

Norman Mailer

Milosevic and Clinton

Milosevic, as many of us have been told by now, grew up an orphan. And his wife's mother might as well have been the protagonist in a Greek tragedy. A Yugoslav partisan, she was captured by the Nazis, tortured, surrendered crucial information, was released, and then was executed by the leader of her partisan group, who happened to be her father.

It is obviously a family history to push beyond the measure of just about all of us. Nonetheless, we use it for political interpretations. Our good Hillary, caught on the cusp between psycho-history and psycho-babble, was heard to remark to Larry King that the Milosevics were looking to turn their inner tragedies out upon the Kosovars.

This about expresses the depth of our comprehension of what we have been up to in Kosovo. What may be more to the point is not Milosevic's personal pain, nor his wife's, but the identity he acquired as a young Communist in a Yugoslav regime at odds with Stalin but nonetheless profoundly influenced by the Soviet sense of virtue. The good Soviet operator was a dedicated bureaucrat who could climb the greasy pole of Party advancement skillfully enough to beat his fellow tigers. Milosevic had to be one of the wildest, toughest, most treacherous, canny, tricky, ruthless, and resourceful human beings Madeleine Albright had ever encountered. She, too, had climbed a greasy pole, but it was as a hostess charming up the Beltway's A-list. That was no mean feat either, but it hardly compares to the vertical rise of Master Milosevic. We must face it. She was no match for him. Nor was Clinton or William Cohen. Neither of them ever served in the Armed Forces.

Combat, for those who get into it, is about as strange and mysterious an experience as first sex. To have, therefore, such men (plus Madeleine Albright) functioning as our command trust for the Kosovo campaign is analogous to asking a young fellow innocent of carnal experience to become a marriage counselor. A genius could probably surmount the difficulty.

Let us look, rather, at Milosevic's strategy. If, before the bombings began, he had already committed all the heinous acts he has since perpetrated, why, he would probably have been doomed. The outrage of the world would have been immense. So, he waited. He set up a

trap. Seven months ago, in October, threatened with air strikes by NATO, he made promises about his future conduct in Kosovo which, over the next months, he resolutely failed to keep. Negotiations, therefore, began again. They came to climax at Rambouillet. But, he refused to appear. Albright, enraged, decided that he was probably, at bottom, soft. If we not only threatened him again but, indeed, carried it out, he would give in quickly. So we began the bombing in cooperation with NATO. They could use a stunning quick war to gild their 50th anniversary. We brought up the curtain with smart bombs.

Milosevic was more than ready. NATO stepped into a trap whose depth is best plumbed by the weight of the malevolent tricks Milosevic had collected in his career. Did no one anticipate that an all-out ethnic cleansing would now begin immediately? Within 24 hours, columns of refugees were in motion and the houses, towns and cities of Kosovo were ablaze. "Genocide" had begun.

If Clinton and NATO have done nothing else, they have certainly leached out the power of that word. The Holocaust is the foundation of its meaning. So the word should be used with caution. Cambodia gave us genocide, as did Rwanda, but ethnic cleansing, with its loss of homes, passports, town and country, its random rage and slaughter, is still not equal to the murder of millions. Ethnic cleansing is better seen as psychic genocide. For the majority who undergo its travail, the past is amputated from the present.

Bombing, in turn, is another form of psychic genocide. Except that now it is your future which is amputated from your present. You no longer know that you have a future. Your present sense of expectation—what you will do tomorrow, or next week, next year—is as crippled as a house with one wall sheared off. What, then, have we accomplished? So soon as the bombing commenced, Milosevic's atrocities increased probably by 50 or 100 times over what he had perpetrated before it all began.

Yet such chaos and horror was further magnified by the horror of what NATO was doing to the Serbs. The average Serb, after all, had no more to do with this war than the average Kosovar. Chaos, therefore, was being laid upon chaos. And there was no military plan for a

conclusion to the war. Just hopes, plus unconscionable arrogance in NATO's exposition of its good motive.

For that matter, do we want to contemplate Clinton's personal motives too closely? Given how badly he was mucked-up by impeachment nausea, it is hard not to believe that apart from his avowed motive that we must fight genocide everywhere, he might also have been looking to shift the media's agenda. (Indeed, he has succeeded at that.) On the other hand, those same impeachment details had soiled the presidency to a point where Clinton could not ask Americans to shed blood. So, he had to give the store away. We will bomb, he said, but we will not use ground troops.

