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**‘Humanitarian Intervention in Kosovo’  
as Justified, Executed and Mediated by NATO:  
Strategic Lessons for Singapore**

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines the humanitarian intervention undertaken by the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) in the Yugoslav province of Kosovo between 24 March and 10 June 1999. Following an examination of the wider ideological and historical background to the Kosovo crisis, it establishes three postulates: first, despite Brussels' attempts to justify its illegal violation of the sovereignty of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia as a moral necessity - in view of Belgrade's ethnic cleansing of the Kosovar Albanians - it is fair to suggest that more traditional *realpolitik* reasons were equally if not more important drivers of the decision to attack. Second, the paper shows that despite the great faith placed by NATO in its capacity to wage a high-technology air campaign blending lethality with accuracy, thereby keeping casualties to a minimum, in reality the bombing contributed directly to the suffering of both Kosovars and Serb civilians, while not significantly degrading the Serb war machine. In short, the air campaign was dubious both strategically and morally. Third, the paper argues that because relatively widespread scepticism about NATO war aims and campaign strategy undermined Brussels' credibility, its propaganda, whilst technically sound, was not at all persuasive as far as the Serb and some elements of the Western public were concerned. The paper ends by highlighting two important wider implications of the Kosovo campaign for Singapore. First, it argues that while the international community is embracing the idea of humanitarian intervention as a global norm, the current lack of agreed-upon criteria for evaluating its appropriateness for specific contexts implies the danger of abuse by powerful states bypassing the perennially enervated United Nations. Second, the largely American-dominated Western media - rather than being the purportedly impartial fourth estate of the liberal imagination - can, as Kosovo clearly demonstrates, act as the de facto rhetorical arm of their governments. It is in Singapore's interests, therefore, to contribute to the development of objective criteria for determining the situations under which intervention for humanitarian reasons is legally defensible, while the influence and power of the Western media suggests that Singapore must retain a strong capacity to compete with the transnational media giants in shaping and regulating popular perceptions.

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# **'HUMANITARIAN INTERVENTION IN KOSOVO' AS JUSTIFIED, EXECUTED AND MEDIATED BY NATO: STRATEGIC LESSONS FOR SINGAPORE**

## **Introduction**

On 24 March 1999, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) intervened in the Yugoslav province of Kosovo, claiming to seek the cessation of atrocities committed by the armed forces of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia against the Kosovar Albanian minority. NATO aircraft conducted operations not merely against Serb forces in Kosovo but also the whole of Serbia. Thousands of Kosovar Albanians were displaced from their homes as a result of the war, while Serb civilians themselves suffered from the NATO onslaught on Belgrade and other major cities. The air campaign was ultimately brought to a close on 10 June with a political settlement between the warring parties. The Kosovo intervention is particularly significant chiefly because – in stark contrast to the Gulf War of 1991 - of the glaring lack of unanimity in the international response to it. Certainly, many have applauded the ejection of the Serbs from Kosovo, but at the same time considerable disquiet was generated concerning NATO motives, the way in which it carried out operations within Yugoslavia, and the manner in which Brussels and the Western media projected or mediated the conflict. In fact, this paper argues that a careful analysis of the NATO intervention suggests the following conclusions: first, while NATO attempted to justify its violation of Yugoslavia's sovereignty on humanitarian grounds, it is clear that more traditional strategic and political considerations were as much or even more important motivations. Second, NATO's high-tech air campaign – despite the hyperbole about its blend of lethality and accuracy – did remarkably little damage to the Serb war machine while inadvertently exacerbating the suffering of both Kosovar and Serb civilians; it was thus both strategically and morally questionable. Finally, as a direct consequence of its dubious war aims and campaign strategy, NATO's propaganda, though technically sound, was rendered ineffectual almost from the beginning.

The paper also argues that the NATO misadventure raises important wider issues. First, it suggests that while the humanitarian intervention idea is becoming widely accepted as an international norm, it remains a prerogative that can realistically be exercised only by the mighty. The problem is, historically, powerful Western states - in particular the United States - have displayed 'selective indignation' in that they have chosen to ignore some egregious

violations of human rights in favour of others, for primarily political and strategic reasons. In this respect the enduring structural weakness of the United Nations ensures that the world's lone superpower can do so with relative impunity. Second, in today's globalized international system, the Western mass media are extremely powerful actors in shaping global norms, and more to the point, they are not necessarily impartial as liberals suggest, but are well capable of pushing the ideological position of the American and Western governments. The paper argues that Singapore must thus play a role in the development of objective criteria for determining the specific circumstances justifying humanitarian intervention. Furthermore, Singapore must retain a strong capacity to counter the media giants in shaping and regulating popular perceptions. At this juncture, as a preface to the substantive discussion, it is necessary to first appreciate the wider ideological and historical canvas against which the NATO intervention was played out.

### **The Ideological Backdrop: The Historic Tension between State Sovereignty and Individual Rights**

In 1648, the Thirty Years' War in Europe was brought to a close with the signing of the Treaty of Westphalia. The most important consequence of this development was the restructuring of European and later world politics into an international society of independent and sovereign political communities called states. The Westphalian architecture – built upon the state as the dominant political unit of international politics - has co-opted other actors such as international governmental organisations, non-governmental organisations and multinational corporations, and remains extant today. This international society of sovereign states has in turn been predicated on one overriding assumption: the imperative of non-intervention in the internal affairs of other states - an idea with a long intellectual lineage. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century natural law advocates such as Vattel argued that because God made all men free and equal, states - which are essentially conglomerations of free and equal men - ought to be free and equal as well. By implication each state 'has a right to govern itself as it thinks proper', and 'no one of them has the right to interfere in the government of the other'.<sup>1</sup>

This moral precept of non-intervention has over time become codified as statutory international law. For instance, Article 2(4) of the United Nations Charter declares that 'All Members' should 'refrain from the threat or use of force' against the 'territorial integrity or

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<sup>1</sup> Vattel, cited in R.J. Vincent, *Nonintervention and International Order* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), p. 30.

political independence of any State', while Article 2 (7) declares that 'Nothing contained in the present Charter shall authorize the United Nations to interfere in matters which are essentially within the domestic jurisdiction of any State'. Moreover, the 1965 'Declaration on Intervention' and the '1970 Friendly Relations Declaration' also represent important legal pronouncements on non-intervention. In international law, there is only one context in which a state's sovereignty can be violated – when the state in question is guilty of 'armed attack' against another state. In these circumstances, the attacked state and the wider international community may violate the sovereignty of the aggressor state in self or collective self-defence as provided for under Article 51 of Chapter VII of the UN Charter. Moreover, Article 42 of the Charter authorises the Security Council to 'take such action by air, sea or land forces as may be necessary' to deal with a state guilty of 'an act of aggression'.<sup>2</sup> These specific exceptions aside, it can be asserted that there has long existed an international moral and legal regime which upholds the sanctity of the principle of state sovereignty.

One major corollary of the moral principle of non-intervention has been the idea – exemplified by philosophers like J.S. Mill - that a people deserve freedom from oppression only if they are willing to endure an 'arduous struggle to become free by their own efforts'.<sup>3</sup> Thus states should not intrude in civil conflicts in support of an oppressed people – the non-intervention norm must be strictly observed. However, there is a powerful alternative view to the moral norm of non-intervention and the notion that an oppressed people have to fight for their liberty. Other natural lawyers posited that the state exists for no other reason than to protect the life and liberties of the men who reside within its boundaries. Hence if a state acts in such a way as to violate its obligation to protect its citizens, it loses its legitimacy and consequently its rights within the wider international society.<sup>4</sup> The Dutch lawyer Grotius, the father of modern international law, thereby argued forcefully that the principle of humanity must be morally prior to that of non-intervention and consequently, should a state persecute its own citizens, 'the right of intervention' by other states 'may be lawfully exercised'.<sup>5</sup> It must be recognised that in contrast to the moral norm of non-intervention, this Grotian ideal of

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<sup>2</sup> See the UN Charter reproduced in A. LeRoy Bennett, *International Organisations: Principles and Issues* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1977), p. 401; Robert Tomes, 'Operation Allied Force and the Legal Basis for Humanitarian Interventions', *Parameters* (Spring 2000), pp. 43-45.

<sup>3</sup> See Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations* (New York: Basic Books, 1977), p. 87.

<sup>4</sup> Tomes, 'Operation Allied Force', p. 49.

<sup>5</sup> Grotius cited in Gary Klintonworth, *Vietnam's Intervention in Cambodia in International Law* (Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1989), p. 54, n. 15.

'humanitarian intervention'<sup>6</sup> has never become international law. Hence there is currently no international legal regime authorising states to engage in humanitarian interventions in support of oppressed peoples. However, since 1945 there has emerged an international legal regime promoting not humanitarian intervention but rather *human rights*. Legal provisions for the advancement of comprehensive civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights include the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights of 1948 and the International Covenants of 1966.<sup>7</sup> Human rights issues have become an increasingly important focus for the United Nations. In 1991 for instance, Secretary-General Boutros Ghali declared that 'the principle of non-interference with the essential domestic jurisdiction of States cannot be regarded as a protective barrier behind which human rights could be massively or systematically violated with impunity'.<sup>8</sup> Such sentiment led to the creation the following year of a Department of Humanitarian Affairs within the UN Secretariat, which was reorganised as the Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs in 1997. The same year the Secretary-General designated humanitarian affairs as one of the four principal work areas of the UN.<sup>9</sup>

It is thus clear that these two international legal regimes – one promoting state sovereignty and the other human rights – exist in 'tension' if not 'outright contradiction' to each other. As Professor Noam Chomsky of MIT suggests:<sup>10</sup>

The [UN] Charter bans force violating state sovereignty; the [Universal Declaration] guarantees the rights of individuals against oppressive states. The issue of "humanitarian intervention" arises from this tension.

Prior to World War Two, the international society of states generally dismissed attempts by certain states to justify their interventions on humanitarian grounds – as when Japan claimed that it desired the preserve Manchuria from 'Chinese bandits' in 1931 or when Italy defended

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<sup>6</sup> Sean Murphy defines 'humanitarian intervention' as 'the threat or use of force by a state, group of states, or international organization for the purpose of protecting the nationals of the target state from widespread deprivations of internationally recognized human rights'. Sean D. Murphy, *Humanitarian Intervention: The United Nations in an Evolving World Order* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), pp. 11-12.

<sup>7</sup> Jack Donnelly, 'Human Rights: The Impact of International Action', *International Journal*, Vol. 43, No. 2 (Spring 1988), p. 242.

<sup>8</sup> See Louis Henkin *et al.*, eds., *International Law: Cases and Materials* (St Paul: West Publishing, 1993), p. 982.

<sup>9</sup> Astri Suhrke, 'Human Security and the Interests of States', *Security Dialogue*, Vol. 30, No. 3 (Sep. 1999), p. 268.

