

Amidst the media propaganda

Key facts in press accounts refute official rationale for Balkan war

Martin McLaughlin
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The two most influential daily newspapers in the United States, the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, each published lengthy articles last Sunday giving an inside account of how the Clinton administration reached its decision to shift policy in the Balkans and move toward a military confrontation with Yugoslavia.

These two accounts, though clearly written with the cooperation of high-level American policymakers, nonetheless give a picture of the turn towards war in the Balkans which undermines the official rationale for the bombing of Yugoslavia. The behind-the-scenes reports demonstrate that it was a shift in American policy, not a decision by Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic and his Serb nationalist regime, which triggered the present crisis, resulting in the biggest humanitarian disaster in Europe since the end of the Second World War.

Throughout 1998 the policy of the Clinton administration was to employ military threats, economic inducements and political pressure as the basis for an agreement on Kosovo with Milosevic. After an offensive in the spring by the Kosovar Albanian guerrilla group, the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), and a counteroffensive during the summer by Yugoslav Army troops, US representative Richard Holbrooke brokered a cease-fire in October.

The cease-fire, like similar ones during the Bosnia civil war of 1992-95, did not represent a lasting end to the fighting. It was merely a reduction in the level of violence during the winter months, while both sides rearmed and regrouped, preparing to renew the warfare in the spring. Nonetheless, the agreement was supported by the six members of the "Contact Group"--the US, Russia, Germany, France, Britain and Italy--which have met regularly over the crisis in the former Yugoslavia.

As late as January 15, according to the *Post* account, "Secretary of State Madeleine K. Albright was pressing--and losing, for the moment--a campaign to scale up US and NATO intervention in Kosovo." Four days later a meeting of top Clinton administration officials in the White House Situation Room approved a radical new plan for Kosovo, proposed by Albright. According to the *Times*: "It again threatened bombing if Mr. Milosevic did not go along with the West. But, for the first time, it demanded that he accept NATO troops in his own country to enforce a deal under which he would withdraw almost all his security forces and grant

Kosovo broad autonomy."

(There is more that could be said about these accounts. The fact that the turn towards war emerged in the midst of the impeachment drive against the Clinton White House is an indication of the enormous instability and recklessness of American policy. Clinton did not even attend the key January 19 meeting where US policy was reversed, since he was meeting with his lawyers on the impeachment trial and rehearsing his State of the Union speech.)

What intervened to effect the dramatic change in US policy was the January 15 massacre of 45 ethnic Albanian peasants outside the small Kosovo village of Racak. The *Post* says, "Racak transformed the West's Balkan policy as singular events seldom do. The atrocity ... convinced the administration and then its NATO allies that a six-year effort to bottle up the ethnic conflict in Kosovo was doomed. In the next two weeks, they set aside the emphasis on containment that had grown over the years."

What actually happened in Racak is far from clear. The first US official on the scene, William Walker, head of the group of unarmed monitors dispatched to Kosovo by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, immediately branded the deaths a Serb atrocity. But eyewitness accounts were conflicting, and no Serb military or police unit could be identified.

The official Serbian government version is that the KLA either carried out the killings itself, to provide a pretext for US and NATO intervention, or took casualties of a firefight between KLA and Yugoslav forces, dressed them in civilian clothes, rearranged the bodies and fired single shots into the heads of each victim in order to simulate a mass execution.

There are several aspects of the Racak incident which make it impossible to simply dismiss the Serbian government account as propaganda. Initial reports, cited by Clinton in his speeches defending the bombing campaign, describe the victims as having been sprayed with bullets from Serb machine guns. Later accounts, including those in the *Post* and *Times* last Sunday, speak of civilians killed execution-style, each one dying from a bullet in the back of the head.

There are political grounds for believing that the KLA could have played a role, as the Serbian side charges. It is well known that the KLA based its strategy on providing a suitable pretext for US and NATO intervention in Kosovo against the Yugoslav army and Serb paramilitary forces.

The *Times* notes that the KLA had launched a new offensive case, those responsible for the attack clearly intended the resulting bloodshed to trigger American and NATO intervention, and they succeeded.