This is now at the core of a prodigious national embarrassment. War is never there to be easily defended, but even so, there is a visceral difference between a combat devoted uniquely to bombing, and participation in a ground war. Ground war is always cruel beyond human comprehension, but there are occasional examples of heroism or sacrifice, and since both of the adversaries lose young men, there is, with all else, a hint of shared sorrow on both sides. Over the years and decades, that can even permit a reconciliation.

Bombing, however, is oppression. If the bombing is done with the notion that our own blood is not to be shed, it is obscene. In large part, people who are bombed will never forgive the aggressor. We can hardly wish to meditate upon the detestation of America that we are seeding in all the poor populations of the world.

Offering his explanation of Clinton's reluctance to send in ground troops, Tony Blair said, "... Kosovo is a very long way from Kansas." It is. It may even be too far away. If we as a nation are not willing to shed our blood to help the Kosovars, then it is time to disabuse ourselves of the notion that we can prevent genocide, actual or psychic. All we can do, using our present methods, is proliferate havoc.

What, then, might we have done?

Well, after Rambouillet failed, we could have built up ground troops on the periphery of Kosovo, and given resonance to such a threat by a sustained leaflet-dropping over all of Serbia delineating the outrages Milosevic had committed. Then, if Milosevic still refused to negotiate, a

ground war fortified by an air war could have commenced. While there would have been notable European and American casualties, such a war would probably have been won by NATO in short time. Of course, this was the last solution Clinton could afford.

Since the above is armchair strategy, the real question is: What do we do now?

The answer. Make peace. Negotiate. Milosevic's problems in rebuilding are already great enough to force him to allow the final results to appear ambiguous. If he is looking for future financial credits—and how would he not?—then he cannot afford to claim victory. From NATO's side, not wishing to look too sheepish at descending to a negotiated peace, stories of the outrages committed against the Serbs by the Kosovo Liberation Army are likely to surface. Clinton, in his turn, will be looking to retain enough face to enable his spin-doctors to gain a draw for him. Given that large Clinton heart which suffers so dependably for all of us, he is quite likely to make the cut. NATO, however, may not. So much the worse for NATO. Its primary function ended with the Cold War, and it has proved propagandistic and witless in its desire to work up a second function. It may be better if reconstituted as a serious strike force, an international Foreign Legion ready to die if necessary in the service of Europe and America.

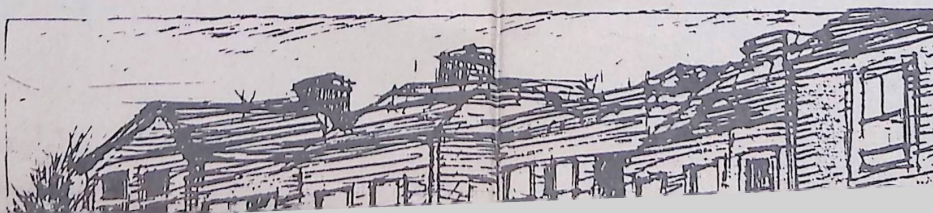
If there should prove to be insufficient volunteers for such a special, dedicated, and conceivably most mortal army, then let us at least recognize that when it comes to standing up to genocide in any form, we are not prepared to sacrifice our sons and daughters, nor, our blood is not as ready as our mouth. Such self-awareness, while humbling, might even be of worth for the future. It can serve to inhibit those acts of programmatic compassion which all too few of us ever feel to the quick. Virtuous emotion that is manipulated at national and international levels is odds-on to breed catastrophe.

Norman Mailer's most recent book is "The Time of Our Time."

Paul Simon and Clifford Johnson

Relief for Victims of Social Devastation, too

This month's tornadoes in Oklahoma and Kansas were among the worst in decades. For devastated communities, the challenges in the storms' aftermath are overwhelming. Nearly everything has been destroyed and must be rebuilt from ground up. And as it did after the North Dakota, the mudslides in and the hurricanes in Florida, government is stepping in to



William Raspberry

Futile Bombing

"Exactly what will we negotiate?" my friend wonders. He was responding to a recent column on Kosovo, in which I suggested negotiation makes more sense than the continued aerial bombing.