

Will ground troops be next?

US rains bombs on Yugoslav capital city

The Editorial Board
3 April 1999

Also in Serbo-Croatian

US cruise missiles and NATO warplanes hit downtown Belgrade early Saturday morning (Friday evening, US time) in the first direct attacks on the Yugoslav capital, a city of one million people, since the air war against Yugoslavia began ten days ago.

Serbian television reported loud explosions at the headquarters of the Interior Ministry and the Defense Ministry, two of the largest buildings in the center of the city. Police cordoned off the area, which was littered with rubble from the blasts. Eyewitnesses said the explosions could be heard or seen throughout the city.

It is the first time since World War II that a European capital has been subjected to aerial bombardment. Serbian vice-premier Vuk Draskovic denounced the American assault on the city, pointing out that the last time Belgrade had been bombed on Good Friday it was by the Nazis in 1941, at the beginning of their invasion and occupation of Yugoslavia--which suffered more at the hands of Hitler than any country but the Soviet Union.

The initiative for this criminal attack on a densely populated urban center came from the US government, which has been pressuring its NATO allies to escalate the military onslaught on the regime of Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic. Figures released by NATO yesterday demonstrate that calling the air war a joint US-NATO operation is a misnomer. US warplanes and cruise missiles account for fully 90 percent of the explosive tonnage dropped on Yugoslavia since the attacks began March 24.

The Pentagon is pouring military forces into the region, with the deployment of the naval battle group headed by the aircraft carrier *Theodore Roosevelt*, as well as new squadrons of F-117A stealth bombers, B-1B bombers based in Britain, and specialized radar-jamming and tank-fighting planes.

The evident failure of the Clinton administration's efforts to bomb Serbia into submission has provoked a drumbeat of pronouncements from media pundits and Washington insiders that the intervention of US and NATO ground forces is the only "solution" to the crisis in the Balkans.

The most influential daily newspapers are either openly campaigning for a reversal of the White House pledge not to order a ground assault on Serbia, or suggesting the time may soon come for such a decision.

The *Washington Post*, the leading newspaper in the US capital, has published a series of editorials demanding stronger military action and criticizing Clinton for ruling out the use of ground troops at the onset of the conflict with Yugoslav President Milosevic.

The newspaper's op-ed page has run one column after another, by Democrats and Republicans, liberals and conservatives, all demanding

the deployment of ground troops and a military offensive to overthrow Milosevic.

On March 31, a column by Republican Senator Chuck Hagel of Nebraska warned, "This is a war. To dance around this and call it anything else misrepresents and demeans the reality and the seriousness of the effort. The only acceptable exit strategy is victory.... We must be prepared to do what is necessary to achieve our objectives and ensure victory, including the option of ground troops."

A column the same day by former Carter administration national security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski urged that the administration prepare to dispatch NATO ground forces to Kosovo and begin making the "political case for such intervention" with the public.

The next day another Republican senator, Richard Lugar of Indiana, wrote in the *Post*: "Immediate, conspicuous planning for the use of NATO ground troops must commence in the numbers required to blunt the Serbia offensive, stabilize Kosovo and, if necessary, repel whatever elements of the Serbian armed forces that remain."

Lugar, a long-time Republican Party spokesman on foreign affairs and the second-ranking member of the Foreign Relations Committee, declared, "President Clinton should have called President Milosevic and told him that if he attacked Kosovo, we would terminate his regime in Serbia."

Liberal spokesmen gave Clinton similar advice. A column Friday co-authored by historian Robert Dallek and former Democratic Congressman Stephen Solarz declared, "The task before us now is to let go of the proposition that ground troops, as in Vietnam, are almost always a bad idea. Sometimes important strategic and humanitarian objectives require them."

Liberal columnist Richard Cohen wrote that Clinton should renounce the position that NATO will not send in ground troops and begin a buildup in Macedonia, while putting off any final decision on invasion. "Nothing should be ruled out," he maintained.

The *Wall Street Journal*, always the most bloody-minded of major US newspapers, also attacked Clinton for ruling out ground troops, saying, "The lesson of war is that if you are compelled to use force, use it overwhelmingly."

The newspaper, which hailed the Persian Gulf War as proof that "force works," concluded that it would work in the Balkans too, providing Clinton sets aggressive war aims for the United States: "Having made this mess, the only thing that can redeem it is the removal from power of Milosevic. The crucial step is to declare removal as a goal."

The *New York Times* has been more cautious, but its editorial Friday advised intensifying the bombing while considering such options as "a limited invasion of 30,000 troops" to establish safe havens in Kosovo, or the use of 200,000 troops for a full-scale anti-Serb war.

The *Los Angeles Times*, in a front-page analysis the same day wrote: "It is also becoming clear that, however distasteful and difficult it may be, President Clinton's options for avoiding the unthinkable debacle of a NATO defeat may soon be reduced to one: ground forces."

The newspaper noted that "in the corridors of the Pentagon, the subject of ground forces has already become Topic A, while in the halls of NATO headquarters in Brussels, officials have begun to talk openly about the inevitability of a deployment of ground forces to the region."

