
WHY MILOSEVIC GAVE UP WHEN HE DID

As might have been predicted, disagreements arose after the cease-fire went into effect over which of the air war's target priorities (fielded forces or infrastructure assets) was more crucial to producing the outcome. Contention also arose over the more basic question of the extent to which the air effort as a whole had been the cause of Milosevic's capitulation. On the one hand, there was the view of those air power proponents who were wont to conclude up front that "for the first time in history, the application of air power alone forced the wholesale withdrawal of a military force from a disputed piece of real estate."¹ On the other hand, there was the more skeptical view offered by the commander of the international peacekeeping forces in Kosovo, British Army Lieutenant General Sir Michael Jackson, who suggested that "the event of June 3 [when the Russians backed the West's position and urged Milosevic to surrender] was the single event that appeared to me to have the greatest significance in ending the war." Asked about the effects of the air attacks, Jackson, an avowed critic of air power, replied tartly: "I wasn't responsible for the air campaign; you're asking the wrong person."²

¹John A. Tirpak, "Lessons Learned and Re-Learned," *Air Force Magazine*, August 1999, p. 23.

²Andrew Gilligan, "Russia, Not Bombs, Brought End to War in Kosovo, Says Jackson," *London Sunday Telegraph*, August 1, 1999. To his credit, Jackson did later testify to the Commons Defense Committee of Britain's parliament that "the effect of the strategic bombing, I suspect, was much weightier than the damage being done to the [Serb] army in Kosovo." "General Admits NATO Exaggerated Bombing Success," *London Times*, May 11, 2000.

We may never know for sure what mix of pressures and inducements ultimately led Milosevic to admit defeat, at least until key Serb archival materials become available or those closest to Milosevic during the air war become disposed to offer first-hand testimony. Asked by a reporter why Milosevic folded if the bombing had not defeated him militarily, Clark, who knew the Serb dictator well from previous negotiating encounters, replied: "You'll have to ask Milosevic, and he'll never tell you."³ Yet why Milosevic gave in and why he did so when he did are by far the most important questions about the air war experience, since the answers, insofar as they are knowable, will help to lay bare the coercive dynamic that ultimately swung the outcome of Allied Force. It need hardly be said that such insight can be of tremendous value in informing any strategy ultimately chosen by the United States and its allies for future interventions of that sort. Accordingly, it behooves analysts to make every effort to delve further into this innermost mystery of the air war, since even approximate answers, if buttressed by valid evidence, are almost certain to be more useful to senior policymakers than most "lessons" of a more technical nature regarding how specific systems worked and how various procedural aspects of the operation could have been handled better, important as the latter questions are.

In the search to understand what ultimately occasioned NATO's success, one can, of course, insist that air power alone was the cause of Milosevic's capitulation in the tautological sense that Allied Force was an air-only operation and that in its absence, there would have been no reason to believe that he would have acceded to NATO's demands.⁴ Yet as crucial as the 78-day bombing effort was in bringing Milosevic to heel, there is ample reason to be wary of any intimation that NATO's use of air power produced that ending without any significant contribution by other factors. On the contrary, numerous considerations in addition to the direct effects of the bombing in all likelihood interacted to produce the Serb dictator's eventual decision to cave in. As Ivo Daalder and Michael O'Hanlon have remarked, in a balanced reflection on this point, "air power

³Michael Ignatieff, "The Virtual Commander: How NATO Invented a New Kind of War," *The New Yorker*, August 2, 1999, p. 31.

⁴See, for example, Rebecca Grant, "Air Power Made It Work," *Air Force Magazine*, November 1999, pp. 30–37.

might best be thought of as the force driving Milosevic into a dead-end corner and threatening to crush him against the far wall. But had NATO not remained unified, Russia not joined hands with NATO in the diplomatic endgame, and the alliance not begun to develop a credible threat of a ground invasion, Milosevic might have found doors through which to escape from the corridor despite the aerial punishment.”⁵

CONSIDERATIONS IN ADDITION TO THE BOMBING

Beyond the obvious damage that was being caused by NATO’s air attacks and the equally obvious fact that NATO could have continued bombing indefinitely and with virtual impunity, another likely factor behind Milosevic’s capitulation was the fact that the sheer depravity of Serbia’s conduct in Kosovo had stripped it of any remaining vestige of international support—including, in the end, from its principal backers in Moscow. Although Milosevic’s loss of Russian support may not have been the determining factor behind his capitulation, it was, without question, a contributing factor. A high-level official in the Clinton administration who was directly involved in setting policies for Operation Allied Force later commented that with respect to the numerous ongoing diplomatic efforts to backstop the coercive bombing, Russia was “a key arrow in the quiver.”⁶ That became most clearly apparent when Russian President Boris Yeltsin called Clinton on April 25, the last the day of the NATO summit, and, in an unprecedentedly long 75-minute conversation, expressed his concerns over the escalating air war and offered to send former Russian Prime Minister Chernomyrdin as his personal envoy to help find a negotiated solution. Once Milosevic came face to face with the realization that Russia had joined the West in pressing for a settlement of

⁵Ivo H. Daalder and Michael E. O’Hanlon, *Winning Ugly: NATO’s War to Save Kosovo*, Washington, D.C., The Brookings Institution, 2000, p. 184.