<sup>10</sup> Noam Chomsky, 'The Current Bombings: Behind the Rhetoric', available at [www.zmag.org/crisescurevts/current\\_bombings.html](http://www.zmag.org/crisescurevts/current_bombings.html).

its Ethiopian incursion four years later as an attempt to liberate thousands of ‘slaves’ and civilise the country.<sup>11</sup> However, in the wake of the horrors of the Nazi genocide against the Jewish nation and the atrocities of the Imperial Japanese army in Southeast Asia, there was a marked increase in sympathy for states claiming to undertake interventions for partly humanitarian reasons: hence the muted international response when India invaded East Pakistan in late 1971 to supposedly stop the massacres being carried out by the West Pakistani army against the Bengali population, or when the Tanzanian army invaded and ousted the brutal Amin regime in Uganda in 1979. Following the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War, moreover, the humanitarian motif gathered momentum. Thus following the establishment of ‘safe havens’ within the territory of northern Iraq to protect Kurds from Iraqi army attacks in 1991, throughout the decade the West again intervened for ostensibly humanitarian reasons in Bosnia, Somalia, Rwanda and Haiti.<sup>12</sup> The decade ended with the Kosovo intervention.

### **The Historical Backdrop: The Roots of the Kosovo Crisis and the Bosnian Prelude**

The Federal Republic of Yugoslavia was created after World War Two and consisted of six republics: Serbia, Slovenia, Croatia, Montenegro, Macedonia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. The country was led by the Communist strongman Josip Broz Tito until his death in 1980. While Tito, in common with other Communist leaders in Eastern Europe quashed all internal opposition and centralised real power in the Communist Party, from 1948 he pursued an independent foreign policy from the Soviet bloc and established economic ties with the West. Always wary of the Soviet Union – an attitude reinforced by the ruthless Soviet interventions in Hungary (1956) and Czechoslovakia (1968) - Tito maintained a policy of ‘national communism’ or ‘Titoism’. Under this policy, while opponents of the regime were dealt with harshly, in general Yugoslavs enjoyed greater freedom than their counterparts in other Eastern European states; for instance, unlike their Communist cousins elsewhere, Yugoslavs were able to travel abroad freely. Moreover, in the 1970s, following the stagnation of the economy, Tito tried to defuse increasing domestic tensions by loosening controls over the six republics, and granting autonomy to two Serb provinces, Vojvodina, and Kosovo. Kosovo, situated on the southern border with Albania, comprised by 1999 a population which was 90 percent

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Richard Caplan, ‘Kosovo: The Implications for Humanitarian Intervention’, (May 1999), available at [www.nrc.no/global\\_idp\\_survey/FMR/99-5/Caplan2.html](http://www.nrc.no/global_idp_survey/FMR/99-5/Caplan2.html); Tomes, ‘Operation Allied Force’, p. 40; Klintworth, *Vietnam’s Intervention in Cambodia*, p. 50.



Albanian. Like their ethnic Albanian brethren to the south, Kosovar Albanians - Kosovars for short - were Muslim. In contrast, the Serb minority within Kosovo were Eastern Orthodox Christians. From 1974, Kosovars enjoyed considerable cultural freedom and set up their own institutions, but this development angered Serb nationalists, to whom Kosovo is no mere Albanian enclave. The northern part of the province retains considerable historical, cultural and emotional significance for the Serbs. It is regarded as the cradle of Serb civilisation, and the Battle of Kosovo Polje, or the Field of Blackbirds, in 1389 between the Serbs and the invading Ottoman Turks is commemorated in Serb history and poetry. It has been said that Kosovo is to Serbia what Jerusalem is to Israel. Serb-Kosovar tensions thus developed during the period of autonomy, and was exacerbated in the 1980s by the continuing economic slowdown and a serious foreign debt crisis.

In 1986, Slobodan Milosevic, a law graduate of Belgrade University and former banker, assumed control of the Communist Party leadership, and the following year became Serb president. Espousing the cause of Serb nationalism, Milosevic advocated the concept of 'Greater Serbia', embracing Serbia proper, Vojvodina, Kosovo and the Serb-dominated enclaves within Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Macedonia. In 1989, Serbia revoked Kosovo's autonomy and sent in troops to quash the protests of the Albanian majority. The following year Milosevic was elected Serb president in a free election, an event which heralded the disintegration of Yugoslavia. Slovenia and Croatia, which elected non-Communist governments in 1990, declared independence in June 1991, and by the end of the year Bosnia-Herzegovina and Macedonia had followed suit. Milosevic did not sit idly by; Serb forces invaded Slovenia and Croatia in June 1991, but failed to overturn their secessions from the Yugoslav Federation. In September, the UN Security Council imposed an arms embargo on all sides, which really benefited only the Serbs, who dominated the federal army. At any rate, the European Community recognised the sovereignty of Croatia and Slovenia in January 1992, and together with the United States, that of Bosnia-Herzegovina in April. The Bosnian civil war duly commenced, with the Bosnian Serbs, comprising 30 percent of the population, fighting with federal backing against Bosnian Muslims and Croats, who formed 44 percent and 17 percent of the population respectively. The Bosnian Serbs from 1 May 1992 began shelling Sarajevo, the Bosnian capital. This was the prelude to the many atrocities they committed in the war, which became notoriously known as 'ethnic cleansing', mainly against thousands of Muslims. This prompted the UN to impose economic sanctions on Serbia and Montenegro – what remained of the old Yugoslav federation, proclaimed on 27 April 1992 – and to demand

an immediate ceasefire in Bosnia. The bloody Bosnian war was resolved only in September 1995 with the signing of the Dayton accords in the United States.<sup>13</sup>

It was during the Bosnian war in particular that international attitudes hardened against the Serbs. On the one hand, by May 1994, it was established by the UN that despite the rhetoric emanating from Belgrade that all parties in Bosnia were engaging in ethnic atrocities, it was in fact the Serbs who were guilty of most war crimes. A UN study commission stated that Serb ethnic cleansing was “systematic”, and “influenced, encouraged, facilitated and condoned” by Serb leaders. In fact the commission went so far as to assert that there was ‘no factual basis for arguing that there is a “moral equivalence between the warring factions”’. An authoritative CIA study published by the *New York Times* on 9 March 1995, moreover, also concluded that it was not fair to suggest that the warring parties were ‘equally guilty’. Rather, the scale of what the Serbs did was ‘so different’ and more than that, ‘there was a conscious, coherent and systematic Serbian policy to get rid of Muslims, through murders, torture and imprisonment’.<sup>14</sup> In addition, intrepid Western journalists such as Roy Gutman and Peter Maass uncovered evidence of Serb atrocities and their reporting not only inflamed world opinion against Belgrade, but shaped a popular image of the Serbs as a brutal, vicious people. Gutman, for instance, whose dispatches on the Bosnian war won him the Pulitzer, declared that while Belgrade had a ‘modestly prosperous appearance, and educated Serbs have charmed more than a generation of diplomats and journalists into thinking this was a Western country-in-waiting’, by the early 1990s Serbia was ‘going full steam backward’ into ‘primitivism’.<sup>15</sup>

Peter Maass was another journalist who attempted to chronicle the scarcely believable ‘primitivism’ that lay at the heart of ethnic cleansing:

You can, for example, barge into a house and put a gun to a father’s head and tell him that you will pull the trigger unless he rapes his daughter or at least simulates the rape...The father will refuse and say, I will die before doing that. You shrug your shoulders and reply, Okay, old man, I won’t shoot you, but I will shoot your daughter. What does the father do now, dear reader? He pleads, he begs, but then you, the man with the gun, put

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<sup>13</sup> Joyce P. Kaufman, ‘NATO and the Former Yugoslavia: Crisis, Conflict and the Atlantic Alliance’, *The Journal of Conflict Studies*, Vol. XIX, No. 2 (Fall 1999), pp. 8-16.

<sup>14</sup> Cited in Peter Maass, *Love Thy Neighbour: A Story of War* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), p. 280.

the gun to the daughter's head, you pull the hammer, and you shout, *Now!*...The father starts weeping, yet slowly he unties his belt, moving like a dazed zombie, he can't believe what he must do....You are the law, and you feel divine.

Such reporting not only unmasked frankly unimaginable Serb bestiality against largely helpless civilians, more importantly, it showed up starkly the impotence of Western leaders in the face of such widespread and systematic crimes against humanity. Maass, for instance, whose searing account of the war won him the *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize, bitterly complained that in Bosnia, the goal of the international community was 'appeasement, and the United Nations was chosen as the instrument to carry it out'. He utterly excoriated the UN and Western leaders, arguing that 'the U.N. flag deserves no more trust than any of the national flags in front of its New York headquarters'.<sup>16</sup> It can be imagined therefore, that prior to Kosovo, Western journalists had helped construct a widespread perception in developed countries that their leaders basically allowed Milosevic to get away with murder – literally – in Bosnia.<sup>17</sup> Consequently, in 1999, there was *very heavy* political pressure on the Western leaders to prevent another Bosnia.<sup>18</sup> This may explain part of the reason for the NATO intervention in Kosovo, a point we shall return to shortly.

Meanwhile, against the background of a disintegrating federation, the Kosovars tried to recover their lost autonomy through peaceful means. They continued to elect their own leaders, set up their own 'parliament' and counter-institutions and generally refused to cooperate with Serb authorities. The Kosovar 'president' was Ibrahim Rugova – a convinced Gandhian - who urged the Kosovars to reject violence as they worked toward regaining autonomy. However, the West took little notice of Rugova and he played no part in the Dayton conference of 1995. Moreover, following Dayton, Milosevic, in an attempt to consolidate his control over the remaining territory of Yugoslavia, increased repression in Kosovo. It was in direct response to the failure of Rugova's non-violent approach, as well as the ostensible 'lessons' of the Bosnian war, that the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) was formed in 1996. The KLA initially mounted ineffective attacks on police stations and Serb

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<sup>15</sup> Roy Gutman, *A Witness to Genocide: The 1993 Pulitzer Prize-Winning Dispatches on the 'Ethnic Cleansing' of Bosnia* (New York: Macmillan, 1993), p. 17.

<sup>16</sup> Maass, *Love They Neighbour*, pp. 52, 172.

<sup>17</sup> Christina V. Balis, 'De-Mystifying the Serbian Horse', *SAIS Review*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (Winter/Spring 2000), pp. 184-187.

civilians, especially those in the latter category who were refugees from the earlier Yugoslav wars: many Kosovars worried that Milosevic was encouraging Serb colonisation of Kosovo to shift the demographic balance against the Kosovars.<sup>19</sup>

### **Descent Into War: March 1998 To March 1999**

The situation in Kosovo deteriorated sharply in the later half of 1997, and on 24 September the International Contact Group comprising the major Western powers appealed for negotiations between Belgrade and the KLA, which the former rebuffed. Violence continued to escalate into 1998, and following a brutal assault by Serb police in March on three villages which killed 80 Kosovars, the KLA cause was greatly strengthened and thousands of Kosovars joined its ranks. The KLA thus became a credible guerrilla army with mass support, and over the next several months took over a third of Kosovan territory. The same month the UN Security Council imposed an arms embargo and slapped economic and diplomatic sanctions on Belgrade, demanding a 'real dialogue' between the conflicting parties. Around the same time the foreign ministers of the Contact Group met in London to discuss the intensified fighting but were only able to agree on modest diplomatic and economic sanctions against Belgrade. This was a case of déjà vu for Milosevic: he had encountered international prevarication over Bosnia and knew that the tough rhetoric of both the European Union and NATO usually masked deep divisions and the unwillingness of key actors – especially the United States - to count the political and material cost of stopping him. Hence, correctly reading that the imposition of only modest economic sanctions implied the collective lack of gumption to truly confront him, he pressed on with his offensive to recapture lost territory, in the process displacing thousands of Kosovars. This mass exodus was precipitated by a stock Serb tactic: the systematic destruction of entire towns and villages.

