

Introduction

ON MARCH 24, 1999, NATO went to war for the first time in its fifty-year history. Its target was not a country, but a man. As the Serb leader of Yugoslavia, Slobodan Milosevic had been most responsible for a decade of violence that accompanied the breakup of Yugoslavia. Well over a hundred thousand people had been killed and millions displaced in Croatian and Bosnian wars during the first part of the 1990s. Now a similar humanitarian catastrophe threatened in Kosovo, part of Serbia, the heart of the former Yugoslavia. Milosevic's security forces were arrayed against the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), a small insurgent force, and the ethnic Albanians who dominated the area's population. In the previous year of fighting, nearly two thousand people had been killed and many hundreds of thousands were driven from their homes. A full-scale war in Kosovo between Serbs and Albanians would likely have been particularly brutal, leaving untold death and destruction in its wake. Compounding the likely humanitarian disaster was the potential for large numbers of refugees engulfing the fragile border countries of Macedonia and Albania, with consequences for stability and security across the entire region.

So NATO went to war. For a decade, the alliance had wavered in its resolve to confront Milosevic. At times, the Serb leader had proven a willing partner in negotiating a halt to the region's violence. More often, he had been the source of that violence. For more than a year, the United States and its principal European allies had tried to head off a military confrontation by seeking to engage the man most responsible for the carnage that had befallen Kosovo, an approach similar to that followed in Croatia and Bosnia earlier in the decade. The Kosovo effort failed, not least because Milosevic displayed little interest in defusing a confrontation with a NATO alliance he assumed would soon founder in disagreement over how and to what extent to prosecute a war.

Late on the night of March 24, NATO warplanes began what was expected to be a brief bombing campaign. The purpose of the campaign was to force Milosevic back to the negotiating table so that NATO could find a way short of independence to protect Kosovo's ethnic Albanian population from Serb violence and political domination. This bombing campaign, it was emphatically stated, was not a war, and none of the NATO leaders had any intention of waging one.

Politics at home and abroad were believed to constrain the United States and its partners in the use of force. When hostilities began, President Bill Clinton had just survived his impeachment ordeal. He faced a Congress that was not just politically hostile but also increasingly wary of U.S. military action designed to serve humanitarian goals, including in the Balkans. Although Clinton had authorized the use of military force several times in his presidency, he had not ordered American soldiers into situations in which some were likely to be killed since the Somalia operation had gone tragically wrong in late 1993. Against this backdrop, the president failed to prepare the country for the possibility that NATO's initial bombing raids might be the opening salvo of a drawn-out war. Nor were he and his top advisers really prepared for this possibility themselves.

As alliance aircraft revved up their engines to start a short air campaign focused primarily on Serb antiaircraft defenses, the expected operation had the flavor of a number of other recent, short, and antiseptic uses of Western airpower. Three months earlier the United States and Great Britain had conducted a four-day bombing campaign against Iraq, and in August 1998 the Clinton administration had launched cruise missile strikes against suspected terrorist facilities in Afghanistan and Sudan in retaliation for the bombings of two U.S. embassies in Africa by the Osama bin Laden network. Neither of those recent military operations had achieved core U.S. strategic objectives. Saddam Hussein had not allowed weapons inspections to resume in Iraq, and the bin Laden network remained intact and, by all accounts, poised to strike again. These generally unsuccessful attacks did little to enhance the credibility of the United States. They were designed more to punish, and to "send a message," than to compel an adversary to change his behavior or directly achieve concrete strategic objectives.

NATO's security interests seemed even less engaged in the Balkans than they had been with Saddam Hussein or bin Laden. This was apparent in the alliance's goals for Kosovo, which were quite nuanced. NATO did not seek to defeat the Serb-dominated Yugoslav armed forces, cause a regime change in Belgrade, or gain Kosovo its independence. Rather it sought to convince

Milosevic to resume negotiations that would allow an armed international force into Kosovo to quell the violence that had erupted there in March 1998. Beyond that the alliance objective was nothing more than autonomy for the ethnic Albanian majority in Kosovo. As a major inducement to Milosevic, it even promised to disarm the KLA. Under such circumstances, a protracted NATO bombing campaign seemed disproportionate—and thus unlikely—to most onlookers, be they in Belgrade, Brussels, Washington, or elsewhere.

However, what had started very much as a foreign ministers' battle soon became NATO's first real war. Seventy-eight days later, it finally ended as Serb forces left Kosovo and a NATO-led international force of 50,000 began to move in. But over the intervening weeks a great deal of destruction was wrought, by Serbs against ethnic Albanians and by NATO against Serbia.

Despite the fact that most of the world's best air forces were conducting combat missions over Yugoslavia from March 24 onward, the early phases of the conflict were dominated militarily by Serb units in Kosovo. NATO lost the war in the initial going, and the Kosovar Albanian people paid the price. Up to 10,000 or so died at Serb hands, mostly innocent civilians; thousands more were raped or otherwise brutalized. Some 800,000 people were forcefully expelled from Kosovo, and hundreds of thousand more were displaced within the territory. Ultimately perhaps 1,000 to 2,000 Serbs perished as well, both civilians killed inadvertently and regular and irregular Serb forces killed on the battlefield.

In the end, NATO prevailed. Although there was no clear turning point, the NATO summit in Washington on April 23–25, 1999—organized originally to celebrate the alliance's fiftieth anniversary—may represent the best dividing line between losing and winning the war. Before that time, the vast majority of Kosovar Albanians were forced from their homes. Despite an intensification of its air campaign, NATO remained powerless to prevent atrocities on the ground or to establish a public perception that it was truly committed to winning the war.

