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by Mark Smith

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**Kosovo Conflict:
U.S. Public Diplomacy and Western Public Opinion**

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“We are not going to stand by and watch the Serbian authorities do in Kosovo what they can no longer get away with doing in Bosnia.”

– Madeleine Albright, March 8, 1998

“Milošević gazed at me the whole time with an expression seemingly meant to say that he was prepared to walk over corpses (something he had proven all too often), and the West, but above all Europe, was not.”

– Joschka Fischer¹

The above two quotations from Secretary of State Albright and German Foreign Minister Fischer capture the public diplomacy challenge faced by the U.S. and its allies during NATO’s military intervention in Kosovo. On the one hand, Secretary Albright, speaking on the eve of a Contact Group meeting on Kosovo in London more than a year before the beginning of the NATO air campaign, “laid down a marker”² meant, yes, for Serbian President Slobodan Milošević, but not only or even primarily for him. “Her main purpose” at the meeting, wrote Ivo Daalder and Michael O’Hanlon in *Winning Ugly*, their Brookings-eye view of the Kosovo conflict based heavily on interviews with U.S. and European officials, “was to push the European allies, American public opinion, and even her own government toward concerted action designed to avert the kind of human tragedy that had happened in Bosnia. Her leverage was neither a plan of action nor a U.S. commitment to threaten or use force but rather her strong rhetoric ... steeped in a determination to

avoid the appearance of another Munich (and the delay witnessed in Bosnia).”³

Joschka Fischer’s assessment of Milošević during their meeting on the eve of the bombing, on the other hand, makes clear that “the butcher of the Balkans” was counting on the delicate sensibilities of the Western public, far more than on the strength of his own military forces, to undermine a NATO intervention. Nowhere were those sensibilities more evident than in Germany, where Fischer’s Green party, many of whose supporters were ardent pacifists, had come to power as part of a governing coalition for the first time just as the Kosovo crisis was heating up, and where the debate over what would be Germany’s first combat mission since World War II was particularly vehement.

The U.S., its NATO allies and Milošević all understood that the looming conflict in Kosovo—where Albanians outnumbered Serbs nearly nine to one, but which many Serbs see as sacred Serbian land—would be in the end a battle for Western public opinion. NATO could not be defeated in a war on the ground or in the air; it could only lose the battle for public opinion—but that would mean losing everything.

This was hardly the first conflict in which the weight of public opinion would be decisive. The United States had learned from bitter experience in Vietnam that military superiority alone is no guarantee of victory. Yet the challenge of maintaining public support for intervention in Kosovo appeared in some respects even more daunting. In Kosovo, unlike in Vietnam, the conflict was waged by an alliance of seventeen democratic governments, each dependent on the support of its own citizens; maintaining a sufficient level of public support throughout the alliance was therefore essential to the success of the NATO intervention. Kosovo also differed from Vietnam in that the war was conducted entirely from the air. The U.S. and its NATO allies had no boots on the ground, either in Kosovo or

in the rest of Serbia, and so efforts to influence Serbian hearts and minds were likewise carried out through the air, via international radio broadcasting and psychological operations (“psyops”). These efforts were as ingenious as they were intensive; one scholar has described them as “the most concentrated media focus directed toward a single foreign country in [U.S.] history”:

The campaign used a plethora of different media methods and platforms, making the media a full-time partner of our military, economic, and diplomatic efforts to win the battle for Kosovo As hostilities began, Milošević pulled the plug on international broadcasters by shutting down their access to local affiliates, but this obstruction did not deter the VOA or RFE/RL. They expanded their broadcasting through external shortwave, medium-wave, and Internet transmissions and worked with the U.S. Department of State and the U.S. Agency for International Development to bolster FM broadcasting in the area that became known as the ‘ring around Serbia.’ [i.e., a ring of FM transmitters in the countries around Serbia] At the same time, RFE/RL began broadcasts via Commando Solo, a fleet of planes developed by the Defense Department to give almost instant surge-broadcasting capability during times of conflict.⁴

For all the importance of Serbian public opinion, though, Western leaders knew that the success or failure of NATO’s intervention would hinge far more on the support of their own citizens. The battle for Western public opinion, then, and not U.S. propaganda efforts within Serbia, is the subject of this study.

In its efforts to maintain Western support for the NATO air campaign, the U.S. and its NATO allies had to maintain a tricky balance. First, they had to assure Western public opinion that NATO intervention, though lacking some of the elements that sanction the use of force under international law—it was unauthorized by a UN Security Council resolution, unprovoked by an attack from Serbia, and in violation of the principle of national sovereignty at the heart of international relations since the Treaty of Westphalia—was

nevertheless justified for humanitarian reasons. While justifying the war, they had to calm the fears of their voters that ground troops would have to be used. And even as they made the case to their own voters in these terms, they also had to demonstrate in words as well as deeds the toughness required to convince Milošević that NATO would do whatever it took to win.

In Kosovo as in Vietnam, the battle for public opinion was waged to a large extent through television images of the military conflict, and how those images were interpreted by allied governments and their citizens. In the end, this battle was won; Kosovo did not turn out to be another Vietnam, where, as Nicholas Cull of the University of Southern California has written, “the cluster bombing, search-and-destroy missions, mounting civilian casualties, and GIs ‘destroying the village in order to save it’ proved more powerful than any protestation at a Washington press conference that the United States was fighting in the best interests of the Vietnamese people.”²⁵ Why didn’t something similar happen in Kosovo? Why did the images from Kosovo—images of Serbian troops, police, and irregulars driving columns of hundreds of thousands of Albanians out of the province with impunity, alongside images of NATO bombing buildings in Belgrade, more than a hundred and fifty miles from where the ethnic cleansing was being carried out—why did such images, far from eroding public backing for the bombing campaign, actually increase support for it, and why did that support hold firm long enough until Milošević finally decided to give in? These are among the questions we will examine in this study.

I played a small role myself in the U.S. public diplomacy efforts. During the Kosovo crisis, I worked at the State Department as Public Affairs Advisor to the President’s Special Representative on Kosovo and Dayton Implementation, and in that capacity took the lead in preparing the Department spokesman every morning to respond to questions on Kosovo at his daily press briefing. Such briefings and public statements—policy advocacy, in short—made up the bulk of

U.S. public diplomacy with Western audiences during the Kosovo conflict.

My vantage point offered many opportunities to observe how U.S. policy messages were formulated. In this study I will examine the U.S. public diplomacy strategy at critical moments of the crisis—in particular the Račak massacre and the beginning of the bombing, when images of the conflict had the greatest influence on public opinion.

Shortly before these events, though, in the fall of 1998, the U.S. laid the groundwork for a tougher line on Kosovo by publicly clearing away much of the ambiguity which had hitherto characterized its relationship with Milošević himself.