In June NATO commenced air exercises in the skies over Macedonia and Albania to signal Belgrade that it meant business. Two months later it again announced that it had approved plans for military force against Serbia. Then in September Brussels issued an Activation Warning (ACTWARN) that authorized the use of force and kept 400 aircraft on

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<sup>18</sup> Freedman makes a similar point. See Lawrence Freedman, 'Victims and Victors: Reflections on the Kosovo War', *Review of International Studies* (2000), No. 26, 344-345.

<sup>19</sup> Warren Zimmermann, *Origins of a Catastrophe* (New York: Times Books, 1999); Elissa Haney, 'Kosovo Factsheet' (16 June 1999), available at [www.infoplease.lycos.com/spot/kosovo1.html](http://www.infoplease.lycos.com/spot/kosovo1.html); Marie-Janine Calic, 'Kosovo in the Twentieth Century: A Historical Account', in *Kosovo and the Challenge of Humanitarian*

standby for immediate deployment if need be. The same month UN Resolution 1199 was passed by the Security Council, calling for an immediate ceasefire, withdrawal of military and paramilitary forces, complete access for humanitarian organisations, and co-operation on the investigation of war crimes in Kosovo. NATO subsequently issued an ultimatum to Milosevic, and on 12 October, with the refugee population estimated by the UNHCR at 200 000 Kosovars, United States envoy Richard Holbrooke coaxed Milosevic to agree to a ceasefire, a partial withdrawal of Serb forces, and the introduction of 2000 unarmed international observers from the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) to monitor the situation in the province.

However, this informal ceasefire was short-lived. By Christmas, the Serbs were responding to KLA attacks with ever-escalating viciousness: in January 1999, following some KLA violence, 45 Kosovars in the village of Racak were massacred by Serb forces and 5000 villagers fled to the hills. It was in truth the Racak massacre, mediated through the so-called ‘CNN effect’, which elicited widespread international condemnation and pressured Western states to move decisively. On 29 January 1999, Contact Group states summoned the Serbs and the KLA to Rambouillet in France for talks scheduled to last between 6-14 February 1999. NATO Secretary-General Javier Solana threatened Milosevic that air strikes would commence if he did not begin talks. The first round, however, flopped and another round of discussions was held on 15 March. These were again unsuccessful, and on 19 March were called off. The Rambouillet talks failed partly because of Serb and Kosovar obstinacy, but equally because the Contact Group members squabbled amongst one another. Because NATO had warned Belgrade repeatedly during the Rambouillet discussions that it would be attacked if it did not come to an agreement, the die was cast. NATO *had* to act once the talks broke down. On the very same day the talks were called off, Belgrade began to implement *Operation Horseshoe* – a systematic plan to eliminate the KLA’s support base by depopulating Kosovo. The following day the OSCE observers were ordered to withdraw from Kosovo, and three days later the Serbs resumed their offensive in Kosovo. On 24 March NATO air strikes against Serbia commenced.<sup>20</sup>

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*Intervention: Selective Indignation, Collective Action, and International Citizenship*, ed. by Albrecht Schnabel and Ramesh Thakur (Tokyo: United Nations University Press, 2000), pp. 19-31.

<sup>20</sup> Michael MccGwire, ‘Why Did We Bomb Belgrade?’, *International Affairs*, Vol. 76, No. 1 (2000), pp. 1-8; Kaufman, ‘NATO and the Former Yugoslavia’, pp. 20-26; Freedman, ‘Victims and Victors’, pp. 348-353.

## NATO's Justifications for Intervention

Because Kosovo is a province within the territory of the sovereign Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, NATO had to justify why it was very obviously violating international law by intervening in the domestic affairs of a fully sovereign member state of the UN. Western leaders repeatedly argued that they were doing so in order to 'prevent a crisis from becoming a catastrophe'.<sup>21</sup> NATO Commander General Wesley K. Clark in this respect painted a grim picture of a Kosovo full of 'empty, destroyed villages; hundreds of thousands of people on the move; the smoke of thousands of burning homes', and of 'stories of cruelty and abuse – summary executions, organised rape and beatings perpetrated on young and old alike'.<sup>22</sup> Accordingly, the aerial bombing campaign – initially of military targets in Serbia – was designed to reduce the capability of the Serb forces to continue with their violence against the Kosovar Albanians. At a more fundamental level, however, NATO also justified its technically illegal action by appealing to higher values. British Prime Minister Tony Blair articulated the official posture in NATO capitals when, during a speech to the Atlantic Club of Bulgaria on 17 May, he asked rhetorically if the outside world could 'simply stand by when a rogue state brutally abuses the basic rights of those it governs?'<sup>23</sup>

In other words, NATO, while conceding that intervention was technically illegal, nevertheless declared that it felt bound to act by a higher law of morality – we might call it Grotius' principle of humanity. In a parallel development, NATO was about to embrace in April, at its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary summit celebrations, a 'new strategic concept' affirming the institution's continuing relevance in the post-Cold War world. This concept was far reaching – it called for NATO to be willing to take enforcement action even in the *absence* of specific UN authorisation, and undertake such action *outside* Alliance borders. Hence the Kosovo intervention was seen by NATO as an opportunity to signal to the international community NATO's willingness and ability to play the role – if necessary - of world humanitarian policeman.<sup>24</sup> In his 17 May speech, Blair expansively added that when 'we defeat Milosevic's policy of ethnic cleansing, we strike a blow for decent values of civilisation everywhere and

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<sup>21</sup> MccGwire, 'Why Did We Bomb?', p. 1.

<sup>22</sup> Wesley Clark, 'When Force is Necessary: NATO's military response to the Kosovo Crisis', *NATO Review* (Summer 1999), p. 14.

<sup>23</sup> 'Speech by the Prime Minister, Tony Blair, to the Atlantic Club of Bulgaria, Sofia University, Bulgaria, Monday 17 May 1999', available at [www.fco.gov.uk/news/speechtext.asp?2436.html](http://www.fco.gov.uk/news/speechtext.asp?2436.html).

<sup>24</sup> MccGwire, 'Why Did We Bomb?', p. 9; *The Alliance's Strategic Concept*, available at [www.nato.int/docu/pr/1999/p99-065e.html](http://www.nato.int/docu/pr/1999/p99-065e.html).

against barbarity and dictatorship everywhere. NATO's success in Kosovo will be the biggest deterrent to tyrants the world over; and the biggest rallying call to democracy'.<sup>25</sup>

Almost immediately, serious doubts were raised concerning the NATO position on its intervention in Kosovo in particular and its stance on humanitarian intervention in general. First, some observers voiced doubts about NATO's lack of moral consistency down the years. The United States government, the key actor in NATO, has never had an unimpeachable record in terms of protecting global human rights; quite the opposite, actually: for instance, before World War Two, Jews escaping Hitler's persecution were denied admission into the country, while in 1965, during the attempted coup by the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI), Washington provided the Indonesian army with lists of Communists to eliminate. About half a million people perished in the ensuing slaughter. During the Third Indochina War, the US displayed no moral qualms in supporting the Khmer Rouge, despite the latter's murderous record whilst it governed Cambodia from 1975 to 1978. In addition, when West Pakistan's army commenced its systematic slaughter of the Bengali population in East Pakistan in early 1971, U.S. policy, in Kissinger's words was 'to tilt in favour of Pakistan'. In 1994, moreover, the extermination of half a million Tutsis did not elicit even a diplomatic response from Washington. Furthermore, even within NATO, concern for human rights is patchy. The government of Turkey has been pursuing a scorched earth policy against the Kurdish minority for years, and has done so largely with American military equipment such as helicopters, fighter-bombers, small arms, tanks and artillery. Sceptics thus argued that if 'you don't care about Kurds or Timorese or Palestinians or Iraqis on humanitarian grounds, you probably are not going to care very much about the Kosovars'. Critics also pointed out that if the US and by implication NATO were so concerned about the plight of the Kosovars, why were they ignored throughout the 1990s? The issue of Kosovar autonomy as noted was not brought up at the Dayton negotiations, and the Kosovar leader Rugova was a conspicuous absentee from the deliberations.<sup>26</sup>

That is why NATO's declarations that it desired to promote human security in Kosovo lacked credibility. Instead, several less altruistic explanations have been forwarded for the

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<sup>25</sup> Speech by Tony Blair to the Atlantic Club of Bulgaria.

<sup>26</sup> Michael Albert and Stephen R. Shalom, 'The Kosovo/NATO Conflict: Questions and Answers', available at [www.zmag.org/Zmag/kosovoqa.html](http://www.zmag.org/Zmag/kosovoqa.html); Stephen R. Shalom, 'Reflections on NATO and Kosovo', available at [www.zmag.org/crisescurevts/shalomnp.html](http://www.zmag.org/crisescurevts/shalomnp.html); Benjamin Schwarz and Christopher Layne, 'The Case Against Intervention in Kosovo', 19 April 1999, available at [www.thenation.com/issue/990419/0419schwartz.shtml](http://www.thenation.com/issue/990419/0419schwartz.shtml).

intervention. First, NATO acted against Milosevic because it was becoming clear that his persecution of the Kosovars was generating a refugee crisis that was affecting the stability of the southern Balkans, principally Albania and Macedonia. Second, an ‘undesirable urgency’ was introduced by the imperative to secure Milosevic’s capitulation to NATO demands by the Alliance’s 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations. In other words, the defeat of Milosevic was seen as crucial to maintaining NATO *prestige*. NATO’s pronouncements of its new strategic concept and continuing relevance in the post-Cold War world would have meant nothing if it failed, and *was seen to fail*, in the Balkans; thus having declared that it would punish Milosevic if he rejected the Rambouillet plan, it had no choice but to carry out its threat and more than that, succeed in crushing Milosevic. Hence there was little serious consideration of non-military options and in fact there was very much a ‘willingness to war among NATO political leaders’. In this context it has been suggested that the Rambouillet peace plan *was designed to be rejected by the Serbs* so as to justify a military strike against them. There is merit to this view. First, Milosevic was expected to agree to the introduction of a 28000-strong implementation force K-FOR, which was explicitly under NATO rather than UN direction. Second, under an appendix to the agreement, K-FOR personnel were to be permitted unimpeded access throughout the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and its associated air and sea space. K-FOR and indeed NATO personnel were to be permitted the right to entry/exit Yugoslavia on production of an identity document. These provisions, as some observers have correctly argued, were tantamount to requiring Belgrade to concede a considerable portion of its sovereignty. Finally, except for a few points, the terms of the agreement were presented as an ultimatum to the Serbs: ‘Sign – or be bombed’. Milosevic naturally rejected the terms. Finally, it must be recognised that NATO leaders, as a result of Milosevic’s callous conduct during the Bosnian war, utterly loathed him, and ‘there was an urge to punish and humiliate’ him.<sup>27</sup>

In sum, there has been considerable disquiet over NATO’s declared justification for intervening in Kosovo. Many serious observers dismiss the institution’s claim that it acted to prevent a humanitarian catastrophe and consider instead that the action was motivated for more traditional political and strategic reasons. In addition, not only were sections of the wider international community sceptical of NATO’s good intentions, the way operations were actually carried out against Yugoslavia did not help matters either.

