

OPINION

The first principle of war

If stopping the slaughter of innocents was an objective, then the United States and NATO have already failed.

By Robert B. Adolph Jr.

The first principle of war is objective. A wise seafarer was once quoted as saying, "If you don't know your destination all winds are foul."



Whether the United States and NATO want to characterize their ongoing bombing of Yugoslavia as war or not is irrelevant. They are at war.

Adolph For the U.S. Armed Forces, knowing the objective is the key critical element in successfully prosecuting that war.

War exacts terrible punishments on those who engage in battle without a clear and unambiguous understanding of their ultimate purpose.

American military professionals in the Pentagon draw up plans to support the stated objective of the National Command Authorities — the president and the secretary of Defense.

All military means are subsequently brought to bear in the attempt to ensure that the objective is met. This planning is extraordinarily complex and enormously difficult; but the one overriding factor that ties military air, ground and sea plans together is objective. If a plan or portion of a plan does not clearly support the objective, it is often scrapped or modified in favor of plans that do.

The problem from a military strategist's perspective is the seeming lack of a clear and unambiguous objective in the current bombing of Yugoslavia. It is clear from presidential and secretary of Defense pronouncements only that "we will stay the course."

It is also clear that the Serbian

leadership can stop the war at any time, simply by withdrawing its troops from Kosovo. The ultimate objective appears to be humanitarian in nature — meaning it is the United States' and NATO's "wish" to stop the ethnic cleansing and restore Kosovo to some form of political autonomy from Belgrade, thus ensuring a hopefully peaceful and democratic future for Kosovars.

A wish is not an objective. Hope is not an objective either.

That wish and hope may now be changing. It is difficult to imagine Kosovars re-joining the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia after the horror of recent events.

What happens if the Serbian leadership refuses to knuckle under? Saddam Hussein has endured nine years of various air campaigns against military targets in Iraq without saying "uncle." Ultimately, it took a ground campaign to push Saddam's forces out of Kuwait. Air forces could not have accomplished that alone.

The U.S. and NATO air forces continue to punish Serbian military forces daily. But punishment is not an objective.

If stopping the slaughter of innocents was an objective, then the United States and NATO have already failed. The horror stories of hundreds of thousands of refugees are proof of that failure.

The ultimate objective of the Gulf War was to "restore Kuwait to sovereignty." That objective was achieved and the coalition forces, for the most part, went home — mission accomplished and victory declared.

Kosovo is not now and has never been sovereign.

The only thing that everyone agrees on is that the Serbian leadership is thoroughly reprehensible. The Serbian leadership does have an advantage, though. It is their only advantage, but it is a powerful one. They know their objective.

Their objective is twofold: to ethnically cleanse Kosovo and to defend their national sovereignty. This objective is brilliantly clear and unambiguous.

They are well on their way to achieving the former, and have little fear concerning the latter without a U.S. and NATO commitment to a ground campaign. So far, the National Command Authorities have stated that "there are no plans for a ground war."

Without a clear and unambiguous war objective, the United States and NATO have jumped onto a very slippery slope. It is absurd to think that there are no plans for a ground campaign.

Hopefully, the American political and military leadership are engaging in a form of semantic misdirection.

Military strategists in the Pentagon would have known long before the air war began that it quite probably would not achieve the desired result. Desire is not an objective, either.

In retrospect, it was a foregone conclusion that America would lose the war in Vietnam. Our war objectives changed with time and presidential administrations. The North Vietnamese objective never wavered.

America's technological might and material superiority was for naught when faced with an adversary with real and well-defined purpose.

Hopefully, that wise seafarer is whispering into the ears of the National Command Authorities. Objective remains the first principle of war for good reason. Currently, all winds are foul.

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