⁶This official, in an interview with RAND staff members in Washington on June 11, 2000, further claimed that the White House was not surprised when Milosevic accepted the deal on June 3, since the administration was confident that once Chernomyrdin had agreed to NATO’s terms, it was merely a matter of time before a successful denouement would be reached, considering that Chernomyrdin knew Milosevic’s bottom line and would not have signed up for any arrangement that he knew Milosevic would not accept. What *was* surprising, the official said, was that Milosevic did not first seek to buy time by proffering more “half-loaf” compromise deals.

the Kosovo standoff, he knew that he had lost any remaining trace of international backing.

On top of that was the sense of walls closing in that Milosevic must have had when he was indicted as a war criminal by a UN tribunal only a week before his loss of Moscow's support. On May 27, that tribunal charged Milosevic and four of his senior aides—including General Dragoljub Ojdanic, the Yugoslav army chief, and Vljako Stojkovic, the interior minister responsible for the MUP—with crimes against humanity for having deported more than 700,000 ethnic Albanians and having allegedly murdered 340 innocents, mostly young men. Even if that indictment did not give Milosevic pause in and of itself, it almost surely closed the door on any remaining chance that Russia might change course and resume its support for him.

Yet a third factor, this one a direct second-order result of the bombing, may have been mounting elite pressure behind the scenes. As the air attacks encroached more on Belgrade proper, Secretary Cohen reported that senior VJ leaders had begun sending their families out of Yugoslavia, following a similar action earlier by members of the Yugoslav political elite and reflecting possible concern among top-echelon commanders that Milosevic had led them down a blind alley in choosing to take on the United States and NATO.⁷ U.S. officials indicated that during the last week of the air war, VJ leaders had swung from supporting Milosevic on Kosovo to openly rebelling and pressuring the Serb dictator to agree to NATO's terms. Cohen's report of increasing demoralization among the VJ's most senior leaders as they helplessly watched the escalating destruction all around them gave rise to hopes within the Clinton administration that Milosevic might be looking for a face-saving way out.⁸ The fact that the bombing effort caused more infrastructure damage during its last week than during its entire first two months was thought by some to have reawakened old tensions between Milosevic and an army leadership that was said to have never fully trusted him.

⁷Daniel Williams and Bradley Graham, "Milosevic Admits to Losses of Personnel," *Washington Post*, May 13, 1999.

⁸Interview with Secretary of Defense William S. Cohen, "Milosevic Is Far Weaker Now," *USA Today*, May 14, 1999.

A related factor may have been mounting heat from Milosevic's cronies among the Yugoslav civilian oligarchy, prompted by the continued bombing of military-related industries, utilities, and other infrastructure targets in and around Belgrade in which they had an economic stake and whose destruction increasingly threatened to bankrupt them.⁹ On that point, administration officials remarked that among other things, the dropping of bridges throughout Serbia by NATO air attacks had hindered the activities of smugglers who represented a key source of income for those cronies. Moreover, CIA and other allied intelligence organizations were said to have been gathering information on the bank accounts and business interests of Milosevic and his closest partners, the latter of whom were starting to pressure him to call it quits.¹⁰

Finally, U.S. psychological operations could have been a contributing factor, although the evidence for that remains both spotty and less than convincing. One report to that effect suggested that Milosevic's wife was becoming "increasingly hysterical" as the bombing intensified and that Milosevic himself was finally pushed over the edge after the United States, via a "friendly intermediary," shipped him a videotape showing what a fuel-air explosive could do to his forces—at roughly the same time as the KLA's counteroffensive in Kosovo forced VJ troops into the open and exposed them to NATO fire.¹¹ Apart from the fact that fuel-air explosives are not currently maintained in the U.S. munitions inventory, this claim presumed that the

⁹Paul Richter, "Officials Say NATO Pounded Milosevic into Submission," *Los Angeles Times*, June 5, 1999. The possible effects of the bombing on what one might call second-tier Serb leaders are especially noteworthy, in that they suggest that the elite substructure of an enemy's hierarchy may make for more lucrative leadership targets than the "big guys." Unlike the topmost political leaders, these second-tier individuals have "retirement plans," in that they have options to recoup their interests under a new regime. They thus may be more malleable than their bosses, even as they are often critical to their bosses' survival. I am grateful to Colonel Robert Owen, USAF, for having suggested this intriguing idea to me.

¹⁰Doyle McManus, "Clinton's Massive Ground Invasion That Almost Was," *Los Angeles Times*, June 9, 2000. A persistent concern that tended to inhibit a truly aggressive use of such information entailed the liability implications of information attacks against foreign bank accounts, as well as official worries about the Pandora's box that might be opened if the United States began playing that game, thus rendering its own economy susceptible to similar measures in return.

¹¹Tom Walker, "Bomb Video Took Fight out of Milosevic," *London Sunday Times*, January 30, 2000.

VJ's troops were a particularly valued asset for Milosevic, which, by all indications, they were not.

