



## **Killing for Credibility: A Look Back at the 1999 NATO Air War on Serbia**

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March 23, 2019

This month marks the 20th anniversary of Operation Allied Force, NATO's 78-day air war against Yugoslavia. It was a war waged as much against Serbian civilians—hundreds of whom perished—as it was against Slobodan Milošević's forces, and it was a campaign of breathtaking hypocrisy and selective outrage. More than anything, it was a war that by President Bill Clinton's own admission was fought for the sake of NATO's credibility.

One Man's Terrorist...

Our story begins not in the war-torn Balkans of the 1990s but rather in the howling wilderness of Afghanistan at the end of the 1980s as defeated Soviet invaders withdrew from a decade of guerrilla warfare into the twilight of a once-mighty empire. The United States, which had provided arms, funding and training for the mujahideen fighters who had so bravely resisted the Soviet occupation, stopped supporting the jihadis as soon as the last Red Army units rolled across the Hairatan Bridge and back into the USSR. Afghanistan descended deeper into civil war.

The popular narrative posits that Osama bin Laden and his al-Qaeda network, Washington's former mujahideen allies, turned on the West after the US stationed hundreds of thousands of infidel troops in Saudi Arabia—home to two out of three of Sunni Islam's holiest sites—during Operation Desert Shield in 1990. Since then, the story goes, the relationship between the jihadists and their former benefactors has been one of enmity, characterized by sporadic terror attacks and fierce US retribution. The real story, however, is something altogether different.

From 1992 to 1995, the Pentagon flew thousands of al-Qaeda mujahideen, often accompanied by US Special Forces, from Central Asia to Europe to reinforce Bosnian Muslims as they fought Serbs to gain their independence from the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. The Clinton administration armed and trained these fighters in flagrant violation of United Nations accords; weapons purchased by Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Iran were secretly shipped to the jihadis via Croatia, which netted a hefty profit from each transaction. The official Dutch inquiry into the 1995 Srebrenica massacre, in which thousands of Bosniak (Bosnian Muslim) men and boys were slaughtered by Bosnian Serb and Serbian paramilitary forces, concluded that the United States was "very closely involved" in these arms transfers.

When the Bosnian war ended in 1995 the United States was faced with the problem of thousands of Islamist warriors on European soil. Many of them joined the burgeoning Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), which mainly consisted of ethnic Albanian Kosovars from what was still southwestern Yugoslavia. Emboldened by the success of the Slovenes, Croats, Macedonians and Bosnians who had won their independence from Belgrade as Yugoslavia literally balkanized, KLA fighters began to violently expel as many non-Albanians from Kosovo as they could. Roma, Jews, Turks and, above all, Serbs were all victims of Albanian ethnic cleansing.

The United States was initially very honest in its assessment of the KLA. Robert Gelbard, the US special envoy to Bosnia, called it “without any question a terrorist group.” KLA backers allegedly included Osama bin Laden and other Islamic radicals; the group largely bankrolled its activities by trafficking heroin and sex slaves. The State Department accordingly added the KLA to its list of terrorist organizations in 1998.

However, despite all its nastiness the KLA endeared itself to Washington by fighting the defiant Yugoslavian President Slobodan Milošević. By this time Yugoslavia, once composed of eight nominally autonomous republics, had been reduced by years of bloody civil war to a rump of Serbia, Montenegro and Kosovo. To Serbs, the dominant ethnic group in what remained of the country, Kosovo is regarded as the very birthplace of their nation. Belgrade wasn't about to let it go without a fight and everyone knew it, especially the Clinton administration. Clinton's hypocrisy was immediately evident; when Chechnya fought for its independence from Moscow and Russian forces committed horrific atrocities in response, the American president called the war an internal Russian affair and barely criticized Russian President Boris Yeltsin. But when Milošević resorted to brute force in an attempt to prevent Yugoslavia from further fracturing, he soon found himself a marked man.

Although NATO called the KLA “the main initiator of the violence” in Kosovo and blasted “what appears to be a deliberate campaign of provocation” against the Serbs, the Clinton administration was nevertheless determined to attack the Milošević regime. US intelligence confirmed that the KLA was indeed provoking harsh retaliatory strikes by Serb forces in a bid to draw the United States and NATO into the conflict. President Clinton, however, apparently wasn't listening. The NATO powers, led by the United States, issued Milošević an ultimatum they knew he could never accept: allow NATO to occupy all of Kosovo and have free reign in Serbia as well. Assistant US Secretary of State James Rubin later admitted that “publicly we had to make clear we were seeking an agreement but privately we knew the chances of the Serbs agreeing were quite small.”

