

*Canadians have a stake in Kosovo* (original title: *Five Rules for Making Sense of Kosovo Coverage*, by Osvaldo Croci and Brian K. MacLean, Laurentian University)

Unlike Italians, Canadians cannot hear the roar of fighter planes flying off to drop bombs on Yugoslav targets. We may therefore feel detached from events. But we are not. Canadian CF-18 fighter planes, manned by Canadian pilots and purchased with your tax dollars, are now bombing another country. Our tax dollars are being systematically used to blow up bridges, wreck factories, and explode power generation and fuel storage facilities. In addition to this planned destruction of "military" targets, there is the inevitable "collateral damage": the killing of civilians and the levelling of centuries-old monasteries and historic monuments. Canadian taxpayers are obviously getting a lot of "bang for the buck" in the physical sense of the phrase, but is this really a wise use of our money? As taxpayers, to ask this question is only prudent. As citizens, it is our duty.

To answer the question, however, is no easy task. The conflict is taking place in a distant country with a complicated history of which most of us know "zip." Kosovo, the centre of the conflict, is effectively closed to journalists and TV cameras. As retired major general Lewis MacKenzie put his decision not to enter Kosovo as a reporter: "I decided that NATO fighters would probably have a difficult time seeing a 12-inch PRESS sign from a few thousand feet and at 965 kilometres per hour."

We cannot see what is going on and we, the Canadian public, lack the historical knowledge to put the events in context. Most of us are dependent on news media divorced from the action. So how do we cope? The general rule for media interpretation, of course, is always to ask: how good is the evidence? For the Kosovo case, we suggest five specific rules.

First and foremost, recognize that the NATO bombing campaign cannot be justified by traditional principles of international law. It must therefore be justified on humanitarian grounds. This means that the Serbs must be portrayed as extraordinarily evil, not just evil relative to the Albanian Kosovars against whom they have been waging a civil war. An independent observer might have a hard time determining whether Serb actions against Albanians in Kosovo prior to NATO bombing were any worse than, say, actions against the Kurds in Turkey (a NATO member). This is true even judging from official Canadian pronouncements prior to October 1998, when Lloyd Axworthy and Art Eggleton signed on for NATO air operations being planned against Yugoslavia. To justify the bombing of Yugoslavia on humanitarian grounds, however, consistency demands that the Serbs be portrayed as markedly more evil than the strong side in other conflicts NATO has seen fit to treat differently.

Second, note that the humanitarian justification for the NATO bombing of Serbian military targets is that, as stated in Axworthy's April 7 address on "Kosovo and Human Security," traditional conceptions of global peace are old-hat. Modern foreign policy must deal not with national security but with "human" (that is, civilian) security. Yet if the very rationale for our bombing intervention is civilian security, it becomes difficult to accept responsibility for the deaths our bombing inevitably inflicts on the very civilians

we have so exalted with words. Thus, NATO spokespersons have been evasive when questioned about civilian casualties resulting from NATO bombing and have even been caught falsely attributing casualties to the Serbs.

Third, be swayed by arguments and evidence, not by the use of rhetoric. In particular, be wary of the rhetorical use of terms such as genocide, apartheid, crimes against humanity, concentration camps, bloodbaths, massacres, systematic rape, and atrocities. Under conditions of civil war, both sides will typically attempt to seize territory, force expulsions, kill soldiers, and commit brutality towards civilians (as the more hot-headed opponents and proponents of Quebec separatism would do well to recognize). Brutality towards civilians is particularly likely in a guerilla war like that being waged by the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), where the demarcation between civilians and fighters is murky at best, as the U.S. learned in fighting the Viet Cong and as we might relearn if NATO troops were sent into Yugoslavia against the Serbs. We need to judge events based upon objective descriptions, not by rhetoric spun to paint one side as Nazis led by the reincarnation of Hitler.

Fourth, realize that Albanian Kosovars -- even the most pitiful refugees but especially leaders of the KLA -- are not necessarily objective sources of evidence about Serb deeds. In late March, relying upon KLA sources, NATO announced that Kosovar nationalist leaders, including the moderate Ibrahim Rugova, had been executed by Serb forces. In what proved to be a major embarrassment for NATO, the leaders surfaced a few days later on TV.

Finally, be wary that what is left unsaid is often as important as what is said. Sometimes demonization of the enemy is blatant, as when magazine covers feature a harsh-looking photo of Yugoslav President Milosevic, tinged with red, and surrounded by flames. Sometimes it is subtle. The need for evidence to support claims about a systematic rape campaign by Serb soldiers in Kosovo has been artfully eliminated by the NATO decision to publicize the distribution of "morning-after" pills to female Kosovar refugees. Reading the foreseeable criticism unleashed by the Vatican and the subsequent response hurled at the Vatican by the UN Population Fund, we are lulled into assuming that systematic rape is indeed occurring, when all we really know is that NATO has been issuing pills.

One final point to keep in mind: the top leader for the NATO side is a politician known in his own country as Slick Willie. When President Clinton thunders to a gathering of U.S. newspaper editors about Milosevic raping "thousands upon thousands" of Kosovars, keep in mind that as recently as last month some of these same editors, based upon Juanita Broaddrick's testimony in the Wall Street Journal, were penning editorials with titles like "Is Clinton a Rapist?"