THE PROSPECT OF A GROUND INVASION

Among the many considerations that converged to produce Milosevic's eventual capitulation, the most discomfiting to him over the long run—apart from the bombing itself—may well have been what he perceived, rightly or wrongly, to be the prospect of an eventual NATO ground intervention. Whatever NATO's declared stance on the ground-war issue may have been, its actions as the air war progressed spoke louder than its words.

To begin with, Operation Allied Harbor, set in motion as early as April 8, aimed at putting some 8,000 NATO ground troops into Macedonia to help with refugee aid efforts. More significantly, a 32,000-person NATO Stabilization Force (soon to number 50,000) patrolling Bosnia-Herzegovina, and 7,500 additional NATO troops in Albania deployed to perform humanitarian work there made for an undeniable signal that a NATO ground presence was forming in the theater. That presence included 2,400 combat-ready U.S. Marines aboard three warships in the Adriatic to provide force protection for the Marine F/A-18s that were operating out of the former Warsaw Pact air base at Tazsar. In addition, some 5,000 U.S. Army troops, with a substantial artillery and armor complement, accompanied the 24 AH-64 Apache helicopters that were sent to Albania in late April. There is every reason to believe that this deployment, along with NATO's subsequent decision to enlarge the Kosovo peacekeeping force (KFOR) to as many as 50,000 troops, was assessed by Milosevic as an indication that a NATO ground option was at least being kept open.

Taking advantage of a covert relationship between the CIA and the KLA, NATO also had begun probing the capability and extent of the VJ's ground defenses, an inquiry that most likely did not escape Milosevic's attention. In a related development, NATO engineers on May 31 began widening and reinforcing a key access road from Durrës to Kukes on the Kosovo-Albanian border so that it could support the weight of a main battle tank. Earlier, Clark had authorized the engineers to strengthen the road to handle refugee traffic only, but they made it strong enough to support the Bradley armored

fighting vehicle (AFV). This time, only three days before Milosevic finally called it quits, Washington gave Clark permission to send in another engineering battalion to make the road capable of supporting M1A2 Abrams tanks and artillery.¹²

Beyond that, Milosevic may have gotten wind of a secret NATO plan for a massive ground invasion code-named Plan B-minus, which was slated to be launched the first week of September if approved by NATO's political leaders. In support of this plan, Britain had agreed to contribute the largest single national component up to that time (50,000 troops) to an envisaged 170,000-man contingent; the United States would have contributed at least 100,000 more. Developed by a secret planning team at NATO's military headquarters in Mons, Belgium, Plan B-minus relied heavily on previous plans going back to June 12, 1998, which featured six land-attack options, including a full invasion of Serbia itself (Plan Bravo, with 300,000 NATO troops). The chief of Britain's defense staff, General Sir Charles Guthrie, later confirmed the outlines of this plan.¹³ Milosevic was said by a well-placed NATO source to have been at least broadly informed of NATO thinking with respect to it. Indeed, as the UK Ministry of Defense's director of operations in Allied Force, RAF Air Marshal Sir John Day, later commented, "the decision to increase KFOR was militarily right in itself, but it was also a form of heavy breathing on Milosevic and a subtle way of moving to B-minus while keeping the coalition together. The move also had the effect of shortening our timelines for B-minus. It is true that the forces that were being prepared for KFOR-plus were the core elements of what would then have become B-minus, the full ground invasion."¹⁴

In a sign that such indicators may have begun to affect Milosevic's risk calculus, VJ units were reported in mid-May to be digging in along likely attack routes from Macedonia and Albania and fortifying the border, in a distinct shift in effort from expelling ethnic Albanians to preparing for a possible showdown with NATO on the ground. In

¹²Dana Priest, "A Decisive Battle That Never Was," *Washington Post*, September 19, 1999.

¹³Patrick Wintour and Peter Beaumont, "Revealed: The Secret Plan to Invade Kosovo," *London Sunday Observer*, July 18, 1999.

¹⁴Peter Beaumont and Patrick Wintour, "Leaks in NATO—and Plan Bravo Minus," *London Sunday Observer*, July 18, 1999.

particular, VJ troops were observed laying mines and attempting to block potential ground attack routes from Skopje and Kumanovo in Macedonia, in a pattern of activity suggesting that the allied bombing effort had not yet come close to breaking their cohesion and fighting spirit.¹⁵

Moreover, earlier on the same day that Milosevic eventually capitulated, President Clinton held a widely publicized meeting with his service chiefs for the express purpose of airing options for land force employment in case NATO decided it had no choice but to approve a ground invasion.¹⁶ That was his first meeting with all four chiefs at any time during the course of Operation Allied Force. Immediately after the meeting, which left the issue unresolved, Clinton was said to have been planning to inform the chiefs that he was now ready to sign on to a ground invasion should developments leave no alternative.¹⁷ In what he later described as “a pretty depressing memo” to the president, Berger wrote that “we basically should go ahead with what Clark had proposed if the [Ahtisaari-Chernomyrdin] mission failed.” In that memo, Berger listed three options. The first, to arm the Kosovars, would create a multitude of undesirable downstream consequences that would persist for years and thus was ruled out as a nonstarter. The second, to wait until spring, was equally unacceptable because it would oblige NATO to supply and protect the Kosovar refugees in Albania throughout the winter. That left only the third option, a massive ground invasion by 175,000 NATO troops, some 100,000 of whom would be American.¹⁸ Taken together, these developments made for a compelling pattern of evidence suggesting that both Washington and its chief NATO allies had crossed the Rubicon when it came to facing up to the land-invasion issue, and that they had become determined by the end of May to commit to a

¹⁵Michael R. Gordon, “NATO Says Serbs, Fearing Land War, Dig In on Border,” *New York Times*, May 19, 1999.

