

NATO'S PLAN: Now that the dust has settled it's time to assess how it fared

[Author's title: Bombers, Ground Troopers, and Negotiators]

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Throughout the 78 day war of NATO against Yugoslavia, and of Serbian forces in Kosovo against the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), Western analysts debated NATO strategy with great fervour. Now the dust has settled and the time is ripe for a preliminary assessment of the three strategist groups: Bombers, Ground Troopers, and Negotiators. How did they fare?

Bombers are strategists who supported NATO's bombing strategy. They initially predicted that the bombing campaign would bring a quick acceptance of NATO's demands, as promised by U.S. Secretary of State Madeline Albright.

When this did not happen, Bombers used arguments about preserving NATO's credibility to justify continued bombing of Yugoslav military targets. They urged that this was a war of 19 nations against 1, the airforces of the world's technological giants against the ground forces of a small, low-income country. It was, the more aggressive of them claimed, a veritable high-tech turkey shoot.

After a few weeks of bombing military targets, refugees were streaming out of Kosovo by the tens of thousands but Yugoslav military capacity was still largely intact. The emphasis of NATO bombing shifted to destruction of the infrastructure of Serbia as a means of demoralizing the Serbian population. This strategy of "raising the price" of spurning NATO demands was put most bluntly by Bombers like Thomas Friedman of the New York Times, who demanded: "Let us have a real air war... It should be lights out in Belgrade, every power grid, water pipe, bridge, road and war-related factory has to be targeted." Civilian casualties, of course, were a key component of raising the price in this manner.

To the extent that bombing served to bend the Yugoslav leadership to NATO demands, it worked by demoralizing the Serbian population. As many as 2000 Yugoslav civilians were killed by NATO bombs, and by early June cities like Belgrade were regularly deprived of electricity and water. The damage to property in Serbia -- including bridges, schools, hospitals, and cultural facilities -- has been estimated in the tens of billions of dollars, and the toll was mounting. Under these conditions, the end of the war came as a relief for most Serbian citizens.

Bombing directed at Serbian military targets, on the other hand, was extremely ineffective. For example, NATO had insisted that it had destroyed dozens and dozens of Yugoslav tanks. Independent assessments currently judge that NATO planes hit only 13 real Serb tanks, destroying three and damaging 10, while hundreds of bombs were either dropped on decoys or missed their targets altogether. That NATO bombs vaporized 5,000

Yugoslav troops and injured another 10,000, as claimed in the official statistics released at the end of the bombing, now seems highly unlikely.

As the Bombers defended the twists and turns of NATO's bombing strategy, they were criticized by Ground Troopers, a group that in Canada included columnists like Gwynne Dwyer. Because NATO demands seem to have been largely met without the use of ground troops, the analytical capabilities of Ground Troopers have been called into question. Ground troopers, however, can claim that the threat of sending in ground troops may have led to increased receptivity to NATO's demands -- the threat was probably more effective than damage inflicted on the Yugoslav military by NATO's bombs. More importantly, the Ground Troopers tended to judge NATO strategy in terms of its effectiveness in meeting NATO's stated objective of protecting Kosovar-Albanians. If that was the objective, and if it was an objective justifying great risks, then NATO should have engaged the Serbian army on the ground in Kosovo rather than punish civilians in Serbia to convince the Yugoslav government to withdraw its forces.

The analysis of the Negotiators, the largely anti-war camp of strategists, has been downplayed in the campaign to portray the events beginning March 24 as a "successful, casualty-free 11-week air war." In Canada the Negotiators were best represented by former Major-General Lewis McKenzie. He pointed out from the very outset that bombing would dramatically escalate the humanitarian catastrophe it was supposed to prevent.

The main "achievement" of 11 weeks of bombing was to give NATO forces a larger hand in the occupation of Kosovo than they would otherwise have had. The death and destruction could have been cut short by about a month if a deal had been done back in early May when German efforts to negotiate a ceasefire were scuttled by the bombing of the Chinese embassy. The whole campaign could probably have been avoided if at Rambouillet the NATO side had avoided impossible demands and had merely pushed for entry of a UN force in Kosovo.

In summary, Bombers played a useful analytical role in clarifying that demoralization of Serbia's civilian population became a central component in NATO strategy. The Ground Troopers rightly emphasized that it would have been more moral for NATO soldiers to join their KLA guerilla allies on the ground against the Yugoslav army than to drop bombs on Serbia from the safe height of 15,000 feet. The Negotiators made a strong case that much better results could have been achieved with a shorter bombing campaign or no campaign at all.

Differences among Bombers, Ground Troopers, and Negotiators have been obscured by the victory speeches of NATO politicians paying tribute to NATO unity. In reality, NATO divided sharply as soon as surgical strikes failed to bring about a quick capitulation. Playing to domestic opinion, Clinton held steady as the quintessential Bomber, Blair transformed into a vociferous Ground Trooper, and the German, Italian, and Greek leaders became Negotiators. On balance, the evidence suggests the superiority of the Negotiators' analysis. This at least is a common lesson being drawn in the

diplomatic circles of continental Europe, where sober analysts are asking: if NATO's war against Yugoslavia was a success, what would constitute failure?

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