“Milošević is the Problem”

Secretary Albright’s March 1998 statement cited at the beginning of this study attracted only fleeting attention at the time, and understandably so. Western leaders and publics could be forgiven for viewing her ultimatum with some skepticism. The U.S. approach to Milošević up to that point had vacillated between denouncing him for the atrocities committed by Serbian forces in Croatia, Bosnia, and Kosovo, and treating him as the guarantor of peace (or at least the absence of hostilities) in the region. In November 1995, Milošević—not Bosnian Serb leader Radovan Karadzic or General Ratko Mladic—had been the Serb negotiator opposite Richard Holbrooke at the Dayton Conference which brought an end to more than three years of appalling bloodshed in Bosnia; the U.S. counted on him to ensure that the Bosnian Serbs would adhere to the agreements reached there. Just two weeks before Secretary Albright’s 1998 ultimatum, Robert Gelbard, then the U.S.’s special envoy to the Balkans—mindful, perhaps, of how much the U.S. was still relying on Milošević to keep the lid on an explosive situation in Bosnia—declared publicly that the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA)

was, “without any questions, a terrorist group”—a pronouncement that, however unwittingly, appeared to Milošević to give Serb forces a green light to step up their attacks on Albanians in Kosovo.⁶ Both Serb and KLA offensives intensified through the summer of 1998, driving hundreds of thousands of civilians from their homes and into the mountains, and ending only in October when Holbrooke, carrying with him the threat of NATO air attacks, sat down once again with Milošević and negotiated an agreement under which Serbian security forces would substantially reduce their presence in the province and unarmed observers of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE)—the Kosovo Verification Mission, or KVM—would monitor compliance with the agreement.

None of these events could have persuaded observers that the U.S. saw Milošević as the problem rather than the solution in the Balkans. Only an unambiguous public shift in approach could do that. And so while in private Secretary Albright began to argue at the White House for the adoption of “a concerted strategy aimed at ending Milošević’s rule in Belgrade,”⁷ in public her spokesman, James Rubin, responded to a question about Serbia and Milošević at his December 1 press briefing with the following declaration:

Milošević has been at the center of every crisis in the former Yugoslavia over the last decade. He is not simply part of the problem; Milošević is the problem We have no interest in propping up President Milošević. We do have an interest in preventing humanitarian catastrophe.⁸

Rubin’s statement was not made off the cuff, nor did it arrive on his desk via the channels through which State Department press guidance is usually formulated. It was drafted on the seventh floor of the Department, where the Secretary and her principal advisors sit. James O’Brien, an architect of the Dayton Accords and one of the Secretary’s closest advisors on the Balkans, had a hand in preparing the language.⁹ It was clearly intended to signal a break with the administration’s previous approach to Milošević. Albright

had Rubin make the statement because she was convinced that the strategy identified with Holbrooke was failing.¹⁰ Holbrooke would meet with Milošević once more, just prior to the beginning of the air campaign; at that point, though, he was not negotiating, but instead making one last effort to persuade Milošević to sign the Rambouillet accords and avoid NATO bombing.

The Račak Massacre and Ambassador Walker's Reaction

In the late afternoon of Friday, January 15, 1999, Ambassador William Walker, an American diplomat heading the Kosovo Verification Mission of the OSCE, learned from his British deputy of a clash that had taken place in the village of Račak, about two hours from Kosovo's capital of Priština. On the following morning, his deputy brought him up to date on the situation, adding "there's something fishy here. Something doesn't smell right." The two men decided to go to Račak to see for themselves. What they found when they got there were the mutilated bodies of more than 40 Albanians.

"We started up this ravine," Walker later recalled,

After about 500 yards, we came across the first body. A couple of journalists were there, and a cameraman was taking some pictures. It was a man's body. There was a small blanket over where his head should be. They lifted the blanket to show me that his head was gone We started up the hill again, and every 15 or 20 yards, there was another body, all in sorts of grotesque postures We finally reached a pile of bodies, maybe 17, 18, 19 bodies just helter-skelter in a big pile, all with horrible wounds in the head. All of them were in these clothes that peasants in that part of the world wear when they're out in the fields doing their jobs I'd seen massacres before. I'd seen people who'd been executed. But I'd never seen anything like this.¹¹

A crowd of journalists was already on the scene in Račak. “When I got back to the office again,” Walker continued, “a lot of the press followed us back They wanted a press conference.”

I said to give me a half an hour to think of what I want to say. I sat down at my typewriter or my computer, and knocked out a few words. Then I went up and appeared before the press conference, which was a packed house Oh, I was angry, yes, absolutely. I think the anger came through. My statement wasn't exactly balanced, but I said, “Here's what I saw. It was obviously a crime against humanity.” I called it a massacre, and I said, “My opinion is that those responsible are in the security services. We have to get to the bottom of this.”¹²

Walker did not consult with anyone in Washington before holding the press conference (“I knew that it takes forever to get permission to do something like that”).¹³ His outrage was visceral, completely unscripted, and extremely undiplomatic—but all the more effective for that. By the end of the day his words were accompanying the images from Račak as the lead story on TV news programs around the world; along with the images, they made Račak a turning point in the West's response to the Kosovo crisis.

The impact of Walker's denunciation had such an effect on Western policy toward Kosovo, in fact, that a quick Google search will turn up those who to this day claim that he was the witting or unwitting dupe of an Albanian fabrication. More conspiratorially-minded circles in Germany have even alleged that the German government falsified information about Račak in order to obtain parliamentary support for the controversial German involvement in the NATO intervention in Kosovo.¹⁴ Milošević was so enraged by Walker's condemnation of the Serbs that he immediately declared him *persona non grata*. Yet Walker's accusations, delivered in the heat of the moment, were largely if tacitly borne out by the report (couched in the language of medicine, not criminal law) of a Finnish-led European Union forensic team that examined the bodies later in January.¹⁵

Evidence that Walker's charges were not part of a premeditated U.S. propaganda campaign can also be found in a little-noticed briefing he conducted for journalists at the State Department on January 8, just one week before the Račak massacre. At the time there was growing concern among many State Department officials over the deteriorating security situation in Kosovo, and the increasing evidence that the Serbs were flouting the October agreement.¹⁶ Walker, however, in his January 8 briefing, sounded anything but alarmist, or anti-Serb:

We certainly think that the verifiers on the ground in their present numbers have been able to do a good bit in terms of containing violence and talking people out of further violence In terms of compliance with the agreement, I think the results have certainly been mixed I think we can look to both sides and say there have been instances of non-compliance on both sides. In our view, the majority of the instances of non-compliance have emanated from the government side. But that is also perhaps a function of the fact that we have asked more of them. When I say that they're not cooperating in terms of landing rights for planes that might be bringing in supplies or quibbles at the border over customs, this sort of thing, those are things you ask for from a government; you don't ask that from the KLA.¹⁷

It is also worth noting that if Walker—whose reputation for bluntly dispensing with diplomatic niceties was well established long before his Kosovo assignment—had not been the first OSCE official on the scene in Račak, the Western reaction to the killings might have been very different. Walker's French deputy, Gabriel Keller, was considered by some U.S. officials to be sympathetic to the Serbs; he had previously been the French chargé d'affaires in Belgrade, and in 2000 was named ambassador there. A few days after the massacre, Keller cast doubt on Walker's interpretation of events in a briefing with French journalists.¹⁸ If Keller rather than Walker had been first to speak to the press about the killings, Račak might have been viewed as just one among many atrocities committed by both

sides, and might not have provided the jolt that impelled the allies first to seek a settlement between Serbs and Kosovar Albanians at Rambouillet, and then, when that failed, to use force to protect the Albanians from Serb repression.

