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Kosovo Déjà Vu

by James Bovard

As the world looks on at the growing mess in post-war Iraq, it is time to recall the U.S. government's bombing campaign against Serbia. There are many similarities to the recent campaign in Iraq. President Bill Clinton's war against Serbia epitomized his moralism, his arrogance, his refusal to respect law, and his fixation on proving his virtue by using deadly force, regardless of how many innocent people died in the process.

Ethnic conflicts exploded throughout the former Yugoslavia in the early 1990s. The casualty toll was highest in Bosnia. In 1995, the Clinton administration backed a sweep by the U.S.-trained Croatian army to recapture Serb-held territory in Croatia. More than a quarter million Serbian civilians were turned into refugees by this attack; much of Croatia was ethnically cleansed in the process, as journalist Doug Bandow reported at the time. The U.S. government made no protest and refused to recognize the plight of Serbian refugees.

By 1998, full-scale civil war was raging in Kosovo, a province of Serbia the size of Connecticut. The Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) controlled about 40 percent of the territory of the province.

Both sides used brutal tactics. For instance, at the State Department daily press briefing for March 4, 1998, department spokesman James Rubin announced that the U.S. government "called on the leaders of the Kosovar-Albanians to condemn terrorist action by the so-called Kosovo Liberation Army." The KLA was known to be heavily involved in drug trafficking and had close ties to Osama bin Laden, allegedly the worst terrorist mastermind in the world.

A cease-fire was negotiated between the Serbian government and the KLA in late 1998, but it did not stop the fighting. According to former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, 80 percent of the cease-fire violations in the months before the NATO bombing campaign began were committed by the KLA.

The United States and its NATO partners pressured the Serbian government to agree to a set of demands that purported to end the ethnic violence in Kosovo. When Serbian President

Slobodan Milosevic refused, NATO bombed. In a speech on March 24, 1999, the day the bombing began, Clinton denounced Milosevic for rejecting

the balanced and fair peace accords that our allies and partners, including Russia, proposed last month, a peace agreement that Kosovo's ethnic Albanians courageously accepted.

However, at negotiations in Rambouillet, France, NATO demanded the equivalent of unconditional surrender from the Yugoslavian government. As John Pilger reported in the British *New Statesman*,

Anyone scrutinizing the Rambouillet document is left in little doubt that the excuses given for the subsequent bombing were fabricated. The peace negotiations were stage-managed, and the Serbs were told: Surrender and be occupied, or don't surrender and be destroyed. The impossible terms, published in full in *Le Monde Diplomatique*, but not in Britain, show that NATO's aim was the occupation not only of Kosovo, but effectively of all of Yugoslavia.

A moral imperative to kill

Launching the bombing of Serbia was a family affair in the Clinton White House. Hillary Clinton revealed to an interviewer in the summer of 1999,

I urged him to bomb. You cannot let this go on at the end of a century that has seen the major holocaust of our time. What do we have NATO for if not to defend our way of life?

There was no fact that could not be brushed aside or twisted to sanctify the bombing. In a March 27, 1999, radio address, Clinton announced,

Through two world wars and a long cold war we saw that it was a short step from a small brush fire to an inferno, especially in the tinderbox of the Balkans. The time to put out a fire is before it spreads and burns down the neighborhood.

The implication that World War II started in the Balkans would surprise Poles who recalled the Nazi invasion of September 1, 1939.

In a special videotape address to the Serbian people on March 25, 1999, Clinton declared that the Serbian attack "was not simply a war against armed Kosovar forces but also a campaign of violence in which tanks and artillery were unleashed against unarmed civilians." But a campaign against unarmed civilians from planes far overhead was different because NATO had a "moral imperative."

The longer the bombing went on, the more brazenly NATO ignored the limits it had initially imposed on its targets. *The Los Angeles Times* detailed many of the “mistakes” made by U.S. and British war planes:

April 5 — An attack on a residential area in the mining town of Aleksinac kills 17 people.

April 12 — NATO missiles striking a railroad bridge near the Serbian town of Grdelica hit a passenger train, killing 14.

April 14 — 75 ethnic Albanian refugees die in an attack on a convoy near Djakovica.

April 27 — A missile strike in the Serbian town of Surdulica kills at least 20 civilians.

May 1 — A missile hits a bus crossing a bridge north of Pristina, killing 47.

May 7 — A cluster bomb attack damages a marketplace and the grounds of a hospital in Nis, killing at least 15.

