

Kosovo Writing Contest: Entry

The Big Picture: A Moral Analysis of Allied Force in Kosovo

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Unless we take and keep the moral high ground, our military superiority will ultimately fail us.

"That's the trouble, you know," Yossarian mused sympathetically. 'Between me and every ideal I always find Scheisskophs, Peckhams, Kornes, and Cathcarts. And that sort of changes the ideal.'

"You must try not to think of them," Major Danby advised affirmatively. "And you must never let them change your values. Ideals are good, but people are sometimes not so good. You must try to look up at the big picture."

Catch-22, Joseph Heller (1955)

There were plenty of Scheisskophs, Peckhams, Kornes, and Cathcarts stifling efforts to achieve an ideal in Kosovo. U.S. policymakers failed miserably to master the ABCs of policy and strategy. They changed the ideal of intervention in Kosovo, which was to save Kosovar Albanian lives, and managed to transform a just cause into an unjust war, and an unjust war into a feeble, protracted, and Pyrrhic peace. After the bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade on 7 May, the U.S. charge d'affaires at the United Nations (U.N.) said:

It's very important, despite this, to keep our eye on the big picture, and the big picture is that Slobadan Milosevic is responsible for what's going on in Yugoslavia now.

This is the same morally bankrupt reasoning that we use to justify continued bombing and sanctions of Iraq, as if immoral actions can be made moral by placing the burden of cessation of

the killing on the leader of the people killed by the bombing and sanctions. Seen through a moral or practical prism, the unfortunate consequences of our performance in the Balkans will last well into the next century.

It would serve our civilian and military leaders well to revisit just war theory, as articulated by St. Thomas Aquinas, among others, apply it to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) intervention in Kosovo, and recalibrate their moral compasses accordingly, as they grapple with modern dilemmas pitting suffering against sovereignty, and contemplate the United States' role in the U.N., and the U.N.'s role in the world. Morality is not only the prerogative

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of statesmen; it is also the province of generals, and lately, far too few of them seem capable or willing to enter the moral arena. We are tasked with fighting a different kind of war and enforcing a different kind of peace these days and we must be prepared morally, mentally, and physically to meet the challenges they present. The most important of these challenges is the moral one.

According to Harvard ethicist Reverend J. Bryan Hehir, the presumption against the use of force in just war theory demands specific ex-

ceptions based on stringent moral criteria, particularly if force is to be used to intervene in a conflict within a sovereign nation. The moral criteria are considered in response to three basic questions. The first two questions relate to *ius ad bellum*, justice of the war; the third question to *ius in bello*, justice in the war.

The first question is why, or for what purpose, can force be used? The answer is to defend human life and human rights or to preserve political order. Serbian “ethnic cleansing,” intent on destroying the Albanian majority, which could only be called genocide as defined by the 1951 U.N. Convention, was justification enough for NATO's use of force. Ser-

bian and Russian chicken and egg arguments about whether Serbs or NATO caused the suffering are specious. When Milosevic sought to preserve Yugoslav sovereignty and po-

litical order, first through ultranationalist rhetoric and rabble-rousing, and ultimately through the expulsion and murder of Kosovar Albanians, he completely forfeited the precarious justice of his cause. NATO's cause was just, and everyone, including Mirjana Markovic knew it; however, when we pose the second and third questions, we find that a just cause, while necessary, can be insufficient to guarantee the justice of the use of force.

The second question is when, and under what conditions, can force be used? The answer is when the action is char-

acterized by the following: right intention, proper authority, last resort, moral probability of success, and proportionality. In the case of Kosovo, preventing genocide was a right intention, and far more credible justification than say, saving NATO. NATO could have been called a proper authority under Chapter VIII of the U.N. Charter, but was less legitimate acting on its own, outside the Charter. Assuming that they would not be successful in obtaining a Security Council resolution approving the use of force, the United States and NATO chose not to pursue it. That choice eroded the moral criterion of last resort; in lieu of a resolution, the United States and NATO satisfied themselves with the coerced cooperation of the Kosovar Albanians at Rambouillet and the preordained failure of Richard Holbrooke in Belgrade.

Up until the first bombs were dropped on 24 March, U.S. and NATO policy and diplomacy seemed designed to lead to a war rather than avoid one; yet once NATO aggression was underway, President Clinton, himself, in announcing the start of airstrikes that he said were designed to prevent a wider war, stated emphatically, "I don't intend to put our troops in Kosovo to fight a war." So much for Sun Tzu and surprise. The means chosen to wage the war, that is, by airpower alone, and broadcasting this message to the enemy reduced the probability of success. Recalling the haunting words of a soldier in Vietnam, "We had to destroy the village in order to save it," NATO, in the face of Milosevic's intransigence, destroyed the Former Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY) from the air, but whether it saved Kosovo remains to be seen. NATO's use of force, by limiting itself to airpower alone, produced evils and disorders greater than the evil it intended, but failed, to eliminate. While a ground war may have caused more "collateral damage" initially, combined with airpower, it would have been a more credible deterrent. Then, had that deterrent failed, what the Department of Defense calls "Full Spectrum Dominance" could have been applied to achieve our objectives. But the United States was worried about casualties

and American public support, so we went with air alone. Milosevic was right when he told a reporter on 29 April that NATO miscalculated. "You are not willing to sacrifice lives to achieve our surrender. But we are willing to die to defend our rights as a sovereign nation." The United States and NATO were more willing to kill than to die for their cause, and Milosevic called our bluffs. Unfortunately for him, he was wrong about his own peoples' willingness to die to defend their rights as a sovereign nation.