The Rambouillet Conference

Even as the gruesome details of the Račak massacre were emerging, it was clear that the NATO allies were not yet prepared to take military action. French President Jacques Chirac told UK Prime Minister Tony Blair, “We must make one more attempt to negotiate a political solution. We Europeans must take responsibility for Europe.”¹⁹ Blair and other NATO leaders agreed that a final diplomatic push was essential.²⁰ Furthermore, key NATO allies believed that force should not be threatened merely in order to bring about a return to the status quo ante; instead, it should “serve to promote a distinct political objective, including a notion of how the conflict in Kosovo could be settled.”²¹ Thus came the decision to bring the Serbs and Kosovar Albanians together at the fourteenth century château of Rambouillet, about 30 miles southwest of Paris, to try to reach a settlement. According to UK Foreign Secretary Robin Cook, “We took the view that if we could get both sides together, as had happened at Dayton, and make sure that they were obliged to confront each other and to confront these difficult issues we might achieve the breakthrough.”²²

The Rambouillet strategy was unveiled in a carefully orchestrated series of public pronouncements.²³ At a January 29, 1999 North Atlantic Council meeting in Brussels, UN Secretary General Kofi Annan urged NATO to “further refine the combination of force and diplomacy that is the key to peace in the Balkans, as elsewhere.” NATO Secretary-General Javier Solana affirmed that NATO remained “ready to act” and called on the Serbs and Kosovar Albanians “to agree to the proposals to be issued by the Contact Group for completing an interim political settlement within the timeframe to

be established.” On the following day, the six member countries of the Contact Group called on both sides to end the cycle of violence, insisted that they accept principles set out by the Contact Group as the basis for a fair settlement, and summoned representatives of both sides to Rambouillet to begin negotiations by February 6 and work to conclude negotiations within seven days (the Contact Group agreed that the negotiators would then report to Contact Group ministers, who would decide whether the progress achieved to that point would justify continuing for another brief period to bring the negotiations to a successful conclusion). Finally, the day after that, NATO added teeth to the Contact Group strategy with an explicit threat to use force, placing the decision to authorize air strikes in the hands of NATO Secretary-General Solana.

Few among those assembled at Rambouillet—whether from the U.S., the other NATO allies, the Serbs, or the Albanians—held out much hope that an agreement was attainable. Desirable, yes—and the negotiators worked tirelessly if vainly toward that end—but not likely, because the U.S. and its allies had made clear that any deal worth signing must provide for an armed international (which is to say, NATO) peacekeeping force, something the Serbs were certain to reject unless the threat of military action was hanging over their heads. The underlying purpose of Rambouillet was not so much to get an agreement as, to borrow President Chirac’s phrase, to let Europeans take responsibility for Europe, or, to put it in the blunter terms of U.S. policy, “to create a consensus ... among the NATO allies that force would have to be used.”²⁴

Rambouillet was chosen as the site for the conference in part for symbolic reasons: to let the Europeans take the public lead and avoid the impression that this would be “another Dayton” with the United States calling the shots.²⁵ In the course of the conference the U.S. made efforts to maintain a low profile—a difficult task at best, since the negotiations had their basis in proposals discussed with both sides over the preceding months by Christopher Hill, then U.S.

ambassador to Macedonia. The conference was chaired by Hubert Vedrine and Robin Cook, the French and British foreign ministers; the Contact Group appointed as conference negotiators a troika, with Ambassadors Wolfgang Petritsch of the EU and Boris Mayorski of the Russian Federation joining Hill; the principal Americans available to brief the press for the better part of the conference were Hill and his spokesman, Philip Reeker. Secretary Albright (accompanied by James Rubin) came to Rambouillet for the first time only following the first week of talks, when the two sides failed to reach agreement by the original deadline. She returned once more nearly a week later when it looked as if, without intervention on her part, not just the Serbs but also the Albanians would refuse to accept the framework agreement. In the words of Secretary Albright, the purpose of Rambouillet was “to get the war started with the Europeans locked in.”²⁶ Such a possibility was of great concern to U.S. policymakers because in the absence of an agreement, as Rubin put it, “in order to move towards military action, it has to be clear that the Serbs were responsible.”²⁷

Confronting Catastrophe

The Albanian delegation, after returning to Kosovo to consult the local population and after weeks of cajoling from U.S. and Western officials, finally did sign the agreement on March 15. The Serbs, for their part, never engaged in serious negotiations. Instead, as the discussions at Rambouillet drew to a close, Milošević began moving 40,000 Serb military and security forces and 300 tanks into Kosovo. As Holbrooke flew to Belgrade for his final, futile meeting with Milošević, and as the OSCE monitors were withdrawing from Kosovo in expectation of the attacks, Serb forces unleashed a campaign of ethnic cleansing as ferocious as it was carefully planned, singling out and slaughtering groups of men and forcing hundreds of thousands of Albanians to flee from their homes into the woods or toward the border with Macedonia. Serb barbarism and the waves of refugees gathering at the border did not diminish when

the NATO bombing—Operation Allied Force—began on March 24; if anything, they grew in intensity. U.S. and NATO officials—who had justified the bombing as necessary to prevent a humanitarian crisis, and who apparently had expected (although never publicly saying as much) that a few days of bombing would be enough to bring Milošević to the negotiating table²⁸—now found themselves liable to accusations (untrue, but damaging nonetheless) that, as NATO spokesman Jamie Shea put it, the bombing was “turning a disaster into a catastrophe.”²⁹

Not that no one in the West had foreseen this scenario. In a March 20 memo to Prime Minister Tony Blair and Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder, for example, senior British and German officials warned that:

political will to see through NATO’s threat of military action is not guaranteed if it does not achieve results in 4 to 6 days Politicians should plan for the worst, not hope for something much better. But they have not yet signaled that they have embraced this nasty reality and considered the impact on public opinion, especially if—as expected—

- the military options become ever messier after a few days of air strikes;
- when the chances of NATO declaring victory (or some other such phrase) become slimmer and slimmer;
- and when the first images of humanitarian suffering and probably Serb revenge slaughter of Albanians start hitting the TV news bulletins.³⁰

Such warnings were not heeded. In his address to the nation when the bombing began on March 24, President Clinton listed three objectives for the campaign: “To demonstrate NATO’s seriousness of purpose to deter an even bloodier offensive against innocent civilians in Kosovo, and, if necessary, to seriously damage the Serb military’s capacity to harm the people of Kosovo.” For the first several days of Operation Allied Force, U.S. and NATO spokesmen were glaringly unequipped to explain how these objectives were

being achieved, or how bombs and missiles targeting buildings in Belgrade could end the humanitarian catastrophe unfolding hundreds of miles away. A senior State Department source told British journalist Tim Judah that although he “would never admit, ever, to panic,” in the U.S. administration there was “a feeling of being ‘real concerned.’”³¹ I too recall that the mood at the State Department during those first days was somber indeed. Somber, but also determined. U.S. officials were shocked by Serb savagery, but those emotions soon gave way to a steely conviction that this was a battle NATO had to win, no matter what the cost.

