

ROBERT B. ADOLPH JR

The problem with bombing ... and with dictating morality



'How much pain are we willing to endure in the attempt to bend the Serbian political leadership to our will?'

SARAJEVO, BOSNIA—The problem with bombing is that no bombing campaign in history, by itself, ever succeeded in convincing anybody of anything.

Except once: the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan, which ended the second world war in the Pacific.

Studies conducted at the end of World War II concluded that the bombing of Great Britain and Germany actually served to harden the resistance of the combatant populations. Likewise, the American bombing campaigns in Indochina were dismal strategic failures.

This may be the case with Yugoslavia as well. The more NATO air strikes against Serbian military targets, the more the Serbs might hunker down. The problem with bombing is that without a ground campaign, the whole exercise could be ultimately pointless.

We bomb for two reasons. First, we bomb because America and NATO are extremely sensitive to the possibility of casualties. Our air forces are the best in the world. The chances of casualties are lessened greatly by the use of advanced aircraft and pilotless cruise missiles.

Second, we bomb because it is what we do best. Our aviation and bombing technology has made quantum level improvement over the last decade. Our technological abilities have far outstripped those of our potential adversaries.

We can strike the Serbs with relative impunity because they cannot respond in kind. We have not succeeded in modifying Saddam Hussein's behavior despite multiple limited air campaigns since the end of the Gulf War.

The Serbian leadership appears to be every bit as stubborn and unyielding as Saddam. You will recall that Operation Desert Storm began with an air campaign, but ended with a knockout punch delivered by American and allied ground forces.

The air campaign could not have been successful in driving the Iraqis out of Kuwait without the ground component.

If the Clinton Administration is serious about changing Serbian behavior, which is clearly reprehensible, a ground assault into Kosovo must be contemplated. More bombs may not do it.

There's the rub. A ground attack by American and NATO forces will sustain casualties. How many lives will the Western powers pay to obtain peace and justice for the Kosovars now living in refugee camps in Macedonia,

Montenegro and Albania?

Pragmatic self-interest, once the bedrock of Western capitalist-democratic societies, is being replaced slowly by the notion that issues of morality should be in the forefront of emerging foreign policy. The Clinton administration claims that our involvement in the Balkans is based on "humanitarian" concerns alone.

Everyone feels pity for the hundreds of thousands of refugees who fled the terror of Serbian forces' ethnic cleansing.

America is the world's leader, like it or not. The question is, are we willing to stay the course in the Balkans? Are we willing to spend American lives to secure the liberty for Kosovars?

How much pain are we willing to endure in the attempt to bend the Serbian political leadership to our will?

America left Vietnam after paying the price of over 58,000 dead and uncounted tens of thousands scarred and maimed for life.

America left Lebanon after one car bomber took the lives of more than 200 Marines. America left Somalia after 18 of our soldiers died in one gunfight.

Our adversaries made us pay a price that the American people would not bear. The sacrifices made by these men were made in vain. Their lives were forfeited to no good end because of the disconnect between our national leaders' lofty aspirations and the American peoples' hardheaded good sense.

Soldiers, Marines, airmen and sailors understand that they may be called upon to make the ultimate sacrifice. All they ask is that their lives not be wasted—as was the case in Vietnam, Lebanon and Somalia.

The objectives of humanitarianism seem noble. Coming to the rescue of a beleaguered people is admirable. Standing by and doing nothing while others die strikes us as immoral.

Is emerging American foreign policy now going to be ruled by humanitarian impulses? Do we possess the wisdom and the right, even if we possess the might, to dictate to the world's multi-ethnic and multi-religious population how they should conduct themselves morally? □

Robert B. Adolph Jr. is a retired Special Forces lieutenant colonel. He holds master's degrees in international affairs and national security studies and strategy. He has served as adjunct faculty in government and history departments at various universities. Today he lives and works in Bosnia.