The third question is how, or by what means, can force be used? The answer is that force can be used by means proportional to the threat that take into account noncombatant immunity. The nature and timing of the application of means matters. Kosovo presented the United States and NATO with a curious paradox arising from the choice to use airpower alone that became escalatory, among other reasons, to prove their commitment; when in fact, as retired Marine Lt-Gen Bernard E. Trainor has pointed out, the litmus test of that commitment would have been the fielding of ground troops. United States' willingness to kill but not to die in the Balkans was at least partly attributable to the United States equating our peripheral or vital interests to NATO's survival interests—NATO

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should have been first to offer ground troops to fight in Kosovo. This willingness-to-kill-but-not-to-die disconnect causes the United States to resort to coercive diplomacy without a viable deterrent and, when that fails, to turn to military force where it is compelled to use its technological power to advantage to defeat the enemy without risking casualties. But American and Allied unwillingness to risk casualties increases the courage and resolve of the enemy, which, in Kosovo, caused the United States to escalate the only means in

its kit—airstrikes. Former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger said, "I've never seen a period in which obligations were defined so readily and spread around so recklessly."

In Kosovo, our resolve was greater than the resources we were willing to commit to the action; means were unequal to undefined ends. Immorality resided in the mismatch. Unsubstantiated claims by the FRY indicated that NATO airstrikes killed thousands of noncombatants and wounded thousands more. Whether one believes the statistics is moot. The train, the convoy, the bus, the hospital, the embassy, the houses, the human shields—the catastrophic consequences of our bombing—flashed across television screens around the world. The American people and Congress decided not to support the President's air war and not to use "any means necessary to stop Milosevic because, in simple terms, they did not believe that two wrongs made a right, and they saw no evidence that bombing was bringing an end to the evil; in fact, many believed that the bombing added its own evil. The Germans had second thoughts about the bombing as the coalition began to unravel, dismayed like Mary Robinson, High Commissioner for Human Rights, that "warmaking [had] become the tool of peacemaking." Of course, it has always been that way, but the fact remains that bad war makes

bad peace. After the war, the Albanians and Serbs continued to play musical murder under the peacekeeping forces' noses, but this time it was the Albanians' turn to kill.

Clausewitz warned that no one in his right senses ought to start a war without being clear in his mind what he intends to achieve by that war and how he intends to fight it—don't take the first step without considering the last. What President Clinton and company didn't get, and still don't get, is the imperative connection between ends and means. If the end of U.S. policy was to save the Kosovar Albanians, and airpower alone was not achieving that end, then something had to give; add ground troops, or adjust the ends. Clinton's answer was to keep on bombing. The United States and

NATO, having had no clear vision of an end state, and suffering self-inflicted subtraction of their means, took the first step, bombing, without considering the next, or the last. We bombed until such time as we could declare victory, one that can only be described, and projected, in retrospect as Pyrrhic. Rather than strengthen our negotiating position, bombing weakened it, and angered and alienated China and Russia, whose veto power in the U.N. Security Council threatened a peaceful resolution favorable to the United States and NATO, and whose relationships with the United States are relatively more important to U.S. foreign policy than NATO.

The United States and NATO had a policy-strategy mismatch that brought us to a military and moral culminating point—a point where the air war had failed to defeat Milosevic and its escalation or initiation of a ground war caused us to lose our moral superiority regardless of the final outcome, which remains to be played out. Our situation was reminiscent of the “peace with honor” dilemma the United States found itself in more than 25 years ago, and ironically, Clinton’s instrument of choice in the Balkans was the same as Nixon’s was in Vietnam—bombing. Jesse Jackson, Kofi Annan,

and the Pope, among others, were all right. From an admittedly ideal moral point of view, the United States and NATO should have stopped the bombing and gotten back to doing what we unfortunately do worst—diplomacy.

The more important moral point is that the United States had the opportunity to take the moral high ground and reestablish order from

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the beginning by exercising preventive diplomacy in the U.N. Security Council before the fact. But this would have required listening instead of talking, cooperation instead of coercion, sharing power rather than abusing it. Ironically, in the aftermath of the Kosovo war, the United States faces reengagement with the Russians, the Chinese, and the U.N. from a morally disadvantageous position. The State Department has no clue how to corral Albanians whose goal is a greater Albania, or how to muzzle Kofi Annan who is intent on defenestrating the definition of sovereignty. They have no idea how the United States should look after our national interests in the U.N.

Who cares how many tanks our air-

planes did or did not kill? We should have worked harder and longer to obtain consensus in the U.N. We should have used ground forces and combined arms as part of a joint combined task force to defeat the FRY sooner. I would even go so far as to say that assassinating Milosevic would have been a more moral means than bombing his people. Once we failed to do those

things, whether we like it or not, our lack of moral authority diminished our military might, as our highest civilian and military leaders continued to bomb even as they passed through the moral

culminating point where small snapshots like Korisa turned into a big picture where our killing looked no better than Milosevic’s murder.

We need to get the big picture. Killing is a *last* resort. The United States needs the U.N. as much as the U.N. needs the United States. If we are not willing to die for a cause, we should not be too willing or anxious to kill for it. Means matter as much as ends. Doing right is as important as being right.

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