Fools’ Crusade

Yugoslavia, NATO and Western Delusions

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Introduction

TURNING POINTS

At the end of November 1999, an important new movement against “globalization” emerged in massive protests against the World Trade Organization meeting in Seattle. Strangely enough, only months earlier, when NATO launched its first aggressive war by bombing Yugoslavia, there had been remarkably little protest. Yet NATO’s violent advance into southeast Europe was precisely related to the globalization process opposed in Seattle. Few seemed to grasp the connection. Was it really plausible that overwhelming military power was being wielded more benevolently than overwhelming economic power? Or that the two were not in some way promoting the same interests and the same “world order”?

Apparently, many people on the left, who would normally defend peace and justice, were fooled or confused by the claim that the “Kosovo war” was waged for purely humanitarian reasons. The altruistic pretensions of NATO’s Kosovo war served to gain public acceptance of war as the appropriate instrument of policy. This opened the way for the United States, in the wake of 11 September 2001, to attack Afghanistan as the opening phase of a new, long-term “war against terrorism”.

The bombing of Yugoslavia marked a turning point in the expansion of U.S. military hegemony. For the first time, a European country was subjected to the type of U.S. intervention usually reserved for Central America. It also marked the end of Germany’s postwar inhibition about foreign military intervention, and saw Germans returning to the scene of Nazi crimes with a clear conscience. For the first time, NATO abandoned its defensive posture and attacked a country that posed no threat to its member states, outside the NATO treaty area, and without seeking UN Security Council authorization. International law was circumvented in the name of an alleged higher moral imperative. A precedent was set. When the United States subsequently arrogated the right to bomb and invade Afghanistan on moral grounds, its NATO allies could only meekly offer to tag along. In a world with no more legal barriers
to might proclaiming itself right, there was nothing to stop a U.S. president from using military force to crush every conceivable adversary.

For all its dubious origins, the 1991 Gulf war against Iraq was waged against a militarized single-party dictatorship, condemned by the United Nations for invading another country. And yet, remarkably, the war against Yugoslavia aroused less public protest than the war against Iraq. A significant difference was that the war against Yugoslavia was waged by the political center-left. The NATO governments were mostly led by liberals and “Third Way” social democrats. The attack on Serbia was endorsed by politicians and intellectuals identified with the left, who exhorted the public to believe that the United States and its allies no longer made war to advance selfish interests, but might be coaxed into using their overwhelming military might to protect innocent victims from evil dictators. This caused considerable confusion in the very segments of public opinion that would normally be expected to oppose war. In most Western countries, only a few drastically weakened fragments of left-wing movements and isolated individuals still remembered that humanitarian intervention, far from being the harbinger of a brave new century, was the standard pretext for all the Western imperialist conquests of the past. The left was too confused, feeble, or isolated to provide a vigorous challenge to the official claim that the NATO war against Yugoslavia marked a new era in global morality. On the contrary, much of the most pertinent challenge came from right-wing analysts, whose minds were kept relatively clear, either by awareness of traditional realpolitik or by libertarian suspicion of official propaganda. Not since the Socialist Parties of Europe rallied to their governments’ war programs in 1914 has the left opposition to war collapsed so ignominiously and with such good conscience.

WAR REHABILITATED

The message that war was once again an acceptable instrument of politics was all the more resounding in that it was delivered by center-left governments composed of those very political parties – Social Democrats and Greens – which in the 1980s had attained a large measure of ideological hegemony within their generation in both Eastern and Western Europe by holding out the promise of a peaceful world. On the eve of the Soviet implosion, there was
talk of a “peace dividend” in the form of resources that could henceforth be diverted from military production to meeting social needs. With the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the big Western peace movements of the 1980s seemed to consider that their job was done. Because the period of superpower stand-off had been called the Cold War, the expectation was widespread that ending it would bring a new era of peace and disarmament.

This turned out to be a brief mirage. A decade after the fall of the Berlin Wall, U.S. military spending again resumed its upward spiral, “Star Wars” was back on the agenda, Washington was pressuring its allies to spend more on armaments, NATO was expanding eastwards, and the United States was using military diplomacy to gain influence across the southernmost tier of the former Soviet Union.

