shepardson Fellow of the Council on Foreign Relations for 1999–2000.

intervened on March 24, approximately 2,500 people had died in Kosovo's civil war between the Serb authorities and the ethnic Albanian insurgents of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA). During the 11 weeks of bombardment, an estimated 10,000 people died violently in the province, most of them Albanian civilians murdered by Serbs.

An equally important NATO goal was to prevent the forced displacement of the Kosovar Albanians. At the outset of the bombing, 230,000 were estimated to have left their homes. By its end, 1.4 million were displaced. Of these, 860,000 were outside Kosovo, with the vast majority in hastily constructed camps in Albania and Macedonia.

The alliance also went to war, by its own account, to protect the precarious political stability of the countries of the Balkans. The result, however, was precisely the opposite: the war made all of them less stable. Albania was flooded with refugees with whom it had no means of coping. In Macedonia, the fragile political balance between Slavs and indigenous Albanians was threatened by the influx of ethnic Albanians from Kosovo. The combination of the Serb rampage on the ground and NATO attacks from the air reduced large parts of Kosovo to rubble. In Serbia proper the NATO air campaign destroyed much of the infrastructure on which economic life depended.

Had this been a war fought for national interests, and had the eviction of Serb forces from Kosovo been an important interest of NATO's member countries, the war could be deemed a success, although a regrettably costly one. But NATO waged the war not for its interests but on behalf of its values. The supreme goal was the well-being of the Albanian Kosovars. By this

standard, although the worst outcome—the permanent exile of the Albanians from Kosovo—was avoided, the war was not successful.

THE FATAL MISCALCULATION

According to the Clinton administration, the harm to the people of the Balkans was inevitable and entirely the fault of Serbia. Yugoslav President Slobodan Milošević, the administration said, had long planned to evict all Albanians from Kosovo—where they had come to outnumber Serbs by almost ten to one—in order to ensure perpetual Serb control of the province. NATO could not honorably stand by while Milošević carried out his scheme of “ethnic cleansing” and thus had no choice but to respond as it did—with a 78-day bombing campaign.

Precisely when Belgrade decided on the tactics it employed in Kosovo after the bombing began, and indeed just what it decided—whether the displacement of almost 1.5 million Albanians was its original aim, simply a byproduct of a sweeping assault on the KLA, or a response to NATO's air campaign—are questions that cannot be seriously addressed without access to such records as the Milošević regime may have kept. To be sure, the practice of ethnic cleansing was scarcely unknown to the regime; indeed, it has been an all-too-familiar feature of twentieth-century Balkan history. And whatever their motives, those who killed and put to flight Albanians, and those with authority over the killers and ethnic cleansers bear personal responsibility for the epidemic of crimes in Kosovo.

But there are reasons for skepticism about the Clinton administration's assertion that Milošević's spring offensive against

the Kosovar Albanians, like Hitler's war against the Jews, was long intended and carefully planned. Milošević had, after all, controlled the province for ten years without attempting anything approaching what happened in 1999. In October 1998, Serb forces launched an offensive against the KLA that drove 400,000 people from their homes. A cease-fire was arranged, and a great many returned. A team of unarmed monitors from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) was dispatched to the province to give the Albanians a measure of protection. At the outset of 1999, the cease-fire broke down, violated by both sides. Although a concerted effort to reinforce the cease-fire and strengthen the international observers could not have ended the violence altogether, it might have limited the assaults on noncombatants and averted the disaster that Kosovo suffered. Containing the fighting could have bought time for what was necessary for a peaceful resolution of the conflict: a change of leadership in Belgrade. Removing Milošević from office was by no means an impossible proposition. He was not popular with Serbs (the subsequent NATO assault temporarily *increased* his popularity), he did not exercise anything resembling totalitarian control over Serbia, and prolonged demonstrations in 1996–97 had almost toppled him.

But NATO chose a different course. Led by Secretary of State Madeleine K. Albright, it summoned the Serbs and the KLA to the French chateau of Rambouillet, presented them with a detailed plan for political autonomy in Kosovo under NATO auspices, demanded that both agree to it, and threatened military reprisals if either refused. Both did refuse. The Americans thereupon negotiated with the KLA, ac-

quired its assent to the Rambouillet plan, and, when the Serbs persisted in their refusal, waited for the withdrawal of the OSCE monitors and then began to bomb.

Albright later said that "before resorting to force, NATO went the extra mile to find a peaceful resolution," but the terms on which the bombing ended cast doubt on her assertion: they included important departures from Rambouillet that amount to concessions to the Serbs. The United Nations received ultimate authority for Kosovo, giving Russia, a country friendly to the Serbs, the power of veto. The Rambouillet document had called for a referendum after three years to decide Kosovo's ultimate status, which would certainly have produced a large majority for independence; the terms on which the war ended made no mention of a referendum. And whereas Rambouillet gave NATO forces unimpeded access to all of Yugoslavia, including Serbia, the June settlement allowed the alliance free rein only in Kosovo.

