

US rejects talks, intensifies bombing

No joy in Washington over Yugoslavia prisoner release

Martin McLaughlin
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The Clinton administration has responded to Sunday's release of three American soldiers, held as prisoners of war in Yugoslavia for more than five weeks, with scarcely disguised anger and resentment.

State Department and Pentagon officials declared that the US-NATO bombing campaign against Yugoslavia would be intensified, not diminished, in the wake of the release of three soldiers, who were captured along the Serbia-Macedonia border in late March.

They flatly rejected the appeal of Jesse Jackson, who headed the delegation of ministers who obtained the release of the soldiers, for a positive response from the US-NATO side in the confrontation in the Balkans, including face-to-face negotiations with Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic.

Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott, speaking on the CBS News program "Face the Nation," rejected any favorable action in response to the release as a "bad idea." He added, "The United States is not negotiating with Mr. Milosevic right now, we are bombing the Milosevic regime."

State Department spokesman James Rubin dismissed the suggestion that the US might free two Yugoslav soldiers held prisoner by NATO, saying, "We're not into reciprocal gestures here."

Secretary of Defense William Cohen said the bombing would be intensified, not stopped, and he emphasized that the administration was seeking funding for escalating raids through the end of the current fiscal year, September 30.

Particularly revealing was Clinton's reaction to the success of Jesse Jackson's effort to free the three American soldiers--a mission that Clinton opposed and tried to sabotage. "As we welcome our soldiers home,"

Clinton said, "our thoughts also turn to the over one million Kosovars who are unable to go home because of the policies of the regime in Belgrade."

But how does bombing Kosovo back into the Middle Ages--destroying its cities, bridges, hospitals, factories, utilities, the entire infrastructure of modern life, scattering cluster bombs throughout its agricultural areas--contribute to returning the Kosovans to their homes? What is left for them to return to?

For millions of working-class and middle-class Americans, who have been confused but not really persuaded by the nonstop media and government propaganda campaign over the events in Yugoslavia, the release of the three soldiers was a welcome event. Even more so was the prospect of a negotiated settlement that would bring a rapid conclusion to the military onslaught before it becomes full-scale war in the Balkans.

The appearance and demeanor of the prisoners dealt a significant blow to the US propaganda campaign. The three soldiers declared that they had been well-treated and well-fed, and they were visited during their captivity by representatives and medical personnel of the International Committee of the Red Cross.

Staff Sergeant Christopher Stone spoke with obvious sympathy for the ordinary Serb soldiers who had guarded him, describing them as "kind" and saying that when Americans left Belgrade, "It was kind of sad that they would still be there with a war going on."

All three soldiers thanked Jackson and the other ministers in his delegation, as well as "the two governments"--i.e. Yugoslavia and the United States--for making their release possible. Jackson himself made criticisms of the US policy, urging a one-

day halt in the bombing so that the three prisoners could safely move from Belgrade, then thanking Milosevic for going ahead with the prisoner release despite a step-up of the bombing after the first reports of an agreement.

On Saturday morning it was announced that Milosevic had agreed to release the three US soldiers to Jackson's delegation. The US-NATO response was to intensify bombing raids all over Serbia, including in the Belgrade area, with the clear intention of provoking the Serb regime into reversing its decision.

In one of the worst atrocities of the month-long air war, a NATO warplane fired a missile which struck a passenger bus on a bridge 12 miles north of Pristina, the capital of Kosovo province, killing 39 people, including 15 children. The victims were incinerated and dismembered by the force of the blast, making it difficult even to count how many had died.

A NATO spokesman claimed, "There was no intent to harm civilians during this strike. NATO takes every precaution to avoid civilian casualties during its operations." But an hour later a second strike was carried out against the bridge, causing injuries among the rescue workers, including one doctor who was seeking to aid the handful of survivors.

NATO officials have reaffirmed the demand for a virtual surrender by Yugoslavia, rather than a negotiated settlement. NATO press officer Jamie Shea, speaking in Brussels, said that for the allied bombing to stop, "Milosevic must publicly commit himself to all of the five conditions. It's all or nothing."

Such categorical statements rejecting any negotiated settlement constitute a warning that, for the imperialist powers, continuing the war has itself become a deliberate policy goal. There are definite political considerations involved.

The war was launched on a completely cynical and false basis, with Clinton administration officials claiming that the bombing was aimed at prevented large-scale refugee flight from Kosovo and the destabilization of the Balkans--precisely the outcome which has ensued.

US officials claimed that Milosevic had rejected a settlement of the Kosovo question which had been agreed by the Kosovar Albanian side, but press accounts in Europe have exposed these statements as lies. The Rambouillet agreement which Milosevic

rejected was not a settlement, but a document of surrender, requiring Yugoslavia to accept the free passage of NATO forces throughout its territory, including all of Serbia and Montenegro, not just Kosovo.

Questions about Rambouillet have begun to be raised in official Washington circles. Republican Senator Don Nickles cited the Rambouillet provisions for NATO occupation of Serbia during a television interview Sunday, asking whether the US-NATO war aim was to "take Belgrade."

With the official rationale for the war increasingly under attack, and the media and government lies beginning to be exposed, especially in Europe, the Clinton administration's decision to intensify the bombing means that it hopes to cover up its earlier crimes with even greater ones. It is a sign of the desperation and recklessness of the US-NATO policy.



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