Recently rewarded with a peerage and the post of NATO Secretary General for his incomparable performance as British defense secretary during the Kosovo conflict, former Labour Party disarmament advocate George Robertson declared on 2 December 1999: “The time for a peace dividend is over because there is no permanent peace in Europe or elsewhere.” This acceptance of war was couched in moral terms: war was not only inevitable, it was good. NATO had taken it upon itself to overrule the postwar international legal order set up around the United Nations and decree unilaterally that war was no longer the scourge of mankind, the worst of all “humanitarian catastrophes”, but rather, when employed by enlightened Western powers, the proper means to protect “human rights” and punish the wicked. The last war of the twentieth century was a promise of more war in the century to come. That promise was fulfilled with a vengeance with the attack on Afghanistan and President Bush’s vow to pursue war against “evil”, with no end in sight.

“During the Cold War, we would not have gotten ourselves involved in a dispute like the one in Kosovo”, one commentator observed. “In the days when the Soviet Union contained us, power realities would have kept the U.S. from interfering. It is because we are now free to indulge in backing up our ideals and sympathies with cruise missiles that we are there.” In choosing to get involved, without any obligation to do so, and in disregard of the UN Charter and international law, “the United States is not serving any particular interest of its own. It is acting out of altruism. This is a new kind of approach to the use of power in world politics.
It was called for by a line of U.S. presidents, from Wilson to Bush to Clinton, who consider this to be a new era in world politics, in which the rules have changed."

In Kosovo, wrote a mainstream American columnist, the United States and its allies “intervened without UN authorization, in violation of Serbian sovereignty and probably of international law”. But this was nothing to be “hung up” about, since “Sometimes the only way to stop bad men from doing bad things is with force. Lawyers won’t get the job done.” The scenario is straight out of a classic Western movie: “bad men” must be stopped from doing “bad things”, presumably by “good men” – and women, of course. A “new era in world politics”? Or the same old story?

THE HUMANITARIAN ILLUSION

For years, a chorus of non-governmental organizations and commentators reproached the United Nations, Europe, and the U.S. government for failing to take action, which came to be understood as military action. As a result, NATO intervention appeared to be a response to public demand. NATO’s 1999 war was presented to the public as a happy ending to the serial drama of Yugoslavia as recounted by the media throughout the previous decade. Many significant factors were systematically ignored. Other elements, sometimes distorted and sometimes simply untrue, were constantly repeated. The result was a collective fiction told and retold, written and rewritten, by very many people, including reporters under pressure to meet deadlines, editors further simplifying the story for readers assumed to be both ignorant and impatient, paid propagandists and public relations officers, pontificating commentators, prejudiced editorialists, ambitious politicians, outright liars – as well as by talented opportunists and conformists sensitive to the direction the wind was blowing and the buttered side of the bread. Endlessly repeated, this collective fiction has become a formidable myth perpetrated by the powerful institutions and individuals whose own credibility is at stake in its maintenance. The fictional saga of Yugoslavia in the 1990s goes something like this:

Yugoslavia was a “prison of peoples” where the Serbs oppressed all the others. It was destroyed by the rise of an evil leader, Slobodan Milošević, who set out to create a “Greater Serbia”
by eliminating other peoples in a process called “ethnic cleansing”. Those other peoples sought to escape, by creating their own independent states. The Yugoslav army, actually Serbian, invaded them. In Bosnia, the invading Serbs tried to drive out the Muslims, who wanted to perpetuate an exemplary multi-ethnic society. The Serb ethnic cleansing killed 200,000 unarmed Muslims while the international community looked on and even prevented the Muslims from arming in self-defense. At Srebrenica, the United Nations allowed the Serbs to commit genocide. Only U.S. bombing forced Milošević to come to the negotiating table at Dayton. The resulting agreement brought peace and democracy to multi-ethnic Bosnia. However, the international community had failed to save the Albanian majority in Kosovo from apartheid. In 1998 Madeleine Albright warned that NATO must intervene to keep Milošević from “doing in Kosovo what he could no longer get away with in Bosnia”.[4] In January 1999, Serbian security forces massacred defenseless civilians in the Kosovo village of Račak, awakening the NATO governments to the need to act to stop genocide. After the turning point of Račak, the Serbs were summoned to peace negotiations in Rambouillet, in France. Milošević stubbornly refused to negotiate. NATO had no choice but to start bombing Yugoslavia. Masses of Albanians were deliberately driven out according to a preconceived plan called “Operation Horseshoe”. Finally, Milošević gave in, and NATO liberated the Kosovars from their oppressors. Conclusion: from now on, humanitarian intervention constitutes a principal mission for NATO, as the military arm of an international community henceforth committed to protection of human rights.