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<sup>27</sup> Robert Hayden, ‘Humanitarian Hypocrisy’, 1999, available at [www.jurist.law.pitt.edu/hayden.htm](http://www.jurist.law.pitt.edu/hayden.htm); Albert and Shalom, ‘The Kosovo/NATO Conflict’; Shalom, ‘Reflections on NATO and Kosovo’; Schwarz and Layne, ‘The Case Against Intervention in Kosovo’.



## NATO Campaign Strategy In Kosovo and the Consequences

NATO thinking passed through three stages. First, it was hoped that Milosevic would cave in if he was directly threatened with air strikes at Rambouillet in March 1999. He did not, and NATO had to revert to 'Plan B': the launching of a 'symbolic' air campaign directed at relatively low-value assets such as unoccupied headquarters buildings. The aim of 'Plan B' was simply to demonstrate NATO resolve to inflict pain on Belgrade should it remain intransigent. President Clinton was in effect seeking 'bilateral bloodlessness': 'No dead bodies on CNN of any type'.<sup>28</sup> However, Milosevic remained unimpressed, and in fact the Serb army intensified its ethnic cleansing drive. The 'CNN effect' amplified the resultant Kosovar sufferings, compelling hawkish columnists in the US to criticise NATO for its kid-gloved approach. For instance, Republican Senator and presidential candidate John McCain told *Newsweek* that: 'We have to drop the bridges and turn out the lights – there should be no more outdoor rock concerts in downtown Belgrade'.<sup>29</sup> Subsequently, NATO intensified the bombing campaign with a view now to disrupting the Serb economy and civilian infrastructure. Thus NATO commanders declared on 21 May that the Serb 'people have to get to the point that their lights are turned off, their bridges are blocked so they can't get to work'.<sup>30</sup> This intensification was applauded by several observers. For instance, the *New York Times* journalist Thomas L. Friedman wrote that 'people tend to change their minds and adjust their goals as they see the price they are paying mount. Twelve days of surgical bombing was never going to turn Serbia around. Let's see what 12 weeks of less than surgical bombing does. Give war a chance'.<sup>31</sup>

While hawks supported NATO's intensification of the air war to include the Serb civilian infrastructure in addition to military targets, other voices were raised in protest. For instance, Robert Hayden argued that NATO strategy was 'not to attack Yugoslavia's army directly, but rather to destroy Yugoslavia itself, in order to weaken the army'. He warned that attacks on roads, railroad tracks, power grids, factories, food processing plants and other elements of the national infrastructure were expressly prohibited by international law, for instance Article 54 of Protocol I of the 1949 Geneva Conventions. He even suggested that technically, therefore, NATO political leaders and senior commanders might be guilty of war

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<sup>28</sup> Charles Krauthammer, 'The Short, Unhappy Life of Humanitarian War', *The National Interest* (Fall 1999), pp.5-6.

<sup>29</sup> *Newsweek*, 12 April 1999.

<sup>30</sup> Hayden, 'Humanitarian Hypocrisy'.

crimes.<sup>32</sup> If NATO's strategy of targeting Yugoslavia's infrastructure raised moral and legal questions, it must be emphasised nonetheless that at no time was the Alliance seeking to obliterate Yugoslavia: such a policy would have been politically suicidal. President Clinton fully recognised that the American public was 'blood-averse', and thus the Kosovo intervention had to come across as bloodless as possible in order to sustain political support at home.<sup>33</sup>

To fight a politically necessary 'bloodless' war, therefore, NATO very early on ruled out – publicly - the use of ground forces and declared its reliance on airpower. The Clinton Administration reposed great faith in high-technology airpower. Officials reckoned that it was NATO bombing in the summer of 1995 which drove the Bosnian Serbs to negotiate at Dayton.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, NATO placed great faith in precision guidance technology to achieve its objective of degrading the Serb fighting machine while keeping the conflict relatively bloodless. Hence it was envisaged that cruise missiles and smart bombs would hit only their designated strategic targets, leaving unmolested the civilian population. Conversely, such technology would enable NATO pilots to fly at very high altitudes and thus reduce their exposure to Serb countermeasures. This was the essential theory behind NATO's hope for a 'bloodless war'. Unfortunately there were two consequences to NATO's almost mystical belief in the capabilities of its airpower. First, the fact that Alliance pilots bombed from 15 000 feet meant that they were not able to do much damage to Serb forces on the ground in Kosovo. This inadvertently exposed the hapless Kosovars to the 'unrestrained savagery' of the Serb paramilitaries who clearly blamed them for the destruction being rained upon Yugoslavia.<sup>35</sup> That is why British journalist Tom Walker, who was on the ground in Kosovo, insisted that NATO air strikes actually *increased* the suffering of the Kosovars precisely because it provoked Serb forces into intensifying their repression.<sup>36</sup> In fact, the International Strategic Studies Association reported that the NATO bombing 'contributed heavily, perhaps overwhelmingly' to the worsened Kosovar plight.<sup>37</sup> For instance, one estimate suggests that the fighting between the KLA and the Serb army in 1998 resulted in 400 000 Kosovar homeless; but between 26 March and 13 April – the first two weeks of the NATO air

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<sup>31</sup> *New York Times*, 6 April 1999.

<sup>32</sup> Hayden, 'Humanitarian Hypocrisy'.

<sup>33</sup> Krauthammer, 'The Short, Unhappy Life', pp. 5-6.

<sup>34</sup> Schwarz and Layne, 'The Case Against Intervention'.

<sup>35</sup> Krauthammer, 'The Short, Unhappy Life', p. 7.

<sup>36</sup> *Times*, 10 July 1999.

<sup>37</sup> *New Statesman*, 12 July 1999.

campaign – 1 million homeless Kosovars had been generated.<sup>38</sup> The other consequence of the NATO decision to bomb from 15 000 feet was that the civilian population – Kosovar and Serb - were hit accidentally several times. Alliance aircraft caused civilian casualties not merely in Kosovo itself, but also in Belgrade, Kraljevo, Kragujevac, Nis and Novi Sad, and officials admitted that residential suburbs, a passenger rail car, and part of a convoy of Kosovar refugees were among those accidentally bombed. In fact one estimate suggests that NATO directly caused the deaths of about 1 500 civilians.<sup>39</sup> This generated much opprobrium: the American analyst Gar Lipow likened NATO to a police officer who, by charging into a hostage situation in a ‘macho frenzy’, gets all the hostages killed.<sup>40</sup> In addition, the respected British journalist, Robert Fisk of the *Independent*, complained that ‘we were killing far too many civilians because our pilots – whose lives must be inviolate – were ordered to fly so high than they couldn’t tell the difference between a tractor and a tank, a hospital or a barracks’.<sup>41</sup>

Compounding the dubious tactical effectiveness – and morality - of high-altitude bombing, was the serious diplomatic firestorm which erupted following the bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade on 8 May, in which three Chinese journalists were killed and 20 other people injured. President Clinton and other senior US officials apologised for the bombing, which was apparently due to faulty intelligence. This did not however appease the Chinese, as Beijing promptly suspended high-level talks on human rights, arms control and proliferation. In addition, thousands of Chinese demonstrated outside the US embassy in Beijing for several days, and there were anti-American protests by overseas Chinese in other cities worldwide as well.<sup>42</sup> Further exacerbating matters was the recognition by many observers in the aftermath of the war that the Yugoslav Third Army in Kosovo had weathered the NATO storm and sustained relatively few casualties. While Milosevic in announcing the official cessation of hostilities on 10 June gave the figures of 462 soldiers and 114 police killed, according to Yugoslav military sources, of the 60 000 Yugoslav troops deployed in Kosovo to engage any possible NATO ground forces, only 132 were killed in NATO air strikes. Moreover, the Third Army lost an estimated seven tanks, three transporters, 13 anti-tank guns and several artillery pieces. In this connection NATO pronouncements during the war that it was ‘knocking the stuffing out of Milosevic’ and had killed 5000 Serb troops by the end of

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<sup>38</sup> Gar Lipow, ‘Summarizing the Case Against the Bombing’, available at [www.zmag.org/crisescurevts/lipowkoso.htm](http://www.zmag.org/crisescurevts/lipowkoso.htm).

<sup>39</sup> Robert Fisk, ‘Serb army “unscathed by NATO”’, available at [www.zmag.org/CrisesCurEvts/twofisk.htm](http://www.zmag.org/CrisesCurEvts/twofisk.htm).

<sup>40</sup> Lipow, ‘Summarizing the Case Against the Bombing’.

<sup>41</sup> *The Independent*, 13 July 1999.

hostilities, began to appear rather disingenuous.<sup>43</sup> Hence, if NATO's declared objectives in intervening in Kosovo seemed dubious to many observers, its campaign strategy elicited much criticism as well.

### **NATO's Propaganda Campaign**

Propaganda refers to the planned use of any form of mass communications to influence the attitudes, beliefs and behaviour of a specific audience.<sup>44</sup> Conventionally understood, propaganda refers to speeches, radio and television broadcasts, leaflets and any other means by which an actor attempts to influence the thinking and actions of a certain group of people. The Kosovo conflict in this connection was much more than just a war of bombs and bullets: given that the NATO involvement was largely justified on humanitarian grounds, it became imperative for the institution to deliberately project through words and images how its actions directly alleviated the plight of the Kosovars. This section therefore studies NATO's propaganda campaign, emphasising its three most outstanding features: its tight control, the resort to the devices of atrocity-attribution and dehumanisation, and 'doublespeak'. An evaluation of the effectiveness of NATO's propaganda campaign will then be attempted.

*The Yugoslav Information Environment.* It is first necessary to sketch out the key features of the information environment which NATO propaganda had to penetrate. In Yugoslavia, newspapers, which do not circulate much beyond the cities and are rather expensive, are considered less important than electronic media such as radio and television broadcasts, which reach throughout the country and are free to air. Accordingly on his accession to power Milosevic sought to exercise total control of radio and particularly television. Radio and Television Serbia (RTS) was transformed into a mere mouthpiece for Milosevic, who consulted with its director daily, and ensured its complete compliance.<sup>45</sup> In addition to completely co-opting RTS, Milosevic also ensured that independent broadcasters never flourished. He refused to permit independent television broadcasters access to national frequencies.<sup>46</sup> Moreover, the only independent television station in Belgrade, Studio B, was

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<sup>42</sup> See the reports for the period 8-10 May 1999 in the *China Daily*, available online at [www.chinadaily.com.cn.net/yugo/y5108.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn.net/yugo/y5108.htm).

<sup>43</sup> Fisk, 'Serb army "unscathed by NATO"'; idem, 'How fake guns and painting the roads fooled NATO', available at [www.zmag.org/CrisesCurEvts/twofisk.htm](http://www.zmag.org/CrisesCurEvts/twofisk.htm).

<sup>44</sup> Based on the classic definition provided by Paul M.A. Linebarger, *Psychological Warfare*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1954), p. 39.

