

Faulty logic, faulty ethics: NATO intervention in yugoslavia

by [Paul Mojzes](#) in the [April 14, 1999](#) issue

Many pronouncements made by Serbs and by ethnic Albanians in Serbia, including Kosovo, are half-truths. Half-truths have also corrupted the pronouncements of many people, including the U.S. government and military and the media. And half-truths lead to total error. Thus, again in this latest Balkan conflict, truth is one of the first casualties of war.

The following truths should be kept in mind as one evaluates the bombardment of Yugoslavia and the espoused goals of the U.S. and NATO:

- The lives of Albanians and Serbs (and other inhabitants of multiethnic Yugoslavia who have been almost completely forgotten) are equally precious.
- Both Serbs and Albanians have lived in Kosovo for centuries, sometimes in isolation from one another, with occasional bloody conflicts.
- Attempts at ethnic cleansing in Kosovo are mutual; Serbs would like to eliminate the Albanian presence and vice versa.
- Ethnic Albanians in Kosovo have been and continue to be subjected to a persecution verging on genocide.
- The tactics of ethnic Albanian guerrillas, both from Kosovo and outside Kosovo, are as brutal toward Serbs as those of the Serbs are toward them.
- The two groups are afraid of each other and are able to see only their own victimization. They do not regard the suffering inflicted by their own side on the other as of any significance.
- For the Serbs, Kosovo has the significance of a "holy land" without which Serb identity is unthinkable. Many are ready to kill or to be killed for this land.
- Albanians' gradual demographic growth has created for them a sense that this land ought to be theirs alone, independent from Serbia, and eventually annexed to Albania.
- Each side would rather be destroyed than give up these claims.

- Each side has harbored and nurtured the collective memory of previous attempts at genocide and repression.

The most pressing tragedy has been the rising toll among ethnic Albanians. It is well known that the most difficult ethical decisions are those where two or more rights collide. In this case, the right of a sovereign state to prevent secession of one of its integral provinces has collided with the right of the ethnic Albanian minority to receive protection of its human rights either by the state or by the international community. The protection of minority rights must take priority, especially when the abuse threatens to develop into genocide. (This principle is not recognized by Yugoslavia, however, or by other states defined by ethnic identity.) I supported the use of U.S. troops to end the Bosnian conflict in the name of preventing an even greater loss of life.

But to intervene on behalf of the ethnic Albanians of Kosovo requires an extraordinarily subtle approach. That subtlety has been entirely lacking. Needing to drum up popular support for military intervention, the administration compared Slobodan Milosevic to Hitler or Saddam Hussein. Such a comparison is an unwarranted magnification.

The demonization of all Serbs quickly followed, which made it palatable to assert that we can and must bomb Milosevic into submission and that it will be his fault if he does not succumb to NATO's ultimatum. Never mind that this entails destroying a multiethnic country whose inhabitants have been told that, though they are being killed, our quarrel is not with them but with Milosevic (who is, needless to say, well protected). We also overlooked the fact that the ultimatum given to Milosevic was unacceptable not only to him but to the vast majority of Yugoslavia's citizens.

The Kosovo problem, like the Bosnian problem, will not go away with the defeat of this or that leader. But Americans lack the stomach or patience to confront intractable problems. Americans offered a set of simple solutions, which consisted mostly of threats and not enough enticements. NATO declared it would bomb Yugoslavia into submission unless or until it invited the soldiers of the very same countries that had just bombed it to patrol it. Imagine, the very same group that would rain destruction upon you would suddenly guarantee your peace! Most people would find fault with this logic.

It would have made far more sense to propose that the peacemaking troops in Kosovo would consist of, say, Portuguese, Danish, Greek, Czech, Russian, Polish and Norwegian soldiers who would be given logistic support by the great powers, rather than NATO troops from Germany and Italy, which partitioned Yugoslavia in World War II (Italy having helped Kosovo Albanian extremists in the ethnic cleansing of Serbs in Kosovo). Is there still time to offer a formula of this kind that might be acceptable to Yugoslavs? I think so.

Another major mistake was that NATO did not act as a neutral negotiator but as an arbiter that sided with the ethnic Albanians, encouraging their hopes for secession. NATO pressured Milosevic to pull back his army and police from Kosovo. Why wasn't equal pressure exerted on the KLA not to use the border with Albania as a porous conduit for arms and personnel? The KLA became very popular with the oppressed ethnic Albanians--but did the U.S. have to court these guerrillas, who were as violent as the Serb forces, rather than the more moderate Kosovar Albanian leaders?