¹⁶Jane Perlez, “Clinton and the Joint Chiefs to Discuss Ground Invasion,” *New York Times*, June 2, 1999.

¹⁷For details, see Steven Erlanger, “NATO Was Closer to Ground War in Kosovo Than Is Widely Realized,” *New York Times*, November 7, 1999.

¹⁸McManus, “Clinton’s Massive Ground Invasion That Almost Was.” NATO commanders were asking for three months to assemble the invasion force.

forced entry on the ground if the bombing did not produce an acceptable settlement soon.

Some, however, have made more of this sequence of events than the evidence warrants. In the early wake of the successful conclusion of Operation Allied Force, revisionist claims began emanating from some quarters suggesting that the air effort had been totally ineffective and that, in the end, it had been Milosevic's fear of a NATO ground invasion that induced him to capitulate.¹⁹ Clark himself, in his memoirs, indicated his belief that by mid-May, NATO "had gone about as far as possible with the air strikes" and that in the end, it had been the Apache deployment and the prospect of a NATO ground intervention that, "*in particular*, pushed Milosevic to concede."²⁰ That notwithstanding the all-but-conclusive evidence Clark presented elsewhere throughout his book that NATO's top political leaders were nowhere near having settled on a definitive invasion plan—let alone decided to proceed with such a plan should the bombing prove unavailing.²¹ Even viewed in the most favorable light conceivable, such far-reaching claims on behalf of the implied ground threat defy believability because any NATO land invasion, however possible it may eventually have been, would have taken months, at a minimum, to prepare for and successfully mount.

In contrast, Milosevic was living with the daily reality of an increasingly brutal air war that showed no sign of abating. Although Clark's

¹⁹A recent example of this countercontention dismissed the claims of unspecified "air power enthusiasts" and posited instead that "the decision to commit ground forces [a decision which, in fact, had *not* been made at the time of Milosevic's capitulation] was critical to NATO's success." Brigadier General Huba Wass de Czege, USA (Ret.) and Lieutenant Colonel Antulio J. Echevarria II, USA, "Precision Decisions: To Build a Balanced Force, the QDR Might Consider These Four Propositions," *Armed Forces Journal International*, October 2000, p. 54.

²⁰General Wesley K. Clark, *Waging Modern War: Bosnia, Kosovo, and the Future of Combat*, New York, Public Affairs, 2001, pp. 305, 425, emphasis added.

²¹The most compelling of such evidence cited by Clark was the May 28 statement by Secretary of Defense Cohen, made less than a week before Milosevic capitulated, that "there is no consensus for a ground force. And until there is a consensus, we should not undertake any action for which we could not measure up in the way of performance. . . . And so, there is a very serious question in terms of trying to push for a consensus that you really diffuse or in any way diminish the commitment to the air campaign. The one thing we have to continue is to make sure we have the allies consolidated in strong support of the air campaign. They are. And they are in favor of its intensification. So that's where we intend to put the emphasis." *Ibid*, p. 332.

effort to find and attack dispersed and hidden VJ forces in Kosovo was consuming the preponderance of shooter sorties while accomplishing little by way of tangible results, more and more infrastructure targets were also being approved and struck every day.²² In a revealing admission of what was uppermost among his concerns on the day he elected to settle, Milosevic asked Chernomyrdin directly on June 3 in response to NATO's ultimatum: "Is this what I have to do to get the bombing stopped?" Chernomyrdin replied in the affirmative, with Ahtisaari adding: "This is the best you can get. It's only going to get worse for you." To which Milosevic responded: "Clearly I accept this position."²³

There is no question that by the end of May, NATO had yielded to the inevitable and embraced in principle the need for a ground invasion should the bombing continue to prove indecisive. There also is every reason to believe that awareness of that change in NATO's position on Milosevic's part figured importantly in his eventual decision to capitulate. There is *no* basis, however, for concluding that the mere threat of a land invasion somehow overshadowed the continuing, here-and-now reality of NATO's air attacks as the preeminent consideration accounting for that decision. There also is little benefit to be gained from the misguided efforts by air and land power partisans alike to argue the relative impact of the air attacks and ground threat in simplistic either-or terms. It detracts not in the least from the air war's signal accomplishments to concede that developments on the land-invasion front almost surely were part of the chemistry of Milosevic's concession decision. Although any impending ground intervention was months away at best, there is no question that both the Clinton administration and the principal NATO allies had made up

²²However, by dispersing their assets and selectively emitting with their radars, Serb IADS operators forced NATO aircrews to remain wary to the very end and denied them the freedom to operate at will in hostile airspace. Although the Serbs' repeated attempts to bring down NATO aircraft frequently came in the form of ineffective ballistic launches, the launches were amply disconcerting to allied pilots, who were forced to threat-react—often aggressively—to ensure their own safety. Many guided shots in accordance with IADS doctrine were also fired against attacking allied aircraft, requiring even more aggressive and hair-raising countertactics by the targeted aircraft. A first-hand account of one such episode is reported in Dave Moniz, "Eye-to-Eye with a New Kind of War," *Christian Science Monitor*, March 23, 2000.