<sup>45</sup> *Christian Science Monitor*, 2 Oct 1997.

<sup>46</sup> Maass, *Love Thy Neighbour*, p. 227.

taken over by the Belgrade municipal council in March 1996,<sup>47</sup> while in the case of radio, in late 1998, Radio *Kontakt* in Pristina (the Kosovar capital), which aimed at promoting inter-ethnic dialogue rather than the pro-Serb rhetoric favoured by Milosevic, was banned. Additionally, prior to the NATO intervention Radio B-92, the influential independent Belgrade network which had enjoyed some Western recognition and support, was curtailed. Milosevic also muzzled the print media by cracking down on dissident newspapers and introducing legislation allowing for detention without trial for two months – which intimidated many anti-government journalists into silence or flight. Finally, by March 1999, the federal government shut down all independent Albanian language media within Kosovo.<sup>48</sup> In effect, long before the NATO war the Yugoslav public basically heard and saw what Milosevic permitted.

Many careful observers have commented in particular on how Milosevic employed television to stimulate a xenophobic anti-Croat, anti-Muslim nationalism. For instance, the last American ambassador to Yugoslavia, Warren Zimmermann, noted that in the hands of Milosevic, ‘the power of television’ became harnessed to ‘officially provoked racism’ and the ‘manufacture of ethnic hatred’. Zimmermann dismissed the notion that the disintegration of Yugoslavia was inevitable. While acknowledging that history and in particular the ‘carnage of World War Two’ supplied ‘plenty of tinder for ethnic hatred in Yugoslavia, it took the institutional nationalism of Milosevic’ to ‘supply the torch’. Moreover Aleksa Djilas, scion of the noted Yugoslav dissident Milovan Djilas, argued in an authoritative work on nationalism in Yugoslavia that even with total control of state media organs, Milosevic still took four years to incite the Serb population to war, and even then, thousands of Serbs fled the country rather than staying to fight the Croats.<sup>49</sup> Peter Maass asserted that the Serbs ‘were brainwashed by television’, because through the medium Milosevic’s spin doctors ‘imparted a clear, Reaganesque message: Milosevic was defending Serbs who lived outside Serbia, and defending Serbia itself from the Islamic-Ustashe dangers lurking at its borders. Simple, clean, effective. Serbs swallowed it’.<sup>50</sup> Milos Vasic, one of the leading independent journalists in Serbia, argued

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<sup>47</sup> Statement by Veran Matic, Editor-in-Chief, Radio B92 Belgrade, Yugoslavia, 29 March 1996, available at [www.cdsp.neu.edu/info/students/marko/veran2.html](http://www.cdsp.neu.edu/info/students/marko/veran2.html).

<sup>48</sup> Terence Nelan, ‘Fighting for Hearts and Minds’, 28 April 1999, ABCNEWS.com., available at [www.more.abcnews.go.com/sections/world/DailyNews/kosovo\\_propaganda990428.html](http://www.more.abcnews.go.com/sections/world/DailyNews/kosovo_propaganda990428.html).

<sup>49</sup> Zimmermann, *Origins of a Catastrophe*, pp. 120, 210.

<sup>50</sup> Maass, *Love Thy Neighbour*, pp. 227-228. ‘Ustashe’ refers to the pro-Nazi Croatian secret police which committed many atrocities on Serbs, Bosnian Muslims and Jews in World War Two.

that even the supposedly independent-minded Americans would 'become nationalists and racists too if [their] media were totally in the hands of the Ku Klux Klan'.<sup>51</sup>

A central theme of Milosevic's ideological programming was that the Serbs historically had been 'victims': of the Turks, the Albanians, the Croats, or the Bosnian Muslims.<sup>52</sup> In fact, Ambassador Zimmermann felt that 'Serbia's tragic flaw is an obsession with its own history'. He recalled how, as 'a foreigner', he 'patiently sat through interminable recitations by Serbs from all walks of life about the boundless ways in which they have been victimized through the centuries'. Moreover, there was a tendency amongst Serb extremists 'to assume that their paranoid view of the past excuses, or at least explains, any atrocity committed in the present'.<sup>53</sup> Milosevic's propaganda moreover amplified innate Serb insecurities and prejudices. For instance, during the Bosnian war, Serb propaganda declared that 'Serb skulls have been halved, brains have been split, bowels have been torn out', and 'Islamic warriors made necklaces out of the eyes and ears of dead Serbs'. There were even reports that Afghan mujahideen were killing Serb babies, and that 'Bosnian Muslims were Koran-waving fanatics trying to set up an Islamic state in which Serb women would be forced to wear *chadors*'. Hence, as Maass observed, the message to all Serbs was clear: 'The cruelties of the past awaited Serbs unless they went on the offensive and committed preemptive genocide'.<sup>54</sup> In sum, Milosevic had by the time of Kosovo possessed considerable power to shape the Serb *zeitgeist*. One example of this power is particularly telling: in mid-April 1999, following NATO's accidental attack on a Kosovar refugee convoy which led to loss of life, Western officials admitted liability but pointed out that Yugoslav forces had also been attacking the refugees. However, when asked by a Western journalist for her response to this latter suggestion, a Serb woman in Belgrade rejected it and declared her belief that NATO had killed the Kosovars in order to pin the deaths on the Yugoslav armed forces.<sup>55</sup>

*The Quest for Information Control.* Given this context, the first defining characteristic of NATO's propaganda war was its quest to break Milosevic's iron grip on information flow within Yugoslavia. NATO sought to secure and monopolize the power to shape the

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<sup>51</sup> Zimmermann, *Origins of a Catastrophe*, p. 121.

<sup>52</sup> Duska Anastasijevic, 'The Closing of the Kosovo Cycle: Victimization Versus Responsibility', in Thakur and Schnabel, eds., *Kosovo and the Challenge of Humanitarian Intervention*, pp. 44-63; Jim Naureckas, 'Legitimate Targets? How U.S. Media Supported War Crimes in Yugoslavia', *Extra!*, July/August 1999, available online at [www.fair.org/extra/9907/kosovo-crimes.html](http://www.fair.org/extra/9907/kosovo-crimes.html).

<sup>53</sup> Zimmermann, *Origins of a Catastrophe*, p. 13; Balis, 'De-Mystifying the Serbian Horse', pp. 182-183.

<sup>54</sup> Maass, *Love Thy Neighbour*, pp. 88, 111. Also Gutman, *Witness to Genocide*, pp. ix-x.

<sup>55</sup> Nelan, 'Fighting for Hearts and Minds'.

perceptions within the country - and for that matter of wider international audiences – including especially the domestic publics in the NATO countries. The perceived need to demolish Belgrade’s information monopoly prompted Brussels to target the broadcasting infrastructure and in late April RTS transmission antennae and headquarters were attacked by NATO aircraft. Unfortunately, one attack on 23 April killed 20 journalists, technicians and other civilians, generating considerable controversy.<sup>56</sup> As NATO sought to eliminate the Serb ability to project its propaganda to the public and the wider international audience, it also tried to inject its material into the airwaves of Yugoslavia. Hence Serb, Bosnian, Croatian and Albanian language news and pop music, generated by the ‘NATO Allied Voice Radio and Television Station’, were beamed into the country directly from specially equipped US C-130 aircraft operated by psychological operations personnel from the Pennsylvania Air National Guard’s 193<sup>rd</sup> Special Operations Wing.<sup>57</sup>

Another important facet of NATO’s information management efforts was its concerted attempt to impose firm control of information flow and presentation to the Western media. Hence top government ‘spin-doctors’ such as Jonathan Prince on the American side and Alistair Campbell on the British, assisted Brussels in crafting news releases.<sup>58</sup> Tight political control of NATO information policy was also expedited by the exigencies of war: because it was extremely hazardous to enter the Balkans war zone due to the NATO air strikes and Serb military activities, Western journalists had little option but to rely for their information on press briefings at NATO headquarters in Brussels, the Pentagon and the White House. Newsmen thus comprised a captive audience for NATO information managers who appeared to be distinctly overzealous in presenting NATO’s version of the news, and in accepting at face value whatever they were told by KLA representatives about the Kosovar plight; the very reasonable possibility that such information may have been biased or exaggerated did not seem to be given serious thought.<sup>59</sup> Moreover, CNN and the BBC, ‘the major source of televised footage aired in news broadcasts throughout the world’,<sup>60</sup> seemed just as nonchalant as NATO officials about the veracity of their information. As the respected

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<sup>56</sup> Naureckas, ‘Legitimate Targets?’

<sup>57</sup> ‘Bullets in the Information War: Yugoslav Government, NATO Both Trade Propaganda’, 29 April 1999, ABCNEWS.com, available at [www.more.abcnews.go.com/sections/world/DailyNews/kosovo\\_prop\\_examples990429.html](http://www.more.abcnews.go.com/sections/world/DailyNews/kosovo_prop_examples990429.html). See also ‘NATO Calling’, available at [www.abcnews.go.com/sections/world/DailyNews/kosovo\\_commandosolo990430.html](http://www.abcnews.go.com/sections/world/DailyNews/kosovo_commandosolo990430.html).

<sup>58</sup> Nelan, ‘Fighting for Hearts and Minds’.

<sup>59</sup> Susan Bryce, ‘The Public Relations of Modern Warfare: Will the Real Nazis Please Stand Up!’, n.d., available at [www.newdawnmagazine.com.au/56b.htm](http://www.newdawnmagazine.com.au/56b.htm).

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

historian of war reporting, Phillip Knightley, observed, journalists of the main networks vaguely cited ‘intelligence sources’, or ‘NATO’ or ‘army spokesmen’ as the sources of their news. Furthermore, there seemed to be an assumption on the part of the Western media that all information from Belgrade on civilian destruction was automatically dubious, but anything the KLA or NATO said had to be true. Knightley thus complained that ‘reporters seemed ready to believe anything as long as it painted the Serbs as monsters’. He concluded that in ‘Vietnam the media were reluctant to believe anything the military told them. In Kosovo the media tend to believe everything the military tells them because the military has stolen the moral high ground’.<sup>61</sup> Within such a climate, it became extremely difficult for others to take a more critical stand of NATO actions. Hence well-known journalists like Robert Fisk and John Pilger were excoriated for their anti-establishment views and worse, branded as Serb apologists.<sup>62</sup> This subtle pressure on the representatives of the media to support the establishment position on Kosovo meant that that it was *NATO’s construction of reality* that was disseminated throughout the world.

Hence Western broadcast and print output, far from being diverse and comprising multiple viewpoints – as one would expect of the liberal persuasion - was unusually uniform. Ted Galen Carpenter of the CATO Institute complained that the Western ‘media and its images’ were ‘driving government policy’ and ‘so much of the press coverage doesn’t even make a pretense of objectivity’.<sup>63</sup> Knightley made a similar point, arguing that the Western media were guilty of ‘dogmatic journalism with no room for honest doubt, no chance for the public to make up its own mind’.<sup>64</sup> In sum, both sides in the conflict made strenuous attempts to secure information dominance, but given the greater financial and telecommunications resources of the West, it was the NATO perspective which gained the ascendancy in the global public imagination.