But the summit revealed an alliance unified in its conviction that the war against Serbia must be won. War planning became more systematic, and further increases in NATO's air armada were authorized. The alliance steeled itself sufficiently that even the accidental bombing of the Chinese embassy on May 7 by a U.S. B-2 bomber did not seriously threaten continuation of the war effort. Perhaps most significantly, on April 25 Russian President Boris Yeltsin called Bill Clinton, resuming U.S.-Russian ties that had been effectively frozen when the war began. Yeltsin, though still upset,

committed to do what he could to end the war, setting in motion a negotiating process that would ultimately put a 360-degree diplomatic squeeze on Milosevic.

When it was all over, the alliance was able to reverse most of the damage Serbia had caused in the early period of the war. Notably, of the nearly 1.3 million ethnic Albanians driven from their homes, virtually all were able to return within a few short weeks of the end of the war. Serb forces left Kosovo, with NATO-led units assuming physical control of the territory. An international administration was set up to run Kosovo, effectively wresting political control over the area from Belgrade.

Although overall political momentum began to shift in NATO's favor around the time of the Washington summit, the military tide of battle turned most dramatically in late May. By then, NATO air assets had nearly tripled and the weather had improved, making precision bombs far more effective. In addition, the alliance's political leadership had authorized attacks against a much wider range of targets in Belgrade and elsewhere. The KLA, though still a modest militia force, had begun to conduct limited offensives against Serb positions within Kosovo, in some cases forcing Serb troops to expose themselves, at which point they became more vulnerable to NATO attack aircraft.

By early June Serbia was reeling. In Kosovo Serb forces had lost substantial amounts of the equipment with which they had begun, and Serb soldiers were finding themselves at considerable personal risk. In Serbia electricity grids were being severely damaged, water distribution was adversely affected in all major cities, and the businesses and other assets of Milosevic's cronies were being attacked with growing frequency.

During the eleven-week air campaign, NATO flew nearly 40,000 combat sorties, about one-third the number flown in six weeks during the 1991 Desert Storm campaign. Fourteen of the alliance's nineteen members participated in the attacks.¹ The air campaign was conducted very professionally and precisely by the armed forces of the United States and other NATO member countries. Although some 500 Serb and ethnic Albanian civilians were killed accidentally by NATO bombs, that toll is modest by the standards of war. Moreover, only two alliance jets were shot down in combat, and only two NATO troops died—U.S. Army pilots who perished in an Apache helicopter training accident in neighboring Albania.

NATO's air war had two main thrusts: a strategic campaign against the Serb heartland and a tactical campaign against the Serb forces doing the

killing and the forced expulsions in Kosovo. NATO supreme commander General Wesley Clark rightly argued that, for understanding how NATO won the war, “the indispensable condition for all the other factors was the success of the air campaign itself.” The Pentagon’s report on the war reached a similar conclusion.² But neither ultimate victory nor historically low losses demonstrate that the air war was well designed or properly conceived by top decisionmakers in Washington and other NATO capitals.

Final victory required more than bombing. Two critical factors occurred on the political front: NATO’s demonstrated cohesion as an alliance and Russia’s growing willingness to cooperate in the pursuit of a diplomatic solution. On the military front, NATO’s talk of a possible ground war (which alliance leaders had unwisely ruled out when the bombing began) and the well-publicized decisions to augment allied troop strength in Macedonia and Albania proved to be crucial as well. Whereas the air war inflicted mounting damage, these other factors probably convinced Milosevic that no plausible escape remained. Once that became clear to him, capitulation became his best course, both to minimize further damage to Serbia and its military and to secure his position in power.

Although U.S. domestic politics complicated the conduct of the conflict at times, and did much to shape the limited way in which it was initially fought, they did not fundamentally threaten the operation once it was under way. Most polls showed clear, though hardly overwhelming or impassioned, majorities of the U.S. public supporting NATO’s air campaign.³ Indeed, once the war started, the Clinton administration faced more criticism from those who felt its war plan to be excessively cautious than from those who believed the use of force to be wrongheaded in the first place. As columnist E. J. Dionne Jr. wrote, liberals in particular supported this war for its humanitarian dimensions, getting over their “Vietnam syndrome” in the process.⁴ And while some conservatives objected to the war as not serving U.S. interests, much of the Republican foreign policy elite felt strongly that the conflict had to end in a NATO victory.

In this book, we trace the causes, conduct, and consequences of the Kosovo conflict, analyzing the prelude to war in 1998 and 1999, the period when the KLA first came into direct conflict with Serb forces in Kosovo and the latter began a deliberate escalation of the conflict. We also critically assess the key decisions in NATO policymaking over the eighteen-month period from early 1998 through mid-1999: the October 1998 Holbrooke-Milosevic agreement to place unarmed international monitors in Kosovo, the Rambouillet

negotiations of early 1999, the alliance's decision to begin bombing, and its gradual realization that it would have to win a war, whatever that ultimately required. We conclude by drawing lessons from the conflict that may be relevant to managing similar crises and conducting other such interventions in the future.

Our basic thesis is summarized in the book's title, *Winning Ugly*. NATO did meet reasonable standards of success in its 1999 war against Serbia. The outcome achieved in Kosovo, while hardly without its problems, represented a major improvement over what had prevailed in the region up to that point and certainly over what would have happened had NATO chosen not to intervene. It is in that relative sense that the policy was successful, not because it was properly designed at most major stages and not because it achieved the best plausible outcome to which NATO might have aspired.

Operation Allied Force was far from a perfect diplomatic and military accomplishment. The United States and its allies succeeded only after much suffering by the ethnic Albanian people on the ground. They prevailed only after committing a number of major mistakes, which future interventions must seek to avoid. In fact, NATO's mistakes were so serious that its victory was anything but preordained. Had Milosevic not escalated the conflict dramatically by creating the largest forced exodus on the European continent since World War II, and had alliance leaders not then realized they had to radically overhaul their military strategy, NATO could have lost the war. That would have held very serious implications for the future of the alliance and even worse implications for the peoples of the region.

