

A Clear Victory for Air Power

Andrew L. Stigler

NATO's Empty Threat to Invade Kosovo

Why did Yugoslav

President Slobodan Milošević surrender control of Kosovo to NATO on June 9, 1999? Two reasons are most commonly cited: (1) the likelihood of continued and intensified NATO air strikes, and (2) the alliance's threat to launch a ground war. The distinction between the two is an important one. If NATO's ground threat did not play a role in Milošević's decision to surrender, then Operation Allied Force, launched on March 24, 1999, demonstrates the ability of coercive air power—and air power alone—to achieve a major political goal. If, however, the ground threat factored into Milošević's decisionmaking, then the Kosovo conflict serves as an example of the inherent difficulty of relying on air power alone to achieve political goals, even under favorable conditions.

The conventional view of the war in Kosovo holds that the threat of ground invasion was an essential element of NATO's success. According to Daniel Byman and Matthew Waxman, this threat "probably played the largest role in motivating Milošević's concessions."¹ Ivo Daalder and Michael O'Hanlon argue that the turning point occurred when U.S. officials began to threaten a decisive invasion.² Benjamin Lambeth contends that "there [was] no question that by the end of May, NATO had yielded to the inevitable and embraced in principle the need for a ground invasion. . . . There is also every reason to believe that awareness of that change in NATO's position . . . figured importantly in [Milošević's] decision to capitulate."³ In his memoirs, NATO's former Su-

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1. Daniel L. Byman and Matthew C. Waxman, "Kosovo and the Great Air Power Debate," *International Security*, Vol. 24, No. 4 (Spring 2000), p. 7. For similar arguments, see Anthony H. Cordesman, *Lessons from the Air and Missile Campaign in Kosovo* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 1999), p. 169.

2. Ivo H. Daalder and Michael E. O'Hanlon, *Winning Ugly: NATO's War to Save Kosovo* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings, 2000), p. 214. Daalder and O'Hanlon, however, explore a number of counter-arguments. See *ibid.*, pp. 160–161, in particular.

3. Benjamin S. Lambeth, *NATO's Air War for Kosovo: A Strategic and Operational Assessment* (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND, 2001), p. 76.

preme Allied Commander in Europe (SACEUR), Gen. Wesley Clark, concurs with this assessment.⁴

This article argues that the conventional wisdom about the role of the ground threat in ending the war in Kosovo is mistaken, and it offers new evidence to support this claim. The signals sent by both President Bill Clinton's administration and NATO that they were preparing to shift to a ground operation were weak and appear credible only in hindsight. Both politically and militarily, NATO sent strong signals to Milošević that it was highly averse to casualties and risk taking, signals that were still being sent even toward the end of the conflict. Serious obstacles to a ground operation (e.g., the lack of consensus among NATO's members in support of an invasion), though broadly discussed by U.S. officials and the media, were never confronted. Moreover, even if NATO's members had agreed on the need for a ground operation, Milošević could have been assured that military preparations for such an offensive would have required a lengthy deployment period, a period that would have promised him numerous opportunities to find a negotiated solution to the conflict. The possibility of a U.S. or NATO invasion of Kosovo appears to have played no more than a minor role in the final round of negotiations with Milošević, and the recollections of key participants usually omit it entirely. I argue that Milošević did not change his mind about NATO's strategy because (1) there are no strong indications that he did, (2) there are many reasons and some evidence that suggest that he did not, and (3) NATO's ground threat remained weak. Thus, the threat of continued and intensified aerial bombardment was the only necessary military condition for Milošević's decision to accept NATO's terms. As a result, the conflict offers an example of the successful use of coercive air power.⁵

The Kosovo case is important for scholars and practitioners alike. Much of the recent scholarship on the use of coercive air power casts doubt on its ability to independently obtain major political and strategic goals. The most prominent work in this regard is Robert Pape's *Bombing to Win*.⁶ Pape's theory argues

4. Wesley K. Clark, *Waging Modern War: Bosnia, Kosovo, and the Future of Combat* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2001), p. 425

5. Although the roles played by different coercive strategies are also of interest, they are clearly less important than determining whether coercion did or did not succeed, and as such are not addressed in this article.