"The Kosovo Albanian rebels were pushing ahead with their own war aims. Sensing that the deal essentially placed the world's most powerful military alliance on their side--despite NATO's continued assurances that it did not want to become the 'KLA's airforce'--the rebels quickly reclaimed territory abandoned by the Serbian forces and mounted a continuous series of small-scale attacks. American intelligence officials warned Congress that the rebels were buying weapons, improving their training and were become [sic] a more formidable force."

At the same time, according to the *Post* account, "US intelligence reported almost immediately that the KLA intended to draw NATO into its fight for independence by provoking Serb forces into further atrocities. Warnings to the rebel leaders from Washington restrained them somewhat, but they assassinated a small-town Serb mayor near Pristina and were believed responsible for the slaying of six Serb youths at the Panda Cafe in Pec on Dec. 14."

Concern over the KLA's provocative activities was a major dividing point between the United States and its European NATO allies in the months before the bombing began. The *Post* cites one unnamed US official saying, "One of our difficulties, particularly with the Europeans ... was getting them to accept the proposition that the root of the problem is Belgrade."

As late as January 21, 1999, when Clinton telephoned British Prime Minister Tony Blair to argue for the new US policy of demanding a NATO troop presence in Kosovo, according to the *Post*, "Clinton knew that his NATO allies believed the Albanian guerrillas of the KLA were driving the violence as much as Belgrade."

Secretary of State Albright saw Racak as the opportunity to overcome European resistance to NATO intervention in Kosovo, the *Post* reports, provided that the administration moved quickly: "According to confidants, she realized that the galvanizing force of the atrocity would not last long. 'Whatever threat of force you don't get in the next two weeks you're never getting,' one adviser told her, 'at least until the next Racak.'"

There is a clear recent precedent for the use of an atrocity story as the basis for brushing aside obstacles to outside intervention in the former Yugoslavia. In January 1995 a mortar shell landed in a crowded market in the Muslim-controlled portion of Sarajevo, the Bosnian capital city. Dozens were killed, many of them women and children, and the gruesome images were shown on television screens worldwide.

The market square tragedy became the basis for a sharp reversal in US and NATO policy in Bosnia, leading to an ultimatum to the Bosnian Serbs, backed by the threat of bombing, and set in motion the intervention which produced the Dayton Accords and the occupation of Bosnia by a mixed US and European force.

While the market square attack was immediately blamed on the Bosnian Serbs, a later investigation by the United Nations failed to substantiate these claims, and concluded, from an analysis of the trajectory of the mortar shells, that they had most likely been fired from Muslim artillery positions overlooking the city. If this is the

The final and most dubious factor in the Racak incident is the role of William Walker, the US government official who arrived on the scene of the massacre within hours and spearheaded the resulting propaganda offensive against the Serbs. Walker has a long and bloody record as a US operative specializing in support for guerrilla wars against governments targeted by the State Department and Pentagon for destabilization.

In the 1980s Walker was a deputy to one of the key figures in the secret US network to arm the Nicaraguan Contras, Assistant Secretary of State Elliott Abrams. Much of the US material and military assistance to the Contras was managed by the so-called Restricted Interagency Group, or RIG, which consisted of mid-level officials from the State Department, Pentagon, CIA and National Security Council. Abrams represented the State Department, with Walker assisting him, while Lt. Col. Oliver North represented the NSC and served as the group's chief.

Under terms of the Boland Amendment, adopted in 1984 by the US Congress, the Reagan administration was barred from delivering anything but "humanitarian aid" to the Contras. At the direction of North and Abrams, Walker took charge of an operation based at Ilopango Air Base in El Salvador to transport these supplies to the Contras. Weapons and ammunition were included along with food, clothing and medicine, in flagrant violation of the legal ban.

Walker was initially a target of Iran-Contra Independent Counsel Lawrence Walsh, but Walsh's prosecutors eventually decided not to prosecute the subordinate, instead focusing on his boss Elliott Abrams, who pled guilty to charges of lying to Congress about the illegal secret arms shipments, and was pardoned by President George Bush.

The veteran of the US "dirty war" in Central America has now emerged as a point man for American operations in the Balkans. The question is raised: did Walker, as he did in Central America, use his "humanitarian" work in Kosovo as a cover for arms-smuggling to the KLA and other illegal secret operations? And did his covert work include his role as the chief publicist of the Racak massacre, the *casus belli* for the US turn towards war against Yugoslavia?

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