The Roots of War

The immediate cause of the conflict in Kosovo was Slobodan Milosevic, and his oppression of Kosovar ethnic Albanians in the preceding decade. Oppression ultimately gave rise to violent opposition to Serb rule, first in the formation of the KLA and then in the spiral of violence of 1998 and 1999. But the antecedents of the war go back many centuries. The most famous historic event of the millennium in the territory was probably the 1389 Battle of Kosovo, in the Field of the Blackbirds, near Kosovo's present-day capital of Pristina. There, Serb forces attempted to fend off the invading Turks, with ethnic Albanians probably fighting on both sides in the battle. A subsequent battle in Kosovo in 1448 between the Ottoman Turks and the Hungarians, together with the fall of Constantinople to the Ottomans in 1453, sealed the fate of the region. The Ottoman Empire would soon dominate the region

and it in fact controlled Kosovo into the twentieth century. Looking back on these momentous events, nineteenth- and twentieth-century Serb nationalists mythologized the 1389 battle and, more generally, the role of Kosovo in their nation's history. In the process, they portrayed the primarily Muslim Albanians essentially as sympathizers of the victorious Turkish invaders. The complex interaction of Serbs, Albanians, and Turks over the ensuing centuries provided the ground for all parties' competing historical perceptions, myths, fears, and vendettas.⁵

Kosovo's population became increasingly ethnic Albanian during the period of Ottoman rule. A decisive turning point, politically and demographically, was the large Serb exodus from the region (ultimately into Hungary) in the late seventeenth century. It was caused by Ottoman armies pressing north, ending in their defeat at Vienna against the Habsburg dynasty during the Ottoman-Habsburg War of 1683–99. That war spelled the beginning of the end for Ottoman rule in the Balkans, though as noted it survived in Kosovo for another two hundred years.

In the early twentieth century, the Ottoman Empire was driven out of the Balkans by Serb, Macedonian, and Bulgarian forces, shortly before its complete collapse. Serbia, having itself regained *de facto* independence in the early 1800s and formal state status in the 1878 Treaty of Berlin, asserted control over Kosovo in 1912. That was the same year in which an independent Albanian state was created for the first time, with many of the key moves on the road to independence occurring in Kosovo, conferring on the territory a historic importance for the Albanian people comparable to that for the Serbs.⁶ Serbia lost control of Kosovo during World War I. After the war both Serbia and Kosovo were integrated into the new country of Yugoslavia, with Kosovo a province of Serbia.

At various times over the last century, Serbs drove large numbers of ethnic Albanians from Kosovo in what would be antecedents to Slobodan Milosevic's 1999 campaign to effectively empty the territory of nearly all of them.⁷ Nonetheless, ethnic Albanians remained the majority population throughout the century, representing an increasingly high percentage of all Kosovars in recent decades. Serbs and Montenegrins constituted slightly less than 30 percent of the population in the early years of Tito's rule, which lasted from 1945 until his death in 1980. They gradually declined to less than half that percentage in recent times due to Serb departures and high Albanian birth rates.⁸

Whatever the recent population proportions, Kosovo is a land to which both Serbs and Albanians have important and long-standing claims.⁹ For

that reason, claims by extremists on both sides that they have exclusive rights to the land are false, as are claims that the peoples are so different from each other as to be innately incapable of coexistence.¹⁰ The fact that Kosovo's Albanians are now effectively in charge in the province—and that they should remain in control of at least most of it, whether through autonomy within Serbia, republic status within Yugoslavia, or eventual independence—has nothing to do with original claims to the land. It has instead to do with the treatment of the Kosovar Albanians by Slobodan Milosevic and his fellow Serb nationalists in recent times.

Problems became serious even before the rise of Milosevic in 1987. As early as 1981, a year after the death of Tito, a student uprising in Pristina gave rise to provincewide demonstrations against Yugoslav authorities and perhaps dozens or even hundreds of deaths of ethnic Albanians. For Serbs the uprising was surprising in that Kosovo had been granted greater autonomy and rights, including Albanian-language schools, under the 1974 revision of the Yugoslav constitution. For Albanians these new rights only made them hunger for more, and the deteriorating economic conditions in the province together with their second-class status exacerbated the political tension. Additional incidents through the 1980s further divided Serbs from Albanians.¹¹

In early 1989, as part of his effort to consolidate power as president of Serbia (the position he held from 1987 until becoming president of Yugoslavia in 1997), Milosevic stripped Kosovo of its autonomy. That denied the territory the special status within the Yugoslav Federation that it had enjoyed since the adoption of the 1974 constitution. In response to growing Serb oppression, Albanians established parallel state structures that were championed by Ibrahim Rugova and his Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK), officially founded in December 1989 and committed from the outset to opposing Serb sovereignty over the Kosovar Albanian people. In the following years, Rugova would be elected and reelected as Kosovo's "president" in unofficial elections among the region's ethnic Albanian population.¹²

Rugova and the LDK hoped that in demonstrating their ability to run the territory in all but name, the West would come to recognize Kosovo's right to be independent, as it had for four Yugoslav republics in the early 1990s. Support for separation from Yugoslavia was essentially universal. According to a 1995 survey, 43 percent of all Kosovar Albanians wanted to join Albania, and the remaining 57 percent desired outright independence, with none favoring any other solution (including the status of an independent republic within Yugoslavia, which by then included only Serbia and the much

smaller Montenegro).¹³ That hope and expectation proved to be misplaced. Kosovo was not at the center of U.S. and European Balkan policy and, as long as violence did not escalate, it would not be at the center of that policy.

