

NATO general ordered military assault on Russian troops at end of Yugoslav war

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NATO Supreme Commander General Wesley Clark reportedly ordered British and French forces to launch a military assault last June to prevent Russian troops from taking control of the Pristina airport following the end of NATO's bombardment of Yugoslavia. But the US general's orders were rejected by the British commander of the NATO forces on the ground in Kosovo (KFOR), who later told Clark he did not want to risk launching a world war by confronting the Russians.

The dispute was revealed in *Newsweek* magazine Monday less than a week after Clark was informed that he would be relieved of duty next spring, a move largely attributed to his repeated clashes with the military and civilian leaders in Washington and Europe over the conduct of the 11-week air war.

The *Newsweek* article says, "At the end of the war, Clark was so anxious to stop the Russians from stealing a march to Pristina airport that he ordered an airborne assault to take the field from them. But Gen. Michael Jackson, the British commander who heads the Kosovo peacekeeping forces, wouldn't carry out Clark's orders. Subsequently, a frustrated Clark asked Adm. James Ellis Jr., the American officer in charge of NATO's Southern Command, to order helicopters to land on the runways so big Russian Ilyushin transports couldn't use them. Ellis balked, saying Jackson wouldn't like it. 'I'm not going to start World War III for you,' Jackson later told Clark. Both Jackson and Clark appealed to their political leadership back home for support. Jackson got all the help he needed; Clark didn't. Effectively, his orders as Supreme Commander were overruled."

According to the British news agency, ITN, US helicopters and British and French troops had already been assembled in Macedonia for the assault and would have been deployed had it not been for Jackson's refusal to carry out Clark's orders.

A military source told the *Washington Times* that after the Russians reached the airport General Clark again ordered the KFOR commander to send tanks and armored vehicle units to the airport to prevent further Russian deployments. The source said General Jackson declined to use British armored units after political leaders in London balked at moving tanks so close to Russian armored personnel carriers.

Some 12 days later, on June 24, Clark arrived in Kosovo from

his Belgian headquarters ostensibly to review the deployment of KFOR forces. According to the British *Sunday Times* Clark complained to Jackson that his orders were not being followed. The American general also complained that Jackson had gone through political channels. It was at this meeting that Jackson made the remark about the Third World War.

On June 11-12 some 200 Russian troops stationed in Bosnia rushed into Kosovo immediately after Serbian forces withdrew at the end of the bombing campaign. They arrived to cheering Serbian crowds hours before NATO troops entered the province. The Russian forces established a stronghold on the northern side of the Slatina airfield, defying NATO demands that they should leave the area.

Washington was deeply concerned over the preemptive move and the Russians' demand that they have their own "peacekeeping" sector in northern Kosovo and that their forces not be subordinated to NATO command. The Clinton administration sought to downplay the significance of the event, preferring to use "diplomatic channels," including threats to cut off IMF loans and offers of bribes to Russian civilian and military officials. At the same time the US persuaded Hungary and Romania to deny Russia overflight through their airspace, thereby preventing the landing of transport planes to reinforce their troops at Pristina airport. By early July the Russians agreed to integrate their forces into NATO's operations.

At the time Clark was ordering a military assault on the Russian troops, a senior Clinton administration aide told the *New York Times* June 12, "I don't think our military people are worked up about this. They don't like the idea they were lied to by the Russians. But on the other hand, there's a lot going on in the Russian Government, so who the hell knows what they're up to."

Clark also publicly said there was no cause for worry about an armed confrontation between Russian and NATO forces, but insisted that Jackson "had the authority" to remove the Russian forces. As a recent article in *The New Yorker* magazine pointed out, "Clark was pretending publicly that it didn't matter much, when in reality he was seething."

It is not entirely clear whether Clark had the support of any Washington officials, but there are certainly suspicions he did, particularly on the part of the Europeans. Jonathan Eyal, the

director of studies at the Royal United Services Institute in London, said, "It is convenient to put the blame on Clark, but I doubt very much he would have taken the risk without American support." The dispute over a potential military confrontation with the Russians, he said, was the tensest and least-told episode between the US and Europe in general, and "would have caused the biggest diplomatic crisis since the end of the Cold War."

Within the US foreign policy establishment there were political figures calling for such a confrontation, including former National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski who wrote a June 14 column in the *Wall Street Journal* entitled "NATO Must Stop Russia's Power Play."

In the end, however, Clark was apparently reined in by his superiors in the Pentagon and the White House, who seemed to have heeded the warnings of the British that a confrontation with the Russians, still armed with nuclear weapons, was not advisable.

Throughout the war Clark had repeatedly clashed with military and civilian authorities. He pushed for the most aggressive military action, regardless of the number of civilian and NATO casualties or the political consequences they produced, particularly in Europe, where governments in Greece, Italy and Germany might have been toppled if anti-war sentiment grew.

Well before the NATO bombing began Clark came into a conflict with US Defense Secretary William Cohen and others, demanding the US use the alleged Serb massacre of ethnic Albanians near the town of Racak last January as the pretext to launch immediate air strikes. US officials preferred instead to first present Milosevic with an ultimatum (the Rambouillet agreement) so that it would appear every diplomatic effort had been exhausted before NATO warplanes began bombing.

On March 24, when the air campaign began, NATO political leaders wanted to limit targets, believing that a first wave of bombing would force Milosevic to capitulate. Clark and his air commanders, on the other hand, wanted to "go downtown" on the first night, hitting power, telephone, and command-and-control sites in Belgrade and other major cities, as well as Milosevic's private residences.

Early in the conflict, Clark ordered up a task force of Apache helicopter gunships, after going to the White House over the protests of the US Army chief of staff, General Dennis Reimer. This was part of Clark's push for the Pentagon to allow him to plan a ground invasion of Kosovo and involve the US Army's "his own branch of the service" in addition to the Air Force and Navy.

In late May Clark pressed for and received permission to strike the transformer yards of the Yugoslav power grid, taking out power for hospitals, water-pumping stations and lighting. In an article in the August 2 edition of *The New Yorker* magazine, Michael Ignatieff quotes Clark acknowledging his frustration up until that point over "the only air campaign in history in

which lovers strolled down riverbanks in the gathering twilight and ate at outdoor cafes to watch the fireworks."

While the general's brutality served US interests well during the war, his reputation of being a loose cannon apparently brought his military career to an end. Clark, who was selected to command NATO in 1997 after heading US forces in Latin America, and serving as the senior military member on Richard Holbrooke's 1995 Dayton peace accords mission, received a midnight call from the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff telling him he was being removed from command.

Clark was due to serve his three-year term as the commander of US forces in Europe and the top general at NATO until next July, but he will now leave in April. Seven of ten of his predecessors served more than three years in that post. While the Pentagon has presented Clark's replacement as a routine job rotation, Clark has made it clear in his public statements since the change was leaked that the move came as a surprise and an affront.

At a Washington briefing Monday US State Department spokesman James P. Rubin avoided questions about last June's clash between Clark and Jackson, saying it "was really up to historians to talk about what did or didn't happen during that period. It's just not relevant anymore."

In fact the events in mid-June demonstrate how the American policy of recklessness and militarism led to the danger of a far greater conflagration, including one with nuclear weapons. Thus far, one might say the war ended successfully for the Clinton administration, albeit bringing humanitarian disaster, continued ethnic violence and economic deprivation to the people of the region. Thus far, at least, neither a full-scale Balkan War nor a military confrontation between NATO and the Russians has erupted. But this incident reveals how close such a confrontation was, and is a warning that the next war might not end so neatly.



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