It is worth pausing to consider the speed with which the terms of the official Washington debate over Balkan policy have changed. Only two weeks ago, the most sweeping military measure under consideration was Clinton's plan to dispatch 4,000 American troops, with Serbia's agreement, as part of a NATO force to patrol a cease-fire in Kosovo. Even this proposal was considered too risky by many congressional Republicans, and won approval by only a narrow 58-41 vote in the Senate. Now there is open discussion of an American-led invasion of Serbia, which could require a quarter million ground troops.

The servile US media attributes this shift in Washington to an outraged reaction against atrocities committed by Serb forces against the Kosovar Albanians. Aside from the questionable accuracy of the reports from inside Kosovo, it remains to be explained why similar or even greater atrocities--in Turkish Kurdistan, Chechnya, Sierra Leone, Sri Lanka and a dozen other countries--have not produced similar reactions in Congress, the White House and the Pentagon.

A more persuasive explanation is that Washington is reacting in outrage because its own plans for intervention in Kosovo have produced a disaster. The Clinton administration evidently believed that the combination of NATO air strikes and ground operations by the US-backed Kosovo Liberation Army would create conditions in Kosovo to force a Serb pullback. Instead, as the *Post* reported Thursday on its front page, Pentagon and CIA officials now believe that the Serb military offensive has shattered the KLA.

One scheme to impose a US-dictated settlement having failed; congressmen and media pundits now demand that the US and NATO military do "whatever it takes" to defeat and overthrow the Milosevic regime. What precisely does this mean: Invasion of Kosovo? Occupation of Serbia? Use of nuclear weapons?

Two questions might be posed to these armchair generals: how many hundreds of thousands of Serbs are they prepared to kill, in an effort to a conquer a country that fought Hitler's Wehrmacht to a standstill; and how many thousands of American lives are they prepared to sacrifice in the process?

(Or alternatively, in the variant courageously suggested by Texas Republican Senator Kay Bailey Hutchison, who proposed a European-only ground force, how many German, French, British and Italian lives should be sacrificed?)

Clinton administration spokesmen claimed initially that the purpose of the air strikes was to stop the Milosevic regime from intensifying its repression of the Kosovar Albanians and to prevent a refugee crisis which would destabilize the region. The result has been a massive onslaught against the Albanians and the worst refugee crisis since the height of the Bosnian civil war.

One of three conclusions must be drawn from this gulf between the initial presentation by the White House and the results after 10 days of warfare:

(1) The US government deliberately concealed its long-term

intentions in order to gain the public's acquiescence in the initiation of a military attack. Clinton's claim that the attack would be limited to bombing and his denial of any plans to introduce troops would then be monstrous lies.

(2) The US government completely overestimated what could be achieved by bombing and is proposing even more drastic measures to cover up for previous failures. But why should anyone believe those who so grossly miscalculated in the first place?

(3) The Yugoslav debacle is a combination of the two, lies and miscalculations, with self-deception thrown in for good measure. This is the most likely scenario. Already the performance of the White House and Pentagon recalls the escalation strategy in Vietnam, with the constant proclamations of "light at the end of the tunnel" if only a few more troops and bombs were employed.

Whatever the conscious motives of Clinton or his generals, the military intervention in the Balkans has a logic of its own, and that logic has the most ominous implications. American imperialism is headed towards a war of conquest against Yugoslavia, a war which would bring forward the worst elements in American society.

Consider the column published in Friday's *Wall Street Journal* by retired general William E. Odom, former director of the National Security Agency, headlined "Take Belgrade." Odom calls for an effort to "bring this war to a successful conclusion, not just liberating Kosovo from Mr. Milosevic's tyranny but also destroying Mr. Milosevic personally along with his regime."

Besides murdering the Yugoslav president and overthrowing a sovereign state, Odom declares, "We should be prepared if necessary to keep a NATO force in place for decades to squash any temptation among local politicians to wait out the occupation." In other words, the establishment of a permanent American protectorate in the Balkans.

What would such a war mean for the American people? A ground war in the Balkans could not be waged without a vast increase in military spending and the mobilization of military forces on the scale of Vietnam or the Persian Gulf. In the likely event that the war was of long duration, or turned into a protracted guerrilla conflict, it would be impossible to maintain the US military commitment without the restoration of the draft.

It is significant that General Odom, in working through the military tactics that a ground war against Yugoslavia would require, reaches the following conclusion:

"A ground invasion must not be limited to Kosovo. In fact, the approach from Hungary--now a NATO ally--into the Voivodina region of Serbia and directly to Belgrade is open country that invites a high-speed armored ground attack. The German military swept down this corridor in World War II, taking the whole of Yugoslavia in a couple of weeks. NATO forces today probably have an even greater qualitative edge over the Serbs than the Wehrmacht had then."

The strategists for American imperialism today, as they contemplate their military options, are driven to embrace the example of Adolf Hitler. That alone should give the thinking public pause, both in America and Europe.



To contact the WSW and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact