

THE PERIODICAL OBSERVER

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The Joyless Victory

A Survey of Recent Articles

When NATO's war over Kosovo ended last June with the saving appearance of victory and not a single American life lost, there was, curiously, no sense of triumph among Americans: no jubilation, no parades, no boost in the polls for President Bill Clinton. Was this because of general indifference to events in the Balkans—or widespread suspicion that the victory was hollow?

William Kristol and Robert Kagan, editor and a contributing editor, respectively, of the *Weekly Standard* (June 14, 1999), see the victory as all but complete. "Slobodan Milosevic's capitulation to U.S. and NATO demands represents a triumph for American power and principle, for the U.S.-led alliance, for President Clinton, and for the small but stalwart group of Republicans . . . who supported the war from beginning to end." It showed "that American power, even when less than artfully applied, is a potent force for international peace, stability, and human decency."

Though the war proved a military success, Michael Mandelbaum, a Fellow of the Council on Foreign Relations, considers it "a perfect failure" in light of its avowed objectives. The people of the Balkans emerged "considerably worse off than they had been before," he writes in *Foreign Affairs* (Sept.–Oct. 1999). Before NATO's intervention, some 2,500 people had died in Kosovo's civil war between the Serb authorities and the ethnic Albanian insurgents of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA). After, "an estimated 10,000 people died violently in the province, most of them Albanian civilians murdered by Serbs." Besides saving lives, NATO also sought to prevent the

forced displacement of the Kosovar Albanians. When the bombing began, an estimated 230,000 had been displaced; when it ended, 1.4 million had been.

"The alliance also went to war, by its own account, to protect the precarious political stability of the countries of the Balkans," Mandelbaum notes. "The result, however, was precisely the opposite: the war made all of them less stable." Moreover, though the United States and other NATO countries were not waging war to serve their own national interests, the war damaged those interests by worsening relations with Russia and China.

While Milosevic's "calculated savagery" deserves most of the blame for the murderous expulsion of Kosovar Albanians, some must go to U.S. secretary of state Madeleine Albright and her fellow diplomats, contends Mark Danner, a staff writer at the *New Yorker*. At Rambouillet, the French chateau to which the Serbs and the KLA were summoned at the beginning of this year after the cease-fire arranged last fall broke down, American and Western diplomats "practiced a statecraft that was ill-prepared, fumbling and erratic," he writes in the *New York Review of Books* (July 15, 1999), "and no one can say what Kosovo might look like—and how many Kosovar Albanians might still be alive—had Secretary Albright not handed to the Serbs an arrogant ultimatum": accept the detailed plan presented for the political autonomy of Kosovo under NATO auspices, or else. Albright and her fellow diplomats were confident that there would be "a quick capitulation, or at the very least a rapid Milosevic retreat," Danner notes.

The secretary of state subsequently claimed “that ‘before resorting to force NATO went the extra mile to find a peaceful resolution,’” observes Mandelbaum, but the peace settlement that ended the bombing “included important departures from Rambouillet that amount to concessions to the Serbs.” Had these concessions been offered before the bombing began, he suggests, the bombing and “ethnic cleansing” might have been avoided.

The initial refusal by the KLA (which had been labeled a terrorist organization by U.S. officials) to sign the Rambouillet agreement “let the NATO alliance off the moral hook and should have been used as an opportunity to step back,” argues Joseph S. Nye, Jr., dean of Harvard University’s Kennedy School of Government, writing in *Foreign Affairs* (July–Aug. 1999). “Instead, the United States ‘fixed the problem’ by pretending to believe the KLA’s promise to accept autonomy within Yugoslavia. The United States then threatened to bomb Serbia. Milosevic called the American bluff and initiated his planned ethnic cleansing of Kosovo.”

Suddenly, Kosovo took on far more importance to the United States, Nye observes. Milosevic’s savage campaign could not be ignored, and Britain and other European allies now joined the United States in calling for NATO action. Failure to act would have meant a major crisis in the American alliance with Europe.

Military analysts are only beginning to decipher the lessons of Kosovo. John Keegan, the noted defense editor of London’s *Daily Telegraph* (June 6, 1999) and author of *The First World War* (1999), declared that he and other military thinkers of the past half-century had been wrong to insist that a war cannot be won by airpower alone—though he allowed that the evidence as to precisely how airpower had succeeded in this case was not all in. Indeed, Tim Butcher and Patrick Bishop of the *Weekly Telegraph* (July 22, 1999) call that success into question, reporting that “a private, preliminary review by NATO experts” concluded that the alliance’s 78-day bombing campaign “had almost no military effect on the regime of President Milosevic, which gave in only after Russia

withdrew its diplomatic backing. . . . [The] thousands of bombing sorties . . . failed to damage the Yugoslav field army tactically in Kosovo while the strategic bombing of targets such as bridges and factories was poorly planned and executed.”

The war highlighted a number of interesting ideological positions. The “humanitarian” label seemed utterly spurious to some on the right, such as Thomas Fleming, editor of *Chronicles* (Aug. 1999), who quotes the Roman historian Tacitus: “They make a desert, and they call it peace.” But the high purpose persuaded some on the left, such as New York University sociologist Todd Gitlin, to abandon their long-time antiwar stance and support—“in fear and trembling”—the NATO war. The Left’s “near-automatic No to military force, a staple of conviction, even ‘identity,’ for three decades, is finished,” he writes in *Mother Jones* (Sept.–Oct. 1999).

Waged in the name of “principles and values,” the war over Kosovo is a landmark in international affairs, declares Czech Republic president Václav Havel in an address delivered while the bombing was in progress, published in the *New York Review of Books* (June 10, 1999). “This is an important precedent for the future. It has been clearly said that it is simply not permissible to murder people, to drive them from their homes, to torture them, and to confiscate their property.”

That indeed was the idea, but Kosovo shows how unsatisfactory the reality of humanitarian war is, columnist Charles Krauthammer maintains in the *National Interest* (Fall 1999). Because Americans will not long tolerate casualties where no important national interest is at stake, humanitarian warfare must be virtually bloodless (at least for Americans)—which not only jeopardizes victory but exposes the people being “helped” to still greater risks.

And even, as in Kosovo, when humanitarian war ends in “victory,” Krauthammer says, the rewards are dubious: “The endless occupation of a murderous neighborhood in pursuit of utopian objectives of the most peripheral strategic interest to the United States.” In light of the Kosovo experience, he concludes, it is unlikely that “any rational Western leader” will want to repeat it.