May 8 — Fighter pilots using outdated maps attack the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, killing 3 journalists and injuring 20 other people.

May 13 — 87 ethnic Albanian refugees are killed and more than 100 injured in a late-night NATO bombing of a Kosovo village, Korisa.

May 20 — At least 3 people are killed when NATO missiles hit a hospital in Belgrade.

May 21 — NATO bombs a Kosovo jail, killing at least 19 people and injuring scores.

May 31 — NATO missiles slam into a bridge crowded with market-goers and cars in central Serbia, killing at least 9 people and wounding 28.

NATO spokesmen responded to each new fiasco by bragging even louder about how smart the bombs were that they were dropping — like defending some mass murderer by talking about his high SAT scores.

If Serbian terrorists had blown up hospitals, bridges, neighborhoods, and old folks’ homes in the United States at the same rate that NATO hit such targets in Serbia, Americans would have viewed the war differently.

NATO repeatedly dropped cluster bombs into marketplaces, hospitals, and other civilian areas. Cluster bombs are anti-personnel devices designed to be scattered across enemy troop formations. NATO dropped more than 1,300 cluster bombs on Serbia and Kosovo and each bomb contained 208 separate bomblets that floated to earth by parachute. Bomb experts estimated that more than 10,000 unexploded bomblets were scattered around the landscape when the bombing ended.

Collateral-damage mistakes

NATO worked overtime to explain away its “mistakes.” On April 12, a NATO pilot sent a missile into a passenger train on a railway bridge, killing 14 people. Gen. Wesley Clark, supreme commander of NATO, took to the press podium to show the video from the nose of the missile, emphasizing that the pilot was focused on the bridge,

when all of a sudden, at the very last instant, with less than a second to go, he caught a flash of movement that came into a screen and it was the train coming in. Unfortunately, he couldn't dump the bomb at that point. It was locked, it was going into the target and it was an unfortunate incident which he and the crew and all of us very much regret.

The video was endlessly replayed on Western television stations, driving home the point that, with the speed of modern missiles, there was sometimes nothing pilots could do to avoid catastrophe.

However, in January 2000, the Frankfurter *Rundschau* revealed that the video was shown at the NATO press conference at triple the actual speed, thus making the attack on civilians look far more inevitable than it actually was. NATO officials had become aware of the deceptive nature of the video several months earlier but saw “no reason” to publicly admit the error, according to a U.S. Air Force spokesman.

On April 14, 1999, NATO bombs repeatedly hit a column of ethnic Albanian refugees a few miles from the Albanian border, killing 75 people. NATO spokesmen initially claimed that Serbian planes carried out the attack and used the incident to further inflame anti-Serbian opinion. Five days later, NATO spokesmen admitted that the deaths had been caused by NATO forces. NATO then released the audio tape from the debriefing of a pilot identified as involved in the attack.

As *Newsday* reported,

According to officials, the American pilot was selected because he gave a graphic account of Milosevic's forces torching a series of ethnic Albanian villages near the Kosovo town of Dakojvica

Wednesday. The pilot told how he selected a three-truck military convoy for a laser-guided bomb strike when he saw it pulling away from a village where fires were just starting.

However, this gambit backfired when high-ranking military officers protested that NATO, at General Clark's urging, had released the tape of a pilot who had nothing to do with bombing the refugee column. The pilot's words were a red herring to distract attention from the carnage inflicted on the refugees.

Perverse consequences

The main achievement of the war was that, instead of Serbs terrorizing ethnic Albanians, ethnic Albanians terrorized Serbs; instead of refugees fleeing south and west, refugees headed north. This result may not have been entirely unwelcome to NATO. British Defense Minister George Robertson declared in March 1999 that the goal of the operation was "Serbs out, NATO in, refugees back."

Unfortunately, few Americans paid close enough attention to the Kosovo war to recognize the danger of permitting the U.S. government to go crusading with bombs dropped from 15,000 feet.

President George W. Bush used similar rhetoric to justify the war against Iraq. Since the U.S. government has proclaimed victory over Saddam, Bush is talking as if no one has a right to criticize any misstatements that helped pave the way to war. As White House senior advisor Karl Rove told *Washington Post* editor Bob Woodward last year regarding the war on terrorism, Everything will be measured by results. The victor is always right. History ascribes to the victor qualities that may or may not actually have been there. And similarly to the defeated.

At some point, "history" is going to catch up with the U.S. government.

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