### Wagging the Dog?

In 1997 the film "Wag the Dog" debuted to rave reviews. The dark comedy concerns a Washington, DC spin doctor and a Hollywood producer who fabricate a fictional war in Albania to distract American voters from a presidential sex scandal. Many observers couldn't help but draw parallels between the film and the real-life events of 1998-99, which included the Monica Lewinsky scandal, Clinton's impeachment and a very real war brewing in the Balkans. As in "Wag the Dog," there were exaggerated or completely fabricated tales of atrocities, and as in the film the US and NATO powers tried to sell their war as a humanitarian intervention. An attack on Yugoslavia, we were told, was needed to avert Serb ethnic cleansing of Albanians.

There were two main problems with this. First, there was no Serb ethnic cleansing of Albanian Kosovars until after NATO began mercilessly bombing Yugoslavia. The German government issued several reports confirming this. One, from October 1998, reads, in part:

The violent actions of the Yugoslav military and police since February 1998 were aimed at separatist activities and are no proof of a persecution of the whole Albanian ethnic group in Kosovo or a part of it. What was involved in the Yugoslav violent actions and excesses since February 1998 was a selective forcible action against the military underground movement (especially the KLA)... A state program or persecution aimed at the whole ethnic group of Albanians exists neither now nor earlier.

Subsequent German government reports issued through the winter of 1999 tell a similar story. “Events since February and March 1998 do not evidence a persecution program based on Albanian ethnicity,” stated one report released exactly one month before the NATO bombing started. “The measures taken by the armed Serbian forces are in the first instance directed toward combatting the KLA and its supposed adherents and supporters.”

While Serbs certainly did commit atrocities (especially after the ferocious NATO air campaign began), these were often greatly exaggerated by the Clinton administration and the US corporate mainstream media. Clinton claimed—and the media dutifully parroted—that 600,000 Albanians were “trapped within Kosovo... lacking shelter, short of food, afraid to go home or buried in mass graves.” This was completely false. US diplomat David Scheffer claimed that “225,000 ethnic Albanian men... are missing, presumed dead.” Again, a total fabrication. The FBI, International War Crimes Tribunal and global forensics experts flocked to Kosovo in droves after the NATO bombs stopped falling; the total number of victims they found was around 1 percent of the figure claimed by the United States.

However, once NATO attacked, the Serb response was predictably furious. Shockingly, NATO commander Gen. Wesley Clark declared that the ensuing Serbian atrocities against the Albanian Kosovar population had been “fully anticipated” and were apparently of little concern to Washington. Not only did NATO and the KLA provoke a war with Yugoslavia, they did so knowing that many innocent civilians would be killed, maimed or displaced by the certain and severe reprisals carried out by enraged Serb forces. Michael McGwire, a former top NATO planner, acknowledged that “to describe the bombing as a humanitarian intervention is really grotesque.”

### Bloody Hypocrites

The other big problem with the US claiming it was attacking Yugoslavia on humanitarian grounds was that the Clinton administration had recently allowed—and was at the time allowing—far worse humanitarian catastrophes to rage without American intervention. More than 800,000 men, women and children were slaughtered while Clinton and other world leaders stood idly by during the 1994 Rwandan genocide. The US also courted the mediievally brutal Taliban regime in hopes of achieving stability in Afghanistan and with an eye toward building a gas pipeline from Turkmenistan through Afghanistan to Pakistan. Clinton also did nothing to stop Russian forces from viciously crushing nationalist uprisings in the Caucasus, where Chechen rebels were fighting for their independence much the same as Albanian Kosovars were fighting the Serbs.

Colombia, the Western Hemisphere's leading recipient of US military and economic aid, was waging a fierce, decades-long campaign of terror against leftist insurgents and long-suffering indigenous peoples. Despite horrific brutality and pervasive human rights violations, US aid to Bogotá increased year after year. In Turkey, not only did Clinton do nothing to prevent government forces from committing widespread atrocities against Kurdish separatists, the administration positively encouraged its NATO ally with billions of dollars in loans and arms sales. Saudi Arabia, home to the most repressive fundamentalist regime this side of Afghanistan, was—and remains—a favored US ally despite having one of the world's worst human rights records. The list goes on and on.

Much closer to the conflict at hand, the United States tacitly approved the largest ethnic cleansing campaign in Europe since the Holocaust when as many as 200,000 Serbs were forcibly expelled from the Krajina region of Croatia by that country's US-trained military during Operation Storm in August 1995. Krajina Serbs had purged the region of its Croat minority four years earlier in their own ethnic cleansing campaign; now it was the Serbs' turn to be on the receiving end of the horror. Croatian forces stormed through Krajina, shelling towns and slaughtering innocent civilians. The sick and the elderly who couldn't escape were executed or burned alive in their homes as Croatian soldiers machine-gunned convoys of fleeing refugees.

