

# The US and ethnic cleansing—the case of Croatia

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If the first casualty of war is the truth, the second, it would seem, is the capacity for critical thought. Beneath the mind-numbing pressure of unrelenting propaganda—centered on the fate of the Kosovar people—a large number of usually intelligent people are losing their political bearings and supporting the US-NATO bombing of Yugoslavia. “Normally”—i.e., when there is no war in progress—they oppose imperialism and militarism. As a general proposition, they are against the waging of war for markets, profits and other geo-political strategical interests. But *this* war is different: it is being waged for “human rights,” to save lives that are threatened by racially-motivated atrocities being committed by the military forces unleashed by the Yugoslav government. In such a situation, it is argued, one is left with no choice but to accept the necessity of war to stop the barbarism known as “ethnic cleansing.”

This position seems, at least on the surface, very reasonable. After all, who possibly can argue against the moral imperative of saving lives? A political criminal—Milosevic—has been identified. The images of his numerous victims have been broadcast all over the world. If bombing is what it takes to deal with this criminal and end the carnage, then so be it.

However, if the history of the 20th century teaches us anything, it is to beware of such “self-evident” justifications for the wars waged by the major capitalist powers. In weighing the explanations offered by the United States and its West European NATO allies for this or some other military intervention, one must never fail to distinguish the various *good reasons*—i.e., those couched in suitably altruistic and moralistic terms—from the *real reasons*—i.e., considerations of international imperialist power politics and commercial-financial bourgeois class interests.

Even if we were to accept, without any further investigation, that Milosevic is guilty of all the crimes of which he stands accused, that would still not explain why the United States insisted upon military action against Yugoslavia. If one were to prepare a list of the real reasons why the United States is bombing Yugoslavia, the fate of the Kosovan people would be, if it were included at all, at the very bottom.

We have not been alone in noting that the attitude of the United States toward cases of mass repression in different parts of the world—even when the repression assumes the form of

“ethnic cleansing”—is hypocritical to the core. When the repression is carried out by regimes which are deemed vital to key geo-political and economic interests—such as that carried out by Turkey against the Kurds—the United States offers not only apologies but also direct practical support.

Moreover, within the Balkans itself, the response of the United States to atrocities has reflected political rather than moral calculations. The manner in which the United States has reacted to the documented atrocities committed by the Croatian regime of Franjo Tudjman provides the most glaring exposure of the cynicism that underlies all the posturing about “human rights.”

On March 21, just several days before the first air strikes were launched against Yugoslavia, *The New York Times* reported that investigators at the international war crimes tribunal in The Hague “concluded that the Croatian Army carried out summary executions, indiscriminate shelling of civilian populations and ‘ethnic cleansing’ during a 1995 assault that was a turning point in the Balkan wars, according to tribunal documents.” The *Times*’ account stated that the tribunal was recommending the indictment of three Croatian generals. The report continued:

“Any indictment of the Croatian Army generals could prove politically troublesome for the Clinton Administration, which has a delicate relationship with Croatia, an American ally in preserving the peace in Bosnia with a poor human rights record.

“The August 1995 Croatian offensive, which drove some 100,000 Serbs from a large swath of Croatia over four days, was carried out with the tacit blessing of the United States by a Croatian army that had been schooled in part by a group of retired American military officers. Questions still remain about the full extent of United States involvement.

“In the course of a three-year investigation into the assault, the United States has failed to provide critical evidence requested by the tribunal, according to tribunal documents and officials, adding to suspicion among some there that Washington is uneasy about the investigation.”

Scenes very similar to those with which the world has become acquainted during the last three weeks would have been seen nearly four years ago had the American media chosen to cover the forced removal of Serbs from the Krajina

province in the summer of 1995. “The Croatian Army,” wrote the *Times*, “drove more than 100,000 Serbs from their ancestral homelands, forcing them to flee on carts and in small cars jammed with their possessions.” The tribunal documents referred to by the *Times* cite numerous instances of atrocities committed by Croat forces against Serbs. “In a widespread and systematic manner,” the tribunal’s investigators assert, “Croatian troops committed murder and other inhumane acts upon and against Croatian Serbs.”