6. Robert A. Pape, *Bombing to Win: Air Power and Coercion in War* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1996). Two other important works are Daniel L. Byman, Matthew C. Waxman, and Eric Larson, *Air Power as a Coercive Instrument* (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND, 1999); and Daniel Byman and Matthew Waxman, *The Dynamics of Coercion: American Foreign Policy and the Limits of Military Might* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

that coercive air campaigns are likely to meet with success only when the coercer can credibly demonstrate that the target's defensive strategy will lead to certain defeat.⁷ If NATO's ground threat did not influence Milošević's decision to surrender, then the war over Kosovo is a significant counterexample to Pape's theory of coercion. The Kosovo case not only provides a considerably more recent application of air power than the 1991 Persian Gulf War; it is also better documented than the more recent conflict in Afghanistan (and is likely to remain so for some time).⁸

Some of the arguments against the role of the ground threat presented in this article have been suggested by others.⁹ Barry Posen, for example, has written that Clinton's attempt to generate a ground threat was not backed by action and that invasion was "a distant prospect."¹⁰ Stephen Hosmer has similarly noted that an invasion was not imminent and that, in postwar interviews, Serbian officials indicated almost no concern about a ground threat.¹¹ This article, in addition to developing Posen's and Hosmer's arguments more fully, presents a comprehensive case against the importance of the ground threat in ending the war in Kosovo.

The article proceeds as follows. In the first section, I show that the ground threat surfaced only toward the end of the conflict, and that factors other than the ground threat and the promise of further air strikes did not play a role in the war's conclusion. In the second section, I briefly review the arguments used to assert the importance of the ground threat in Milošević's decision to surrender. In the third section, I present three counterarguments to the conventional wisdom. I conclude by discussing the factors that actually caused Milošević's surrender, and I briefly explore the policy implications of NATO's coercive success in Kosovo.

7. For Pape's claims concerning the denial strategy and its superiority to punishment and other strategies, see Pape, *Bombing to Win*, pp. 51–53, 69–79, 314–326.

8. Although our understanding of Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan is still inchoate, it probably was not an example of coercion, which means that the war over Kosovo is still the most recent prominent example of military coercion.

9. Barry R. Posen deals with the NATO ground threat in a single paragraph with two extended footnotes. Posen, "The War for Kosovo: Serbia's Political-Military Strategy," *International Security*, Vol. 24, No. 4 (Spring 2000), p. 74. Stephen T. Hosmer deals with the issue in a six-page chapter. Much of his account, however, explores the tangential issues of Yugoslavia's ability to defend itself against invasion, Milošević's fears of intensified bombing, and the possible ramifications of a ground war. Hosmer, *Why Milosevic Decided to Settle When He Did* (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND, 2001), pp. 109–114.

10. Posen, "The War for Kosovo," p. 74, n. 83.

11. Hosmer, *Why Milosevic Decided to Settle When He Did*, pp. 109–114.

Timing of the Ground Threat

The ground threat was not a significant factor in the Kosovo war before the last weeks of the conflict. NATO's strategy clearly relied on coercive air power, and Milošević understood this to be the case. Other factors that could have diminished the significance of NATO's coercive air campaign—attacks by the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) and the effects of NATO's bombing on the Serbian military—were not important in Milošević's decision to surrender.

THE ONSET OF THE WAR

Scholars agree that, for much of the conflict, NATO (including the United States) chose not to prepare for a ground war because it believed that such "decisive military action" would not be necessary.¹² Beginning with Milošević's decision to crack down on the KLA and Kosovar Albanians in March 1998, many NATO members found themselves increasingly disposed toward the use of military force to halt what they saw as a gradually unfolding humanitarian disaster. In July and August 1998, NATO planners presented the North Atlantic Council (NAC) with a range of military options for dealing with a potential Kosovo crisis; options that involved the use of ground forces generated "very little interest" and were shelved.¹³ More important, as the crisis unfolded in mid-1998, President Clinton publicly rejected the use of ground troops, telling nine Republican members of Congress: "I can assure you the United States would not support [ground] options."¹⁴ U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright's public diplomacy before the opening of the Rambouillet conference in February 1999 (which was NATO's final effort to resolve the crisis diplomatically) warned that if Milošević refused to comply, he could expect a sustained NATO air campaign; there was no mention, however, of a ground assault.¹⁵ After the war began in late March, official U.S. and NATO support for the alliance's coercive strategy was common. In May the White House still believed that "by calibrating the use of force from the air, NATO [could] change Milošević's calculations about his self-interest." There was also open talk of avoiding even a discussion of ground troops to assure the alliance's approval

12. Daalder and O'Hanlon, *Winning Ugly*, p. 65.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 34.

14. Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 55.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 77.

for continued bombing.¹⁶ These and other official statements sent early and unmistakable signals to the world that NATO was not contemplating a ground operation.

