

Washington Post Online echoes official line on Chinese embassy bombing

3 December 1999

For the information of our readers, the WWSW is posting the following analysis published by "Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting" on November 30, 1999. FAIR's web site can be visited at www.fair.org.

In October, FAIR posted an alert on its website (10/22/99) noting that the mainstream U.S. media had overwhelmingly ignored an explosive report in the London *Observer* (10/17/99; online at <http://www.newsunlimited.co.uk/Kosovo/Story/0,2763,92806,00.html>) that received substantial attention abroad: an investigative article alleging that NATO's attack on the Chinese embassy in Belgrade last May had been deliberate—not accidental, as NATO claimed at the time. (On November 28, the *Observer* published an important follow-up to its Chinese embassy report, available at <http://www.newsunlimited.co.uk/observer/focus/story/0,3879,108792,00.html>.)

Following the release of FAIR's alert, dozens of readers contacted mainstream media outlets, including the *Washington Post*, to ask them why they had ignored or downplayed the *Observer*'s findings. (Some of the replies readers received from mainstream media outlets, along with FAIR's response, can be viewed at <http://www.fair.org/activism/china-response.html>.) Less than three weeks later, a story purporting to debunk the *Observer*'s investigation ("Chinese Embassy Continues to Smolder," 11/8/99) appeared on the *Washington Post*'s website (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A10160-1999Nov2.html>). Written by the *Post*'s online military columnist, William Arkin, the article declared: "There was no plan to hit the Chinese Embassy. But to some high-level denials are themselves proof, and the bombing is becoming another cover-up milestone for Internet conspiracy junkies."

One notable feature of Arkin's column is that his effort to "reconstruct" the embassy attack is based solely on

"interviews with officers in the air staff at U.S. headquarters in Europe and in Washington"—which means that all his sources are American officers. Such a journalistic approach would seem unpromising in light of the fact that the Chinese embassy strike has turned into a bitter source of friction between the U.S. and its European allies, who have expressed concerted skepticism toward the U.S.'s explanation.

In fact, Arkin's "reconstruction" of the embassy bombing is identical to CIA Director George Tenet's account in every way—except that Arkin's sources are anonymous. His column simply reiterates the official explanation: NATO pilots intended to hit a nearby Yugoslav arms agency, the Federal Directorate for Supply and Procurement (FDSP). Meanwhile, "faulty maps" failed to show the embassy's correct address, while intelligence agencies forgot to update NATO's "prohibited targets" list to include the embassy's new location. Arkin's article adds little new to this dubious mix, except a few basically extraneous details concerning other NATO targets struck in Belgrade on the same night.

Yet Arkin fails to address the main question raised by NATO's official account: What led NATO to think that the FDSP—the Yugoslav arms agency supposedly targeted—was located at the address of what was in fact the Chinese embassy? Indeed, Arkin unwittingly undermines his own story with one of the few new pieces of information in his column: The FDSP, he asserts, "had been on the U.S. intelligence community's watch list for years, because of its role in export[ing] arms to countries like Libya and Iraq." If this allegation is true, it makes NATO's official story even more difficult to believe: How could the CIA not know the address of a building it had been watching for years?

Moreover, Arkin's column avoids the inescapable fact that the *Observer*'s allegations were based on high-level NATO sources who confirmed that the bombing was deliberate. Arkin doesn't let his readers know what the

Observer's sourcing consisted of—or even that the report was sourced at all. In fact, while Arkin's online column includes worldwide web links to CIA director George Tenet's congressional testimony on the bombing, as well as State Department official Thomas Pickering's formal explanation for the attack, the *Post* did not include a link to the London *Observer* article that was the very subject of the column.

As FAIR reported in its November 3 follow-up alert, the *Observer*'s initial sources included European NATO generals at the two-star and four-star levels, a NATO intelligence officer in Macedonia, a NATO air staff member in Naples, and a very high-ranking former American intelligence official. In its November 28 follow-up, the *Observer* added that "as this paper's journalists have continued to pursue the story, more witnesses have come forward...":

"...Five weeks ago *The Observer* reported evidence gathered from sources within NATO—serving military officers who would be instantly sacked if named. Our account was denied by the CIA, by Albright and by Cook, who said there was not a 'shred of evidence to support this rather wild story.'

" *The Observer* has gone back to its original sources, and also spoken to other serving officers, from Nato colonels to intelligence officers to a military officer with the rank of a general. All are in agreement. The Chinese Embassy was deliberately bombed."

Investigative journalism is not like taking a poll: If five credible military sources independently confirm a secret operation while five others deny its existence, that does not represent a "tie." It represents strong evidence that the secret military operation occurred.

But perhaps the *Observer*'s reporters made these sources up out of whole cloth. Or perhaps a band of NATO military officers from various nations has conspired to fabricate a damaging story about one of the most sensitive incidents from NATO's war on Yugoslavia. "So many plots," Arkin sighs derisively as he describes the Chinese belief that the bombing was intentional. Yet Arkin seems oblivious to the rather far-fetched journalistic or military plots that his own unintentional scenario implies.

Meanwhile, the story is still burning in Europe. The November 28 *Observer* carries an editorial ("Balkan Fiasco") charging that the questions raised by the paper's Chinese embassy reporting "demand urgent answers," including:

"an explanation from the United States over the way in

which it disregarded its NATO partners to launch an illegal attack against a diplomatic mission.... It is left to America's partners in the war against Yugoslavia to investigate what they know of this affair. For this reason, we are calling on the Defense and Foreign Affairs Select Committees [of the British parliament] to ask what our senior servicemen knew.... And while an inquiry by our own MPs [members of parliament] cannot compel an errant ally, it can embarrass. That remains a powerful weapon."

What's more, an angry November 10 report from the French Defense Ministry has confirmed one of the *Observer*'s central allegations: that in addition to the normal Alliance procedures used to select targets for the allied bombing of Yugoslavia, there existed a separate, "American-only" targeting track from which the Europeans were excluded. "The conclusion cannot be avoided that part of the military operations were conducted by the United States outside the strict framework of NATO and its procedures," the French Defense Ministry concluded.

"What the Americans really knew" about the embassy bombing, a French Defense Ministry official told the *Observer* (11/28/99), "I wouldn't like to say."

That the allegations swirling around the Chinese embassy bombing could contribute to such a strain in U.S.-Europe relations without producing even a mention in U.S. newspapers like the *New York Times* raises troubling questions on its own. (Though the *Times* still hasn't reported the *Observer*'s findings, the paper has quietly changed its policy: It no longer refers to the "accidental bombing of the Chinese embassy"; a November 11 piece instead referred to the raid "that the alliance said mistakenly hit the Chinese embassy in Belgrade.")

Meanwhile, the question originally posed by FAIR in its October 22 alert remains unaddressed: Why has the American public been kept in the dark about these crucial revelations concerning last May's Chinese embassy attack? The *Washington Post*'s cursory attempt at debunking the *Observer*'s report does not constitute an answer.



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