

One month of the Balkan War: a balance sheet

The Editorial Board
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Also in Serbo-Croatian

One month ago President Clinton went on nationwide television to tell a stunned population why the United States and its NATO allies had launched an air war against Yugoslavia. Without even the pretense of a public debate, and no prior authorization from Congress, the Clinton administration had initiated the first-ever NATO war against a sovereign country, and the biggest military action in Europe since the Second World War.

Not since the Gulf of Tonkin incident in 1964--now generally acknowledged to have been a US provocation--have the American people been so rapidly drawn into a major war against a nation that posed no direct threat to their lives or well-being. Indeed, in his television address that Wednesday evening, March 24, Clinton felt obliged to point out on a map of Europe the location of Yugoslavia and the province of Kosovo.

A month later, what has become of the rationale given for the war? What has the US-NATO assault produced for the people of Yugoslavia, including the ethnic Albanians of Kosovo? How does the present bombardment of the country compare to the limited war aims initially spelled out by Clinton and other US and NATO officials? And, with US combat troops on their way to the Albanian border with Kosovo and American officials demanding a naval blockade of Yugoslavia, what will be the dimensions of the conflagration a month from now?

That Wednesday evening Clinton portrayed the bombing as a humanitarian act designed to pressure Yugoslav President Milosevic to halt the uprooting of Kosovar Albanians and accept the so-called peace plan fashioned in Washington. There was no suggestion that the Serb nationalist Milosevic, confronted with an ultimatum to accept the domination of Kosovo by the armed separatists of the Kosovo Liberation Army, under the protection of 28,000 NATO troops, might respond to the NATO attack by intensifying his offensive against his KLA enemy, fanning the flames of ethnic hatred and creating a massive refugee crisis in the process.

Failing to "act," Clinton declared, would run the risk "that many more innocent people will die or be driven from their homes by the tens of thousands; the risks that the conflict will involve and destabilize neighboring nations."

Had Clinton set out to predict the consequences of the very action he was announcing, he could not have done better. Hundreds of thousands of ethnic Albanians, and an unknown number of Kosovo Serbs, have fled the scene of civil war and aerial bombardment that Kosovo has become in the space of a few weeks. Serb depredations on the ground compete with US-NATO atrocities from the air, while the KLA, with direct support from Washington, seeks to exploit the

carnage to further its own nationalist aims.

Every country in the Balkans has been destabilized by the NATO war. Macedonia and Albania have been turned into staging grounds for NATO attacks on Yugoslavia, while their impoverished economies and backward social structures have been brought to the breaking point by the influx of refugees. Albania, now a platform for the KLA and American Apache helicopters and support troops, is already in a de facto state of war with Yugoslavia.

The Adriatic is choked with carrier fleets armed with cruise missiles and attack planes, and the whole of the Balkan peninsula--including Croatia, Bosnia, Greece, Turkey, Romania and Bulgaria--is on the verge of being drawn into the conflict.

As for the scope of the NATO assault on Yugoslavia, what was initially portrayed as a limited air attack on Yugoslav air defenses, oil depots and radar installations has mushroomed into an ever-widening campaign to destroy the economic infrastructure of an entire country. Within hours of the first air strikes, US and NATO officials recognized that they had badly miscalculated, drastically underestimating the determination of the Serb regime to hold onto Kosovo and wipe out the KLA, and overestimating the ability of the KLA to resist. The one consistent thread in their policy since then has been to rectify their mistake by intensifying the firepower unleashed on the population.

Here is how the air war was described on the eve of the war and after the first day of bombing:

"The attacks would begin by destroying as much of the Serbs' air defense network as possible and then strike Serbian heavy armor within Kosovo. Most targets in the heart of Serbia have been placed off limits, diluting NATO's overall threat" (*New York Times*, March 23).

"A strike by cruise missiles--from ships and submarines as well as B-52 bombers based in Britain--could last a day or two, followed by an air campaign involving American and NATO jets that could last two to four days or more, say officials who have been briefed on the planning" (*New York Times*, March 24).

"American defense officials said their targets included missile batteries, radar installations and military communications sites in Kosovo, Belgrade and other key areas" (*New York Times*, March 25).

There would be nighttime bombing, followed by daytime pauses, it was reported. One Pentagon official, who did not wish to be named because of the controversial nature of his projection, said the air campaign might last an entire month.

It only took a few days of the Serb offensive and disappointing bombing results to render such talk of restraint inoperative. The bombing of downtown Belgrade signaled the beginning of a war not

simply against the Serb military, but rather against the Serb people. There followed the bombing of factories, oil refineries, bridges, even hospitals and schools in remote villages. Then came the bombing of a passenger train. Increasingly, Serb TV relay stations have been hit, as NATO moves to eliminate the ability of the people at home to see the impact of its policies on the Yugoslav civilian population.

