

Behind and beyond the propaganda: Why is the US bombing Serbia?

David North
2 April 1999

Also in Serbo-Croatian

Why are the United States and NATO bombing Serbia? The simple answer, according to all the governments involved in this enterprise, is to stand up for human rights and stop the "ethnic cleansing" of the Albanians in Kosovo.

This theme has resonated throughout the media, which has gone so far as to proclaim that the attack on Serbia represents an entirely new type of war, i.e., one whose purpose is purely humanitarian. As Max Boot of the *Wall Street Journal* declared in the edition of April 1:

"Though it may seem odd to link foreign policy and altruism, it seems clear that NATO's purposes in Kosovo are primarily humanitarian. Whether the mission goes badly or well, the objective is simply to stop the ethnic cleansing of Kosovar Albanians. The F-16s and B-2s, in short, are being used in an act of international charity on a grand scale."

One cannot help but imagine how Orwell would have responded to this extraordinary contribution to *Newspeak*: bombing described as charity! This seems to open up intriguing possibilities. Why not simply proclaim this war to be a vast philanthropic exercise and rename the mission, Operation Generosity?

In every imperialist war, vast propaganda resources are devoted to the manipulation of public opinion. No capitalist government expects to win popular support for war on the basis of a frank discussion of the financial, commercial and great-power interests that motivate its military actions. Thus, it seeks to mobilize public opinion by appealing to the nobler sentiments of the masses: "Fight the War to End All Wars," "Make the World Safe For Democracy," "Defend the Free World," etc.

A corollary of such propaganda campaigns is the demonization of the enemy, who supposedly represents the antithesis of all these worthy ideals. He needs only to be eliminated and an earthly paradise will be achieved. In its most developed form, this is known as "The 'Bad Hitler' theory of history."

When George Bush prepared for the invasion of Panama, the media suddenly discovered quite shocking similarities

between Noriega, a one-time asset of the CIA, and Hitler. A year later, Bush declared that Saddam Hussein was "Hitler revisited." Now has come the turn of Milosevic.

In the weeks leading up to the bombing of Serbia, it was frankly admitted in the press that the Clinton administration was finding it difficult to explain to the public why the United States should go to war against a small country that was not viewed as an enemy by the overwhelming majority of the American people. Indeed, Clinton admitted somewhat ruefully that most Americans (and this probably includes the vast majority of news media celebrities) would not be able to locate Kosovo on a world map.

Finally, the administration concluded that claims of gross violations of human rights by the Serbs--chillingly described as "ethnic cleansing" and evoking images of Nazi genocide--would be the most effective means of rapidly winning public support for a bombing campaign.

From the standpoint of the administration, the claim that the war is being fought to stop "ethnic cleansing" is seen as particularly effective because it serves to de-legitimize all opposition to the war. After all, how can any decent person oppose a war that is being fought simply to prevent mass murder?

The effectiveness of such a simplistic argument is enhanced by the fact that the media is in a position to control and manipulate the images of the war that are broadcast over the airwaves. After all, sitting in front of a television, the average viewer is not in a position to question the commentary that accompanies video footage of refugees. The context is presented by the networks. The viewer has no way of independently determining why or from whom the refugees are fleeing.

For example, the media simply does not report that one of the essential constituent elements in the violence that has produced a flood of refugees is the clash between the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA)--which has enjoyed increasing political and logistical support from the United States--and the Serbian army. We have no doubt that the Serb forces have targeted Kosovan civilians and bear

responsibility for much misery and death. But they are not the only actors in this tragedy, and the refusal of the media to examine the role of the KLA serves only to distort reality and conceal the political aims that underlie the intervention of the United States.

Earlier this year, on February 2, the director of the Central Intelligence Agency, George J. Tenet, appeared before the Senate Armed Services Committee. Describing Kosovo as "the most acute problem" in the Balkans, Tenet asserted that "The Kosovo Liberation Army will emerge from the winter better trained [by whom?], better equipped [again, by whom?] and better led than last year. With neither Belgrade nor the Kosovar Albanians willing to compromise at this point, spring will bring harder fighting and heavier casualties, unless the International Community succeeds in imposing a political settlement."

Tenet provided a brief review of the history of the KLA: "By 1996, a loosely organized insurgency, the Kosovo Liberation Army or KLA, had emerged--dedicated to overthrowing Belgrade's rule by force. The KLA grew quickly and was able last spring to mount low-level attacks against Serb police forces and expand its presence throughout the province, even exercising effective control over some areas in central Kosovo."

In Tenet's view, the counterinsurgency efforts of the Serb army had achieved only limited results, and the KLA had successfully exploited the cease-fire to which Belgrade had agreed in October "to improve its training and command and control, as well as to acquire more and better weapons. As a result the KLA is a more formidable force than the Serbs faced last summer. We estimate that there are several thousand KLA regulars augmented by thousands more irregulars, or home guards. Moreover, funds pouring into KLA coffers from the Albanian Diaspora have increased sharply following the massacre at Recak."

Tenet then offered the following prognosis:

"We assess that if fighting escalates in the spring--as we expect--it will be bloodier than last year's. Belgrade will seek to crush the KLA once and for all, while the insurgents will have the capability to inflict heavier casualties on Serb forces. *Both sides likely will step up attacks on civilians. There is already evidence that the KLA may be retaliating for the slaying of Albanian civilians at the hands of Serb security forces by attacking Serb civilians. The recent attacks against Serb bars and restaurants in Pristina and Pec could be the beginning of a pattern of tit-for-tat retaliation that will grow more severe as fighting intensifies.* Heavier fighting also will result in another humanitarian crisis, possibly greater in scale than last year's, which created 250,000 refugees and internally displaced persons along with hundreds of destroyed buildings and homes" (emphasis

added).

A number of important political conclusions emerge from this testimony.

First, in contrast to the propagandized presentation, the human tragedy in Kosovo is unfolding within the context of a bitter civil war between competing nationalist forces for control of the region. The United States foresaw that Kosovan civilians would be caught in the crossfire of this struggle.

To state this fact is not to condone atrocities or shrug one's shoulders in the face of human suffering. But it is necessary to point out that the indiscriminate use of the term "ethnic cleansing" prevents an objective and serious examination of the political dynamic--regional and international--of this conflict.

Second, Tenet's testimony before the Senate committee sheds disturbing light on the calculations of the United States. The Clinton administration believed that the Kosovan insurgents were developing into a significant military force. Within the framework of an autonomous region--which was to be imposed upon the Serbian government at the talks in Rambouillet--the KLA would be able to develop under American tutelage into a useful regional asset of the United States, one that could be utilized to maintain steady pressure upon Belgrade.

But the United States miscalculated. It had expected that the Serbian government, faced with the threat of aerial bombardment and increasingly effective ground operations by US-and-NATO-backed KLA forces, would buckle under the pressure applied at Rambouillet and accept Kosovan autonomy.

Instead, the Serb government refused to back down. It then responded to the launching of the US-NATO bombing campaign by moving against the KLA forces with far greater speed and effectiveness than the Clinton administration had expected. It would appear from the results of the past week that the CIA grossly overestimated the fighting capacities of the KLA.

One cannot help but suspect that it is the fate of the KLA, far more than that of Kosovan civilians, which accounts for the vitriolic response of the media to the Serbian resistance.

Tomorrow: A closer look at the strange US double standard on human rights



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