Almost everything about this tale is false. Unfortunately, disproving falsehoods, especially established falsehoods, is a hard task. What has been repeated over and over becomes “obviously true”. Very many facts challenging the dominant myth have been reported by news agencies. But such reports are not the ones that major mainstream media highlight. They mostly end up in the wastebaskets of editorial rooms or deleted from computer screens. Those who have believed and helped spread such belief by public advocacy cannot easily reverse themselves. The collective fiction creates its own collective defense. Once the Yugoslav imbroglio was dramatized as a new version of the Nazi Holocaust, any effort to return to
reality was stigmatized as the equivalent of “Holocaust denial”, and critics were dismissed as “revisionists” and “negationists”, comparable to apologists for Nazi crimes.

GLOBALIZATION AS U.S. HEGEMONY

The economic and institutional factors that animated the Cold War in the United States remained as vigorous as ever after the collapse of the Soviet Union. More so, in fact. The military-industrial complex was intact and triumphant. It no longer had to counter domestic fears that an arms race could lead to war with the other nuclear superpower. While one superpower, exhausted, dropped out of the arms race, the other looked ahead to unlimited opportunities. In the words of Madeleine Albright, “What’s the point of having this superb military ... if we can’t use it?” The use of military power had to be justified, however. There was to be no “conversion” of military industry to production of civilian goods. The only conversion was ideological: the identification of new enemies and threats.

With the Soviet communist challenge to the capitalist system lying in ruins, U.S. leaders had no reason to accept the sort of “historic compromise” with socialism apparently imagined by the discarded transition leader Mikhail Gorbachev and various European social democrats. Soviet-style political command of the economy had been discredited by incompetence, corruption, and the absence of democratic control or even availability of accurate information. The former Soviet Bloc countries became “transition” countries, as they scrambled to learn how to play the liberal capitalist game. A minority of well-placed individuals made fortunes. Millions of people in the former Soviet Bloc lost their jobs as well as security as basic social services disintegrated.

The elimination of the Soviet system was seen as the triumph of a single dominant model of social, political, and economic organization, imposed by the United States. The uncontested hegemony of the U.S. model is the meaning of “globalization” as it is being carried out by Western transnational corporations, supported by “this superb military”.

Globalization has meant worldwide empowerment of the transnational private sphere, dominated by ever more powerful corporations, financial institutions, and wealthy individuals. The function of government is reduced to creating conditions favorable
to private investment. This is accomplished by deregulation, privatization of public service, and cutbacks in public spending for social welfare. Every activity must offer prospects for competitive return on investment capital or be abandoned. Throughout the world, government policies are judged, approved, or condemned decisively not by their populations but by “the markets”, meaning the financial markets, movements of investment capital outside all political control. Foreign investors rather than domestic voters decide policy.

As the ability of nation-states to protect the interests of their citizens declines, the importance of citizenship diminishes in turn. The democratic process is unable to provide citizens with the protection they need to earn a decent living, stay healthy, and educate their children. In compensation, group identities of all kinds offer the prospect of mutual assistance, protection, or at least solace to populations struggling to cope with changes beyond their control. People turn to identity groups – national, religious, “ethnic”, etc. – for protection. It is surely not by chance that in the post-communist era one of the most successful forms of socio-economic organization has been the cross-border Mafia, based on national or ethnic loyalty.

Meanwhile, regulatory functions are transferred to a new international bureaucracy, totally outside any democratic process. Globalization is advanced institutionally by such bodies as the International Monetary Fund and the World Trade Organization, which set the rules and arbitrate between the dominant economic powers. These institutions severely limit the power of governments to protect public interests, whether citizens’ welfare or the environment, from the demands of private business. The stalled “Multilateral Agreement on Investment” (MAI) would go even further in shifting vital political decision-making power to the private sector, acting in obscure, non-elected bureaucratic tribunals.