*Atrocity-attribution and Dehumanisation.* The aim of the device known as the atrocity story is to incite hatred for the enemy. Such hatred is necessary to provide emotional and political impetus to the war effort. The atrocity story does not have to be false. True accounts of misdeeds judiciously presented can also elicit the desired reaction in the public. The atrocity

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<sup>61</sup> *The Independent on Sunday*, 27 June 1999.

<sup>62</sup> Robert Fisk, ‘The Infantile Nonsense of the Downing Street “Lie Machine”’, *The Independent*, 13 July 1999; John Pilger, ‘Nothing in My 30 Years of Reporting Wars Compares with the Present Propaganda Dressed as Journalism’, *New Statesman*, 12 July 1999.

<sup>63</sup> Cited in Christopher J. Petherick, ‘War Propaganda Now Promoted as News’, *Spotlight*, 3 May 1999, available at [www.compuserb.com/kosovo/warprop1.htm](http://www.compuserb.com/kosovo/warprop1.htm).



story technique featured heavily in NATO's Kosovo campaign. There were many examples of this but one will suffice: the influential British establishment newspaper, the *Telegraph*, put out a report dated 11 May 1999, pointedly headlined: "AK 47 bullet is souvenir of girl's escape from Serbs". In conspicuously emotive language, the report told of how Kosovar teenager Refique Aliu miraculously survived an attack by Serb forces on her family 'as they cowered in a valley near their village after fleeing from their homes'. It continued: 'Opposite [Refique], her nine-year old cousin, Albiana, cries out in anticipation of the pain as the nurses arrive to change the dressing on the bullet wound to her hip. Albiana is luckier than her 11-year-old brother, Ladvim. He was hit in the kidney as he stood beside her, and died of his wounds in a Kosovo Liberation Army field hospital as few hours after the attack'.<sup>65</sup> The basic theme of the report is that the 'evil' Serbs were committing vile atrocities against 'innocent' and 'helpless' Kosovar children. That these Serb atrocities really happened, and that the Kosovars were really innocent and helpless is not at issue. From a strict propaganda standpoint, there was a conspicuous lack of *equivalent coverage* of the impact of NATO's systematic targeting of Yugoslavia's infrastructure - as well as its 'errors' - on the mass of the Serb public who were not directly involved in the ethnic cleansing of Kosovo.<sup>66</sup> The reason why the media emphasised Kosovar suffering while de-emphasising that of the Serb public brings us to the associated propaganda technique of dehumanisation.

This involves portraying the enemy leader and country as unusually evil and somewhat less than human, so as to justify taking extremely harsh, perhaps brutal countermeasures against them. Dehumanisation was certainly a major technique employed by NATO and the Western media in Kosovo. Slobodan Milosevic was naturally a prime target. Knightley observed that Milosevic, 'from being a pragmatic leader that the West could do business with, became a new Genghis Khan, and, significantly, a new Hitler'.<sup>67</sup> *Newsweek* referred to Milosevic, who graced its 19 April 1999 cover as the 'Face of Evil'.<sup>68</sup> *Time* went even further: in its 12 April 1999 issue, it described Milosevic as having 'reddish, piggy eyes set in a big round head'.<sup>69</sup> Originally, as Michael Powell pointed out, NATO tried to paint the Kosovo intervention as a war against Milosevic rather than the Serb public. However, the Serb people

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<sup>64</sup> *The Independent on Sunday*, 27 June 1999.

<sup>65</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, 11 May 1999.

<sup>66</sup> Marie-Pierre Lahaye, 'Yugoslavia: How Demonizing a Whole People Serves Western Interests', March 1999, available at [www.revision.co.yu/memories/0007.html](http://www.revision.co.yu/memories/0007.html); Transnational Foundation for Peace and Future Research, 'The Information War About Kosovo', 15 April 1999, available at [www.transnational.org/pressinf/pf62.html](http://www.transnational.org/pressinf/pf62.html).

<sup>67</sup> *The Independent on Sunday*, 27 June 1999.

<sup>68</sup> *Newsweek*, 19 April 1999.

<sup>69</sup> *Time*, 12 April 1999.

were rapidly dehumanised as well, when it emerged that life in Belgrade and other major Yugoslav cities had been virtually unaffected by the initial NATO strikes.<sup>70</sup> Apparent Serb nonchalance precipitated anger amongst many Western journalists, and as noted, NATO subsequently intensified its campaign against the Yugoslav infrastructure. When some liberal columnists protested this intensification, Anthony Lewis of the *New York Times*, on 29 May 1999, wrote of ‘a price that must be paid when a nation falls in behind a criminal leader’.<sup>71</sup> In like vein, Daniel Goldhagen went so far as to brand the Serbs as a nation which ‘clearly consists of individuals with damaged faculties of moral judgment and has sunk into a moral abyss’.<sup>72</sup> David Binder of the *New York Times* admitted that in ‘New York and Washington it is considered politically correct to malign the Serbs on any and all occasions until it has almost turned into racism. The Serbs are being demonized practically to the point of excluding any reporting that brings about a balance’.<sup>73</sup>

The Western media throughout the dehumanisation process of the Serb nation neglected to point out that Milosevic was elected not directly but by the Yugoslav federal assembly, in an irregular vote in which he was the sole candidate. The fact that there was a significant Serb pro-democracy opposition, which won local elections in 14 of Serbia’s 19 largest cities in November 1996, was also underemphasised.<sup>74</sup> This was because NATO and the Western media, through the propaganda devices of the atrocity story and dehumanisation, were intent only on sending out a certain message which was congruent with Western war aims: “the Serb public are supporting an evil dictator Milosevic and an evil army which has committed countless atrocities in Kosovo. Hence the Serbs as a whole deserve to be punished because they are basically evil”.

“*Doublespeak*”. This technique refers to the practice of deliberately assigning dissimilar moral labels to identical actions performed by different actors. The essence of doublespeak is captured in the following sentence by the American media critic Norman Solomon: ‘When *they* put bombs in cars and kill people, they’re uncivilized killers. When *we* put bombs on missiles and kill people, we’re upholding civilized values.’<sup>75</sup> Doublespeak was extremely evident in Western media coverage on Kosovo. For instance, on 3 May 1999, the *New York Times* front-

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<sup>70</sup> *Washington Post*, 27 May 1999.

<sup>71</sup> *New York Times*, 29 May 1999.

<sup>72</sup> *The New Republic*, 17 May 1999.

<sup>73</sup> Cited in Lahaye, ‘Yugoslavia’.

<sup>74</sup> Naureckas, ‘Legitimate Targets?’

page story was headlined “Survivor Tells of Massacre at Kosovo Village”. The lengthy piece recounted the killing of 58 Kosovars at Bela Crkva on 25 March, and focused heavily on the ‘lingering anguish of the survivors’. On page A14 of the *same* issue, moreover, was a brief story headlined: “NATO admits Missile Hits Bus but Says Bridge was a Legitimate Target”. This told of how a NATO missile hit a bus in Luzane, killing 47 Yugoslav civilians. In contrast to the emotive, sensationalist front-page report, the Luzane incident was reported in ‘fairly dry, straightforward’ language. As the American media watchdog group *FAIR* (Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting) complained: “The two *Times* stories are an extreme though hardly unique example of the media’s tendency to focus justifiable outrage on Serb atrocities, while presenting NATO forces as principled strategists who occasionally make mistakes”.<sup>76</sup> The ultimate aim of the Western media’s doublespeak strategy was simple: to completely demolish the credibility of all official pronouncements coming from Belgrade, contrasting the latter’s ‘ludicrous propaganda’ with the ‘responsible journalism’ of Western media.<sup>77</sup> In sum, NATO’s propaganda campaign in Kosovo involved the quest for total information control by eroding Milosevic’s domination of the information environment within Yugoslavia whilst providing the compliant Western print and broadcast media with information which reflected the preferred version of events. NATO and the media also used the key propaganda techniques of atrocity-attribution, dehumanisation and doublespeak throughout the campaign. The question that has to be asked is how effective was this propaganda effort?

The leading Allied propagandist of the Second World War was Richard H.S. Crossman, an Oxford don and future Cabinet Minister within the Labour Government of Harold Wilson in the 1960s. Crossman always maintained that the most critical commodity the propagandist had to secure was credibility. That is, before the propagandist could influence the hearts and minds of his audience, the latter had to trust him. Crossman argued that the way to achieve credibility or trust was by telling the truth, because once the audience verified that what the propagandist was saying was factual and true, it would begin to repose its trust in him. In turn, to tell the truth meant that what the propagandist said and did had to be consistent. In other words, the words and deeds of the propagandist had to match.

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<sup>75</sup> Norman Solomon, ‘The Orwellian Language of War’, May 1999, available at [www.msnbc.com/news/257902.asp](http://www.msnbc.com/news/257902.asp).

<sup>76</sup> FAIR Action Alert: ‘Massacres vs. Regrettable Accidents: Double-Standard for Coverage of Civilian Deaths in Yugoslavia’, 7 May 1999, available at [www.fair.org/activism/kosovo.html](http://www.fair.org/activism/kosovo.html).

<sup>77</sup> Solomon, ‘The Orwellian Language of War’.

Otherwise, the audience would conclude that the propagandist was lying and would dismiss everything else he had to say.<sup>78</sup>

If the aim of all propaganda is to secure credibility as the critical prelude to influencing an audience, then to evaluate the effectiveness of the Western propaganda campaign in Kosovo is to ask to what extent NATO was able to achieve credibility with the relevant audiences, namely: the Serb and Kosovar publics, the domestic publics in the NATO countries and the wider international community. It is clear, as noted earlier, that in this respect there was general disquiet about the aims and conduct of the Kosovo intervention. Brussels' high-sounding rhetoric about seeking to prevent a humanitarian disaster in the Balkans was completely rejected out of hand by major non-NATO powers. Satish Nambiar, a retired Indian Army Lieutenant-General and first Force Commander and head of Mission of UNPROFOR in the former Yugoslavia, complained of the arrogant way in which the United Nations was totally bypassed.<sup>79</sup> The Chinese were equally perturbed. Zhang Yunling, Director of the Institute of Asia-Pacific Studies, articulated Beijing's chief concern that the Kosovo intervention suggests that it too could at some point be subjected to 'Western-imposed values backed by "collective intervention"' on issues such as Taiwan.<sup>80</sup> The Russians were equally outraged. Vladimir Baronovsky pointed out that 'Russia is deeply concerned with the possibility that the Kosovo pattern might be applied to Russia itself or to its immediate environment'.<sup>81</sup>

Moreover, as pointed out earlier, the manner in which NATO conducted its intervention drew much criticism, naturally and especially from the Serb and Kosovar civilians who lost families to NATO 'accidents' and 'collateral damage'. More significantly, however, the bombing alienated the anti-Milosevic pro-democracy movement within Serbia as well. The case of Belgrade resident and Serb Valdimir Aleksic, is in this respect very suggestive. Aleksic, who owned an electronics firm, spoke and wrote good English and had visited the United States many times on business, e-mailed ABCNEWS.com on 27 March 1999, to voice his sheer incredulity at the NATO bombing:<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Richard H.S. Crossman, 'Psychological Warfare', *RUSI Journal*, Vol. XCVII, No. 587 (Aug 1952), pp. 324-326.