Yet the United States and its European allies recognized that Kosovo was a powder keg in the middle of a highly volatile region. With Albanians living in at least four countries (Albania, Greece, Macedonia, and Yugoslavia), anything that stoked Albanian nationalism could be highly destabilizing for Kosovo's neighbors. Probably of most concern was Macedonia, whose population is a potentially volatile mix of Slavs with a large minority of Albanians. The fragility of Albania itself was also a reason for concern. Widespread violence in Kosovo was therefore to be avoided, even if that required direct U.S. military action. This together with congressional pressure explains why the Bush administration, which otherwise had a hands-off policy toward Yugoslavia's breakup, decided in late 1992, in response to indications that Serbia might be contemplating a violent crackdown against the Albanian population in Kosovo, to issue a stern warning that such action would lead to U.S. military action. In a letter to Milosevic, President Bush warned that "in the event of conflict in Kosovo caused by Serbian action, the United States will be prepared to employ military force against the Serbs in Kosovo and in Serbia proper."¹⁴ This so-called Christmas warning was reiterated by the Clinton administration within a month of taking office in 1993, when the new secretary of state, Warren Christopher, stated, "We remain prepared to respond against the Serbians in the event of conflict in Kosovo caused by Serb action."¹⁵

On the whole, however, Kosovo occupied a distinctly secondary place in U.S. and Western policy toward the region. Indeed, unlike Bosnia, Croatia, and the other former Yugoslav republics, Kosovo was regarded as an integral part of Serbia rather than as a constituent part of the federation that broke up in the early 1990s. Whereas the republics were regarded as new states that emerged from Yugoslavia's dissolution and thus enjoyed sovereign rights, this status did not apply to Serbia's autonomous provinces (Kosovo and Vojvodina), even though these had enjoyed many of the same prerogatives the republics had, including their own constitutions, governments, judiciaries, central banks, and seats alongside the republics in Yugoslavia's eight-member federal presidency.¹⁶ As a result, the issue for Western policy in Kosovo was not self-determination or national rights but how to protect minority and human rights.

Almost from the beginning, therefore, U.S. and European policy toward Kosovo was limited to increasing pressure on Belgrade to improve the hu-

man rights situation in the territory and establish conditions for greater autonomy and self-government. These demands were raised as a matter of course in all diplomatic dealings with the Belgrade government. The chief U.S. negotiator for ending the Bosnian war, Richard Holbrooke, also raised the issue of Kosovo with Milosevic during their Bosnia negotiations in Dayton in 1995. However, not only were the issues to be resolved in Dayton highly complex and the negotiations intense, the fact that Milosevic's cooperation was critical to success weakened the negotiators' leverage in exacting the concessions that would have been necessary for progress on Kosovo.¹⁷

Still, even after sanctions on Serbia were lifted as the reward for Milosevic's important role in concluding the Bosnian peace agreement, an "outer wall" of sanctions remained in place, partly to encourage the Serb government to improve its policies in Kosovo.¹⁸ In 1996, moreover, the United States established an official government presence in Pristina, when it opened a cultural center run by the U.S. Information Agency that, in Holbrooke's words, amounted to "a virtual U.S. embassy." This step demonstrated U.S. concern over the deteriorating conditions in Kosovo. Finally, during the few meetings he had with Milosevic after successfully concluding the Dayton negotiations, Holbrooke consistently repeated the Christmas warning, even though he says that he was not 100 percent clear on what it was or exactly what it would mean in practice.¹⁹

Despite these limited efforts, there was no concerted attempt to resolve the Kosovo issue before it exploded in full violence (for example, by threatening to impose new sanctions unless Milosevic restored autonomy to the Kosovar Albanians). Although the failure to address Kosovo in Dayton was understandable, the lack of international attention to the issue dealt a major setback to Rugova's strategy of nonviolence. It became increasingly clear in the second half of the 1990s that the Serbs would not stop their repression of Kosovo's majority population and that the international community would do little to effect a change in Serb policy, let alone endorse the Kosovars' demand for independence. For many ethnic Albanians, one conclusion was inescapable: only violence gets international attention.²⁰ A previously unknown group—the Kosovo Liberation Army—took advantage of this realization and started to engage in sporadic violence, harassing and even killing Serb policemen and other authority figures. Its levels of violence were fairly modest; the KLA claimed to have killed ten Serbs in the two-year period up to early 1998. Nonetheless, the situation was deteriorating.²¹

Meanwhile, Rugova's efforts at nonviolent resistance were leading nowhere after Dayton. In 1996, he negotiated an agreement with Milosevic

(with the assistance of *Comunità di Sant'Egidio*, an Italian Catholic charity) that would have given the educational systems run by ethnic Albanians access to official government buildings. Milosevic failed to implement the accord. Rugova was also hurt when the Sali Berisha government in Albania, from which he had received support, fell in 1997 as a result of the spectacular collapse of a nationwide pyramid scheme. The ensuing chaos in Albania led to looting of weapons stocks in many parts of Albania, some of them undoubtedly winding up in the hands of the KLA.²²

In March 1998 Serb security forces stoked the fires by massacring eighty-five people in a brutally indiscriminate attempt to stem the KLA's growing importance in Kosovo. At that point, the violence in Kosovo reached a critical threshold and demanded sustained international attention. Unless stopped by a third party, the ethnic Albanian population and Slobodan Milosevic's Serb nationalists were headed for war. The only remaining questions were two. First, did the United States and its allies care enough about Kosovo to be true to Washington's 1992 Christmas warning? Second, would they find an integrated strategy involving both diplomacy and the threat of force that would succeed in getting the local parties off their collision course? The respective answers to these questions were yes and no.