Some of Europe’s elite media were concluding that the battle had already been lost. “The first week of NATO airstrikes has ended in public frustration and anxiety” was the verdict of the *Times* of London on April 1. “For the urgent tactical task of stopping Serb forces in their murderous tracks, NATO’s combined air power has appeared agonizingly irrelevant.” The French daily *Libération*, after a week of commentaries lamenting the failure of the bombing to stop the ethnic cleansing, wrote on April 5 that “either NATO admits that the Serbs have won their bet, or it must launch a battle to reconquer Kosovo. The war is over How can one stop what has already concluded?” And in the view of the influential German foreign affairs commentator Theo Sommer, writing in the April 8 issue of the weekly *Die Zeit*, “The war was supposed to prevent a humanitarian catastrophe in Kosovo—the catastrophe is underway, the return of the refugees uncertain the West cannot endlessly rain bombs and missiles on Serbia. Their populations won’t go along with it Western public opinion will surely tire of the war before Milošević does.” Exactly what Joschka Fischer had seen in Milošević’s eyes.

During the first week of the bombing, Western spokesmen argued that the images of mass expulsions and humanitarian catastrophe that were horrifying Western television viewers proved the NATO air campaign was justified. They had no convincing answer for the response that the NATO bombing was not only failing to halt

the expulsions, but was making a disastrous situation even worse. With their original justification for the bombing now untenable, they found themselves groping in vain for another. NATO Secretary-General Solana was hardly reassuring when he told the *New York Times* on March 31, “We may not have the means to stop it [i.e., the ethnic cleansing], but we have shown we have the will to try.” U.S. Defense Secretary William Cohen was no more persuasive the week after when he asserted that the air campaign’s goals were to demonstrate “resolve on the part of the NATO alliance” or “to make him [Milošević] pay a serious substantial price.”³²

Lacking as yet a new justification for the NATO air campaign, State Department spokesmen were left to assert, in the face of most evidence, that the U.S. and its allies had foreseen a multi-week bombing campaign all along, and to cite Kosovar Albanian sources confirming that the new wave of Serb repression had begun prior to the bombing and that the air campaign was having the desired effect. At the same time, though, to compensate for the absence of U.S. media on the ground in Kosovo, they took on a quasi-journalistic role of their own by publicizing in detail reports of Serb human rights violations.³³ More importantly, they vigorously denounced such atrocities and put Serb leaders on notice that they would be held accountable. As early as March 26, the third day of the bombing, Rubin opened his press briefing with the statement that “the United States is extremely alarmed by reports of an escalating pattern of Serbian attacks on Kosovar Albanian civilians,” and he went on to issue this warning:

The United States Government wants to send a clear message to those responsible for the actions of the Yugoslav army and the Ministry of Internal Affairs that the United States is using national technical means to watch unfolding events in Kosovo. We will continue to work with the prosecutor of the International Tribunal to assist her efforts to prosecute anyone responsible for ordering and carrying out war crimes, crimes against humanity or genocide in Kosovo.

The United States also reminds those responsible for the actions of the Yugoslav Army and the Ministry of Internal Affairs in Kosovo that attacks directed against the civilian population, the summary execution of detained persons and wanton destruction or devastation not justified by military necessity are war crimes under international law. War crimes, along with genocide and crimes against humanity, that may be committed in Kosovo are within the jurisdiction of the International Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia. Such crimes have no statute of limitations.

Rubin hammered home the war crimes warning repeatedly during his press briefings over the next few days, culminating in an April 7 statement in which he singled out nine Yugoslav military commanders by name, putting them on notice that Yugoslav forces were committing war crimes in Kosovo. On the following day, he showed the assembled journalists before and after photographs of Kosovo villages where Serbian forces had carried out atrocities.

In addition, on March 29 and March 31, Julia Taft, the Assistant Secretary of State for Population, Refugees, and Migration, briefed the press on the humanitarian crisis, and on March 31, Rubin gave the press corps a report summarizing the ethnic cleansing perpetrated by Serb forces to that point. From then until Milošević's May 27 indictment by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) and the end of the conflict a week later, the State Department would issue 13 additional periodic summaries of ethnic cleansing, as well as an April 7 report by David Scheffer, Ambassador-at-Large for War Crimes Issues, on interviews he conducted with refugees at the Macedonia border crossing, and a May publication, "Erasing History: Ethnic Cleansing in Kosovo," a comprehensive documentation of the atrocities and war crimes committed by Serb forces.³⁴ Video and photographic evidence of war crimes was also presented during press briefings (e.g. the press briefings of May 19 and May 28, the day following the Milošević indictment).

To safeguard U.S. credibility, when describing reports of atrocities during his briefings Rubin took pains to distinguish between those confirmed by U.S. government information and unconfirmed reports from second-hand sources, including KLA members. This scrupulous concern for credibility characterized State Department press briefings throughout the crisis. Even information on atrocities provided by NATO press spokesman Jamie Shea during his own briefings was not repeated by State Department spokesmen unless it had been independently confirmed by U.S. government sources.³⁵

Although it had an impact on Western public opinion, as we shall see, the publicizing and denouncing of Serb war crimes was not in itself a sufficient justification for the NATO intervention. After nearly two weeks of scrambling for one, during the first week of April the U.S. and its NATO allies made public a five point statement of war aims. The first draft of these had been prepared in the German Foreign Ministry on March 30, when Joschka Fischer asked his staff to draw up a paper containing their view of the non-negotiable political conditions for NATO to end the bombing. When Fischer informed Albright later that day of the five conditions his Ministry proposed, he emphasized the urgency of filling the “political-strategic vacuum” created by NATO’s inability to halt the Serb atrocities, but also the need “to make much clearer to the public where we are heading and what we want to achieve.”³⁶ The essence of the five points—an end to violence, the withdrawal of all Serb forces, the return of all refugees, an international armed security force, and establishment of a dialogue leading to autonomy—was summarized in the meme-like phrase “Serbs out, NATO in, refugees back,” which Albright later described as “our mantra.”³⁷ The war aims would serve until the end of the conflict as both the unshakeable foundation of policy and the public justification for the air campaign.

