

The real catastrophe

No amount of Nato bombing will make Milosevic see sense in Kosovo

Why Kosovo? Why, of all the current civil wars and humanitarian horrors, is it Kosovo that now summons British troops to the colours? Or put it another way, why does a bloodstained shroud only have to wave over a Balkan village for otherwise intelligent people to take leave of their senses?

Yesterday the West tossed another gauntlet before the Yugoslav leader, Slobodan Milosevic. All previous ultimatums have been bluffs, and he has called them. In response to a month of Nato sabre-rattling, he has unleashed on Kosovo a pre-emptive scorched-earth campaign of medieval brutality. Now squadrons of bombers are waiting to pulverise his country, and 10,000 Nato troops stand ready to invade from Macedonia. Yet a BBC interviewer yesterday could gasp "How can Milosevic be so stupid?" A wise general never asks that question of his enemy, only of his friends.

In the early 1960s, Americans considered it unthinkable that a modern President such as John Kennedy could entangle the United States in a third land war in the Far East within 20 years. It was simply beyond imagining that, in a nuclear age, American boys would ever again die fighting in distant jungles. The world was too safe and Kennedy too shrewd and too liberal to make such a mistake. Besides, America was omnipotent. The orientals would be no match for the rolling thunder of the world's mightiest air force.

The historian Barbara Tuchman famously addressed the puzzle of Vietnam and concluded that, in the matter of war, little had changed since the fall of Troy. In *The March of Folly*, she related how each crisis was confounded by vain and hesitant leaders, by fears of retreat, by deafness to unpalatable advice and by a constant belief "that there was no choice". Kennedy had to take America into Vietnam to prove he was tough on communism, and Lyndon Johnson to prove that "I am not going to lose it". After half a million dead, it was lost. Nothing was gained, and it appears nothing was learnt.

I cannot find a single strategist to give me a level-headed outline of Britain's war aims in Yugoslavia. Everything said by Tony Blair and others in the Commons yesterday amounted to fine words and posturing: "Punish Milosevic . . . teach

him a lesson . . . send a message . . . credibility of Nato at stake". So far, a year of intervention has been a disaster for those whom it was meant to benefit. A minority of Kosovan militants have been encouraged to believe that Nato troops will help them to win their freedom from the Serbs. They have committed atrocities, and provoked counter-atrocities from the Serbs. They have provoked a powerful and ruthless Government to repress areas of the country which it had previously ruled undemocratically but not murderously.

The objective set out by Mr Blair yesterday appears to be to bomb the Serbs into granting partial autonomy to Kosovo. It is scarcely credible that a serious person can believe this will be done by bombs — least of all after the Iraqi experience — and Mr Blair was unable to say how. The action seems certain both to kill more civilians and to provoke bloody retaliation against the Kosovans which Nato is powerless to prevent. What kind of humanitarianism is that?

The policy appears to be rooted in a belief that President Milosevic was "made to see sense by bombing" in Bosnia. As General Sir Michael Rose, the former commander in Bosnia, angrily repeated yesterday, this is just not true. The real prelude to the 1995 ceasefire was the Serbs losing a land war with the Croats in southern Bosnia and fighting to a stalemate round Sarajevo. Mr Milosevic had already achieved his strategic goal of de facto partition. If bombing "brought him to his senses" then, why has the threat of more severe bombing not done so now?

Bombing is irrelevant. The issue in all territorial disputes is the military balance on the ground. In Kosovo that balance is now overwhelmingly Serbian. Nato spin is

that bombing "will help Mr Milosevic to retreat" and that "he cannot possibly win". I am sure the Wehrmacht thought the same in Yugoslavia in 1940, to its cost. Last year the British Government sent 3,000 troops as part of the 10,000 Nato force in Macedonia. They were to help to get Western monitors out of Kosovo in the event of danger. Then they were to go in and "keep the peace" at the invitation of both sides. Now, according to one of their commanders, they are to "separate the combatants and disarm them", a feat that for thirty years has defied the British Army in Northern Ireland. Next week, if Mr Blair is not cruelly deceiving the Kosovans, the objective may have to be to confront 40,000 Serb troops in open battle.

This is not so much mission creep as mission stampede. It is madness posing as morality. But if it happens, it does give point to William Hague's question yesterday: why did Nato not act sooner before it allowed Mr Milosevic to deploy his full army on his southern front facing Nato? If British troops are to die in the cause of Kosovan autonomy, this delay will seem criminally negligent.

The frantic hope of the interveners must be that Mr Milosevic might, yet again, offer them some fig-leaf for their retreat. He has virtually invited a bombing raid, which may make Nato feel better for a while, but what is surely inconceivable is that the Serb leader will suddenly withdraw what is one of Central Europe's biggest armies from defending what Serbs regard as their territory. He may bluff and bluster yet again. Yet as the Tories indicated, and most Labour MPs believe, there is still not the will among any Nato country to invade any part of Yugoslavia and confront Mr Milosevic's army on the ground.

Even suppose, just suppose, a

miracle occurs. Suppose Mr Milosevic does back away, then what? The objective as stated by Mr Blair is for Serb and Albanian Kosovans to live in peace with each other in an autonomous, democratic province of Yugoslavia. The implicit model is Bosnia. Yet for almost four years Bosnia has been a UN protectorate under a High Representative, and it is likely to stay that way for the foreseeable future. The country is militarily dependent on Nato and financially dependent on aid, with one of the world's most subsidised populations, costing the rest of us more than \$1,000 per head a year.

The attempt to make Bosnia a democracy is described this week in a devastating analysis by David Chandler, *Bosnia: Faking Democracy after Dayton* (Pluto). It is a farce. The country is ruled by an army of some 50,000 foreign soldiers and UN staff, who run or regulate its executive, its bank, its police force, its aid distribution and its media, holding periodic "elections" that are no more than tribal opinion polls. They are upholding a temporary peace and a vast edifice of international job-creation. They will never leave. As Chandler points out, "the one solution that has not been advocated by the international community . . . is that of letting the Bosnian people begin to work out their own way forward".

The desperate irony of the present crisis is that the least worst outcome for the Kosovans is to become such a UN colony. To achieve it they will have to endure enough bloodshed to induce Nato leaders to match threats with deeds, to invade and somehow drive Serb forces off Kosovan territory. The suffering will be horrific and the result for Kosovo will be not autonomy but merely freedom from the Serbs.

The fact is, we should have left Kosovo's separatists to fight their own battles, as we normally leave separatists round the world. We should have offered such help as charity can supply. But charity no longer wins headlines. Only bombs do that. When the blood flows, we yearn to meddle. When the meddling is mixed with machismo, it gets out of hand. It has now brought Nato possibly and Kosovo certainly to a catastrophe. Of course the fault lies with the monstrous Milosevic, but not all the fault.

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