“Painful for the Serbs”

Washington's selective indignation at Serb crimes both real and imagined is utterly inexcusable when held up to the horrific and seemingly indiscriminate atrocities committed during the NATO air campaign against Yugoslavia. The prominent Australian journalist John Pilger noted that “in the attack on Serbia, 2 percent of NATO's missiles hit military targets, the rest hit hospitals, schools, factories, churches and broadcast studios.” There is little doubt that US and allied warplanes and missiles were targeting the Serbian people as much as, or even more than, Serb forces. The bombing knocked out electricity in 70 percent of the country as well as much of its water supply.

NATO warplanes also deliberately bombed a building containing the headquarters of Serbian state television and radio in the middle of densely populated central Belgrade. The April 23, 1999 attack occurred without warning while 200 employees were at work in the building. Among the 16 people killed were a makeup artist, a cameraman, a program director, an editor and three security guards. There is no doubt that the attack was meant to demoralize the Serbian people. There is also no doubt that those who ordered the bombing knew exactly what outcome to expect: a NATO planning document viewed by Bill Clinton, UK Prime Minister Tony Blair and French President Jacques Chirac forecast as many as 350 deaths in the event of such an attack, with as many as 250 of the victims expected to be innocent civilians living in nearby apartments.

Allied commanders wanted to fight a “zero casualty war” in Yugoslavia. As in zero casualties for NATO forces, not the people they were bombing. “This will be painful for the Serbs,” Pentagon spokesman Kenneth Bacon sadistically predicted. It sure was. NATO warplanes flew sorties at 15,000 feet (4,500 meters), a safe height for the pilots. But this decreased accuracy and increased civilian casualties on the ground. One attack on central Belgrade mistakenly hit Dragiša Mišović hospital with a laser-guided “precision” bomb, obliterating an intensive care unit and destroying a children's ward while wounding several pregnant women who had the misfortune of being in labor at the time of the attack. Dragana Krstić, age 23, was recovering from cancer surgery—she

just had a 10-pound (4.5 kg) tumor removed from her stomach—when the bombs blew jagged shards of glass into her neck and shoulders. “I don’t know which hurts more,” she lamented, “my stomach, my shoulder or my heart.”

Dragiša Mišović wasn’t the only hospital bombed by NATO. Cluster bombs dropped by fighter jets of the Royal Netherlands Air Force struck a hospital and a market in the city of Niš on May 7, killing 15 people and wounding 60 more. An emergency clinic and medical dispensary were also bombed in the mining town of Aleksinac on April 6, killing at least five people and wounding dozens more.

Bridges were favorite targets of NATO bombing. An international passenger train traveling from Belgrade to Thessaloniki, Greece was blown apart by two missiles as it crossed over Grdelica gorge on April 12. Children and a pregnant woman were among the 15 people killed in the attack; 16 other passengers were wounded. Allied commander Gen. Wesley Clark claimed the train, which had been damaged by the first missile, had been traveling too rapidly for the pilot to abort the second strike on the bridge. He then offered up a doctored video that was sped up more than three times so that the pilot’s behavior would appear acceptable.

On May 1, at least 24 civilians, many of them children, were killed when NATO warplanes bombed a bridge in Lužane just as a bus was crossing. An ambulance rushing to the scene of the carnage was struck by a second bomb. On the sunny spring afternoon of May 30, a bridge over the Velika Morava River in the small town of Vavarin was bombed by low-flying German Air Force F-16 fighters while hundreds of local residents gathered nearby to celebrate an Orthodox Christian holiday. Eleven people died, most of them when the warplanes returned and bombed the people who rushed to the bridge to help those wounded in the first strike.

#### No One Is Safe

The horrors suffered by the villagers of Surdulica shows that no one in Serbia was safe from NATO’s fury. They endured some 175 bombardments during one three-week period alone, with 50 houses destroyed and 600 others damaged in a town with only around 10,000 residents. On April 27, 20 civilians, including 12 children, died when bombs meant to destroy an army barracks slammed into a residential neighborhood. As many as 100 others were wounded in the incident. Tragedy befell the tiny town again on May 31 when NATO warplanes returned to bomb an ammunition depot but instead hit an old people’s home; 23 civilians, most of them helpless elderly men and women, were blown to pieces. Dozens more were wounded. The US military initially said “there were no errant weapons” in the attack. However, Deputy Defense Secretary John Hamre later testified before Congress that it “was a case of the pilot getting confused.”