This book explains how these and other questions were raised, and answered, during the critical eighteen-month period from early 1998 through mid-1999, when Kosovo was a top concern of Western policymakers. Chapters 2 and 3 focus on the prewar period, up to and including the Rambouillet negotiations of early 1999. Chapters 4 and 5 trace the seventy-eight-day violent conflict, including the ups and downs of NATO's, Serbia's, and the Kosovar Albanians' fortunes, and identify its key elements and milestones. The conclusion addresses three key policy questions: Was the war inevitable? Did NATO win? And why did Milosevic ultimately capitulate? It also draws several lessons for future policy regarding coercive diplomacy, the use of force, and humanitarian intervention.

Before addressing these questions, however, it is necessary to spell out the main argument of the book: that NATO's cause was worthy, and its efforts ultimately were reasonably successful, but that the strategy it chose to pursue its cause was seriously flawed.

NATO's Worthy Cause

NATO had moral and strategic rectitude on its side in using military power in the Balkans. First, upholding human rights and alleviating humanitarian

tragedy are worthy goals for American national security policy. Doing so reinforces the notion that the United States is not interested in power for its own sake but rather to enhance stability and security and to promote certain universal principles and values. Second, the United States and its allies have a special interest in upholding these values in Europe, a continent that has become generally free and undivided since the cold war ended but that remains conflict ridden in the Balkans. Third, in addition to these humanitarian and normative rationales, traditional national interest argues for quelling violence in the Balkans because instability there can affect key allies more directly than instability in most other parts of the world.

A number of critics of NATO's approach to the Kosovo crisis either disagree with these arguments or argue that the alliance should have found a way to solve the problem without going to war. More specifically, critics of the alliance argue the following: that the level of violence in Kosovo did not justify NATO military action, especially given the predictable fallout such an action would have on relations with Russia and China; that a more tactically creative and balanced negotiating strategy in the years before the conflict, and particularly at Rambouillet in the winter of 1999, might have averted war; and that even after Milosevic capitulated to most of NATO's main demands in June, conditions in Kosovo did not improve enough to deem the outcome successful. On all of these points, however, critics have overstated their case.²³

Certainly the levels of violence in Kosovo before March 24, 1999, were modest by the standards of civil conflict and compared to what ensued during NATO's bombing campaign. The violence had caused the deaths of an estimated 2,000 people in the previous year. This was not an attempted genocide of the ethnic Albanian people. However, there was good reason to believe that, without intervention, things would have gotten much worse. Milosevic and his fellow Serb extremists had already displayed their true colors earlier in the decade in Bosnia, where at least 100,000 people, mostly Muslims and Croats, had been killed. More recently, and more to the point, in 1998, before the October agreement between Milosevic and U.S. special envoy Richard Holbrooke, Milosevic and his henchmen had driven some 300,000 Kosovar Albanians from their homes, with 50,000 winding up, vulnerable and exposed, hiding in the hills of the province. It was one of the world's five largest crises involving refugees and internally displaced persons in 1998 and the only one in a country subject to cold winters.²⁴ What the alliance has since learned about Milosevic's planned Operation Horseshoe only confirms these judgments. Recognizing that the KLA was prob-

ably becoming too strong and too popular within ethnic Albanian society for him to defeat using classic counterinsurgency techniques, he chose to expel much of the civilian population instead. If this policy was conceived to serve a military purpose, it had a real political appeal for Milosevic too, being the surest way to restore Kosovo to complete Serb control and to free land for Serbs displaced from other parts of the former Yugoslavia in recent conflicts.

At the very best, had Milosevic been left to his own devices, hundreds of thousands of ethnic Albanians would have been driven permanently out of the province, possibly causing serious economic and political consequences in Albania and Macedonia. Fewer Kosovar Albanians might have died in a slower campaign of forced expulsion than the number who died in the actual war, but even that is not certain. It is equally plausible that, once Milosevic saw NATO's lack of resolve in protecting the Kosovars, he would have reverted to the style of warfare perpetrated in Bosnia, killing far more than the 10,000 or so who ultimately perished.

As for the effects on Russia and China, both of these countries had supported previous UN Security Council resolutions demanding an improvement in the human rights situation in Kosovo. Yet neither offered any constructive or serious alternatives to NATO's adopted strategy. The damage to relations with Moscow and Beijing was deeply regrettable; the NATO May 7 bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade was both tragic and incompetent; and the need to act without a UN Security Council resolution was unfortunate. But NATO could not allow itself to be prevented from stopping a mass murderer in its own backyard by unreasonable demands from foreign capitals. In fact, there may even have been a silver lining, in that NATO demonstrated to Russia and China that it would not be intimidated by their protests over a matter that did not concern them directly—and that they seemed uninterested in trying to solve in any case.

NATO's war against Serbia will remain an irritant in Western relations with both China and Russia, perhaps for years, but it was already fading in salience by late 1999 and early 2000. By that point, most normal ties between Western capitals and Moscow and Beijing had been resumed, the U.S.-China relationship had moved on to trade issues and Taiwan security matters, and the U.S.-Russian agenda had refocused on nuclear and economic issues as well as on achieving a smooth transition from Boris Yeltsin to Vladimir Putin. The UN Security Council had restored its ability to function effectively, as evidenced by resolutions proposing a new weapons inspection regime for Iraq and peacekeeping forces for East Timor and Congo. Despite

the charges of some, it is not plausible that NATO's war over Kosovo was a chief cause of Russia's resumed conflict in Chechnya or of China's tense relations with Taiwan. Both of those problems are far too central to those countries' core interests to be blamed on Western military action in the Balkans. Operation Allied Force was clearly bad for the West's relations with China and Russia, but it was hardly a turning point. Ultimately, both China and Russia have more important things to worry about and more important matters to discuss with the United States and its allies.