Whether such modifications, if offered before the bombing began and combined with a more robust OSCE presence in Kosovo, could have avoided what followed can never be known. What is clear is that NATO's leaders believed that concessions were unnecessary because a few exemplary salvos would quickly bring the Serbs to heel. "I think this is . . . achievable within a short period of time," Albright said when the bombing began. She and her colleagues were said to consider Milošević a Balkan version of a "schoolyard bully" who would back down when challenged. Apparently the customs in Serbian schoolyards differ from those in the institutions where the senior officials of the Clinton administration were educated, for he did

not back down. NATO thus began its war on the basis of a miscalculation. It was a miscalculation that exacted a high price. The people of the Balkans paid it.

Yet when the war ended, the political question at its heart remained unsettled. That question concerned the proper principle for determining sovereignty. The Albanians had fought for independence based on the right to national self-determination. The Serbs had fought to keep Kosovo part of Yugoslavia in the name of the inviolability of existing borders. While insisting that Kosovo be granted autonomy, NATO asserted that it must remain part of Yugoslavia. The alliance had therefore intervened in a civil war and defeated one side, but embraced the position of the party it had defeated on the issue over which the war had been fought.

This made the war, as a deliberate act of policy, a perfect failure. The humanitarian goal NATO sought—the prevention of suffering—was not achieved by the bombing; the political goal the air campaign made possible and the Albanian Kosovars favored—independence—NATO not only did not seek but actively opposed.

Moreover, the Albanian Kosovars were unlikely to accept any continuing connection to Belgrade, in which case NATO would face an awkward choice. An effort to grant independence to Kosovo would encounter opposition from Russia and China, which, as permanent members of the U.N. Security Council, would be able to block it. Denying independence, however, would risk putting the NATO troops in Kosovo at odds with the KLA and repeating the unhappy experiences of the British army in Northern Ireland since the early 1970s and the American troops in Lebanon in 1982–83, both of which arrived

as peacekeepers but eventually found themselves the targets of local forces.

THE CLINTON DOCTRINE

Besides protecting the Albanian Kosovars, NATO aspired to establish, with its Yugoslav war, a new doctrine governing military operations in the post–Cold War era. This putative doctrine of “humanitarian intervention” had two parts: the use of force on behalf of universal values instead of the narrower national interests for which sovereign states have traditionally fought; and, in defense of these values, military intervention in the internal affairs of sovereign states rather than mere opposition to cross-border aggression, as in the Gulf War of 1991.

The first of these precepts contained a contradiction. Because no national interest was at stake, the degree of public support the war could command in NATO’s member countries was severely limited. Recognizing this, the alliance’s political leaders decreed that the war be conducted without risk to their military personnel. Its military operations were thus confined to bombardment from high altitudes. But this meant that NATO never even attempted what was announced to be the purpose of going to war in the first place: the protection of the Kosovar Albanians.

As for the second tenet of “humanitarian intervention,” it is, by the established standards of proper international conduct, illegal. The basic precept of international law is the prohibition against interference in the internal affairs of other sovereign states. Without this rule there would be no basis for international order of any kind. But if the rule is inviolable, rulers can mistreat people in any way they like as long as the mistreatment takes place

within legally recognized borders. Thus, in recent years international practice has begun to permit exceptions, but only under two conditions, neither of which was present in NATO's war against Yugoslavia.

One condition is a gross violation of human rights. The Serb treatment of Albanians in Kosovo before the NATO bombing was hardly exemplary, but measured by the worst of all human rights violations—murder—neither was it exceptionally bad. Far fewer people had died as a result of fighting in Kosovo before the bombing started than had been killed in civil strife in Sierra Leone, Sudan, or Rwanda—African countries in which NATO showed no interest in intervening. Thus NATO's war did nothing to establish a viable standard for deciding when humanitarian intervention may be undertaken. Instead, it left the unfortunate impression that, in the eyes of the West, an assault terrible enough to justify military intervention is the kind of thing that happens in Europe but not in Africa.

A second condition for violating the normal proscription against intervening in the internal affairs of a sovereign state is authorization by a legitimate authority. This means the United Nations, which, for all its shortcomings, is the closest thing the world has to a global parliament. But NATO acted without U.N. authorization, implying either that the Atlantic alliance can disregard international law when it chooses—a precept unacceptable to nonmembers of the alliance—or that any regional grouping may do so (giving, for example, the Russian-dominated Commonwealth of Independent States the right to intervene in Ukraine if it believes ethnic Russians there are being mistreated)—which is unacceptable to NATO.

Nor did the way the war was fought set a useful precedent. The basic procedure for the conduct of a “just war” is to spare noncombatants. NATO was scrupulous about trying to avoid direct attacks on civilians. But by striking infrastructure in Serbia, including electrical grids and water facilities, the alliance did considerable indirect damage to the civilian population there. Besides harming those whom NATO's political leaders had proclaimed innocent of the crimes committed in Kosovo—for which they blamed Milošević, not the Serb people—these strikes violated Article 14 of the 1977 Protocol to the 1949 Geneva Convention, which bars attacks on “objects indispensable to the survival of the civilian population.”