CONVERSION OF THE THREAT

In a mono-polar world, a “threat” is anything that might weaken the hegemony of the single superpower. Under President George W. Bush, this has been made explicit. However, the main thrust of U.S. foreign policy has been essentially the same for over half a century. The gist is that the liberal capitalist model favored by the United States is the only permissible model for future
development. Large parts of the world may lag far behind, but there must be no viable attractive alternative. Chaos is preferable to the wrong kind of order. Elimination of any viable alternative model of economic development is the essence of “globalization”, just as it was the prime motive for the protracted war against communism. Communism was only one form of the basic, intolerable alternative: a government of a sovereign state determined to control its own resources and markets. The existence of the communist “threat” was an ideological asset to the United States, which could use certain aspects of the Soviet system, notably its harsh repression of political dissent, as the justification for its own intervention, even in places such as Central America where U.S. intervention was already the rule before communism existed. Control of oil resources, not “communism”, was the reason why the CIA engineered the military overthrow of the bourgeois reformist government of Mohammed Mossadegh in Iran in 1953. Control of the fruit plantations was the reason why the CIA engineered the overthrow of the reformist government of Guatemala in 1954. The communist threat was an all-purpose ideological excuse.

In Vietnam, the United States failed in its most ambitious project: to impose a Western-style, Catholic-led satellite regime on the territory of an Asian nation whose population was already fully mobilized to liberate itself from a century of colonial oppression. The project failed ignominiously. Nevertheless, the destruction wrought by bombs, napalm, and chemical defoliants, followed by economic sanctions and a cynical alliance with China, prevented Vietnam from emerging as an attractive alternative model of development. After the semi-failure in Vietnam, a shift took place, toward a mixture of edifying rhetoric and destructive action. The great lesson of Vietnam drawn by American strategists was that it was easier to arm a guerrilla movement than to combat one, and easier to destroy an unfriendly state than to build a friendly one. Nation-building was abandoned in favor of destruction pure and simple. The following period was marked by the use of every possible means to sabotage undesirable regimes: criminal mercenaries, drug traffickers, obscurantist religious fanatics. Jonas Savimbi in Angola, the Contras in Nicaragua, death squads throughout Latin America, even Pol Pot after his defeat by the Vietnamese benefited from more or less covert aid from the CIA, while American diplomats preached the gospel of human rights to the world. The *chef d’œuvre* of that policy of destruction was undoubtedly the use of Islamic
mujahidins in Afghanistan to entrap the Soviet Union – the declared goal of Jimmy Carter’s openly cynical advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski.

Gorbachev was already in power and seeking an historic compromise with the West and a way out of Afghanistan when the United States dramatically reinforced the mujahidin in 1986 by supplying them with Stinger missiles able to shoot down Soviet planes. The only U.S. aim was to humiliate the Soviets as much as possible, afterwards abandoning Afghanistan to chaos and misery, and at the mercy of obscurantist tribal warlords.

Between Democratic and Republican administrations there is no fundamental difference, even though the Democrats often prefer to stress positive and ambitious goals such as “nation-building” and “human rights”. Republicans tend to stress national interests and threats from enemies: communists, the Evil Empire and, starting with Reagan, the “war against terrorism”. Presidents come and go but the continuity of U.S. policy is ensured by a small elite of policy-makers who remain outside party politics – and often outside public view. An influential member of this foreign policy establishment is Morton Abramowitz, whose career has involved him with both the Afghan mujahidin and Kosovo Albanian rebels. In 1986, as assistant secretary of state for intelligence and research in the Reagan administration, Abramowitz helped arrange delivery of the Stinger missiles. The collapse of the Soviet Union obliged U.S. policy-makers to redefine the “threat” justifying foreign intervention. The “war on terrorism”, launched by President Reagan in the early 1980s, was suffering by the end of the decade from a dearth of active terrorists. As president of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in the early 1990s, Abramowitz headed a project to develop a new U.S. foreign policy for the post-Cold War era. Rather than simply identifying “threats”, especially at a time when few threats could be seen, a successful new policy needed to combine promotion of U.S. interests with proclamation of American “ideals”.