<sup>79</sup> Satish Nambiar, 'India: An Uneasy Precedent', in Thakur and Schnabel, eds., *Kosovo and the Challenge of Humanitarian Intervention*, p. 267.

<sup>80</sup> Zhang Yunling, 'China: Whither the World Order after Kosovo?', in *ibid*, pp. 122-124.

<sup>81</sup> Vladimir Baranovsky, 'Russia: Reassessing National Interests', in *ibid*, p. 104.

<sup>82</sup> Vladimir Aleksic to ABCNEWS.com, 27 March 1999, available at [www.more.abcnews.go.com/sections/world/DailyNews/belgrade990330\\_letters1.html](http://www.more.abcnews.go.com/sections/world/DailyNews/belgrade990330_letters1.html).

It is difficult to accept that this is actually happening. My generation was brought up on the [sic] U.S. culture. Most of the population speaks excellent English. I visited the States several times and traveled from Chicago to Seattle and back. I still have a lot of friends there. My business is international, and my education as well. I cannot imagine that there is an intellectual in the world that might approve what's going on.

By 6 April, after a particularly heavy raid on mainly 'civilian targets', Aleksic complained of a 'personal vendetta of NATO' aimed at 'total destruction' of the Yugoslav economy.<sup>83</sup> Finally, by 14 April, the transmutation was complete and Aleksic was utterly opposed to the West. He complained that the 'bombing of civilian targets and too many civilian victims including women and children made us all very bitter', and warned defiantly that 'we all know that we are up against the ultimate military power, but everybody I talk to is anxious to see NATO ground troops. The bombing made Serbs so angry that the army who wants to come to Kosovo will have a very hard time'.<sup>84</sup> While it might be suggested that the general Serb audience, given Milosevic's hold over the national media, could be expected to parrot the official Belgrade perspective, the brainwashing explanation loses force in the case of relatively better-educated, professional and much-travelled Serbs like Aleksic, who were declared anti-Milosevic, pro-democracy supporters. That such people could express such anti-Western views suggests strongly that quite apart from Belgrade's propaganda, the NATO bombing per se turned them into conservative supporters of Milosevic.

The Serbs aside, many commentators within the NATO publics themselves also expressed unhappiness with the NATO strategy. In this respect, the politically-motivated 'force-protection' thrust of the air campaign and the desire to send ground troops - if at all - only into a 'permissive environment',<sup>85</sup> attracted severe brickbats. The American strategic analyst Edward Luttwak, for instance, observed acerbically that the 'Kosovo intervention was executed by NATO pilots who flew in greater safety than the passengers of some Third World

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<sup>83</sup> Aleksic to ABCNEWS.com, 6 April 1999, available at [www.more.abcnews.go.com/sections/world/DailyNews/belgrade990408\\_letters11.html](http://www.more.abcnews.go.com/sections/world/DailyNews/belgrade990408_letters11.html).

<sup>84</sup> Aleksic to ABCNEWS.com, 14 April 1999, available at [www.more.abcnews.go.com/sections/world/DailyNews/belgrade990416\\_letters14.html](http://www.more.abcnews.go.com/sections/world/DailyNews/belgrade990416_letters14.html).

<sup>85</sup> Coral Bell, 'Kosovo: The "Zero Casualties" Strategy', *Strategic and Defence Studies Centre Newsletter* (Autumn/Winter 1999), pp. 1-4; idem, 'Force, Diplomacy and Norms', in Thakur and Schnabel, eds., *Kosovo and the Challenge of Humanitarian Intervention*, p. 454.

airlines’,<sup>86</sup> while Nicola Butler felt that while ‘NATO forces escaped with minimal loss of life, the impact of the air strikes on civilian life in Yugoslavia’ was ‘severe’. More damagingly, ‘air strikes did not prevent widespread atrocities against civilians on the ground in Kosovo or the mass exodus of refugees into neighbouring countries’. She went so far as to state that ‘the transition from OSCE monitoring to NATO air strikes’, quite possibly ‘precipitated a greater disaster for those left in Kosovo’.<sup>87</sup>

It is against this backdrop of the perceptions of NATO aims and strategy in Kosovo that its propaganda campaign has to be evaluated. Propaganda cannot function in a vacuum; it is always the ‘handmaid of official policy and strategy’.<sup>88</sup> To put it another way, because the ‘deeds’ of NATO in terms of its aims and its conduct of the intervention generated much adverse comment, this situation *sharply undermined its overall credibility*. Aleksic expressed this fact succinctly:<sup>89</sup>

I have seen President Clinton addressing the people of Serbia. I heard that Madeleine Albright even spoke in the Serbian language. They tried to explain that the bombing of Yugoslavia is for our own good. Do you honestly believe that the Serbs will buy that? Do you think that millions of leaflets and a NATO radio station can persuade Serbs that bombs that kill their children are for their own benefit? Are the bombs that left 80 percent of the population jobless going to bring us democracy? Trust my words, they won’t.

Because NATO’s ‘deeds’ were already causing such controversy, its propaganda or ‘words’ became *ipso facto* suspect, and the blatant anti-Serb bias of the Western print and broadcast media was immediately detected. Aleksic complained on 8 April that ‘the gap’ between reality and the ‘observations and the reports that appeared in U.S. media’ was ‘the size of the Pacific Ocean’.<sup>90</sup> He was utterly outraged at the blatant double standards exercised by the Western

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<sup>86</sup> Edward Luttwak, ‘Kofi’s Rule: Humanitarian Intervention and Neocolonialism’, *The National Interest* (Winter 1999/2000), p. 62.

<sup>87</sup> Nicola Butler, ‘NATO: From Collective Defence to Peace Enforcement’, in Thakur and Schnabel, eds., *Kosovo and the Challenge of Humanitarian Intervention*, pp. 280-281.

<sup>88</sup> Sir Robert H. Bruce Lockhart, ‘Political Warfare’, *RUSI Journal*, Vol. XCV, No. 577 (1950), p. 195.

<sup>89</sup> Aleksic to ABCNEWS.com, 29 April 1999, available at [www.more.abcnews.go.com/sections/world/DailyNews/belgrade990430\\_letters16.html](http://www.more.abcnews.go.com/sections/world/DailyNews/belgrade990430_letters16.html).

<sup>90</sup> Aleksic to ABCNEWS.com, 8 April 1999, available at [www.more.abcnews.go.com/sections/world/DailyNews/belgrade990409\\_letters.html](http://www.more.abcnews.go.com/sections/world/DailyNews/belgrade990409_letters.html).

media, recalling bitterly that when 350 000 Serbs had to evacuate Croatia (during the Croatian Army's August 1995 blitzkrieg which cleared the Croatian Krajina of its Serb population), 'NO-ONE said it was a human catastrophe'.<sup>91</sup> Aleksic had a point. As Freedman notes, the 'net effect of the Croatia and Bosnian wars was to leave the Serbs stigmatized'. While this was 'not wholly unfair', he correctly points out that the resulting anti-Serb bias at times hampered accurate and fair reporting. Hence when during the Bosnian war the Bosnian Croats destroyed the Muslim city of Mostar, some Western news editors, accustomed to painting Bosnia as a war of Serb aggression, 'failed to mention the Croat role'.<sup>92</sup> As we noted earlier, the anti-Serb slant of news stories continued in the Kosovo case. Consequently, at least amongst American and most European audiences, the anti-Belgrade thrust of Western journalism tended to exert a reinforcing effect on negative attitudes initially formed during the earlier Balkan wars. According to media analyst Steven Livingston, by the end of April 1999, for instance, 61 percent of the American public supported the bombing, and more significantly, despite coverage of errant NATO bomb damage, 'countervailing expressions of sympathy' for the Kosovar refugees 'negated the effects' of NATO 'mistakes'.<sup>93</sup> In other words, Western propaganda was successful in influencing American and most European publics to empathise with the Kosovars and attribute blame for the crisis to the Serbs. This sentiment naturally translated into political support for the NATO intervention.

Nevertheless, NATO propaganda could not overcome the perceived flaws in its overall policy and strategy. Hence at one level, by the end of the war the Serb public, appalled at what NATO had inflicted upon it for 11 weeks, was firmly in Milosevic's corner, and the Serb pro-democracy opposition was virtually silent. For instance, the day after the war ended, while one 17-year old Serb girl confessed to a Western reporter that she still liked Milosevic, on the other side of the generation gap, an old woman declared that Milosevic 'is only defending his country and his people', and that 'we didn't attack anybody and they attacked us'. When the journalist asked her about the plight of the Kosovars, she retorted: 'The Albanians demanded independence of what was Serbian land for centuries'.<sup>94</sup> In short, the Serbs remained utterly wedded to Belgrade's official line and NATO had failed to undermine Milosevic's image amongst his own people. That Milosevic finally lost the presidency to Vojislav Kostunica in October 2000 was due more to his own follies rather than anything

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<sup>91</sup> Aleksic to Michael Lowery, 5 April 1999, available at [www.more.abcnews.go.com/sections/world/DailyNews/belgrade990406\\_letters10.html](http://www.more.abcnews.go.com/sections/world/DailyNews/belgrade990406_letters10.html).

<sup>92</sup> Freedman, 'Victims and Victors', p. 344.

<sup>93</sup> Steven Livingston, 'Media Coverage of the War: An Empirical Assessment', in *ibid.*, p. 381.

NATO did.<sup>95</sup> In a wider sense, moreover, despite the best efforts of its image-makers, NATO emerged from Kosovo with a tarnished reputation. While the British Labour MP Tony Benn accused the United States of launching a ‘war against the (UN Charter),’<sup>96</sup> former Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev decried NATO’s intervention as ‘pure lawlessness’ and condemned its apparent new role as ‘supreme arbiter.’<sup>97</sup> Perhaps Michael MccGwire summed it up best when he noted that instead of coming across as a self-appointed guardian of global humanitarian rights, ‘the world at large saw a political-military alliance that took unto itself the role of judge, jury and executioner’, which ‘claimed to be acting on behalf of the international community and was ready to slight the UN and skirt international law in order to enforce its collective judgement’. Moreover, the alliance came across as ‘given to moralistic rhetoric, one no less economical with the truth than others of its kind,’ whose ‘unmatched technical capacity to kill, maim and destroy’, was ‘limited only by their unwillingness to put their “warriors” at risk’.<sup>98</sup>

### **Strategic Implications for Singapore and Recommendations for Action**

What does the NATO intervention in Kosovo suggest for Singapore? It is argued that the following lessons and policy recommendations are especially pertinent:

First, we must recognise that despite the disquiet surrounding the aims and conduct of NATO’s Kosovo action, the international community has virtually embraced the idea that ‘the principle of non-interference with the essential domestic jurisdiction of States cannot be regarded as a protective barrier behind which human rights could be massively or systematically violated with impunity’. Hence some scholars are already suggesting that there should be a legal distinction between sovereign ‘status’ and sovereign ‘rights’, and should a sovereign state grossly infringe human rights, its sovereign right of domestic jurisdiction may be suspended by the international community even if its overall sovereign status remains inviolate. This would mean in practice that external powers acting on behalf of the international community would enjoy the legal right to intervene in and occupy segments of

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<sup>94</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, 11 June 1999.

