

Kosovo War: U.S. Performance Review

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Overview of the War: In March 1998, violence erupted in the Balkans. Yugoslavian President Milosevic conducted oppression of the ethnic Albanians in Kosovo, a region considered as an integral part of Serbia, Yugoslavia. The animosity between the Serbs and Albanians over this region was historically intense. The region enjoyed autonomy until Milosevic removed it in 1989. The Kosovar Albanians strenuously opposed the move and wanted independence while Milosevic wanted to the complete control. NATO was concerned over the human rights and regional stability issues but not the self-determination of the region. With its failed negotiation attempts, NATO launched military intervention in March, 1999, expecting Milosevic to end the attacks and restore Kosovo's autonomy after a few days of bombing. But Milosevic escalated the violence and it was only in the second month of the protracted war that NATO prevailed.

Benchmark: The judgment of the following people is based on an evaluation of their performance against their roles and responsibilities. However, it must be noted that their performance is often a result of collective decision making so who exactly did what is not 100% clear-cut. Besides, the existence of friction is also to be considered.

(1) U.S. President *Bill Clinton*: 6.5

Constitutionally, the President is the chief executive of agencies, chief of the state and commander in chief of the country's armed forces. As leader of the nation, Clinton's leadership left much to be desired in this case. He displayed some political timidity under his overcautious assumptions of domestic politics: a Congress disinclined to humanitarian intervention abroad and a public with zero tolerance of casualties for such interventions. Therefore, he never tried to make the case to these two fronts. In addition, U.S. didn't play a very significant leader role in NATO. In waging the war, Clinton readily accepted the

assumed political constraints, whose validity remained a question. As a result, his commitment to the war and the military preparation was not sufficient. As Clausewitz puts it, war requires the utmost use of force. U.S. and the NATO apparently didn't act that way. Clausewitz also had a distinction of "limited" and "absolute" wars in terms of objectives and means. However, in this modern case, although Kosovo only constituted limited interest to the U.S., U.S. probably needed to allocate more resources. The logic is that if U.S. does not make serious efforts to win, then what is the point of launching the war at all? The constant lack of credible threat in deterring Milosevic was the biggest strategic mistake that Clinton made. Although the necessity of the use of ground force and the adequacy of use of air power alone are still under debate, Clinton's frequent ruling-out of the ground force was equal to a reassuring announcement to Milosevic. To the same effect, Clinton also made clear that America did not intend to get involved in a protracted war. "War does not consist of a single short blow", says Clausewitz, but U.S. and NATO thought a few days of antiseptic bombing would be effective enough. Clinton's preoccupation with domestic politics was understandable as friction is inevitable in reality, but he really did not have to make such an explicit effort to clarify his bottom line to his enemy. In the pre-war situation, U.S. and NATO already lost much time in the exclusive use of diplomacy without the backup of credible military threat. The Christmas warning was not repeated and therefore lost its credibility. Now that the war started, the credible threat problem remained. There was not enough military preparedness in the first stage of the war, which projected a weak and slow NATO image. To the contrary of NATO's expectation, Milosevic simply escalated violence when the bombing started. Clinton's hesitation and unpreparedness made NATO act only reactively and incrementally.

However, after the NATO summit, Clinton put in place integrated strategies that combined military, economic, diplomatic and other means. He no longer explicitly

excluded the possibility of ground invasion. NATO military campaign intensified. Oil embargo and attack on Milosevic's economic assets were used as economic pressure. Russia was dragged in to pressure Milosevic. Again, as Clausewitz says, war is a true political instrument, a continuation of political intercourse carried out with other means. Politics is the objective and war is the means. When the military strategies were in line with the political objectives, in this case, making Milosevic accept NATO's core demands, the military strategies turned out effective. Therefore, in view of Clinton's initial mistakes (-) and his corrections later (+), I will grade him 6.5 out of 10.