²³Quoted in Tyler Marshall and Richard Boudreaux, "Crisis in Yugoslavia: How an Uneasy Alliance Prevailed," *Los Angeles Times*, June 6, 1999.

their minds on the need to do something along those lines should the air war continue to prove unavailing. In light of that, as two RAND colleagues have suggested, “in assessing NATO air attacks on Serbia, analysts should focus not on the role air power played *instead of* a ground invasion . . . but on the role it played in combination with the possibility of one.”²⁴

MILOSEVIC’S PROBABLE DECISION CALCULUS

To better understand the interaction of influences that most likely persuaded Milosevic to concede, it may be instructive to view Allied Force as it unfolded not through our own frame of reference, but rather through Serbian eyes. Those who planned and ran the air operation understandably tended to fixate on such negative aspects as target-list restrictions and what many considered to be excessive fretfulness on the part of the alliance’s political leaders over the possibility of causing collateral damage. For them, the air war’s dominant hallmarks were such sources of daily frustration as repeated delays in the target approval process and the consequent inefficiency of the overall effort. Naturally, in their view, the performance of air power in Operation Allied Force left a great deal to be desired.

Yet to those on the operation’s receiving end far removed from such concerns, it must have seemed, certainly by the end of the second month, as though NATO was prepared to keep escalating and to continue bombing indefinitely. From Milosevic’s viewpoint, new targets were being attacked with mounting regularity after the NATO summit of April 23–25, and ever more infrastructure targets were being hit with seemingly no end in sight. Moreover, one might surmise that even the inadvertent Chinese embassy bombing played an indirect part in inducing Milosevic to capitulate. Whatever U.S. and NATO officials said about that incident for the public record, Milosevic may have thought that the bombing had been intentional and that it presaged both a lifting of NATO’s target limitations and worse damage yet to come. As if to affirm that fear after the fact, USAFE’s commander, General John Jumper, later disclosed that with the increased number of strike aircraft that had become available in the-

²⁴Daniel L. Byman and Matthew C. Waxman, “Kosovo and the Great Air Power Debate,” *International Security*, Spring 2000, p. 15.

ater by late May, the operation's intent was to employ FACs and begin attacking kill boxes all throughout Serbia, not just in Kosovo, and to go at will after tunnels, bridges, storage areas, and other military targets of interest.²⁵

The almost universal belief among air warfare professionals that a more aggressive effort starting on opening night, in consonance with a more doctrinally pristine strategy, would have yielded the same result more quickly may have been correct as far as it went, but that conviction was based solely on faith in the intrinsic power of the air weapon, not on any evidence directly related to the case at hand. The only way a more intensive and resolute air campaign would have caused Milosevic to fold substantially sooner than he did would have been for the air war's effects to persuade him that much earlier that his strategy had no chance of succeeding.

In fact, as RAND colleague Stephen Hosmer has argued, Milosevic's decision to capitulate hinged on developments that necessarily took time to unfold and mature.²⁶ To begin with, the Serb dictator, just like NATO, pursued a concrete, if also flawed, strategy from the very start. He knew that the terms levied by the United States at Rambouillet, if implemented, would have replaced Serb dominance over Kosovo with a NATO military presence that claimed rights of access to all of Yugoslavia. They also would have raised the distinct possibility that Kosovo's future would be decided by a NATO-enforced referendum, an event which could only have resulted in a loss for Serbia.²⁷ Those two threatened outcomes, along with additional downside consequences, would have put at risk not only Serbian control over Kosovo, but also the foundations of Milosevic's personal rule, and hence his political—and perhaps even physical—survival.

²⁵General John Jumper, USAF, "Oral Histories Accomplished in Conjunction with Operation Allied Force/Noble Anvil."

²⁶Stephen T. Hosmer, *The Conflict over Kosovo: Why Milosevic Decided to Settle When He Did*, Santa Monica, California, RAND, MR-1351-AF, 2001.

²⁷The latter of these two concerns was more an issue for Milosevic than the former. Had he been seriously worried about a NATO presence that might actually encroach into Serbia, as opposed to just taking effective control of Kosovo (his real fear), he would have sought to head off that possibility at Rambouillet. He never did. I am grateful to Ivo Daalder of the Brookings Institution for bringing this point to my attention.