Nor have the ethnic Albanians escaped the brutal logic of the West's "humanitarian" war. The past two weeks have seen the bombing of a residential neighborhood in the Kosovan capital of Pristina, and the slaughter from the air of more than 80 refugees on the road to Albania.

The long-term impact of the bombing is almost incalculable. Hundreds of thousands of workers have already been rendered jobless as a result of the bombing of their factories. The repeated attacks on oil depots and refineries outside of major cities such as Belgrade and Nis are creating an environmental disaster. Nuclear experts warn that the use of missiles containing depleted uranium, which spreads radioactive dust upon impact, threatens a health crisis that could last for generations.

The air armada has grown from 400 to 1,000 planes, and tens of thousands of additional troops, mainly American, have been sent into the region. This is where things stand after the first month of the war. All indications are that the present level of destruction is a mere prelude to what is in the offing.

US General Wesley Clark, the NATO supreme commander, and his civilian counterparts in the Clinton administration, led by Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, are fiercely lobbying NATO, over French resistance, to authorize a naval blockade of Yugoslavia's only port, in Montenegro. The aim is to choke off the country's oil supply.

Such a measure, whatever the denials of US and NATO policymakers, can only be designed to reduce the population to a condition of semi-barbarism. Can there be any doubt that, once again in the name of peace and democracy, Washington plans to create in Europe the type of social devastation that in Iraq has caused an estimated 1.5 million deaths since the imposition of the oil embargo nine years ago?

As for the political implications of a naval blockade for relations between Russia and the West, one can safely predict that future generations would look back on such a measure as a major step on the road to war.

The domestic economic and social implications of the war are beginning to emerge. Clinton is asking Congress for an emergency bill to authorize \$6 billion to prosecute the war through next September. Many in Congress predict the cost will rise to more than \$10 billion over the same period. This outlay, between \$1 billion and \$2 billion a month, dwarfs Clinton's meager proposals for education, healthcare and other social needs. Inevitably such massive war spending will spur inflation and higher interest rates, fueling the tendencies toward recession.

The number of Americans dragged into the conflict is accelerating, as seen in the decision to call up some 33,000 reservists. This is but the first step in the inexorable buildup to a ground war. Already more than 4,000 US troops of the 82nd Airborne Division are being deployed to Albania, to sustain the operation of 48 Apache helicopters inside Kosovo.

Washington at the same time is pressing for the removal of virtually all restraints on the bombing campaign. Monday's *New York Times* carried a front page article with a headline--"NATO Said to Focus on Serb Elite's Property"--that qualifies as a textbook example of Orwellian *newspeak*. The premise was that NATO planners have

carefully targeted their bombs on properties dear to Milosevic and his political associates. When one read the article, however, one discovered that the *Times* considers such properties to embrace the entire Yugoslav economy:

"In Yugoslavia's state-run economy, virtually any industrial or economic activity can be linked to Mr. Milosevic's Government.... Agriculture, fuel, manufacturing and exports and imports are operated by Mr. Milosevic's cronies virtually as private fiefs, American officials say."

The same article provided an ominous indication of the level of human and material destruction now being prepared. It is worth quoting at length:

"The chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Henry H. Shelton, disclosed that NATO's political leaders had not yet approved a select group of targets for heavy attack. He said NATO warplanes could begin striking such targets 'in a few days.'

"General Shelton declined to identify those targets, but the highly classified list includes additional industrial and economic sites, according to a senior Administration official.

"Attacking those targets would carry a much higher risk of civilian casualties and would cause the kind of profound disruption of day-to-day life for ordinary Yugoslavs that NATO has so far sought to avoid, that official said.

"Such strikes could also undercut NATO's stated rationale for its bombing: to weaken the military and police forces involved in the killings in Kosovo rather than wage a war on the people of Yugoslavia.

"Nevertheless, the Pentagon and NATO are looking for ways to intensify pressure on Mr. Milosevic's Government. 'We're trying to make the price higher and higher,' a senior defense official said."

These lines make it clear that after only one month, the war has reached the point of a calculated campaign of terror and death against the civilian population. What horrors will the coming weeks and months bring? Will making the price "higher and higher" require the use of nuclear weapons? How many tens of thousands of people--Serb, Albanian, American, European--are to be sacrificed?

This headlong rush into a war, whose dimensions and consequences nobody can predict with any degree of certainty--least of all the firebrands in Washington who are directing it--is the product of a ruling elite whose global ambitions are matched only by its political disorientation and recklessness. Nothing could more clearly demonstrate that the imperialist ruling classes of America and Europe are unfit to rule. They are drawing the people of the United States and the entire world towards a catastrophe.



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