(2) Secretary Of Defense William Cohen: 6

Secretary of Defense Cohen is the principal defense policy advisor to Clinton and he is responsible for the formulation of general defense policy and other policies related to the Department of Defense (DoD), and for the execution of approved policy. Under the direction of Clinton, Cohen exercises authority, direction, and control over the DoD, which is responsible for providing the military forces needed to deter war and protect the security of the United States. Cohen emphasized the importance of consensus in NATO. In his view, U.S. could not afford to take any unilateral action in intervention and he absolutely would not recommend that to Clinton. What he said had certain truth but it had some inherent contradictions to the requirement of rapid action. Another inherent contradiction is the trade-off between American leadership and the unity of the allies. Friction is everywhere and reaching consensus without a leader takes time, yet to deal with crisis needs quick response. U.S. and NATO lost much time before the war and even well into the war. In this sense, Cohen's recommendations were not very good. Moreover, there was a paradox of pressure on Milosevic and reliance on him for negotiation. As Professor Odom said, with military intervention whose only purpose was to keep the peace without effective government to maintain that peace, the operational victory on the battle fields, even if

attained, is not sustainable. (Michael Howard also said to win the heart of the people of the enemy is important.) Milosevic was apparently not to be trusted as capable of effective government. Cohen could have thought more out-of-the-box so less constraint will be put on NATO itself. However, to provide a surrogate government would require a lot of resources on the part of U.S. and NATO and sometimes it is not very politically justified to do so as it may well be a matter of internal affairs of sovereign states. In view of all these and taking into account the limited power of Cohen defined by his role, I would give him a grade 6 out of 10.

(3) Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Henry Shelton: 6

The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff is responsible for the coordination of military elements in DoD. He is the principal military advisor to the President, the National Security Council, and the Secretary of Defense. The military unpreparedness was undesirable in this war. Moreover, the overstated “zero casualties” syndrome in military actions supplanted the accomplishment of the missions as priority. There is also a view that airpower alone is not enough to subdue the enemy. Since Shelton was the military advisor and coordinator, he may well be blamed for all these. However, according to Snow and Brown, CJCS is given essentially no power. And I have also sensed from the book that he did not have a significant say in this war, e.g., although he and Cohen indicated on Feb. 3 that the Pentagon was planning to make 2000-4000 troops available in a possible Kosovo Force, Clinton said the following day that no decision was made. (Winning Ugly, P.74) His performance was certainly not commendable but in view of his inherent limit given the organizational structure, I will grade him 6.

(4) SACEUR (Supreme Allied Commander Europe) Wesley Clark: 5.5

SACEUR is the senior military commander for NATO's Strategic Command Europe. He is also a U.S. Flag or General officer. In the case of Wesley Clark, he is the

Commander-in-Chief, United States European Command, a part of the Unified Combatant Commands, which are responsible to the President and the Secretary of Defense for accomplishing the military missions assigned to him. The operational chain of command runs from the President to the Secretary of Defense and then to him.

The air bombing had a slow start. Clark requested the deployment of Apache helicopters 48 hours after the war began and there was a considerable delay in getting the approval and deployment. The cost involved was high but they were not actually used in the battles. This again shows the lack of commitment on the part of U.S. But the fact that Clark requested the resources only after the war began was really a discredit to his performance. Clark believed that the Serb forces in Kosovo would need to be directly defeated. However, it turned out that the more decisive aspect of the air campaign was the attack on Milosevic's civil infrastructure in Belgrade, the real center of gravity. In the later stage of war, Clark did start to work on the ground force option, which at least posed a credible threat. In his book *Waging the Modern War*, he talked about the complicated dynamic between SACEUR and various players in the Allied force. Clark admitted that the "most stressful part of the operation was dealing with Washington", meaning the ambivalence, apathy and indecision he encountered amongst the American political and military leadership, and the constant rounds of conflicting direction. Although his performance was not so good, after all, the war was won. And again, he was limited in his own power, I would grade him 5.5 out of 10.

List of References:

Stephen Biddle: *The New Way of War?*

Wesley Clark: Waging the Modern War

Clausewitz: On War

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Michael Howard: *When Are Wars Decisive?*

William Odom: *Intervention for the Long Run*

Snow and Brown: United States Foreign Policy