“American ideals and self-interest merge when the United States supports the spread of democracy around the globe – or what we prefer to call ‘limited’ constitutional democracy, meaning rule by a government that has been legitimized by free elections”, was the conclusion of the Carnegie experts, summed up in the Endowment’s 1992 publication *Self-Determination in the New World Order*. “The vision of a ‘new world order’ since 1990 has been a
world with one superpower – the United States – in which the rule of law supplants the rule of the jungle, disputes are settled peacefully, aggression is firmly met by collective resistance, and all people are justly treated.” This future “rule of law” is not to be confused with existing international law. Rather, it will be developed under U.S. influence. “International law – as it always has done – will respond and adjust to the behavior of nations and the actions of multilateral institutions.” A major feature of this “new world order” will be the weakening, even the destruction, of national sovereignty, the basis of existing international law. The sovereignty of the single superpower cannot be seriously challenged, but for other nations, the concept may be outdated.

The sovereign nation is being broken down subtly by the pressures of economic globalization. It may also be undermined from within, by domestic insurgencies. In the post-Cold War world, the Carnegie Endowment study noted, “groups within states are staking claims to independence, greater autonomy, or the overthrow of an existing government, all in the name of self-determination”. In regard to these conflicts, “American interests and ideals compel a more active role.” This may go so far as military intervention when self-determination claims or internal repression of such claims lead to “humanitarian calamities”. In the future, the authors announced in 1992, “humanitarian interventions will become increasingly unavoidable”. The United States will have the final word as to when and how to intervene. “The United States should seek to build a consensus within regional and international organizations for its position, but should not sacrifice its own judgment and principles if such a consensus fails to materialize.”

This text is significant because it expressed the vision of precisely the people who later led the United States and NATO into the Kosovo war. The selected experts included Richard Holbrooke and Madeleine Albright, among others, who were to become senior officials in the Clinton administration. One of the two co-authors of Self-Determination in the New World Order, David Scheffer, became Albright’s special ambassador for war crimes issues. The other, Morton Halperin, served as the State Department policy planning director, offering advice on war with Serbia. Another participant in the Carnegie project, Leon Fuerth, former Vice President Al Gore’s foreign policy expert, was put in charge of administering sanctions against Serbia.

Abramowitz continued to act from behind the scenes as an eminence grise for Albright. He helped found the high-level
International Crisis Group, a chief policy designer for Bosnia and Kosovo. He was omnipresent behind the scenes of the Kosovo drama, both in making policy and in shaping elite business, government, and media opinion. He acted as an advisor to the Kosovo Albanian delegation at the Rambouillet talks, whose programmed breakdown provided the pretext for NATO bombing.

The same group of advisors that theorized military intervention for “humanitarian” reasons went on to make it happen. Events in Kosovo were influenced and interpreted to fit the pattern of a “humanitarian calamity” requiring U.S. military intervention. Perhaps this was sincere, in line with the psychological tendency to see, in an obscure field of vision, whatever one expects to see. One way or another, the prophets fulfilled their own prophecy.

The relationship between Afghanistan in 1979 and Kosovo in 1999 is uncanny. In both cases, out in front there was the discourse on human rights, and in the background, drug traffickers, retrograde clan warlords, and even Osama bin Laden. It is noteworthy that until the 11 September attacks, the United States had consistently chosen to ally with the most obscurantist fundamentalist Islamic fanatics, whose center is Saudi Arabia, against nationalist secular governments. Islamic fundamentalism is compatible with U.S. globalization in that it cares nothing for national boundaries and does not threaten to establish national governments that can serve as a progressive model of alternative development. The plight of Afghan women was of no concern to the Western champions of “human rights” so long as the enemy was the Soviet Union, whose support of the education of girls and women incurred the murderous wrath of the U.S.-backed “freedom fighters”.

Osama bin Laden belongs to the same category of enemies as the former Panama strongman Manuel Noriega: discarded assets. After being used to serve U.S. aims, they turned out to have aims of their own. But a superpower can use almost everything. The war against discarded assets provides an opportunity to strike moral poses against the crimes formerly tolerated or encouraged by the United States in its fight against the other category of enemies: potential alternatives.

In a way, Yugoslavia became an enemy both as a discarded asset and as a potential alternative. When the Soviet Bloc collapsed, non-aligned Yugoslavia lost its value to the West as a strategic asset. As a nominally socialist country with considerable Third World relationships thanks to its leading role in the Non-Aligned