According to the *Times*’ report, these crimes were committed in the course of an operation that had been planned with the assistance of a retired American general working for a private company based in Virginia, Military Professional Resources, Inc.

The double standard applied by the United States in its attitude toward atrocities in the Balkans emerges quite clearly in the boastful account given by Ambassador Richard Holbrooke of discussions he held with Croatian President Tudjman while the offensive was in progress. He describes how the United States, while publicly feigning disapproval of the Croatian offensive that drove the Serbs from the Krajina, privately encouraged Tudjman to pursue his military assault vigorously:

“Galbraith [the US ambassador to Croatia] and I saw Tudjman on September 14. Tudjman wanted clarification of the American position. He bluntly asked for my *personal* views. I indicated my general support for the offensive, but delayed a more detailed exchange for a second meeting so that I could discuss it with my colleagues and Washington.

“Galbraith and I met with Tudjman alone again on September 17 ... I told Tudjman the offensive had great value to the negotiations. It would be much easier to retain at the table what had been won on the battlefield than to get the Serbs to give up territory they had controlled for several years.” [1]

At the time of the meeting Holbrooke was fully aware that the Croatian Army was carrying out atrocities against the Serbs. Indeed, Holbrooke was concerned that the extent of the carnage might prove politically harmful and urged Tudjman to place some restraints on the actions of the forces under his control:

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“Using a provocative phrase normally applied only to the Serbs, I told Tudjman that current Croatian behavior might be viewed as a milder form of ethnic cleansing. Tudjman reacted strongly, but did not quite deny it...” [2]

The atmosphere of relaxed cynicism with which Holbrooke and his associates viewed the killing in the Balkans is strikingly portrayed in another episode. In the early stages of this critical Croatian offensive, one member of the American negotiating team, who seemed to be taking the United States’ formal disapproval too seriously, pressed Tudjman at a lunch meeting to call off his military action. Robert Frasure, Holbrooke’s principal aide, sharply disapproved of this naïve intervention.

He wrote a brief note that he passed over to Holbrooke. It read:

“Dick: We ‘hired’ these guys [i.e., Tudjman and the Croatian military leaders] to be our junkyard dogs because we were desperate. We need to try to ‘control’ them. But this is no time to get squeamish about things.”

This note, which Holbrooke cites so proudly, more or less summarizes the relation of American imperialism to the leaders of the various states of the Balkans: They are the “junkyard dogs” of the United States, to be controlled or unleashed depending on the circumstances.

A brief coda to this episode. *The Wall Street Journal* reports in its edition of April 14 that the United States, over the objections of some of its European allies, is grooming Croatia for membership in NATO. Human rights groups complain that Tudjman continues to protect war criminals, encourages the activities of extreme right-wing nationalist organizations, and runs a repressive authoritarian regime. Still, Croatia has been invited to attend NATO briefings on the progress of the bombing campaign. On Monday evening Croatia was invited to a dinner meeting with Secretary of State Madeleine Albright attended by the foreign ministers of “front line” states in the Kosovo crisis.

There is another aspect of the blossoming relation between Croatia and the United States noted by *The Wall Street Journal*:

“Since Croatia ended its war with Yugoslavia in 1995, the U.S. has established strong commercial ties, and Croatia now cites America as its biggest foreign investor. EnronCorp. is negotiating to build a power plant here. BechtelCorp. won a \$600 million road-building job, for which the U.S. Export-Import Bank last month granted a \$228 million low-interest loan, the first of its kind in the region; the timing appears to have been coincidental.”

Notes:

1. *To End A War* (New York, 1998), pp. 159-60.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 160.



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