In addition, Milosevic probably convinced himself that if he hunkered down and stoically endured the bombing, he could undermine NATO's persistence and cohesion by ensuring the eventual occurrence of noncombatant civilian fatalities and extracting the fullest propaganda value from collateral-damage incidents. Indeed, he most likely balked at Rambouillet in full expectation that he would be bombed by NATO, yet only symbolically and for a token period of time, convinced that NATO would lack the stomach to continue bombing for very long. On this point, Stojan Cerovic, a Serb journalist working in Washington, suggested that Milosevic at first saw no danger to himself from the bombing and operated on the assumption that other nations would become so incensed over NATO's perceived attempts at hegemony that they would rally behind the Serb cause.²⁸ No doubt expecting nothing more than a replay of the ineffectual pinprick attacks that had been carried out by U.S. forces against Iraq since the preceding December, he evidently calculated that he could easily wait out any punitive air strikes that NATO might bring itself to carry out.

Where Milosevic blundered even more grievously than did NATO (in the latter's faulty assumption that just a few days of bombing would suffice) was in unleashing the full brunt of his ethnic cleansing campaign almost immediately after Allied Force began. No doubt he calculated that Operation Horseshoe would quickly empty Kosovo of its ethnic Albanian populace and thus enable him to move directly against the KLA, eliminate it as a continued factor affecting any ultimate political outcome, and, along the way, solve his ethnic problem in Kosovo with a *fait accompli*. Alternatively, or perhaps in addition, he may also have been trying to signal his own determination to NATO, although there is no "smoking-gun" evidence to this effect. After all, the main lesson he likely drew from Deliberate Force in 1995 was that he gave up the fight just a few days too early. Most assessments of Deliberate Force include arguments that NATO was approaching the end of its rope politically and militarily because of a

²⁸Justin Brown, "Why U.S. Bombs Failed to Topple Milosevic," *Christian Science Monitor*, March 24, 2000.

lack of additional approved targets.²⁹ In light of that perception, Milosevic, in addition to working on his Kosovar Albanian problem, may simply have been trying to tell everyone that this time it would not be so easy. Whatever the case, his depredations instead merely galvanized NATO's resolve and ensured that the allies would continue bombing until their objectives were met. By throwing down a gauntlet to NATO and, in effect, challenging it to see who could hold out longer, Milosevic forced NATO to recognize that its own credibility and existence as an alliance were now on the line.³⁰

There is no way of knowing for sure from the evidence currently available why June 3 was the date on which Milosevic finally elected to give in. There is a strong presumptive case to be made, however, that by the end of May, he had come to realize that any remaining countercoercive leverage he had over NATO was almost nonexistent. As Hosmer concluded, once the Serb dictator became convinced that future attacks would be unconstrained, a settlement at the earliest possible moment became not just an option but an imperative. Continued bombing during the negotiations over implementation of the agreement, moreover, closed the door to any possibility of his backsliding. Milosevic further had every reason to assume by that time that any terms of a settlement agreement would never look better, and that the time was propitious for a loss-cutting move while he could retain at least the polite fiction of having extracted concessions from NATO.

As for disincentives against holding out any longer, Milosevic also had every reason to believe that continued resistance on his part would only lead to continued, and quite probably escalated, bombing. Even in the absence of an imminent NATO ground assault, he knew that the air war could have continued for many more weeks, even indefinitely. With the possibility that electrical power and water supplies to Belgrade might be cut off at any time, the approach of

²⁹See, in particular, Colonel Robert Owen, USAF, ed., *Deliberate Force: A Case Study in Effective Air Campaigning*, Maxwell AFB, Alabama, Air University Press, January 2000, pp. 455–522.

³⁰Stephen Hosmer has pointed out that the ethnic cleansing hardened NATO's resolve in another way as well: Only a NATO military presence in Kosovo would have convinced the refugees to go back to their homes, and no outcome short of the latter would have been acceptable to NATO.

winter offered the prospect of making daily life horrendously difficult for Serbia's leaders and rank and file alike. Worse yet, the mere thought of a NATO land invasion occurring at some indeterminate future point had the most ominous implications, in that it could have meant Serbia's loss of Kosovo for good, posing the direst threat to Milosevic's survival. In light of those mutually reinforcing facts, he evidently convinced himself that although his own continued livelihood required his capitulation, he could convert his tactical defeat into a long-term loss for NATO by swallowing his temporary setback in Kosovo while remaining in power to fight another day.

In sum, although it did not achieve a military victory over Belgrade in the classic sense, NATO unquestionably prevailed over Milosevic in a high-stakes contest of wills. Diplomacy and coercive bombing together convinced the Serb dictator that he had failed to split NATO and that Russia would not act to stop the air war. At the same time, they allowed him enough maneuver room to maintain at least a fig leaf of a claim to credibility in the eyes of his compatriots that he had not yielded to NATO on all fundamentals. As Barry Posen concluded, "all of the principal wedges into NATO's cohesion had been tested. Further testing would prove very expensive in terms of damage to Serbia's infrastructure and economy."³¹

In the end, however inefficient the air war may have been because of its need to honor U.S. and NATO domestic political realities, the manner in which it was conducted (avoiding friendly fatalities and minimizing noncombatant enemy casualties) nevertheless effectively countered and ultimately neutralized Milosevic's strategy by keeping NATO's cohesion intact to the very end. In response, the Serb dictator most likely opted to accept NATO's demands simply out of a rational calculation that he had nothing to gain and much to risk by holding out any longer. Indeed, as the endgame neared, one can imagine how he may even have begun to harbor dark visions of being gunned down in the street, in the grim manner of the Ceauces-