<sup>95</sup> ‘Serbia Goes to the Polls: A Defining Moment for the Federation’, *IJSS Strategic Comments*, Vol. 6, No. 10 (Dec 2000).

<sup>96</sup> Cited in Gurmeet Kanwal, ‘NATO’s Kosovo Intervention: Threat to Stable World Order’, *Indian Defence Review*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (Apr-June 1999), p. 48.

<sup>97</sup> *Hindustan Times*, 13 May 1999.

<sup>98</sup> MccGwire, ‘Why Did We Bomb?’, p. 18.



the territory of sovereign but perceived-to-be delinquent states like Iraq and Yugoslavia.<sup>99</sup> Moreover, others suggest that the norm of humanitarian intervention may be seen as an overriding customary law which obviates the sovereignty principle. Called the '*jus cogens*' view, this sees humanitarian intervention as a 'norm thought to be so fundamental that it invalidates rules consented to by states in treaties or customs'.<sup>100</sup> This ideational ferment has not been confined to academia. At the policy level, British Prime Minister Tony Blair, who it must be said proved more hawkish than President Clinton throughout the Kosovo intervention, delivered a highly significant address in Chicago in April 1999 in which he outlined a new 'Doctrine of International Community' for the post Cold War world. According to Blair, humanitarian intervention should be regarded as justified if five principles were observed:<sup>101</sup>

- 'are we sure of our case?'
- 'have we exhausted all diplomatic options?'
- 'on the basis of a practical assessment of the situation, are there military operations we can sensibly and prudently undertake?'
- are intervening states prepared to endure 'for the long term'?
- are 'national interests' involved?

Furthermore, in the wake of Kosovo, attention has been increasingly focused on ways to structure institutional procedures so as to operationalise the intervention norm. As noted, at one extreme is the view endorsed by NATO in its April 1999 'new strategic concept', which authorises it to embark on out-of-area operations even without a UN Resolution. On the other hand, several scholars feel that NATO should always work within the UN ambit, although they recognise that reform of the decisionmaking mechanism within the Security Council would be desirable. Hence Andrew Linklater and Richard Caplan suggest that the great power veto in the Security Council be removed in 'exceptional circumstances', so that the support of a majority of the great powers is all that is required to permit states to engage in 'humanitarian war'. Caplan also suggests that the UN Charter could be amended to accommodate a new international convention on humanitarian intervention.<sup>102</sup> In contrast, A.J.

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<sup>99</sup> Alan M. James, 'The Concept of Sovereignty Revisited', in Thakur and Schnabel, eds., *Kosovo and the Challenge of Humanitarian Intervention*, pp. 334-343.

<sup>100</sup> Tomes, 'Operation Allied Force', p. 49.

<sup>101</sup> *Chicago Tribune*, 23 April 1999.

<sup>102</sup> Andrew Linklater, 'The Good International Citizen and the Crisis in Kosovo', in Thakur and Schnabel, eds., *Kosovo and the Challenge of Humanitarian Intervention*, p. 490; Caplan, 'Kosovo: The Implications for Humanitarian Intervention'.

R. Groom and Paul Taylor argue that seeking an international consensus on the principles that should govern intervention through Security Council Resolutions would not be practicable at this time. They suggest instead that for the time being, it would be better if Security Council Resolutions were based on a growing agreement about ‘coded messages’ in the form of wordings such as ‘all necessary measures’ (SC678 Nov. 1990 on the Iraq invasion of Kuwait). They point out that some states will only agree to action if the form of words does not appear to be strengthening a norm of intervention and creating a ‘precedent’.<sup>103</sup>

However, as far as small, vulnerable states like Singapore are concerned, it is unclear if the ‘coded messages’ approach is the best way forward. Tony Blair reiterated in his Chicago speech that ‘on some occasions, human rights are more important than national sovereignty’.<sup>104</sup> Surely the pressing question is precisely *what* those ‘occasions’ are and *who* determines them. The Kosovo case showcases in stark relief the ‘selective indignation’ shown by the West in responding to humanitarian crises, in that not all such disasters have received the same degree of attention. Hence there exists a real danger of abuse of the humanitarian intervention norm for the pursuit of political and strategic reasons utterly unrelated to the publicly proffered moral justifications. Moreover as Stephen R. Shalom incisively argues, the capacity to exercise humanitarian intervention is the province of only a select few, because ‘Uruguay cannot use B-52s to punish Britain for its policy in Northern Ireland’. Hence ‘we need to be very careful about a right that can be enjoyed only by the powerful’.<sup>105</sup>

The potential for abuse is why non-Western powers like China, India and Russia immensely dislike the new NATO strategic concept and desire to relocate sole decisionmaking authority on humanitarian interventions within the Security Council. It is suggested that Singapore should discreetly support such a move, and to play an active part in discussions on the possible reformation of the Security Council decisionmaking procedures to expedite humanitarian wars. More importantly, there is a pressing need for Singapore and ASEAN to play a much more proactive part in generating objective criteria for determining the point at which the international community should intervene in internal crises. The political pitfalls of the lack of an ‘ASEAN Way’ with respect to coping with humanitarian crises within Southeast Asia was clearly evinced during the recent East Timor crisis, which saw the Association

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<sup>103</sup> A.J.R. Groom and Paul Taylor, ‘The United Nations System and the Kosovo Crisis’, in Thakur and Schnabel, eds., *Kosovo and the Challenge of Humanitarian Intervention*, pp. 295-300.

<sup>104</sup> *Chicago Tribune*, 23 April 1999.

<sup>105</sup> Shalom, ‘Reflections on NATO and Kosovo’.

reduced to playing second fiddle to Australia, a non-ASEAN state.<sup>106</sup> In this respect, ASEAN scholars should contribute a distinctly ASEAN perspective to the debate on humanitarian war, in the manner in which Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew, Tommy Koh, Chan Heng Chee, Kishore Mahbubani and Bilahari Kausikan have tried to prise open the tight Western grip on the global human rights and governance discourse. In line with the recent moves to flesh out an ASEAN philosophy of ‘flexible engagement’, and ‘enhanced interaction’,<sup>107</sup> therefore, we should also be working towards nothing less than an explicit ASEAN doctrine of Humanitarian Intervention. This is far too sensitive and complex an issue to even briefly explore here; the point is that we should be proactive and generate our humanitarian code of conduct and offer *it* as a possible global model before the West presents its version as the international default norm.

Furthermore, the Kosovo crisis confirms that the powerful Western, largely American and British, media is anything but an impartial actor. It must be reiterated, while the Serbs were clearly guilty of heinous crimes against humanity, and without a doubt, generated the tragedy of Yugoslavia, since then, the Croats and Bosnian Muslims, and increasingly in the aftermath of the war, the KLA, have also shown themselves to be equally culpable. The problem is, the Western media projected the impression that it was the Serbs who were the only thugs in the Balkan neighbourhood. In this way, Western print and broadcast media served as the *de facto* rhetorical arm of the Americans in particular. This is highly significant for Singapore, because it is a truism that the global media *is* the Western media. The world’s media is dominated by a small number of ‘super-powerful’, mainly American-based transnational media corporations such as Time Warner, Bertelsmann, Viacom and Rupert Murdoch’s News Corporation. These media giants control the entire global spectrum of media output, including magazines, newspapers, television channels and networks, film production and book publishing.<sup>108</sup> The Western media is clearly all-pervasive, and it is unsurprising that it enjoys virtually complete penetration into the English-language information domains of Singapore and the other ASEAN countries. Given the exigencies of an integrated global economy, this is unavoidable. But it also means that ASEAN societies and polities remain keenly vulnerable to external opinion manipulation across a range of issues such as human rights in Myanmar, separatism in Indonesia, or political succession in Malaysia.

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<sup>106</sup> Lee Kim Chew, ‘Politics behind Asean’s inaction’, *Straits Times*, 17 Oct 1999.

<sup>107</sup> Jurgen Haacke, ‘The Concept of Flexible Engagement and the Practice of Enhanced Interaction: Intramural Challenges to the “ASEAN Way”’, *The Pacific Review*, Vol. 12, No. 4 (1999), pp. 581-617.

It is thus highly incumbent upon Singapore to encourage the setting up of an ASEAN print and broadcast media coalition – perhaps built around *Channel News Asia* – to offer regional and global audiences reasoned alternatives to Western constructions of reality. What is required is nothing less than the wherewithal to conduct an effective strategic counterpropaganda campaign across the entire media spectrum. This is an increasingly critical imperative because in the age of the Internet, real political influence will increasingly reside in the power to shape local, regional and global orthodoxies. Little wonder that since Kosovo, Belgrade has decided to ‘start publishing daily bulletins in English, open new Internet web sites and work closely with state media on satellite transmissions of their broadcasts’.<sup>109</sup>

Finally, the Kosovo crisis, and the larger tragedy of Yugoslavia also suggests that in the wrong hands, the modern media can be a powerful force for ripping apart multiethnic polities. As we noted, there was never anything ‘inevitable’ about the breakup of the country. A *quarter* of all marriages in the country were mixed, and until the ascension of Milosevic and the late Croatian President Franjo Tudjman, racial relations were, on balance, generally stable. Authoritative and keen observers with many years of experience in the country such as the last American ambassador to the country, Zimmermann, noted that it was the Serb leaders, which manipulated television in particular to whip up anti-Croat and anti-Muslim nationalism, which ultimately tore the country apart. In the end, incessant racist propaganda put out by a state-controlled media created an anarchical situation which was seized upon by extremists. One anguished Serb lawyer told Peter Maass:<sup>110</sup>

A lot of Serbs think this is leading us nowhere but they feel powerless....Perhaps thirty percent disagree, but most of them are frightened and quiet. Perhaps sixty percent agree or are confused enough to go along. They are led by the ten percent who have the guns and who have control of the television towers. That’s all they need.

It is hard to believe that Yugoslavia broke up in the 1990s, at a time when the Holocaust was apparently receding into the background and the world had supposedly internalised the lessons of history. Instead, Kosovo and Yugoslavia in general – and in our own neighbourhood,

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<sup>108</sup> Robert W. McChesney, ‘The Global Media Giants: The Nine Firms that Dominate the World’, *Extra!*, Nov/Dec 1997, available at [www.fair.org/extra/9711/gmg.html](http://www.fair.org/extra/9711/gmg.html).

<sup>109</sup> ‘Serbia to step up ripostes to “Western propaganda”’, Reuters report, 25 Dec 1999.

<sup>110</sup> Maass, *Love They Neighbour*, p. 107.

Indonesia - confirms that in any multiethnic polity, there always exists what Maass called the 'wild beast', waiting for an opportune moment to rear its ugly head and unleash racial hatreds. Indeed, in an age when continuous advances in information and communications technology expedite increasingly rapid and efficient dissemination of words and images, the ability of the 'wild beast' to wreak havoc in society has been enhanced in an unprecedented manner. At the very least, this suggests that in multiracial Singapore, quite apart from persevering with nationbuilding efforts, a modicum of regulation of the mass media, especially television, ought to be retained. If 'modern', relatively sophisticated, multiracial Yugoslavia could be undone in the space of a decade by television in particular, smaller and more vulnerable Singapore has little reason to be overly sanguine.