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Kosovo: Redefining Victory in an Era of Limited War

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It was a splendid little war, begun with the highest motives, carried on with magnificent intelligence, and favored by that fortune which loves the brave.

Secretary of State John Hay
on the Spanish-American War of 1898¹

NATO's war against Serbia, officially dubbed Operation Allied Force, resulted in a clear and compelling victory. Serbian President Milosevic publicly conceded defeat and agreed to NATO demands for withdrawal of Serb forces from Kosovo, return of the refugees, and insertion of a NATO-led international peacekeeping force. Moreover, during the 78-day operation, substantial damage was inflicted on Serb military capability, industry, and infrastructure, with some casualty estimates exceeding 5,000 Serb soldiers, while NATO maintained an astonishing record of zero combat casualties. In this first true combat engagement of NATO's existence, the Alliance displayed an extraordinary degree of political unity, coalition interoperability, and overall military effectiveness.

Yet, despite this impressive performance, the war has sparked a firestorm of controversy among American national security strategists and has been the subject of widespread criticism from across the political spectrum. The operation has been characterized variously as a fiasco,² a perfect failure,³ and a miscalculation that ranks with the Bay of Pigs and Vietnam.⁴ Even the few examples of more charitable commentary have levied severe judgments on the war's "dark victory and ambiguous results"⁵ and its "noble effort left more than half undone."⁶ In stark contrast to the exuberant reaction of Secretary Hay and most other Americans to the Spanish-American war a century prior, Kosovo has engendered an almost consensus response of consternation if not outright condemnation.

The apparent disconnect between the "objective facts" of the war's outcome and the critical assessment of American analysts is due in large part to the complexity and unprecedented nature of this operation. As an offensive action undertaken by a defensive alliance against a sovereign entity over its treatment of an indigenous minority, the war has taken both NATO and the United States into previously uncharted –and still stormy – waters. In addition, much of the controversy has been driven by concern about the suffering of the ethnic Albanians under the

¹ Joffe, Joseph, "Three Unwritten Rules of the Serbian War," New York Times, p. 15, July 25, 1999.

² Harries, Owen, "Three Rules for a Superpower to Live By," New York Times, p. 15, Aug 23, 1999.

³ Mandelbaum, Michael, "A Perfect Failure," Foreign Affairs, p.2-8, New York, Sept/Oct 1999.

⁴ Hirsh, Michael, "At War With Ourselves," Harpers, p.60-69, New York, July 1999.

⁵ Evans, Michael, "Dark Victory," U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings, p.33-37, Sept 1999.

accelerated Serb program of ethnic cleansing following the onset of NATO bombing, as well as by the fear that the U.S. has gotten itself further entangled in the Balkan quagmire, a region of increasingly debatable strategic value. And, as with all post-conflict assessments, there are a number of military analysts who have justifiably found fault with elements of the operation's planning and execution.

However, the judgment that the war itself was a failure, that its results represent an inadequate and unacceptable outcome, hinges on yet another factor: the deep-seated discomfort of many Americans today with the type of endeavor represented by Kosovo -- a limited use of military force with explicitly limited political objectives. From this perspective, the war is viewed critically not because it failed to meet NATO's stated objectives, but rather because it failed to achieve the sort of fundamental transformation -- militarily, politically, and socially -- that much of American society now believes is the only justifiable cause for resorting to the use of force. As one observer has noted, "many of the failings of Operation Allied Force can be traced to that fundamental decision to use limited military means to pursue the essentially political objective of breaking the will of one man, Milosevic."⁷ And this, in turn, has driven a tendency to define "victory" only in absolutist terms -- a definition inherently incompatible with the limited use of force and increasingly inconsistent with the circumstances prevailing at the close of the 20th century.

I. The Clash Between Principle and Practice

The political object, as the original motive of the war, should be the standard for determining both the aim of the military force and also the amount of effort to be made. -Clausewitz⁸

Military theorists have long underscored the determinative relationship between political ends and military means. Both the 19th century theorist Clausewitz and his 20th century successor Liddel Hart were committed advocates of the use of limited war or limited force (as opposed to total or Napoleonic-type wars), as often the most effective way to achieve the political goal of an enhanced post-conflict outcome.⁹ Indeed, Clausewitz's seminal contribution to the discipline of military studies centered on his distinction between war in its theoretical or

⁶ Bishop, Phillip, "Bittersweet Victory," New Republic, p.14-16, Washington, July 5, 1999.

⁷ Kitfield, James, "War-making By Committee," National Journal, p.1277-1278, May 8, 1999.

⁸ Howard, Michael and Paret, Peter, eds, Carl von Clausewitz: On War, p.81, Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1976.

⁹ Hart, Liddell, Strategy, p.338, Meridian, New York, 1991.

“ideal” state, in which it is an absolute act of violence, and the reality of war, in which mitigating or limiting factors are always present. It is this distinction (the so-called dual nature of war) which provides the conceptual framework for Clausewitz’s renowned construct of the trinity – violence and passion; uncertainty, chance and probability; and political purpose and effect – with each of the three components exerting important influences on war as it actually occurs. Of the three trinity elements, Clausewitz gave special emphasis to war as an instrument of policy and the frequently limiting impact of policy upon the conduct of war. He insisted, for example, that “the political object is the goal, war is a means of reaching it, and means can never be considered in isolation from the purpose.”¹⁰ Underscoring this key causal relationship, Clausewitz went on to argue that: “since war is not an act of senseless passion but is controlled by its political object, the value of this object must determine the sacrifices to be made for it in magnitude and also in duration. Once the expenditure of efforts exceeds the value of the political object, the object must be renounced and peace must follow.”¹¹

These ideas were subsequently echoed in the more modern writings of American analysts Robert Osgood and Henry Kissinger, who sought in the early 1960’s to argue that, despite the existence of nuclear weapons, limited use of conventional forces could still serve as an effective instrument of policy. As Osgood noted: “the decisive limitation upon war is the limitation of the objectives of war” and “...in the use of armed force as an instrument of national policy, no greater force should be employed than is necessary to achieve the objectives to which it is directed.”¹²

Theory notwithstanding, there is little in contemporary American sentiment toward war that is consonant with the framework of limited war. On the contrary, the experiences of the Civil War as well as two World Wars left a deeply ingrained belief among most Americans that the unconditional surrender and complete victory of total war are inherently preferable, if not the natural course of events.¹³ With a tendency to demonize the enemy and to view war more a morality play than as an extension of policy, this characteristically “American approach” to war is driven by a sense of national exceptionalism and the belief that “we can remake the world anew.” Driven more by the “violence and passion” component of Clausewitz’s trinity (rather

¹⁰ Howard and Paret, p.87.

¹¹ Ibid, p.92.

¹² Weigley, Russell, The American Way of War, p. 412, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1973.

¹³ Ibid, p.476.

than rational policy), the essence of this approach was distilled for many in MacArthur's now famous quip that there is no substitute for victory.

The perceived failures of limited force in both Korea and Vietnam strongly reinforced this inclination and drove a widespread conviction that political constraints had made military victory unachievable. For much of the professional military establishment as well as the American electorate, the lesson of these limited conflicts was categorical: "It is better to stay clear unless you can get in fast, with maximum force in defense of vital interests, and get the nasty business over with before body bags erode public support and troop morale."¹⁴

II. Struggling with Post-Cold War Realities

As soon as they tell me it's limited, it means they do not care whether you achieve a result or not. As soon as they tell me it's 'surgical,' I head for the bunker. -Colin Powell¹⁵

What's the point of having this superb military you're always talking about if we can't use it? -Madeleine Albright.¹⁶

For most of the post-Vietnam generation, the inherent fallacy of limited force was epitomized by the 1983 terrorist bombing of the Marine barracks in Lebanon. With only the opaque mission of "demonstrating a presence," the Marines had been placed, many argued, in an untenable and ultimately indefensible position – an error for which 241 soldiers paid with their lives. The response to this debacle was a ground swell of opposition to the use of the military for anything short of vital interests – an approach that shaped what came to be known as the Powell Doctrine. Actually first articulated by Defense Secretary Weinberger¹⁷ and subsequently profiled by General Powell, this "doctrine" argues that the U.S. military should only be used as a last resort in defense of vital interests, and then only with overwhelming force to ensure the fulfillment of precisely defined objectives. An intentional effort to set the deployment benchmark very high, the Powell Doctrine quickly found widespread support within the professional military and, following its seeming vindication in the success of the Gulf War, among the American population.

However, the changed circumstances following the end of the Cold War led many, particularly (though not exclusively) within the Clinton Administration, to challenge this

¹⁴ Warren, James, "Small Wars and Military Culture," *Society*, p. 6-13, New Brunswick, Sep/Oct 1999.

¹⁵ Powell, Colin, *My American Journey*, p.544, Ballentine, New York, 1995.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, p.561.

¹⁷ Weinberger, Casper, *Fighting for Peace*, p. 433-445, Warner Books, New York, 1990.

approach. It has been argued, for example, that the eruption of long-suppressed ethnic tensions and nationalist ambitions have created a number of regional conflicts in which limited use of force is both necessary and appropriate.¹⁸ Moreover, with the demise of the Soviet Union, there is no longer a risk of escalation to superpower conflict, long a traditional restraint on U.S. involvement. Finally, as the sole remaining superpower, the U.S. has, in the eyes of many, a special responsibility – a sentiment conveyed in Secretary Albright’s declaration of the United States as the “indispensable nation.” While this more activist approach to limited force was applied with varying degrees of success in Somalia, Haiti, Rwanda, and Bosnia, it became increasingly clear that the true test was to be found in the ethnic tinderbox smoldering in the remote Serbian province of Kosovo.

III. *Defining Limits in Kosovo*

The first, the supreme, the most far-reaching act of judgment that the statesman and commander have to make is to establish...the kind of war on which they are embarking; neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into, something that is alien to its nature. -Clausewitz¹⁹

In the lead-up to Operation Allied Force, the Clinton Administration identified three primary political objectives for the military action against Serbia: first, to stop ethnic cleansing of Kosovar Albanians and to impair Serb ability to conduct such oppression in the future; second, to prevent the spread of tension and destabilization throughout the region, particularly to NATO allies Greece and Turkey; and finally, to maintain the credibility of the NATO Alliance as it grappled with Europe’s most serious regional conflict since the collapse of the Warsaw Pact.²⁰ At no point did the Administration include in its war aims the complete destruction of the Serb armed forces, the total acquiescence of the Serbian people, or a wholesale change in Belgrade’s political regime. On the contrary, in an obvious effort to counter such absolutist notions, National Security Advisor Berger specifically stated that “there will be no Douglas MacArthur taking charge in Belgrade at the end of the fighting.”²¹

In order to achieve their explicitly delineated objectives, NATO allies took the decision to proceed with a campaign limited to aerial bombardment. Alliance strategy was based on

¹⁸ Callahan, David, “The Lesson of Kosovo,” Washington Monthly, p. 34-37, Washington, July/Aug 1999.

¹⁹ Howard and Paret, p.88.

²⁰ See for example: Congressional Testimony by Under Secretary of Defense Slocombe and Under Secretary of State Pickering, February 10, 1999; Presidential Address to the Nation, March 24, 1999; and Remarks by the President at the U.S. Air Force Academy, June 2, 1999.

strong historical precedent: in two previous cases -- in 1995 prior to the Dayton talks and again in 1998 – Milosevic had quickly relented when faced with a credible threat of NATO bombing. There was every reason, or so it seemed, to expect that he would again follow a similar course.

But this time the stakes had shifted. Though NATO continued to perceive the conflict in limited terms, Milosevic was facing a different calculation. In contrast to 1995, when his Bosnian Serb clients had already achieved many of their objectives on the ground, or similarly in 1998, when acceptance of civilian observers in Kosovo presented little impediment to continuation of Serb oppression, the circumstances of 1999 appeared far more threatening from the Serb perspective. The terms presented at the Rambouillet talks in France – the presence of NATO troops on Serbian territory and the likely autonomy if not outright independence of the Kosovo province – cut to the core of Serbian sovereignty (as well as national mythology) and, by extension, carried the potential to topple the Milosevic regime. So what appeared to NATO as the third in a continuing series of limited face-offs, was now almost certainly viewed in Belgrade as a struggle for existence. And it is within this asymmetry or “interest imbalance,” in which one side is pursuing limited ends with limited means, while the other side is fighting a conflict of much larger dimensions for which it is prepared to pay a much higher price, that NATO struggled for much of the war.

Exacerbating this imbalance were two other elements central to the employment of limited force in today’s environment: the restraint on costs and the maintenance of coalition unity.

On the issue of costs, it has become a truism that Western publics, and particularly the American electorate, are unwilling to tolerate casualties. As polling data has repeatedly confirmed, there is a direct and causal relationship between the value of the interests at stake and the raising or lowering of this tolerance threshold. Which, in turn, means that in limited engagements there is not only an expectation of limited cost, but also a domestic imperative. An obvious guide to our own policy, as we saw in the decision to keep NATO pilots above 15,000 feet and thus out of range of Serb anti-aircraft fire, this imperative is also a major factor in the calculation of our opponents. As Mohammed Aided stated so prophetically in 1993, “we have studied Vietnam and Lebanon and know how to get rid of Americans, by killing them so that

²¹ Hoagland, Jim, “The Trouble with Playing Global Cop,” Washington Post, p. A39, Sept. 2, 1999.

public opinion will put an end to things.”²² An unnerving echo of this statement came in the Serb assertion in early 1999 that America’s “magic number” was 18 -- that Somalia had “proven” that even 18 casualties would force the U.S. to back out of a conflict.²³ This was clearly another key factor in Milosevic’s decision to withstand the bombing, as he could reasonably expect the “inevitable” allied casualties to weaken U.S. and NATO resolve.

A second factor that proved decisive in Kosovo was U.S. determination to proceed only in the context of multilateral action with NATO allies. Driven by the need for both political viability and practical burdensharing, the preference for multilateral action is likely to characterize most U.S. limited engagements for years to come. Despite its many benefits, multilateral action also entails the substantially increased complexities of coalition warfare and decisionmaking by committee. As Clausewitz noted: “...allies do not cooperate at the mere desire of those who are actively engaged in fighting.”²⁴ In Kosovo, this resulted in what proved to be the single most controversial element of the war – the President’s disavowal of ground troops on the first day of the operation. Though an accurate reflection of NATO’s intentions (as some allies had made a “no-ground-troops” pledge the price of their support for the air campaign), the elimination of ambiguity on this crucial point of strategy gave enormous advantage to Milosevic. Tactically, it obviated the need for concentration of Serb forces to repel a possible ground assault, allowing them to remain dispersed and thus less vulnerable to aerial attack. But even more important from a strategic perspective, it undoubtedly encouraged Milosevic to believe that he could simply hunker down and wait out the bombing, confident in the assessment (shared by most military experts) that air power alone has never proven decisive, and that sooner or later the thin veneer of alliance unity would shatter under the strain.

IV. Search for the Center of Gravity

I never believed the Third Army was a center of gravity. Body bags coming home from Kosovo didn't bother Milosevic or the rest of the Serb leadership elite. Only when we turned out the lights in Belgrade did we get their attention.
-Michael Short²⁵

As the engagement expanded from what was intended to be a brief exercise in coercive

²² Blechman, Barry and Wittes, Tamara, “Defining Moment: the Threat and Use of Force in American Foreign Policy,” Political Science Quarterly, p.1-30, New York, Spring 1999.

²³ Evans, p.35.

²⁴ Howard and Paret, p.79.

²⁵ Priest, Dana, “The Commanders’ War, Part III,” Washington Post, p.1, September 21, 1999.

diplomacy into a widening war of attrition, it became increasingly clear that NATO had not identified the proper “center of gravity,” i.e., what Clausewitz characterized as the “hub of all power and movement” of the enemy which, when attacked, will allow imposition of outside will and coercion of desired behaviors. Repeated assaults on Serbian Third Army elements in Kosovo were having little evident impact on the Milosevic regime safely ensconced in Belgrade. And, perhaps most difficult in terms of human suffering and public opinion, the acceleration of ethnic cleansing after the onset of bombing made even the most sophisticated precision guided munitions appear absurdly ineffective against the sort of Medieval butchery carried out by masked men moving from house to house.