Yet over the two weeks that elapsed until the new policy was announced, as NATO proved unable to achieve its initial objective of preventing a humanitarian crisis and some European media were

already declaring defeat, public support for the NATO air campaign not only failed to crumble; from the start of the bombing to mid-April it actually increased in the U.S., the UK, and France. Even in Germany, thought to be the weakest link in the European chain, public support for the bombing held steady.³⁸ How can this be explained? How did the “first images of humanitarian suffering and ... Serb revenge slaughter of Albanians,” which British and German officials, in the March 20 memo quoted earlier, feared would have such a disastrous effect on public opinion—how did these, alongside images of seemingly ineffectual NATO bombing, actually manage to bolster support for the air campaign?

The answer lies less in what spokesmen in the U.S. or at NATO did or said than in what Western publics were already disposed to believe about Milošević and the Serbs. The term “ethnic cleansing” emerged (or re-emerged) in political discourse as a description of Serb atrocities in Bosnia in the early nineties. That term and those atrocities provided the lens through which Western viewers interpreted the images of renewed Serb barbarism in Kosovo. It is probable—one cannot know for sure to what extent—that the State Department’s unremitting denunciation of Serb war crimes in late March and early April helped to shape Western public perceptions of what the Serbs were perpetrating in Kosovo. What is certain is that after Bosnia, the readiness of Westerners to think the worst of Milošević and the Serbs was already established, and the images coming out of Kosovo would only reinforce it. Once the West saw hundreds of thousands of Albanians being driven from their homes and their homeland, Milošević had lost the media war.

All of which leads one to ask: why did he do it? After all, as many analysts of the Kosovo conflict have observed, “if Milošević had hunkered down and restrained his military and paramilitary forces during the bombing, support within NATO countries for sustaining the operation probably would have quickly dissipated.”³⁹ Instead of ordering his troops to stand down and wait for the images

of NATO dropping bombs on a country harming no one to have their predictable effect upon Western viewers, why did he decide to go for broke and unleash a campaign of terror aimed at driving the Albanian population out of Kosovo once and for all—a campaign that would lead the ICTY to indict him for war crimes and crimes against humanity? The most plausible answer seems to be that Milošević—in line with Joschka Fischer’s view of him—did not believe the West had the stomach for a prolonged bombing campaign under any circumstances. The Clinton administration’s pinprick bombing of Saddam Hussein’s Iraq the year before would have provided support for this view; when Milošević met with Holbrooke in October 1998, he made it clear that he was expecting any NATO bombing to be perfunctory.⁴⁰ Milošević apparently could not conceive that Western publics, rather than growing squeamish at the sight of him “walking over corpses,” would show renewed determination to reverse the ethnic cleansing that he had carried out. He thus believed that he could achieve “what generations of Serb ethnic engineers had only dreamed of: turning Kosovo into an Albanian-free zone.”⁴¹

The Final Weeks: Which Side Would Crack First?

Although in hindsight it may seem clear that Milošević lost the war for public opinion during the first ten days of April, that was not evident at the time, and the battle still had to be waged until one side or the other gave in. As Albright later put it, “we were in a race in which both runners were tiring; the question was whose legs would buckle first.”⁴² For the Allies the principal public diplomacy task would be to maintain public support during the month of negotiations required to bring Russia in line with NATO’s position, which resulted in Russia’s Viktor Chernomyrdin, along with Martti Ahtissari representing the UN, flying to Belgrade to present Milošević with the ultimatum that led to his capitulation on June 3. To ensure that NATO would have the public diplomacy resources needed for the task, Alastair Campbell, Prime Minister Blair’s press secretary, led a group of six British officials to Brussels as reinforcements

for Jamie Shea and his exhausted public affairs staff. They were augmented by three colleagues from Washington, including White House speechwriter Jonathan Prince.⁴³

In the U.S. during this period, there were three major public diplomacy challenges. First was the ongoing one of dealing with the charge that the NATO bombing was not putting a halt to the ethnic cleansing. As Rubin and his deputy, James Foley, continued their detailed reporting and vigorous condemnation of Serb atrocities, they also settled upon a formulation that, under the circumstances, seemed the best way to respond to that charge and make the case for the bombing. A representative example was offered by Rubin on April 30:

In our view this ethnic cleansing is not the result of NATO's bombing; it's not something that NATO's bombing could be expected to stop for sure. It is the reason NATO is bombing. NATO is using air power against the Serbs and the Serb military machine because of things like this.

The two other challenges arose only as the conflict proceeded. One was episodic, emerging whenever a NATO bomb hit a civilian target. The bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade on May 7, which understandably received the most media coverage of all such errant attacks, turned out to be of relatively brief consequence in the battle for Western public opinion; its impact was far greater on U.S.-China relations, of course, but even there the damage was patched up in fairly short order. When other NATO attacks went astray and killed civilians, the reporting of the details of the attack was left to NATO and the Pentagon; the primary concern of State Department spokesmen was to limit the damage that such mistakes could do to public support for the bombing. After NATO mistakenly attacked a refugee convoy on April 16, Rubin tried to do this by emphasizing "the extraordinary lengths that NATO military forces are going through to avoid civilian casualties, while the policies of President Milošević are designed to achieve civilian casualties."⁴⁴ A

month later, after Belgrade media reported that another bomb had gone astray and killed numerous Albanian civilians, Rubin reminded the press to treat Serbian media reports with caution, urged them to wait for NATO's report on the incident before drawing conclusions, and then gave a more extensive (and persuasive) justification for continuing the bombing:

When you think about the civilians that have been killed in this situation, you have to also think about the million and a half civilians who have been the victim of President Milošević's campaign and the thousands of people who we think have been murdered, the tens of thousands who are missing and the women who have been raped and the families that have been separated. That's what has to be thought about when one answers the question of are we prepared to just stop the bombing campaign because one out of 1,000 air strikes has not hit its target, as painful and regrettable the result of those misses may be.⁴⁵

The other challenge grew in importance as it seemed increasingly unlikely that the air campaign alone would be enough to make Milošević give in, and sentiment grew in some quarters (most notably from UK Prime Minister Tony Blair) for the use of ground troops. From mid-April until the end of the conflict, polls in both the U.S. and Europe revealed a slight but steady decline in the level of support for the bombing; on the other hand, among the major NATO allies, polls showed a clear majority in support of the ground troops option only in France.⁴⁶

In his March 24 statement announcing the NATO bombing, President Clinton reassured the nation that he did not "intend to put our troops in Kosovo to fight a war." National Security Advisor Sandy Berger later remarked that "we would not have won the war without this sentence."⁴⁷ The allies had avoided a potential split over the issue at the NATO summit in Washington in late April by agreeing to leave a discussion of ground troops off the agenda. But the pressure for ground troops was growing among the pundits if not yet among the public, and U.S. press spokesmen had to make

some effort to counter it. In doing so they relied heavily in the final weeks of the conflict on three points: first, the bombing would continue until Milošević's unconditional acceptance of NATO's five points ("which I will mercifully not repeat for you," Rubin dryly remarked at his May 14 briefing, having spent the previous month drilling them into the heads and stories of the media); second, NATO was growing stronger and Milošević weaker by the day; third, in support of the second point, there was growing evidence of anti-war sentiment within Serbia, including in the military. A fine example of how these three points were woven together can be found in Rubin's May 19 briefing:

The NATO air campaign has grown more effective day by day and is increasingly crippling the foundations of Milošević's regime. The cracks in that regime are more and more apparent, even within Milošević's inner circle. NATO does remain united behind the air campaign and will persevere until it has achieved its objectives. Milošević himself may now see the writing on the wall and may be looking for a way out of the catastrophe that he has created. Voices of dissent from the disastrous consequences of Milošević's policies in Kosovo are on the rise in Serbia. Yesterday, Montenegrin television reported that anti-war protests erupted this week in the Serbian towns of Aleksandrovac and Krusevac. Today we have learned of an anti-war demonstration in a third Serbian town, Cacak, and we have reports that the demonstrations in Krusevac have continued for a third day. The Aleksandrovac protest reportedly involved some 1,000 citizens who demanded that the mayor prevent the departure of local troops to Kosovo. The demonstrations in Krusevac have involved as many as 5,000 people. It should be noted that all three of these towns are located in the heartland of Serbia. The civilian population in Serbia is showing increasing signs of war weariness – yet another indication that NATO's air campaign is working. Finally, we have received information that I think is quite important, that as many as 500 Serbian Army soldiers appear to have deserted their deployment locations in Kosovo yesterday to return to their homes in Serbia.

At last, on May 18, President Clinton signaled a subtle but deliberate shift in the administration's stance on ground troops when

he stated in response to a reporter's question that "NATO will not take any option off the table."⁴⁸ Rubin repeated the statement in his briefing the following day, even while stressing, as had the president, that "we have confidence in the air campaign." A little more than two weeks later, on June 3, Milošević gave in, and the ground troops option never had to be used, rendering moot the question how public opinion would have reacted if it had, or how long Western publics would have continued to support the air campaign in the absence of a ground offensive.

Conclusion

"The conflict in Kosovo was won during the first ten days of April, when the administration could have made bad choices but did not," wrote Madeleine Albright in her memoirs.⁴⁹ If she was right—and I believe she was—one could add that the conflict was won off the battlefield as well as on it. The decision to continue and intensify the air campaign was essential, of course, but so was the forging of a new political and public diplomacy strategy once the original one had been rendered obsolete by Milošević's savage assault on the Kosovar Albanians.

One should not exaggerate the contribution of public diplomacy to the victory. As in any modern war, at times public diplomacy strategy was swept along (or aside) by the tide of events, and particularly by the media images of those events. Both after Račak and during the first two weeks of bombing, U.S. public diplomacy, far from being a carefully planned strategy, was largely reactive and improvisational—at Račak, it was improvised literally on the spot. But that did not prevent it from being successful; and a crucial element in that success was a keen sense of how Westerners viewed Milošević and the forces he commanded, which enabled U.S. spokesmen to use his most blood-curdling atrocities to rally rather than dishearten Western public opinion.

Endnotes

- 1 Fischer, *Die rot-grünen Jahre*, Knauer Taschenbuch Verlag, Munich, 2008, p.148 (my translation). According to some accounts, Milošević may actually have spoken something like these words to Fischer. In *Winning Ugly: NATO's War to Save Kosovo* (Brookings Institution Press, 2000), Ivo H. Daalder and Michael E. O'Hanlon quote Milošević saying to Fischer, "I can stand death—lots of it—but you can't" (p. 94); they cite an unnamed German Foreign Ministry official as the source. The same quote appears in other works, e.g., Louis Sell's *Slobodan Milošević and the Fall of Yugoslavia* (Duke University Press, 2003, p. 301) and Timothy Garton Ash's "Kosovo: Was It Worth It?", *The New York Review of Books*, September 21, 2000, both of which cite Daalder and O'Hanlon as the source. In Germany, the writer Peter Schneider included the quote in an article in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* of May 26, 1999; in an article on Kosovo two weeks earlier, however, the weekly *Die Zeit* did not use the quote, describing instead Fischer's impression of Milošević in terms similar to those he would later use in *Die rot-grünen Jahre* (see G. Hoffmann, "Wie Deutschland in den Krieg geriet," *Die Zeit*, May 12, 1999). I have been unable to find an account in which Fischer himself asserts that Milošević made such a statement; accordingly, I have used here the version of the episode contained in his book. I am deeply grateful to Laura Schlotthauer for the effort she put into unraveling this mystery, as well as for her industrious and imaginative research assistance for this paper.
- 2 Madeleine Albright, *Madam Secretary* (Miramax, 2003), p. 381.
- 3 Ivo H. Daalder, and Michael E. O'Hanlon, *Winning Ugly: NATO's War to Save Kosovo* (Brookings Institution Press, 2000), p. 14.
- 4 Edward Kaufman, "A Broadcasting Strategy to Win Media Wars," in Alexander T.J. Lennon (ed.), *The Battle for Hearts and Minds: Using Soft Power To Undermine Terrorist Networks*, MIT press, 2003, pp. 301–302. Secretary Albright and other U.S. officials used these broadcasts to address the Serbian people during the NATO air campaign; see James Rubin's Department of State press briefing of April 16, 1999.
- 5 Nicholas J. Cull, "Public Diplomacy: Taxonomies and Histories," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Volume 616, March 2008, pp.44–45.
- 6 Tim Judah, *Kosovo: War and Revenge* (Yale University Press, 2000), p. 138.
- 7 Albright, *op. cit.*, p. 387.

- 8 The archive of Department of State press briefings may be accessed on-line at <http://secretary.state.gov/www/briefings/>.
- 9 I was present as Rubin and O'Brien went carefully over the language during a phone conversation on the morning of the press briefing.
- 10 Daalder and O'Hanlon, *op. cit.*, p.69. Holbrooke, who had spent more time negotiating with Milošević than any other U.S. official, reportedly was not happy about the shift. Michael Ignatieff writes that "When I asked Holbrooke about the Rubin briefing, he rolled his eyes" (Ignatieff, "The Dream of Albanians," *The New Yorker*, January 11, 1999, p. 36).
- 11 Walker interview shown in the 2000 PBS *Frontline* program "War in Europe" (<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/kosovo/interviews/walker.html>).
- 12 *Ibid.*
- 13 *Ibid.*
- 14 As, for example, in the February 2001 Westdeutscher Rundfunk (WDR) program "Es begann mit einer Lüge." See, *inter alia*, the reactions of the people of Račak to the broadcast, as reported in "Massacre Village Outraged by Defence Video," *The Guardian*, February 15, 2002.
- 15 Heike Krieger, *The Kosovo Conflict and International Law: An Analytical Documentation 1974–1999*, Cambridge University Press, 2001, pp. 197–198.
- 16 My own recollections of late December 1998–early January 1999.
- 17 www.state.gov/www/policy_remarks/1999/990108_walker_kosovo.html.
- 18 Judah, *op. cit.*, p. 194. I was in Kosovo two days after the Racak massacre, accompanying Ambassador James Pardew, then the President's Special Representative for Kosovo and Dayton Implementation. When Keller met with us that afternoon, he immediately launched into an account of Albanian atrocities committed during the previous 24 hours, as if to remind us that both sides had blood on their hands.
- 19 James Gow with Miroslav Hadzic, "US/NATO Intervention in Kosovo, 1998–1999," p. 18, <http://www.cla.purdue.edu/SI/Team9Report.pdf>.
- 20 Daalder and O'Hanlon, *op. cit.*, p. 64.
- 21 *Ibid.*, pp. 72–73.
- 22 Gow with Hadzic, *op. cit.*, p. 18.
- 23 The account in this paragraph is drawn from the reconstruction of events in Daalder and O'Hanlon, *op. cit.*, pp. 75–77.
- 24 Daalder and O'Hanlon, *op. cit.*, p. 85.