What about the possibility of protecting the ethnic Albanians without going to war? Critics argue, for example, that NATO essentially ignored the Kosovo problem throughout the 1990s, doing little to make the 1992 Christmas warning credible. Others argue that NATO made a deal with Milosevic impossible when it demanded at Rambouillet that its troops have access to all Yugoslav territory and that a plebiscite on Kosovo's future be held three years after the signing of an accord. Still others assert that partitioning Kosovo between Albanians and Serbs might have prevented war or that arming the KLA might have allowed NATO to stay out of the violent conflict once it did begin.

It is true that NATO's tendency to neglect Kosovo throughout the 1990s was a mistake. At a minimum, once the 1995 Dayton Accords were signed and NATO troops deployed to Bosnia, the United States and its allies should have threatened to impose sanctions as conditions in Kosovo deteriorated in the ensuing years. They no longer needed Milosevic to establish or keep the peace in Bosnia and could thus hold him up to reasonable standards of behavior in his own backyard. However, it is doubtful that doing so would have convinced Milosevic to back down; he had already demonstrated his willingness to accept sanctions as the price of trying to gain land in Bosnia for Serbs, and if anything he cared more about Kosovo than about Bosnia. Moreover, by the time of Rambouillet Milosevic knew the tide had turned against him in Kosovo and that to keep his hold over the territory he would have to wipe out the KLA rather than simply restore autonomy to the ethnic Albanians (which it is doubtful that he wished to do in any event). Having watched NATO troops become ensconced in Bosnia, he probably also doubted whether NATO troops, once allowed in, would ever leave Kosovo.

NATO did err in insisting on military access to all of Serbia at Rambouillet. It clearly failed to recognize that the kind of language common in status-of-forces agreements it had negotiated previously (including with Croatia) might be wrongly interpreted, but this provision was almost certainly not the decisive factor in Milosevic's thinking. The Serbs never raised it during

the negotiations, focusing their opposition instead on the proposed deployment of a NATO-led force inside Kosovo. Had they objected to the provision, negotiators would surely have recommended that alliance military authorities change their position. NATO made this demand as a matter of military convenience and nothing else. As the later Kosovo Force (KFOR) operation showed, NATO did not need access to northern and central Serbia to carry out its mission in Kosovo.

The conflict in Kosovo was fundamental: only NATO troops could have protected the Kosovar Albanians reliably enough to convince the KLA to disarm, but such troops were anathema to Milosevic, as was the idea of Kosovo's autonomy or independence. The parties were on a collision course for war, and a different negotiating strategy could not itself have changed that fact. It may still have been worth making one last offer to Milosevic, partly to allow Russia a somewhat greater role in setting the terms of NATO's ultimatum. But the practical purpose of doing so would have been more to limit the fallout between NATO and Moscow once the war began than to avoid war. Only a very credible threat of massive NATO military action—a demonstrated willingness to achieve by force what negotiations could not—might have been enough to convince the butcher of Belgrade to relent. Yet critics do not generally make that argument, focusing instead on secondary or tactical issues, where their case is unconvincing.

What about partitioning Kosovo between Serbia and the ethnic Albanian population? It would have run counter to the views of virtually all NATO governments, which believed that partitioning *within* the various republics of the former Yugoslavia, such as Bosnia, was a bad idea. That is not itself sufficient reason to dismiss the idea analytically. However, while partitioning can help produce stable peace accords in civil conflicts, it is doubtful it would have worked in this particular instance. Ethnic Albanians, who were the overwhelming majority of Kosovars, would have insisted on, and had rights to, the majority of Kosovo's territory. Yet that would surely have been too high a price for Milosevic, who viewed Kosovo as key not only to his own rise to power a decade before but also to the territorial integrity of the Serb nation. Both sides essentially wanted all of the province. Perhaps partition would have been moderately preferable, in Milosevic's eyes, to having NATO throughout all of Kosovo. But either way, serious NATO threats or the use of force would have been necessary to convince him to give up most of a territory that he and his countrymen held very dear.

Arming the KLA might have contributed to an eventual battlefield success once war was under way, but it could hardly have prevented violence or

allowed the Kosovar Albanians to win a quick victory. Leaving aside the fact that the KLA was an organization with goals for Kosovo's independence that NATO governments and Russia did not share, arming it would not have achieved any of the stated goals. An organization with only a few thousand ragtag fighters into early 1999, it could not have become strong enough to take on tens of thousands of Serb soldiers and police—or to prevent Milosevic's campaign of "ethnic cleansing"—in the space of a few short months of equipping and training by NATO.²⁵ Arming the KLA might have prevented Serbia from consolidating its control over the province but only at the price of turning Kosovo into another Afghanistan or Angola. That was not the right way to pursue a policy focused first and foremost on humanitarian goals.

Finally, many critics argue that postwar Kosovo, beset by problems like the exodus of local Serbs, is little improved from conditions that prevailed when Serbia ran the province. This claim is wrong. The level of per capita violence in Kosovo remains too high, but it dropped tenfold within the nine months after the war ended on June 10, 1999.²⁶ Serbs have left in great numbers, many out of a very real fear for their lives, but the displacement of some 100,000 Serbs since the end of the war is a far less severe violation of human rights than what Milosevic did to the ethnic Albanians—and for the most part it happened much less violently. Two wrongs do not make a right. But people who have been discriminated against for decades, oppressed for the last decade, brutalized for a year, and then driven from their homes and their land—often with the collaboration of local Serbs—can be forgiven a certain paranoia, even if their revenge attacks against Serbs cannot be condoned. To be sure, enough problems remain in Kosovo that NATO's victory cannot yet be called permanent. But the international community is now in a very favorable position to maintain basic military peace in the territory and to gradually improve its economic and social conditions. With good policymaking, it should be able to consolidate its victory, at least by standards that are reasonable to apply to a place, such as Kosovo, that has recently suffered a vicious civil war.

