

Why did events in Kosovo take the Clinton Administration by surprise?

Martin McLaughlin
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Clinton administration officials have admitted in recent days that they gravely miscalculated the likely consequences of launching air strikes against Serbia. They claimed to have been "taken by surprise" by the intensified bloodletting and ethnic cleansing in Kosovo, which has resulted in tens of thousands of ethnic Albanians being driven out of their homes and forced into refugee camps in Albania and Macedonia.

If one assumes for the sake of argument that these claims are true, it demonstrates the blindness and stupidity which guide the formulation of American foreign policy. Blindness, because there were many forecasts of the disaster that would ensue in Kosovo in the event of NATO bombing, even in the pages of the American press. Stupidity, because even a rudimentary knowledge of the history of the region would suggest that dropping bombs on Serbia is a sure way to incite nationalism and provoke more violence.

Even more extraordinary is the conclusion which administration spokesmen seek to draw from this admission. Having conceded that their decision to launch the bombing of Serbia was based at least in part on an enormous miscalculation, the White House and State Department declare that the remedy is even more bombing! But why should the latest argument for heavier bombing be accepted, when it comes from those who failed to foresee the obvious consequences of the first week of air strikes?

What is behind the manifest incapacity of American foreign policy makers--not only in the White House and State Department, but in Congress and in the elite circles in Washington where such issues are debated? This is an important question, for we are dealing with ignorance not merely as the affliction of various individuals in government, but with a definite socio-political phenomenon. In the final analysis, the political

dementia that seems to prevail in Washington arises from the nature of American imperialism and the contradictions which beset its role in world affairs.

There is an enormous gap between the global aspirations of the United States, which seeks to impose its will in every corner of the planet, and its real power to affect events. The United States is, as Clinton and countless media pundits proclaim, "the world's only superpower." But this status does not give America unlimited scope to exercise its domination. Indeed, from the standpoint of its economic and political power, the United States is far weaker today than it was 50 years ago, at the end of World War II, when American industry dominated the world market and its major imperialist rivals--Germany, Japan, Britain and France--were either conquered or bankrupted by the conflict.

This relative decline has left the United States with undisputed dominance in only one area--military force. Hence the infatuation of American policy-makers with violence, and their unshakeable conviction that cruise missiles, smart bombs and other high-tech weapons can produce the results desired by Washington, regardless of historical processes and local conditions. The end result is diplomats like Madeleine Albright, who believe that military power makes diplomacy itself irrelevant. Their answer to every problem is "We'll bomb."

Another factor is the role played by the mass media in the degradation of political and intellectual life in the United States. Especially since the Vietnam debacle--which was followed by recriminations about the impact of critical media coverage of the war on public opinion--the ruling class has developed the media as a gigantic machine for stultifying public opinion and blocking any genuine democratic

discussion about American foreign policy. Of course, crass commercial considerations have contributed to the virtual disappearance of serious news analysis and commentary. The evening news consists largely of a series of 30 to 60 second clips. A feature that runs as long as two minutes is called an "in-depth" report. The transformation of news programs into a variety of entertainment requires that all political subjects, no matter how complex, be reduced to the most simplistic formulae, i.e., American "good guys" vs. foreign "bad guys." Any foreign adversary of American interests is likely to find himself labeled "another Hitler."

In the language of the Pentagon, however, there has been "collateral damage" from the carpet bombing of public opinion with stupidity and lies. The social types recruited into the media are, with few exceptions, largely ignorant of the topics and issues they pronounce upon. And those who give some sign of intelligence have been utterly corrupted by the wealth and prestige bestowed upon them by their celebrity status. Thus, there is not to be found in the media a single commentator who seriously questions the assumptions and premises upon which foreign policy decisions are based. But in the process of lowering the level of public understanding of world events, the American ruling class has also succeeded in stupefying itself.



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