- 25 Solicitude for the allies, particularly the French, could assume curious forms. On one occasion during the early days of the Rambouillet conference, as I was preparing the daily Kosovo press guidance, I received some draft language from the office of Ambassador James Dobbins, who had taken over in early February as the President's Special Advisor for Kosovo, and who spent a good deal of time in daily phone discussions with his counterparts in allied foreign ministries; the draft text contained the phrase "the Rambouillet accords." When I brought the guidance to Ambassador Pardew for his approval, I drew his attention to the oddly Gallic formulation. Pardew looked at it, let out a derisive chuckle, then scratched it out and wrote in its place "the Rambouillet agreements." The text was then passed on for final approval to Dobbins, who proceeded to restore the original wording; and "Rambouillet accords" it remained from then on.
- 26 Daalder and O'Hanlon, *op. cit.*, p. 89; see also p.85 ("For some in the Clinton administration, as indeed in key allied capitals like London, the purpose of Rambouillet was not so much to get a deal that few thought attainable. Rather it was to create a consensus in Washington and among the NATO allies that force would have to be used From this perspective, Rambouillet could be viewed as successful.") and p.89 ("Not only would Rambouillet give peace one last chance, its collapse would signal the end of the diplomatic road It was only then that those reluctant to use force ... would come to see that this perspective was correct.").
- 27 Rubin statement to the press, February 21, 1999; the full quote is "We believe it is extremely important to put pressure on the Serbs. We cannot put the full amount of pressure if we don't get an agreement from the Kosovar Albanians. Contrary to what many of you seem to believe, it has never been the view of NATO or the United States that a Serb refusal along with a Kosovar Albanian refusal would necessarily lead to NATO military action. All of the officials who have worked on this have made very clear that in order to move towards military action, it has to be clear that the Serbs were responsible," www.state.gov/www/policy_remarks/1999/990221_rubin.htm.
- 28 See, *inter alia*, Sell, *op. cit.*, p. 302.
- 29 Judah, *op. cit.*, p. 253.
- 30 *Ibid.*, p. 245.
- 31 *Ibid.*, p. 253.
- 32 Daalder and O'Hanlon, *op. cit.*, p. 195.

- 33 “Some of you and your news organizations, in particular, sought to get our assistance in trying to determine what was going on in Kosovo, because they were unable to do so. So in the furtherance of that project that was suggested to me by some of the news organizations in this room—their executives at the very highest levels – I tried to do what I could to provide that information to you, without commenting on whether we could confirm the information, leaving it up to you as journalists to decide whether to use it,” Rubin press briefing, April 9, 1999.
- 34 http://www.state.gov/www/regions/eur/rpt_9905_ethnic_ksvo_toc.html.
- 35 My own recollection.
- 36 My translation. Fischer’s illuminating account of the progress of the five points from German Foreign Ministry paper to NATO policy is in *Die rot-grünen Jahre*, pp. 176–180; Albright’s account of their conversation is in *Madam Secretary*, p. 410.
- 37 Albright, *op. cit.*, p. 410.
- 38 For U.S. polling see www.pipa.org/OnlineReports/Kosovo/Kosovo_May99/Kosovo_May99_rpt.pdf; for European polls see <http://www.usia.gov/kosovo/kosop3.htm> and “The Kosovo Conflict in the Polls,” Center for the Study of Political Change, University of Siena www.gips.unisi.it/circap/file_download/63.
- 39 Daalder and O’Hanlon, *op. cit.*, p. 19; see also Sell, *op. cit.*, p.304, and Judah, *op. cit.*, p. 251.
- 40 Sell, *op. cit.*, pp. 302–303.
- 41 *Ibid.*, p. 305.
- 42 Albright, *op. cit.*, p. 419.
- 43 Stephen Castle, “War in the Balkans: Media War—Campbell Helps Put the Spin into NATO,” *The Independent*, April 28, 1999, p. 2.
- 44 Rubin press briefing of April 16, 1999.
- 45 Rubin press briefing of May 14, 1999.
- 46 See the polls cited in note 37 above.
- 47 Daalder and O’Hanlon, *op. cit.*, p. 97.
- 48 *Ibid.*, p. 156.
- 49 Albright, *op. cit.*, p. 411.

Former Yugoslavia



A Chronology of Key Events in Kosovo History

12th century - Kosovo lies at the heart of the Serbian empire, under the Nemanjic dynasty. The period sees the building of many Serbian Orthodox churches and monasteries.

1389 28 June - Epic Battle of Kosovo heralds 500 years of Turkish Ottoman rule. Over the ensuing decades many Christian Serbs leave the region. Over the centuries the religious and ethnic balance tips in favor of Muslims and Albanians.

1689–1690 - Austrian invasion is repelled.

1912 - Balkan Wars: Serbia regains control of Kosovo from the Turks, recognized by 1913 Treaty of London.

1918 - Kosovo becomes part of the kingdom of Serbia.

1941 - World War II: Much of Kosovo becomes part of an Italian-controlled greater Albania.

1946 - Kosovo is absorbed into the Yugoslav federation.

1960s - Belgrade shows increasing tolerance for Kosovan autonomy.

1974 - Yugoslav constitution recognizes the autonomous status of Kosovo, giving the province de facto self-government.

1981 - Troops suppress separatist rioting in the province.

1987 - In a key moment in his rise to power, future president Slobodan Milošević rallies a crowd of Kosovo Serbs, who are protesting against alleged harassment by the majority Albanian community.

1989 - Yugoslav President Slobodan Milošević proceeds to strip rights of autonomy laid down in the 1974 constitution.

1990 July - Ethnic Albanian leaders declare independence from Serbia. Belgrade dissolves the Kosovo government.

1990 September - Sacking of more than 100,000 ethnic Albanian workers, including government employees and media workers, prompts general strike.

1991 - Slovenia, Croatia and Bosnia break away from Yugoslavia and declare their independence.

1992 - War breaks out in the Balkans.