The bombing of Serbia, moreover, continued an ugly pattern that the Clinton administration had followed in Haiti and Iraq, a pattern born of a combination of objection to particular leaders and reluctance to risk American casualties. As with Milošević, the administration had opposed the policies of the military junta that had seized power in Haiti and of Saddam Hussein in Iraq. As in the case of Yugoslavia, invading those two countries to remove the offending leadership was militarily feasible but politically unattractive for the Clinton administration. In all three countries, the administration therefore took steps short of invasion that inflicted suffering on the civilian population—the crushing embargoes of Haiti and Iraq were the equivalents of the bombing of the Serb infrastructure—without (until October 1994 in Haiti, and to the present in Iraq) removing the leaders from power. If there is a Clinton Doctrine—an innovation by the present administration in the conduct of foreign

policy—it is this: punishing the innocent in order to express indignation at the guilty.

STRATEGIC DAMAGE

Although ostensibly waged on behalf of NATO's values, the war also affected two of its most important interests: relations with China and Russia. Its effect was to worsen relations with the only two countries in the world that aim nuclear weapons at the United States.

The Chinese leaders professed to be unconvinced by the American explanation for the accidental attack on their embassy. Whatever they thought, the attack was a political windfall for their regime. It deflected attention from the tenth anniversary of the bloody crackdown on the student rallies in Beijing and other cities and channeled against the United States popular sentiment that might otherwise have been directed toward the perpetrators of oppression. It was thus a double setback for American China policy: it strengthened the elements in the Chinese government least favored by Washington, and it stirred anti-American sentiment in some sectors of the Chinese population.

As for Russia, the war accelerated the deterioration in its relations with the West that the ill-advised decision to extend NATO membership to Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic had set in motion. In return for permitting a reunited Germany within NATO, Mikhail Gorbachev was promised that the Western military alliance would not expand further eastward. The Clinton administration broke that promise but offered three compensating assurances: that NATO was transforming itself into a largely political organization for the promotion of democracy and free markets; that insofar as NATO retained a military

mission, it was strictly a defensive one; and that Russia, although not a NATO member, would be a full participant in European security affairs. The war in Yugoslavia gave the lie to all three: NATO initiated a war against a sovereign state that had attacked none of its members, a war to which Russia objected but that Moscow could not prevent.

Whereas NATO expansion had angered the Russian political class, the bombing of Serbia by all accounts triggered widespread outrage in the Russian public. Thus the sudden postwar occupation of the airport at Priština, the capital of Kosovo, by 200 Russian troops evoked enthusiastic approval in Russia and signaled a shift in the politics of Russian foreign policy in a nationalist direction.

Moscow sought to secure a separate Russian zone of occupation in postwar Kosovo; NATO refused. Russia could not reinforce its position at the airport (and in any case depended on the NATO governments for economic assistance), so it accepted something less: a presence within the American, French, and German zones. The war therefore had the same consequence for Kosovo that NATO expansion had for Europe as a whole: the stability of the military arrangements in both places came to depend less on Russian consent than on Russian weakness.

THE ALBRIGHT LEGACY

The United States dominated the prewar diplomacy and the air campaign, and the war was thus a monument to the efforts of the two officials with the greatest influence on American policy toward the Balkans.

The lesser of the two was President Clinton. He assumed the role of commander in chief with reluctance. Asked

at an April 23 press conference with NATO Secretary-General Javier Solana during NATO's 50th anniversary celebration whether the alliance would consider inserting ground troops into Kosovo, Clinton deferred to Solana, as if it were the Spanish official and not he who had the power and responsibility to make that decision.

The official most closely identified with the war was Albright. When it ended, she spoke to troops in Macedonia preparing to enter Kosovo as peacekeepers. "This is what America is good at," she said, "helping people." The help the Albanian Kosovars needed was with rebuilding their homes and their lives. Here, the Clinton administration's track record was not encouraging: it had promised order in Somalia and left chaos. It had gone to Haiti to restore democracy and had left anarchy. It had bombed in Bosnia for the sake of national unity but presided over a *de facto* partition. But since Clinton had made clear that little money for recovery would come from the United States, the Kosovars' prospects depended on whether, at the end of the twentieth century, "helping people" was what *Europe* had come to be good at.

Albright was on firmer ground with another assertion. Kosovo, she said, was "simply the most important thing we have done in the world." This proved accurate, in no small part due to her efforts. And unlike the other political consequences of NATO's Yugoslav war, it was, for her, entirely intentional. In an administration increasingly preoccupied with its legacy, she had thereby produced one for herself. Focusing the vast strength of American foreign policy on a tiny former Ottoman possession of no strategic importance or economic value, with which the United States had no ties of history, geography,

or sentiment, is something that not even the most powerful and visionary of her predecessors—not Thomas Jefferson or John Quincy Adams, not Charles Evans Hughes or Dean Acheson—could ever have imagined, let alone achieved. But as American bombs fell on Yugoslavia, Madeleine Albright had done both. 🌐