NATO's—and Washington's—Key Mistakes

The story of the Kosovo crisis is largely a saga of NATO and its major international partners doing the right thing but in the wrong way. From the beginning of the Kosovo crisis, U.S. and European leaders shared a common belief that they had to "do something" about the situation in this small ter-

ritory in the heart of the former Yugoslavia. They just could never agree what that “something” was. When Milosevic’s forces engaged in a brutal crackdown on the KLA in early March 1998, the Clinton administration knew it had to act for political, strategic, and moral reasons. Politically, Milosevic’s actions challenged U.S. and NATO policy in other parts of the Balkans, including the decision to reward the Yugoslav leader for his cooperation in helping stabilize the situation in Bosnia. Strategically, widespread violence pitting Serbs against Albanians could rapidly spread to other parts of the Balkans, notably to Albania and Macedonia and even to Greece and Bulgaria. Morally, after what the world had witnessed in Croatia and Bosnia earlier in the decade, it was not difficult to imagine what Milosevic and his henchmen might be capable of doing against an ethnic Albanian population long despised by much of the Serb majority in Yugoslavia.

The choice for the Clinton administration and its European allies was not whether to act but how. The administration’s fundamental failure in dealing with the Kosovo crisis was that it never decided what it was prepared to do, except incrementally and reactively. It was likely not until May 1999—six-plus weeks into NATO’s war against Serbia—that President Clinton finally determined that, if necessary, the United States would do whatever was required to prevail, probably even including a U.S.-led allied invasion of Kosovo to end the war and ensure safety and autonomy for the Kosovar Albanians.

In the year and a half leading up to that point, the Clinton administration resorted to speaking loudly and carrying a small stick. It threatened largely unspecified action, hoping that would be sufficient to influence the parties to enter a dialogue leading to a political settlement. That approach was never adequate. Slowly but surely, the United States and its NATO allies moved down a slippery slope of making threats, planning for military action and demonstrations, backing up the threats by deploying military assets, issuing ultimatums, using airpower, intensifying strategic bombing, and finally being on the verge of committing to a ground invasion of Kosovo. No one thought that the policy would eventually end up there. Indeed much of the effort was designed to prevent the use of force—and certainly to prevent the use of ground forces, even in a peacekeeping mode.

The failure in Kosovo was the result of policymakers in Washington and elsewhere who proved unwilling or unable to set political objectives and to consider how far they were prepared to go to achieve them militarily. To be sure, the broad goals were widely agreed on: to end the violence and to establish conditions for the political autonomy of Kosovo within Yugoslavia.

But since this broad objective proved unacceptable to the Serb authorities, who wanted to maintain the political status quo, and to many Kosovars, who wanted independence, an international protectorate of the territory was the only real alternative. It took the alliance nearly a year to arrive at that conclusion. Even when it finally did, it failed to develop a reliable strategy for establishing such a protectorate-like arrangement in Kosovo. It had a hope, but not a plan.

NATO stumbled into war, unready either for countering Serbia's massive campaign to forcefully expel much of the ethnic Albanian population from Kosovo or to do militarily what it would take to achieve its stated objectives. Even if the war itself was not easily or demonstrably avoidable, NATO leaders should have been better prepared. That required knowing what the objective was and then committing to achieve it with the necessary military might. Instead NATO went to war in the hope it could win without much of a fight. It was proven wrong.

NATO's campaign plan was unsound in the war's early going. The fault did not lie in the alliance's decisionmaking processes or in specific foreign capitals like Paris and Berlin, as some have argued.²⁷ Rather, the fault lay in the basic strategy espoused for the war by the United States and its allied partners as a group. The basic idea of using bombing as an element of coercive diplomacy against Milosevic was pushed incessantly by Washington, and most specifically by the State Department, with strong support from NATO's military leadership. The U.S. government generally expected air strikes to last only a few days—a couple of weeks at the outside—as interviews with key officials and other sources convincingly attest. The United States did not even envisage hard-hitting attacks during that short period: on March 24 it had made available only about one-third the number of aircraft it ultimately devoted to the war, and days earlier it had pulled its only nearby aircraft carrier out of the Mediterranean region and thus away from the war zone. During the war's early going, NATO's limited number of strike sorties focused largely on attacking Serb air defenses, due largely to a body of U.S. Air Force doctrine that requires that air supremacy be established in the early phase of any war.²⁸ NATO's policy of keeping aircraft above 15,000 feet above sea level, which limited the effectiveness of the tactical bombing—severely so in the war's early going, given the predictably poor Balkan early spring weather—was primarily due to Washington's preference to avoid casualties at nearly any cost. In short, the frequent postwar tendencies of Clinton administration officials, particularly at the Pentagon, to blame the allies for the slow start of Operation Allied Force is almost entirely without foundation.

Operation Allied Force was in its early weeks a textbook case of how *not* to wage war. The blindness of NATO's major members to the possibility that the war might not end quickly was astounding. As a result of that blindness, the alliance was caught entirely unprepared for what followed. Had NATO not enjoyed such a huge military advantage over Serbia, the alliance might well have lost its first real war. The losers would have included the Kosovar Albanians as well as NATO itself, since a defeat would have called into doubt not only NATO's *raison d'être* but even its basic competence in the post-cold war world.