³¹Barry R. Posen, "The War for Kosovo: Serbia's Political-Military Strategy," *International Security*, Spring 2000, p. 75. One can, however, question Posen's subsequent suggestion that Milosevic achieved "some political success" by holding out as long as he did, considering that he lost control of Kosovo, suffered heavy damage to his infrastructure and economy, and ultimately was defeated in a fair election, arrested, and jailed for having committed crimes against the state.

cus after their control over Romania collapsed in 1991. Said a source close to the Yugoslav government: "I can't pinpoint an exact moment when Milosevic finally listened, but there was tremendous pressure from all sides; the West, his inner circle, and his wife. It was building up, and eventually he just let go."³²

THE DETERMINING ROLE OF THE AIR WAR

To repeat a point stressed at the beginning of this chapter, it would be reductionist to a fault to conclude that Milosevic was bombed into submission by air attacks to the exclusion of any other contributing factors. However, the bombing did create political conditions in Belgrade that enabled Milosevic to negotiate.³³ Insofar as the bombing may have been insufficient to produce his capitulation in and of itself, it bears underscoring that those conditions were all indirect effects of the air war. Had it not been for Allied Force and its direct effects, the additional stimuli would never have materialized. As General Clark later remarked, "the indispensable condition for all other factors was the success of the air campaign itself."³⁴

From the Yugoslav perspective, there must have been a nagging sense of the inexorability of NATO's eventual victory as the air war neared the end of its second month. The truculent early defiance that was so studiously expressed by Belgrade's citizens before the war began affecting them personally soon turned into sullen resignation under the mounting duress caused by the bombing of infrastructure targets. For a time, the half-hearted bombing during the first month actually seemed to rally public determination to withstand the offensive and to increase public support for the widely unpopular Milosevic. However, the spontaneous street celebrations that erupted immediately *after* the cease-fire suggested that the Yugoslav rank and file had begun to doubt Milosevic's stewardship in having led the country into an unwinnable contest of wills against the world's most powerful alliance. Possibly reflecting mounting

³²"NATO's Game of Chicken," *Newsweek*, July 26, 1999, p. 59.

³³For detailed amplification on this point, see Hosmer, *The Conflict over Kosovo: Why Milosevic Decided to Settle When He Did*.

³⁴Quoted in John T. Correll, "Lessons Drawn and Quartered," *Air Force Magazine*, December 1999, p. 2.

popular weariness of the bombing, Deputy Prime Minister Vuk Draskovic declared as early as April 25 that “Yugoslavia should recognize that it cannot defeat NATO and that it must face the reality of a world standing against Yugoslavia.”³⁵

The precise and measured nature of the attacks that were being conducted against leadership and infrastructure targets in the heart of the Yugoslav capital on a daily basis only became fully apparent to outside observers after they had a chance to inspect the results up close. As one American reporter who visited Belgrade after the war remarked tellingly: “Like ice-pick punctures in the neck, the chilling quality of the strikes was not their size but their placement. We stopped at an intersection in the heart of the city. At each corner of the intersection, but only at each corner, there were ruins. The Serbian government center, the foreign ministry and two defense ministry buildings had been reduced to rubble or were fire-gutted shells. The precision of the destruction suggested a war with an invisible, all-seeing enemy and a city helpless to protect itself.”³⁶

In what may have been read by Milosevic as an ominous indicator that the bombing was coming ever closer to the most senior national leadership, General Ljubisa Velichkovic, the former air force chief of staff, was killed in an air attack on Day 70 while visiting VJ troops in the field. Velichkovic, who had been removed from office by Milosevic the previous year as a part of a purge of the military leadership and been given the honorific title of deputy chief of staff, was identified as the highest-ranking casualty since Operation Allied Force began.³⁷ It is entirely possible that Milosevic had come to fear by that point that a similar fate could befall him at any moment.

Viewed in hindsight, the bombing seems to have had two outcome-determining effects. First, it eventually persuaded Milosevic that

³⁵Quoted in Robert Hewson, “Allied Force, Part II: Overwhelming Air Power,” *World Air Power Journal*, Winter 1999/2000, p. 97. Three days later, Draskovic was fired by Prime Minister Momir Bulatovic for having made that statement.

³⁶Blaine Harden, “The Milosevic Generation,” *New York Times Magazine*, August 29, 1999, p. 34.

³⁷“Sacked Yugoslav Air Chief Killed,” *London Times*, June 2, 1999. See also William Drozdiak and Steven Mufson, “NATO Sending Tough Terms to Belgrade,” *Washington Post*, June 2, 1999.