The CIA was also apparently confused when it relied on what it claimed was an outdated map to approve a Stealth Bomber strike on what turned out to be the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade. Three Chinese journalists were killed and 27 other people were wounded. Some people aren’t so sure the attack was an accident—Britain’s Observer later reported that the US deliberately bombed the embassy after discovering it was being used to transmit Yugoslav army communications.

There were plenty of other accidents, some of them horrifically tragic and others just downright bizarre. Two separate attacks on the very Albanians NATO was claiming to help killed 160 people, many of them women and children. On April 14, NATO warplanes bombed refugees

along a 12-mile (19-km) stretch of road between the towns of Gjakova and Deçan in western Kosovo, killing 73 people including 16 children and wounding 36 more. Journalists reported a grisly scene of "bodies charred or blown to pieces, tractors reduced to twisted wreckage and houses in ruins." Exactly one month later, another column of refugees was bombed near Koriša, killing 87—mostly women, children and the elderly—and wounding 60 others. In the downright bizarre category, a wildly errant NATO missile struck a residential neighborhood in the Bulgarian capital Sofia, some 40 miles (64 km) outside of Serbia. The American AGM-88 HARM missile blew the roof off of a man's house while he was shaving in his bathroom.

### NATO's "Murderous Thugs"

As the people of Yugoslavia were being terrorized by NATO's air war, the terrorists of the Kosovo Liberation Army stepped up their atrocities against Serbs and Roma in Kosovo. NATO troops deployed there to keep the peace often failed to protect these people from the KLA's brutal campaign. More than 164,000 Serbs fled or were forcibly driven from the Albanian-dominated province and by the summer of 2001 KLA ethnic cleansing had rendered Kosovo almost entirely Albanian, with just a few die-hard Serb holdouts living in fear and surrounded by barbed wire.

The KLA soon expanded its war into neighboring Macedonia. Although NATO Secretary-General Lord Robertson called the terror group "murderous thugs," the United States—now with George W. Bush as president—continued to offer its invaluable support. National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice personally intervened in an attempt to persuade Ukraine to halt arms sales to the Macedonian army and when a group of 400 KLA fighters were surrounded at Aracinovo in June 2001, NATO ordered Macedonian forces to hold off their attack while a convoy of US Army vehicles rescued the besieged militants. It later emerged that 17 American military advisers were embedded with the KLA at Aracinovo.

### Credibility Conundrum

The bombing of Yugoslavia was really about preserving the credibility of the United States and NATO. The alliance's saber rattling toward Belgrade had painted it into a corner from which the only way out was with guns blazing. Failure to follow threats with deadly action, said President Clinton, "would discredit NATO." Clinton added that "our mission is clear, to demonstrate the seriousness of NATO's purpose." The president seemed willfully ignorant of NATO's real purpose, which is to defend member states from outside attack. British Prime Minister Tony Blair agreed with Clinton, declaring on the eve of the war that "to walk away now would... destroy NATO's credibility." Gary Dempsey, a foreign policy analyst at the libertarian Cato Institute, wrote that the Clinton administration "transformed a conflict that posed no threat to the territorial integrity, national sovereignty or general welfare of the United States into a major test of American resolve."

Waging or prolonging war for credibility's sake is always dangerous and seems always to yield disastrous results. Tens of thousands of US troops and many times as many Vietnamese, Laotian and Cambodian soldiers and civilians died while Richard Nixon sought an "honorable" way out of Vietnam. Ronald Reagan's dogged defense of US credibility cost the lives of 299 American and French troops killed in Hezbollah's 1983 Beirut barracks bombing. This time, ensuring American credibility meant backing the vicious KLA—some of whose fighters had trained at Osama bin Laden's terror camps in Afghanistan. This, despite the fact that al-Qaeda had already

been responsible for deadly attacks against the United States, including the 1998 embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania.

It is highly questionable whether bombing Yugoslavia affirmed NATO's credibility in the short term. In the long term, it certainly did not. The war marked the first and only time NATO had ever attacked a sovereign state. It did so unilaterally, absent any threat to any member nation, and without the approval of the United Nations Security Council. "If NATO can go for military action without international blessing, it calls into question the reliability of NATO as a security partner," Russian Ambassador Sergey Kislyak, then Moscow's ambassador to NATO, told me at a San Francisco reception.

Twenty years later, Operation Allied force has been all but forgotten in the United States. In a country that has been waging nonstop war on terrorism for almost the entire 21st century, the 1999 NATO air war is but a footnote in modern American history. Serbs, however, still seethe at the injustice and hypocrisy of it all. The bombed-out ruins of the old Yugoslav Ministry of Defense, Radio Television of Serbia headquarters and other buildings serve as constant, painful reminders of the horrors endured by the Serbian people in service of NATO's credibility.