But the decision to move from the limited “Phase I” targets within Kosovo to the more expansive “Phase III” target base in Serbia proper appeared to many of the Allied political leaders to carry the risk of expanding the conflict beyond its original limited scope. And despite continued vocal British pressure for a ground option, there were few other allies prepared to even discuss the possibility. The result was a slow and seemingly incoherent escalation that raised for many the specter of Vietnam. As Wes Clark insisted: “I didn’t want another Rolling Thunder, pecking away indefinitely.”²⁶

One of the perennial dilemmas of limited conflict is discerning the “right” center of gravity – that pressure point which, when effectively impacted, will unhinge the enemy’s will -- without taking the conflict beyond its intended parameters. And because the center of gravity is a shifting phenomenon, different for each conflict and at different times within the same conflict, it is dangerous to rely on generic or formulaic approaches. In Kosovo, for example, many of the air commanders argued that there was only one “right” approach – early, massive attacks on Belgrade and Serb industry that would maximize the shock value for the Serb population and intensify pressure on the Serb leadership. Convinced that gradual escalation of pain only serves to raise the pain threshold, most U.S. military leaders argued for a shift to Phase III targets as soon as it became clear that Milosevic was not deterred by either casualties or material losses in Kosovo. However, given the apprehension of allied political leaders that overly aggressive bombing could spin the conflict out of control (a sentiment reinforced by the accidental bombing of the Chinese Embassy and a refugee convoy), much of the war was spent in a search for -- and debate over -- the “proper” center of gravity.

²⁶ Priest, p.1.

What ultimately drove Milosevic to concede defeat remains a matter of intense debate. Possibilities include the cumulative effects of the bombing, particularly in combination with pressure on the ground from the indigenous Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA); the decision to take out the electrical power grid serving Belgrade and most of Serbia, which truly “brought the war” to the Serbian people; the perception that NATO was secretly planning for a ground assault (the now infamous B-Minus plan); and the withdrawal of Russian political support. In truth, it is probably all of the above, but at this point only Milosevic knows for certain.

IV. Redefining Victory

Wisdom comes by suffering slowly, drop by drop. –Aeschylus²⁷

Sometimes the very best that a statesman can achieve is to avoid the worst. –Henry Kissinger²⁸

If Kosovo is indicative of the kinds of limited engagements the United States is likely to encounter in the future, then the lessons to be drawn from this conflict are as crucial as they are complex. As stated at the outset, our victory in Kosovo was clear in that we achieved our stated objectives. But the results were clouded for many Americans because they lack a clean and definitive reversal of the status quo ante. Milosevic, now an indicted war criminal, remains in power. The ethnic Albanian refugees have been allowed to reclaim their homes in Kosovo, but they return to a province that remains part of and dependent upon the oppressive regime that forced them to leave in the first place. And, while NATO’s effective performance in this first real combat test brought the conflict to a close in a relatively brief period of 78 days, the 50,000 troops (including 7,000 Americans) that make up the peacekeeping force are likely to remain on the ground for several years at least.

What the experience of Kosovo teaches, above all, is that limited conflict in the post-Cold War era is likely to be a complicated and often convoluted affair that defies quick fixes and easy solutions. Sustaining sufficient public support for this sort of endeavor will not be easy, as impatience, intolerance of costs, and a tendency to withdraw into domestic concerns will continue to dominate majority opinion. Moreover, the potential for asymmetry of interests (with the U.S. pursuing limited aims while other conflict participants perceive far greater interests to be

²⁷ Christiansen, Drew, “What We Must Learn from Kosovo: Military Intervention and Humanitarian Aid,” America, p.7-12, New York, Aug 28-Sept 4, 1999.

²⁸ Kissinger, Henry, White House Years, p. 913, Little, Brown, and Co. Boston, 1979.

at stake) is likely to increase, along with the attendant potential for miscalculation and misstep. As a result, despite our current predominance as the world's sole superpower, the U.S. could easily find itself over-extended in far-flung regions, hamstrung by the internal dynamics of coalition operations, and facing outcomes that are increasingly difficult to place within traditional categories of "success."

Though obviously daunting, these inherent potential problems should not be used as a justification for wholesale inaction. On the contrary, there will inevitably be cases in which the circumstances compel U.S. involvement. Kosovo was arguably such a case. With a looming humanitarian disaster and likely political eruption in an area of historic strategic value to both the U.S. and our allies, Kosovo was a situation in which inaction ultimately could have proven more costly. While the experiences of Kosovo have usefully underscored the need for caution and sobriety, they have also demonstrated that important, albeit limited, objectives can be advanced through the limited use of force. Though far from categorical, this central "lesson" of Kosovo represents a step away the absolutist criteria of the Powell Doctrine and a shift back toward the Clausewitzian notion of limited force as a legitimate instrument of policy. For that shift to continue and ultimately prove effective, however, we must also come to appreciate that an outcome less than "perfect" or total is still worth pursuing.