NATO's shortsightedness, and its cavalier attitude toward the use of force, could have had extremely serious consequences. Had Milosevic's henchmen in Kosovo been more brutal—for example, on the scale of what Ratko Mladic's Bosnian Serb forces did in Srebrenica in July 1995—or had food supplies in the hills and forests of Kosovo not held up for the many thousands of people who had to hide outdoors during the war, far more people might have died, with NATO powerless to save them. Had these things happened, NATO's ultimate victory would have been Pyrrhic.

Finally, had Milosevic not upped the stakes in the conflict by drastically escalating his forced expulsion campaign, NATO could easily have lost the war. He so repulsed Western publics with his barbaric actions that the alliance found a resolve it would almost certainly not have otherwise displayed. If Milosevic had hunkered down and restrained his military and paramilitary forces during the bombing, support within NATO countries for sustaining the operation probably would have quickly dissipated.

Perversely, Milosevic came to NATO's rescue. In a way that alliance leaders did not anticipate, he shored up their resolve and cohesion by his brutal treatment of the ethnic Albanians. Without it, NATO would probably have bombed for a few days and then been obliged to desist, even had Milosevic continued to resist an international armed presence in Kosovo. This argument is supported by our interviews with numerous NATO government officials, the Desert Fox precedent in Iraq from the previous December, and the alliance's limited enthusiasm for coming to the military aid of the KLA. True, Milosevic would have had to expect stronger economic sanctions in the aftermath of such an unsuccessful bombing campaign, but he had proven he could live with that. Moreover, Washington had already demonstrated the December before in the bombing campaign against Iraq—which was both short and ineffective—that it could “bomb and forget” even more heinous and dangerous adversaries affecting even more important U.S. interests. Milosevic had ample reason to think that NATO would bomb for a

spell, declare victory, and stop. He could have then proceeded to a more patient form of ethnic expulsion, gradually, over a period of many months or even years, pushing ethnic Albanians out of large swaths of Kosovo while also weakening the KLA's hold in those areas. That he did not adopt such an approach may have been his greatest mistake of the war.

Since the day the war ended U.S. officials from President Clinton on down have concluded that the alliance “did the right thing”—which is true—and that it also did so in “the right way”—which is not.²⁹ Their argument rests on the twin contentions that in the end NATO prevailed and that the alliance could not have fought any other way given its internal political constraints. However, making war by accepting political constraints that impede sound military preparations can be a prescription for defeat—and nearly was in this case. Particularly for the United States, the alliance’s undisputed leader, accepting alliance political constraints rather than working to mold them in support of the U.S. perspective was bad policy. It is true that NATO is, and must be, a committee. But in this war it was a committee without a chairman, particularly in the conflict’s early going.

What was NATO’s real alternative to its policy of diplomatic caution and military gradualism? Before the war, the proper approach would have been a muscular NATO threat to Milosevic, with the goal of convincing him to allow the establishment of a *de facto* international protectorate over Kosovo that would ensure the safety of civilians and demilitarize the KLA. Either in the fall of 1998 or in the immediate aftermath of the January 1999 Racak massacres, NATO should have promised a much more extensive and open-ended bombing campaign. Ideally it should also have deployed forces into the region to conduct a ground invasion if necessary.

This approach might have produced a negotiated settlement allowing international peacekeeping troops into the province. If not, once it began bombing NATO would have had the option of intervening quickly had massive slaughters been undertaken by the Serbs or if a lack of food supplies had led to widespread starvation. That it would have been extremely hard for the Clinton administration to convince Congress and the NATO allies to support such a strategy and that there was no guarantee that such a threat would then have worked, we acknowledge. But there is no excuse for not trying. Whatever the outcome would have been on preparing a possible invasion option, moreover, Washington could have and should have convinced NATO to pose a far more daunting aerial threat from the war’s beginning. And it should never have ruled a ground force option off the table.

Conclusion

Operation Allied Force, the last war in Europe in the twentieth century, was ultimately an accomplishment for which NATO, the Clinton administration, and a number of other key actors can take satisfaction. The ethnic Albanian people of Kosovo, who suffered significant oppression under Slobodan Milosevic, are today far better off than they would have been had NATO stood aside. Their violent reprisal against Serbs in Kosovo since the war ended, while highly regrettable, does not begin to compare to what had happened before. The war's damage to Western relations with Russia and China, though real, is generally reparable and has already been largely attenuated. Moreover, NATO as an alliance distinguished itself by showing the political will to do what was right, on humanitarian and political grounds, even in the face of strident opposition from Moscow and Beijing. The demands the war placed on NATO military forces, in budgetary terms and human terms, were modest and were largely compensated for by important lessons the alliance's members learned about how to improve their individual and combined military capabilities for the future.

But this book is not, primarily, a laudatory history of NATO's first real war. It is a critique and, in places, a rather severe one. NATO in general, and the Clinton administration in particular, missed key opportunities in 1998 and early 1999 to reduce the odds of war. The alliance then undertook armed hostilities when it was unprepared for real combat, unwisely confident that its short campaign of coercive bombing would work. Its poor preparation and early lack of resolve extended the conflict; luckily that did not exact an enormous price in civilian or military lives lost, but it was risky—and unnecessary.

NATO's war in Kosovo was difficult enough, and unpleasant enough on many grounds, that it is unlikely to be seen by Western governments as a precedent for frequent humanitarian intervention. But the post-cold war world has already seen major Western military interventions designed to save lives or uphold democratic principles in Panama, northern Iraq, Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia, Kosovo, and East Timor. That track record, and the continuing prevalence of civil conflict around the world, suggests that Western countries need to learn as much as they can from NATO's 1999 war against Serbia, for better and for worse. This war will not be the last time that NATO governments use force to save lives.