

## sections

[home](#)  
[top stories](#)  
[local news](#)  
[ap wire](#)  
[sports](#)  
[lifestyles](#)  
[entertainment](#)  
[business](#)  
[opinion](#)  
[weather](#)  
[archives](#)

## marketplace

[classifieds](#)  
[employment](#)  
[real estate](#)  
[automotive](#)  
[yellow pages](#)

## city guide

[community](#)  
[cinema guide](#)  
[coloradosprings](#)  
[military](#)

## reach us

[e-mail](#)  
[resources](#)  
[columnists](#)



## Alan J. Parrington: Clinton had a chance to avoid Kosovo bombing

Now that Slobodan Milosevic has been voted out of office, many in the Clinton Administration will be celebrating the 1999 bombing of Yugoslavia as a completed moral victory. We were told after all, that the war was fought for humanitarian reasons - to stop genocide and ethnic cleansing - and that it was started only after all diplomatic efforts had failed. With Kosovo free and Milosevic vanquished, the war is finally won. It was a good war.

As the U.S. Air Attaché in London at the time, I saw a different war, one not so flattering or altruistic. I saw a war of underlying motives, missed diplomatic opportunities, misguided military strategies and questionable outcomes. Worst of all, the war never need happened: Milosevic conceded major U.S. demands two weeks before the war began.

On the evening of March 11, 1999, I was confronted by the Yugoslavian Defence Attaché to the Court of St. James at a British diplomatic reception and told, "Milosevic has decided to accept international, even NATO, troops in Kosovo, but he must first have (a) letter from Clinton explaining the benefits Yugoslavia will receive (in exchange)." I stood there silent, somewhat dumbfounded, as the deployment of foreign troops had been the sticking point in negotiations. The Serb colonel repeated his statement verbatim, questioning if I had understood the import of his message.

"Yes," I assured him, "I understand perfectly, but what benefits are you talking about?"

"I myself do not know," he answered, "But Holbrooke knows!"

Richard Holbrooke, author of the Dayton Accord on Bosnia, had been shuttling back and forth to Belgrade trying to find a peaceful solution to the Kosovo crisis. He had left Belgrade the day before to consult with Washington and was due back in Yugoslavia that weekend. He apparently carried with him a detailed brief of the Milosevic offer.

The timing, place and presence of other diplomats cut short my discussion with the Serb, but by coincidence I had dinner with him at the home of a fellow attaché a few days later. I asked if he had learned any more about the benefits he had spoken of during our last encounter. "I can only speak for myself," he answered, "but there are only three things Yugoslavia must

### Alan J. Parrington,

of Monument, served as U.S. air attaché to the Court of St. James in London during the Kosovo campaign. He retired from the Air Force with the rank of colonel at the beginning of this year.

have: Yugoslavia must keep sovereignty over Kosovo, the terrorists (i.e. the Kosovo Liberation Army) must be disarmed, and the referendum (on independence for Kosovo) must be removed." It was apparently too much for the Clinton Administration to accept as Holbrooke's shuttle diplomacy failed and the bombing began March 24.

The war that was supposed to last three days ran into weeks, then months, and had all the appearances of lasting well into the future when, ironically, Russia stepped in and brokered a peace. The war ended June 10 with the United Nations accepting responsibility for Kosovo. When I read the agreement, I was not surprised to see the three Yugoslavian demands had been met or that each side had spun the agreement into a victory for their side. Such is the nature of 20th-century politics. But I began to wonder why it had taken so much blood to come back to the same starting point as before the war began. There were lots of explanations I reasoned, but none that fit the scenario comfortably, save one.

I came to the conclusion - hypothesis really - that the war had not been about humanitarian issues at all. Like most wars it had been about politics. In this case, the objective all along had been to get rid of Milosevic, Europe's last reigning communist, and whose virulent nationalism had set the region ablaze, sending millions of refugees fleeing to the West where they were not wanted or welcomed.

It was difficult to gauge when Milosevic became the target of the administration's Balkan policy, perhaps as early as 1995 following the debacle in Bosnia. State appointments and initiatives from that time seem to support that theory. In any case, it all hinged on cornering the Serb leader in a war he could not win and for whom capitulation or defeat would spell disaster. Milosevic's Waterloo was thought to be Kosovo, his Achilles heel to be bombing. This is where the strategy went awry.

It is one of the enduring myths of the 20th century that strategic bombing will compel a weak power to throw in the towel and dump an unpopular leader. In practice, the opposite has always been true and even the most unpopular dictators have been made into national heroes by the symbiotic logic that befalls strategic bombardment. Most American administrations, captured by the omnipotence of their own polls, have been slow to grasp this reality and have repeatedly reached for the strategic bomber or missile as an easy way to avoid hard choices.

The Clinton administration was no different. Three days at most, it was claimed, and Milosevic will be history. But in Yugoslavia, as in Iraq and elsewhere, the bombing backfired and rallied disparate Serbian political parties around a common foreign enemy. After 11 weeks of bombing, the administration, running short of precision weapons and faced with the prospect of a bloody ground war, abandoned the bombing strategy and asked the Russians to broker a deal based upon Milosevic's antebellum offer. The war achieved no more than was offered by Milosevic at the

beginning and only inflamed ethnic passions for generations to come.

It is a Pyrrhic victory to now claim that the bombing served its purpose. Kosovo remains a part of Yugoslavia, the independence referendum has been cancelled, ethnic cleansing continues (albeit reversed in terms of nationalities), and NATO has been stuck with the impossible task of disarming the KLA. As one KLA leader told me, "One day the Serbs will be selling us guns to shoot at NATO!" Even new Yugoslavian President Vojislav Kostunica has been quoted as saying, "We cannot forget what some countries did to us last year during the NATO bombing."

Benjamin Franklin believed that there is no such thing as a good war, nor is there a bad peace. Democratic forces brought about Milosevic's demise, not bombs or bullets. Milosevic was widely hated before the war ever began. Advocates of the Clinton doctrine might think on these dilemmas and well consider the old sage's advice before launching any new moralistic adventures. War is at best a necessary evil that should be invoked only in the most extreme of situations. Getting rid of Milosevic was not one of them.

---

Copyright 1999-2000, [The Gazette](#), a [Freedom Communications, Inc.](#) Company. All rights reserved. [Contact us.](#)