1992 July - An academic, Ibrahim Rugova, is elected president of the self-proclaimed republic.

1993-97 - Ethnic tension and armed unrest escalate.

1998 March–September - Open conflict between Serb police and separatist Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA). Serb forces launch a brutal crackdown. Civilians are driven from their homes.

1998 September - NATO gives an ultimatum to President Milošević to halt the crackdown on Kosovo Albanians.

NATO Intervention

1999 March - Internationally-brokered peace talks at Rambouillet fail. NATO launches air strikes against Yugoslavia lasting 78 days before Belgrade yields. Hundreds of thousands of Kosovo Albanian refugees pour into neighboring countries, telling of massacres and forced expulsions which followed the start of the NATO campaign.

1999 June - President Milošević agrees to withdraw troops from Kosovo. NATO calls off air strikes. The UN sets up a Kosovo Peace Implementation Force (Kfor) and NATO forces arrive in the province. The KLA agrees to disarm. Serb civilians flee revenge attacks.

2002 February - Ibrahim Rugova is elected as president by the Kosovan parliament after ethnic Albanian parties reach a power-sharing deal. Bajram Rexhepi becomes prime minister.

2003 October - First direct talks between Serbian and Kosovo Albanian leaders since 1999.

2003 December - UN sets out conditions for final status talks in 2005.

Mitrovica Clashes

2004 March - 19 people are killed in the worst clashes between Serbs and ethnic Albanians since 1999. The violence started in the divided town of Mitrovica.

2004 October - President Rugova's pro-independence Democratic League tops poll in general election, winning 47 seats in 120-seat parliament. Poll is boycotted by Serbs.

2004 December - Parliament re-elects President Rugova and elects former rebel commander Ramush Haradinaj as prime minister. Mr Haradinaj's party had entered into a coalition with the president's Democratic League.

2005 February - Serbian President Boris Tadic visits, promises to defend rights of Serbs in Kosovo.

2005 March - Mr Haradinaj indicted to face UN war crimes tribunal in The Hague, resigns as prime minister. He is succeeded by Bajram Kosumi. President Rugova unhurt when explosion rocks convoy of vehicles in which he is travelling through Pristina.

2005 July - Nearly-simultaneous blasts go off near UN, OSCE and Kosovo parliament buildings in Pristina. No one is hurt.

2005 August - Two Serbs shot dead and two injured when their car is fired at.

2006 January - President Rugova dies in Pristina after losing his battle with lung cancer. He is succeeded in February by Fatmir Sejdiu.

2006 February - UN-sponsored talks on the future status of Kosovo begin.

2006 March - Prime Minister Kosumi resigns following criticism of his performance from within his own party. He is succeeded by former KLA commander Agim Ceku.

2006 July - First direct talks since 1999 between ethnic Serbian and Kosovan leaders on future status of Kosovo take place in Vienna.

2006 October - Voters in a referendum in Serbia approve a new constitution which declares that Kosovo is an integral part of the country. Kosovo's Albanian majority boycotts the ballot and UN sponsored talks on the future of the disputed province continue.

Independence plan

2007 February - UN envoy Martti Ahtisaari unveils a plan to set Kosovo on a path to independence, which is immediately welcomed by Kosovo Albanians and rejected by Serbia.

2007 July - US and European Union redraft UN resolution to drop promise of independence at Russian insistence, replacing it with pledge to review situation if there is no breakthrough after four proposed months of talks with Serbia.

2007 November - Hasim Thaci emerges as winner in general elections.

2008 February - Kosovo declares independence. Serbia says declaration is illegal. Europe's major powers and the United States recognize independence.

2008 March - Serb opponents of independence seize a UN courthouse in Mitrovica, and more than 100 people are injured in subsequent clashes with UN and NATO forces. A UN police officer is killed.

New Constitution

2008 April - Parliament adopts new constitution.

2008 June - New constitution transfers power to majority ethnic Albanian government after nine years of UN rule. Kosovo Serbs set up their own rival assembly in Mitrovica.

2008 October - The UN General Assembly votes to refer Kosovo's independence declaration to the International Court of Justice.

2008 December - European Union mission (Eulex) takes over police, justice and customs services from UN. Serbia accepts EU mission. Serbia arrests 10 former ethnic Albanian rebel fighters suspected of war crimes, including murder and rape, prompting protests from Kosovo.

2009 January - New multi-ethnic Kosovo Security Force launched under NATO supervision, replacing a unit dominated by veterans of independence campaign against Serbia.

2009 February - UN war crimes tribunal in the Hague acquits former Serbian President Milan Milutinovic of charges that he ordered a campaign of terror against Kosovo Albanians in the 1990s.

2009 March - Spain announces it is to withdraw most of its 600 troops from Kosovo by the end of the summer, despite widespread criticism.

2009 April - Serbian President Boris Tadic makes rare visit to Kosovo, coinciding with the deadline for parties to submit arguments to the International Court of Justice on the legality of Kosovo's declaration of independence.

Author Biography:

Mark Smith was a member of the U.S. Foreign Service for nearly 29 years, retiring in 2009 at the rank of Counselor. Before his assignment at the USC Center on Public Diplomacy in September 2008, he served as Cultural Affairs Officer at the U.S. Embassy in Rome from 2004 to 2008. The Rome assignment was his second in Italy; he served previously as Information Officer at the embassy from 1992 to 1996.

Mark Smith joined the Foreign Service in 1981, and was sent to Lisbon for his first overseas assignment. From 1983 to 1986, he served as Assistant Information Officer at the U.S. Embassy in Moscow, where he was a member of the embassy team that negotiated a new cultural exchanges agreement with the Soviet Union. The fifteen months of negotiations produced an accord signed by President Reagan and General Secretary Gorbachev in Geneva in November 1985, enabling cultural exchanges between the two countries to resume after a six year hiatus following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

In 1988, he began a four year posting as Branch Public Affairs Officer at the U.S. Consulate in Zagreb. During those turbulent years, he witnessed the fall of Communism in Eastern Europe, the collapse of Yugoslavia, and the outbreak of war in Slovenia, Croatia, and Bosnia. He completed his tour in Zagreb just as the U.S. formally recognized Croatia as an independent country.

Following his first Rome assignment, he returned to Washington as Team Leader for Democracy and Human Rights in the I Bureau (now the Bureau of International Information Programs) of the United States Information Agency. During the summer of 1997, he was seconded to the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe as spokesman for the OSCE's elections monitoring mission in Albania. In the fall of 1998, he moved to the State Department as Public Affairs Advisor to the Special Representative on Kosovo and Dayton Implementation; for the next year, during the NATO military intervention in Kosovo, he took the lead in preparing the Department spokesman to respond to questions on Kosovo at the daily press briefing. From 2000 to 2004, he served as Information Officer at the U.S. Embassy in Berlin. Smith was the U.S. Public Diplomat in Residence at the USC Center on Public Diplomacy at the Annenberg School from 2008–2009.

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