The U.S. claims that the only language which Milosevic understands is power. So we unleashed awesome destruction upon his land, hoping that he would cave in or that perhaps the attack would topple him or strengthen the opposition. President Clinton also stressed that bombing Yugoslavia would avert not only a humanitarian disaster but a Balkan or European conflagration (especially in Albania, Macedonia and Greece). How reasonable was this expectation? It seems that the result is exactly the opposite.

As this is written, the casualties from the bombing do not yet exceed the estimated 2,000 lives lost in the latest round of Kosovo violence. But the question is whether the goals of the attack are likely to be achieved.

The scope of the bombing has been too comprehensive. Instead of the expected concentration on military targets in and around Kosovo, cities in all parts of Yugoslavia have been hit, from the Hungarian border to the Adriatic, including their downtown areas.

Opponents of Milosevic (both Serb and non-Serb) had to seek shelter, flee to the countryside, suffer damage to their property, be wounded or killed. (Our media still show only Albanian casualties and refugees; Yugoslav media show only theirs.) Almost instantly, ranks closed around Milosevic and a superpatriotic spirit arose. For the time being the opposition to the dictator is completely wiped out. It is hard to be

pro-Western while the West is blowing you up.

In Kosovo, chaos reigns. As organized government weakens, blind, willful, retaliatory violence escalates. Ethnic cleansing has increased dramatically. As ever larger numbers of ethnic Albanians flee to neighboring Albania, Macedonia and Montenegro, those countries will be destabilized and might be drawn into war.

What if Yugoslavia does not cave in to the NATO bombing? Two major alternatives seem available. One is that NATO ground troops will intervene (something that at the outset was categorically rejected). Will NATO troops occupy Kosovo? If so, the ethnic cleansing of Serbs will be accomplished. Kosovo will become 100 per cent Albanian, will be eventually annexed to Albania and will probably then be attacked by the Serbs in the hope of regaining it, whether in ten, 20 or 50 years. But if NATO ground troops do not enter Kosovo, then the ethnic cleansing of Albanians from Kosovo will be accomplished--something the bombing was supposed to prevent rather than expedite.

The most likely scenario, however, is that the rump Yugoslavia will be massively destroyed by bombing, devastating it for the next four or five decades without successfully changing its government. Interethnic violence might explode among all of Yugoslavia's ethnic groups in such a way that it will be hard to know who won and who lost. NATO will then wash its hands, saying that its mission was accomplished, since the Yugoslav army's war machine has been devastated. My greatest anxiety is that a war in Serbia and Montenegro may erupt, a war as devastating as the one in Bosnia and Croatia. I did not expect that the U.S. and NATO would promote rather than prevent it.

A multiethnic Bosnia was imposed upon the Serbs of Bosnia by the U.S. and its allies, who said that the integrity of a Bosnian state--a state with little recent independence--must be respected. I agree with that goal, although there is very little reason to be optimistic about the successful integration of that country, especially now that the fellow Serbs of Yugoslavia are in harm's way. But why not stand by the same principle when it comes to Serbia? Why not insist that Serbia's borders--to which a much more substantiated historical claim can be made--must be inviolate, even though the composition of that state is also multiethnic?

Neither the Serb majority in Yugoslavia nor the Albanian ethnic minority (a majority in Kosovo only) would have been thrilled by this prospect, but they would have

found some political solution sooner or later. To dangle the idea that in three years a decision should be made about the destiny of Kosovo, perhaps by offering a referendum, is, from a Serb perspective, tantamount to giving Kosovo independence now; any sane person can tell what the outcome of such a referendum restricted to inhabitants of Kosovo would be. The basis for multiethnic coexistence in the long run is being wiped out from the air.

The logic that a small country will cave in when faced by the world's mightiest military alliance is faulty, as is the social ethic which claims that intense, uninterrupted and indiscriminate bombing will somehow lower the level of violence. Instead, both Serb and Albanian leaders (yes, even the despised Milosevic) must be given a chance to save face--not for their own sake but for the sake of the population.

My suggestion: Stop the bombing, offer an international police made of nonobjectionable national forces under the auspices of the Organization of States for the Security of Europe or the UN, engage the Russians in the negotiation process (which is more palatable to the Serbs), offer to lift economic sanctions against Yugoslavia so its people see the advantage of negotiation, and rebuild the bombed homes and factories (with the exception of arms factories). And stop the selling of arms to both Serbs and Albanians. That wouldn't completely stop the killing, but it would reduce it considerably.

One more truth: What Serbs consider "collateral damage" as they flush out guerrillas from their hiding places in villages is regarded by us as genocide. What is regarded as "collateral damage" by NATO forces as they bomb installations in cities is regarded as genocide by Yugoslavs. But from God's perspective, the victims of this "collateral damage" are infinitely precious human beings.