

A liberal brief for militarism and neo-colonialism

Virtual War—Kosovo and Beyond

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Virtual War—Kosovo and Beyond, *Michael Ignatieff*, Metropolitan Books, New York, 2000, 246 pp., \$23.00

Appearing one year after the US-NATO war against Yugoslavia, this book by a prominent liberal commentator ostensibly provides an analysis of the conflict and its significance for the future of warfare. If, however, one is looking for a serious historical exposition of the crisis in the Balkans and the policies of the West, one will have to look elsewhere. Ignatieff quite shamelessly and uncritically accepts the official rationale for the US-NATO air war against Yugoslavia.

The author presents the US-NATO line, according to which all of the horrors that have befallen the various states carved out of Yugoslavia in the 1990s are the sole responsibility of the Serb nationalist leader Slobodan Milosevic. He repeats the mantra that the 1999 war was entirely the result of Serb aggression, to which the US and its European allies responded out of purely humanitarian motives.

Given the mass of evidence which has surfaced over the past year refuting this banal and self-serving version of events—the fact that the Rambouillet conference that preceded the war was a provocation orchestrated by Washington to provide a pretext for waging war against Serbia, that the Kosovo Liberation Army was backed by the US and played a key role in provoking Serb reprisals in Kosovo, that Western government and media reports of Serb “genocide” against ethnic Albanians were grossly exaggerated, etc.—one might think that whitewashing the NATO war would be a daunting task. Ignatieff, however, dispenses with such problems by simply ignoring them.

He is unconcerned with arriving at the historical truth. Instead, he sees his task as providing sympathetic advice to those who organised the Balkan War, arguing not only for the legitimacy of wars waged by the Great Powers against small and relatively defenceless countries, but for the most effective means of carrying them out.

Ignatieff is entranced by the overwhelming advantage the United States demonstrated in Kosovo in terms of the sophistication and effectiveness of its military hardware. But, he contends, America's “humanitarian” aims cannot be achieved if US military might limits itself to restricted targets, or relies solely on smart bombs and missiles delivered from tens of thousands of feet in the air or war ships deployed hundreds of miles from ground zero. Rather, the US must be prepared to use the full force of its firepower as well as ground troops to smash the enemy. And it must be prepared to accept the consequences, including large numbers of American casualties.

Ignatieff, who established a reputation among academics and intellectuals with a biography of the well-known liberal philosopher Isaiah Berlin, cannot contain his enthusiasm over the bombing of Belgrade. He writes, “The paradox is that greater ruthlessness—going downtown on the first night and taking out the grid—might have been more effective, and in the end, more merciful...”

He insists that the new US military technology brings with it a moral responsibility to wage unrestrained war. On a recent US talk show he summed up the book's perverse message: “If you take these risk-averse means to accomplish human rights ends, you can't accomplish human rights ends. That's the problem.”

Ignatieff epitomises a whole layer of liberals who joined the US-NATO bandwagon in the assault on Yugoslavia. Many of these same people at one time criticised imperialism and expressed sympathy for the plight of oppressed peoples, as well as for the poor and minorities in the United States. Such is their transformation that they now reject any suggestion of imperialist interests in the Balkans.

With this book, Ignatieff continues and extends his role as a supporter of American militarism in the Balkans. Last November, after United Nations personnel investigating Serb atrocities in Kosovo concluded that Western reports of mass killings had been grotesquely exaggerated, Ignatieff

published a column in the *New York Times* arguing that such facts were irrelevant. That US-NATO war propaganda was based on outright lies cast no shadow, he insisted, on the moral rectitude of the war-makers.

In *Virtual War—Kosovo and Beyond*, Ignatieff speaks of a “revolution in military affairs”, which he designates with the initials RMA, whereby developments in precision weaponry and computerisation in the 1970s and 80s enabled the United States to make a quantum leap in the techniques of conventional warfare.

He defines a “virtual war” as one in which the combatants are safely removed at a distance from their targets through the use of precision guided missiles. On the basis of this technology, the US and its NATO allies were able to destroy much of Yugoslavia's infrastructure without suffering a single casualty. In Ignatieff's words: “what was new about the Kosovo war, therefore, was the impunity with which it was waged.”

He draws the conclusion that the new technology has made war an effective, viable and low-risk option, with the potential to “return war in the West to its position as the continuation of politics by other means.” The bluntness of the remark is significant. Ignatieff openly states what US political leaders normally say behind closed doors.

This view sees various oppressed nations as targets for US military technology. Ignatieff writes: “Rogue states like Iraq and Yugoslavia, and weak, failed states like Sudan and Somalia were custom-made as firing ranges for the new technology: they were too weak to resist effectively, and their own behavior was so offensive that they forfeited the support of powerful friends.”

Ignatieff's chief regret is that the US failed to take fuller advantage of its military supremacy in its pummelling of Yugoslavia. “Now that the planes are back in their hangars,” he muses, “what is striking about the conflict is the disconnection between the high moral language of the cause and the limited character of the war itself.”

Given the new firepower, some RMA adherents feel that sending in ground forces is no longer necessary, but Ignatieff believes Yugoslavia should not have been spared a land invasion. He is critical of the amount of time it takes the US army to deploy its forces, and feels that RMA techniques should be applied there as well: “Kosovo occurred—in other words—mid-revolution. America dominates space; dominates the skies; but it does not dominate the ground.”

Much of the book consists of disjointed interviews and portraits of major players in the war, such as US envoy Richard Holbrooke, Supreme Allied Commander in Europe General Wesley Clark and various diplomats. Ignatieff writes much like a star-struck fan in the presence of great men.

Of Holbrooke, he notes: “He holds to a simple gut conviction: that the Americans are the only people capable of replacing the Ottomans and the Austro-Hungarians—the only people with the character required for an imperial vocation.”

Wesley Clark is cast in an heroic light: “The campaign took its cool, enclosed and disciplined commander to his outer limits: in terms of stamina, political acumen, will-power and leadership. But there will be no ticker-tape parade for Wesley K. Clark.... The man who won the first postmodern war in history was now looking for a job.”

Ignatieff includes exchanges with two figures who are critical of NATO's humanitarian pretensions. The first is Lord Robert Skidelsky, who warns of the new humanitarian rationale for war out of concern for the principle of national sovereignty. Ignatieff accuses him of “appeasement”.

The second is Aleksa Djilas, the son of Milovan Djilas, a creator with Tito of the Yugoslav state who later became an opponent of the regime. The younger Djilas opposes the imperialist bombing, essentially from the standpoint of Yugoslav patriotism. But Ignatieff approvingly quotes Djilas for deriding the unwillingness of the US and NATO to risk combat casualties: “If we [the US and its allies] had really fought them, face to face, he was implying, and if we had faced death as they had done, then we might have had his respect.”

The myth of humanitarian aims behind the US-NATO bombing thus serves to justify a further militarization of society in the United States and other Western countries. The book espouses a new version of Bismarckian “blood and iron” behind a facade of humanitarianism. It is a reactionary and sinister work that expresses the shift in North American liberalism to an open embrace of militarism and neo-colonialism.



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