

US military uses Yugoslavia as testing ground for high-tech weaponry

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The US military has welcomed the confrontation with Serbia as an opportunity to test its arsenal of high-tech weaponry and to train American military personnel in a new theater of war.

Military commanders were elated the night the bombing began, according to the *New York Times*. "For some diplomats and officials at NATO headquarters in Brussels, where [Supreme Commander US General Wesley] Clark has made no secret of his judgment that an air campaign against Milosevic was justified long ago, the mood this evening was almost jubilant," the newspaper wrote. "'It's accelerating and exhilarating,' said one."

Each branch of the armed forces is jockeying for the chance to display its weapon systems, regardless of whether any specific military purpose is fulfilled, simply to justify their multibillion-dollar budgets.

Since the bombing began US Navy warships and submarines in the Adriatic Sea, and bombers flown from Italy, have launched scores of cruise missiles at Serbian targets. These include a new generation of Tomahawk missiles, which the Pentagon says have "proven effective" during recent raids against Iraq, hitting 80 percent of their targets.

Military planners prefer the unmanned missiles--which cost \$750,000 each--in the initial stages of an attack rather than risking more expensive manned aircraft. The cruise missiles, built by Raytheon Corporation, are launched with the click of a computer mouse from ships floating well out of reach of any enemy threat. Traveling at the speed of sound, the missiles are guided to their targets by 24 global positioning satellites orbiting the earth.

Wednesday was also the debut of the US Air Force's most expensive warplane, the B-2 "Spirit" stealth bomber. Two of the \$2.2 billion planes flew from air

bases in Missouri to Yugoslavia, where they dropped 40,000 pounds of bombs each, and then returned nonstop to the US.

First introduced in 1988 for long-range nuclear strikes deep into the former Soviet Union, the plane had been plagued by technical problems, including a radar system which had difficulty distinguishing mountain ranges from clouds and radar-absorbent paint that wore off too quickly. The fear of losing the aircraft, two of which cost as much as an aircraft carrier, led the military to pass over the B-2 for combat missions at a time when every other strike aircraft was being deployed in the Persian Gulf.

The Air Force had been "champing at the bit" to test its B-2 squadron on real missions since its deployment in 1993, said Chris Hillman, an analyst with the Center for Defense Information in Washington, DC. Although the military has simulated using the B-2s, Hillman said simulations are like video games when compared to real battle. The only true test of the B-2 "is to have somebody who really hates us trying to shoot us down," he said.

After the mission General Leroy Barnidge, commander of the B-2 Bomb Wing in Missouri, said, "I got to tell you, the crews in these jets performed magnificently. It says to the critics that this plane did everything it advertised, and then some."

The US currently has a fleet of 21 B-2 bombers, which costs \$44 billion. The warplane's "success" over the skies of Yugoslavia will surely mean billions more in future procurements for manufacturer Northrop Grumman.

Raytheon, Northrop Grumman, Lockheed Martin, Boeing and other US defense contractors have made no secret of the fact that they see the conflict in Yugoslavia as an opportunity to market their weapons

and secure new contracts. On Friday Reuters financial service carried an article entitled, "Conflict lets US weapon makers strut their stuff" which began, "The conflict in Yugoslavia will give US defense firms, especially Raytheon Co., a chance to show off their wares on a global stage, analysts said on Thursday."

Robert Friedman, an analyst for S&P Equity Group, told Reuters, "It really depends on how long this conflict goes. If this becomes a protracted war, and it is heavily dependent on cruise missiles, then that would help Raytheon's short-term bottom-line."

Raytheon spokesman Dave Shea concurred, saying, "Certainly, it portends for increased business, but it would be difficult to quantify at this point." Referring to the cruise missiles, smart bombs and other weapons made by the company, Shea added, "Assuming that the weapons work as advertised, we view that as the best advertising."

Since the Cold War ended in 1990 sales to foreign governments have represented the greatest growth opportunity for US defense contractors, which have consolidated over the last decade. The companies lobbied hard for the expansion of NATO and US government loans to Eastern and Central European countries to upgrade their militaries with American-made equipment.

Military planners are also anxious to test out US military forces in a new terrain, and fighting a new enemy, in Yugoslavia. Unlike the flat desert expanse of Iraq, where isolated targets were clearly visible in the springtime, Serbian mobile anti-aircraft missiles and artillery are hidden in the mountains, valleys and woods and the weather is typically cloudy. Pentagon spokesman Ken Bacon said, "We've had a lot of experience against these weapons, but every country and every air defense system presents its own challenges and we take those challenges, very, very seriously."

The opportunity to test improvements in weapons systems and give pilots and other specialists experience under hostile fire is a significant factor in American foreign policy. In the 25 years since its ignominious withdrawal from Vietnam, the US military has engaged in foreign adventures every few years: Lebanon and Grenada, 1983; Libya, 1985; Panama, 1989; Iraq, 1990-91; Somalia, 1992-93; Haiti, 1994; Bosnia, 1996; and now Yugoslavia.

There is, of course, a down side to such training missions--the potential for US losses. The Pentagon has elite squads to rescue pilots in the event that a plane is shot down. The Clinton administration is greatly concerned that any substantial US military casualties could evoke domestic opposition. At the same time, US military commanders know that a "bloodying" of the troops is essential for the type of sustained conflicts that are being planned for the future.

The US has greatly exaggerated the Serbian military threat in order to justify the massive forces it has arrayed against the country. But senior Pentagon officials said the Yugoslav airforce consists mainly of old Soviet planes and only 15 newer MiG-29s and is not considered a major threat to US and NATO warplanes. The official gloated, "Our air-to-air pilots would probably love to see them come up to fight."

Another element of the attack on Yugoslavia is the desire of military officials to condition the American public to accept massive civilian casualties. US-NATO commanders have warned that targets in Serbia will not be isolated desert outposts, but cities, towns and villages where Serbian troops and Kosovar rebels are fighting.

"The American public is used to these instant gratification operations with zero defects," said retired Admiral Thomas J. Lopez, former commander of NATO's southern command. Once the military operations begin against Serbia "they are going to pound the living hell out of it," he said.



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