NATO not only would not relent, but also was determined to prevail and had both the technical and political wherewithal to do so. Second, given the incapacity of the Serb IADS to shoot down significant numbers of allied aircraft, it further convinced him that his own defeat sooner or later was inevitable. Although its resolve was slow in coming, NATO finally showed that it would not be moved by the public outcry over collateral damage and could sustain the bombing indefinitely, at a negligible cost in terms of friendly losses. As with Iraq's forces during Operation Desert Storm, the VJ's leaders, no less than Milosevic, must have found NATO's ability to inflict unrelenting damage on their country with virtual impunity to be profoundly demoralizing. Before June 3, the commander of the VJ's 3rd Army in Kosovo, General Nebojsa Pavkovic, had argued that his forces remained more or less intact and that they could defend Serbia if put to the test. After Ahtisaari and Chernomyrdin delivered NATO's ultimatum on June 2 and a cease-fire was agreed to, however, he reportedly declared to a group of disconcerted VJ reservists that Serbia's leaders had been put on notice by the Russians that if NATO's terms were rejected, "every city in Serbia would be razed to the ground. The bridges in Belgrade would be destroyed. The crops would all be burned. Everyone would die."³⁸

True enough, thanks to the improved flexible targeting procedures (that is, procedures for responding promptly to mobile or pop-up targets that had been detected by allied sensors) that had been implemented by late April (see Chapters Six and Seven) and the clearer weather that had begun to develop the following month, NATO's ability to get at dispersed and hidden enemy forces in Kosovo improved perceptibly during the air war's final week. In all likelihood, however, NATO broke Milosevic's will and that of his political supporters primarily because it had convincingly shown that it could also destroy such key infrastructure targets as hardened bunkers, bridges, electrical power stations, and other targets directly tied to Yugoslav society and the regime's control over it. By all indications, those attacks played the central role in bringing Milosevic to accept NATO's demands and created the political conditions in Serbia that

³⁸Quoted in Chris Hedges, "Angry Serbs Hear a New Explanation: It's All Russia's Fault," *New York Times*, July 16, 1999.

allowed Milosevic to abandon Belgrade's physical presence in Kosovo in exchange for a cessation of the bombing.

As one may recall, manipulation of the Kosovo issue and Serbia's strong emotional attachment to the province had figured prominently in Milosevic's rise to power and in his continued hold on it since 1989. For that reason, acceding to NATO's demands as expressed in the proposed Rambouillet accords would, in all likelihood, have meant political suicide for him. By June 1999, the opposite had become true: Milosevic's continued survival seemed to depend on finding a way to stop the bombing and to extricate himself gracefully from his growing predicament. Although Ahtisaari and Chernomyrdin provided him with the ready pretext that he needed, it was the air war's steadily increasing encroachment on Serbia's core equities that most likely prompted the decisive shift in his political calculus, as perhaps best attested by his own plaintive question to Chernomyrdin on June 2 cited earlier.³⁹ In contrast, by Clark's own admission after the cease-fire, the attempted attacks against dispersed and hidden VJ forces in Kosovo caused the latter little significant pain or inconvenience. That suggests, by elimination, that whatever one may believe was Milosevic's most critical vulnerability, the bombing of Clark's target priorities in the KEZ was *not* what mainly swung his decision to capitulate.⁴⁰

On this still-contentious issue, defense analyst William Arkin, who led a private bomb damage assessment mission for Human Rights Watch for three weeks in August 1999 and who visited more than 250 targeted sites in the process, perhaps offered the most helpful and

³⁹Indeed, from a low of fewer than 100 daily strike sorties flown during the air war's fifth night, the bombing effort intensified steadily and uninterruptedly to almost three times that number by the eve of Milosevic's capitulation on June 3. Briefing by the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, June 10, 1999, cited in Major General Eitan Ben-Eliahu, commander, Israeli Air Force, "Air Power in the 21st Century: The Impact of Precision Weapons," *Military Technology*, April 2000, p. 40.

⁴⁰It bears acknowledging here, however, that only the authoritative report of NATO's intent to proceed with an eventual ground invasion, should the bombing alone fail to dislodge Milosevic, finally convinced Moscow to play its constructive role in June 1999. Russia's deploying of Chernomyrdin helped negotiate an international military presence in Kosovo, thus warding off a NATO-only presence and preserving at least some Russian influence in the Balkans. On this point, see the informed comment offered by former Russian foreign ministry Balkan official Oleg Levitin, "Inside Moscow's Kosovo Muddle," *Survival*, Spring 2000, p. 138.

incontestable perspective when he observed: “It was not *what* we bombed, but *that* we bombed. The coalition didn’t crumble, the Russians didn’t bail Belgrade out, China was unable to affect the war. At some point it was clear to Milosevic that he wasn’t going to be able to wait out the bombing, that NATO wasn’t going to go away, and that progressively Serbia was being destroyed, he chose to get the best negotiated settlement he could. To say it was this or that target that was important to Milosevic is just to engage in mirror-image speculation.”⁴¹

⁴¹William Arkin, “Yugoslavia Trip Report,” September 8, 1999. In a similar vein, Karl Mueller suggested that “while it was not clear how NATO was going to win, it certainly would continue the effort until it managed to do so. From this perspective, it was not *what* NATO was bombing that mattered, but the fact that it was *continuing* to bomb. . . .” Karl Mueller, “Deus ex Machina? Coercive Air Power in Bosnia and Kosovo,” unpublished paper, School of Advanced Air Power Studies, Maxwell AFB, Alabama, November 7, 1999, p. 10.