MILOŠEVIĆ'S PERCEPTION OF NATO'S STRATEGY

Until the last weeks of the war, Milošević seemed to recognize the coercive nature of NATO's strategy. As Richard Holbrooke, Clinton's special envoy to the Balkans, recalled of his meeting with the Yugoslav leader on March 22, "I said to him, 'You understand what will happen when I leave here today if you don't change your position . . . ?' And he said: 'Yes, you will bomb us.' And there was a dead silence in the room. . . . I said: 'I want to be clear with you . . . it will be swift, it will be severe, it will be sustained.' And he said, in a very matter- of-fact way, very flat: 'No more engagement, no more negotiations, I understand that you will bomb us.'"¹⁷ Russian officials similarly perceived NATO's strategy as coercive. General Clark reports that several Russian military leaders had told him: "We used airpower in Afghanistan, and it failed for us. It will fail for you too."¹⁸

In a lengthy interview in late April 1999, Milošević discussed NATO's strategy. He stated: "[U.S.] leaders are not strategic thinkers. Short-term quick fixes, yes. They said let's bomb Yugoslavia and then figure out what to do next. . . . NATO believes it can pick on a small nation and force us to surrender our independence. And that is where NATO miscalculated. You are not willing to sacrifice lives to achieve our surrender. . . . The U.S. Congress is beginning to understand that bombing a country into compliance is not a viable policy or strategy. And . . . we can see the day when lesser nations will be able to retaliate. America can be reached from this part of the world." When asked how the conflict could be resolved, Milošević replied, "A political process, not by more bombing."¹⁹

MILOŠEVIĆ AND THE KLA

The KLA's campaign against Serbian forces does not appear to have significantly influenced Milošević's decision to withdraw from Kosovo.²⁰ In-

16. John F. Harris, "Berger's Caution Has Shaped Role of U.S. in War," *Washington Post*, May 16, 1999, p. A1.

17. Quoted in Tim Judah, *Kosovo: War and Revenge* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 227.

18. Clark, *Waging Modern War*, p. 430.

19. Milošević interview with Arnaud de Borchgrave, United Press International, April 30, 1999.

20. For more on this point, see Posen, "The War for Kosovo," pp. 62–66; and Hosmer, *Why Milošević Decided to Settle Where He Did*, pp. 85–90.

deed, recent revisions of NATO's battlefield damage estimates challenge earlier assertions that NATO bombing had crippled the Serbs' ability to resist the KLA. A postwar conference of U.S. and British intelligence experts concluded that the Yugoslav army was only "marginally smaller" than it had been before the conflict.²¹ According to Hosmer, "Up to the moment of their withdrawal . . . [the Serbs] demonstrated a continued capability to dominate the battlefield in Kosovo."²² One reporter observed how "NATO commanders were surprised to see the robust [Serb] columns that eventually withdrew from Kosovo, and they concluded that the Yugoslav 3rd Army could have held out for weeks or even months."²³ Some have argued that the KLA made its most significant advances against the Serbs in its attack near Mt. Pastrik on May 26. Yet, as General Clark reports in his memoirs, the KLA soldiers "were not able to secure their objective."²⁴ Moreover, Western military investigators could find no evidence to support the KLA's claim that its fighters had killed hundreds of Serbs in the battle.²⁵ The KLA thus was not a major factor in Milošević's decision to surrender.

NATO'S LIMITED DAMAGE TO THE YUGOSLAV MILITARY

Despite its sustained bombing campaign, NATO did little damage to the Serbs' ability to control Kosovo.²⁶ In July 1999, about a month after Milošević's surrender, General Clark led a group, code-named the Munitions Effectiveness Assessment Team (MEAT), to ascertain the success of the air campaign against Serb military targets. The survey revealed that NATO had not destroyed nearly as much equipment as it had claimed. Shortly after the war, the alliance declared that it had destroyed 120 tanks, 220 armored personnel carriers (APCs), and as many as 450 artillery pieces.²⁷ In contrast, the MEAT survey found evidence of successful strikes against only 14 tanks, 12 self-propelled guns, 18 APCs, and 20 artillery pieces.²⁸ Such modest losses would not have hindered the Serbs' ability to field forces. Moreover, Milošević's claim to have lost only 576 soldiers and policemen was probably not too far off from the true figure.²⁹

21. Hosmer, *Why Milosevic Decided to Settle When He Did*, pp. 83–84.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 87.

23. Dana Priest, "A Decisive Battle That Never Was," *Washington Post*, September 19, 1999, p. A1.

24. Clark, *Waging Modern War*, p. 328.

25. Judah, *Kosovo*, p. 284.

26. For more on this point and supporting evidence, see Posen, "The War for Kosovo," pp. 63–66; and Hosmer, *Why Milosevic Decided to Settle When He Did*, pp. 80–90.

27. Daalder and O'Hanlon, *Winning Ugly*, p. 153.

28. Hosmer, *Why Milosevic Decided to Settle When He Did*, p. 83.

29. Daalder and O'Hanlon, *Winning Ugly*, p. 154.

These numbers suggest that NATO's bombing did not render Kosovo indefensible, nor would continued military action by the alliance have done so in the near future.

Evaluating NATO's Ground Threat

The remainder of this article analyzes the role of NATO's ground threat in the war over Kosovo. Although the case presented here is broad, it is important to recognize from the outset that undercutting a threat is often easy. Even a few contradictory signals can be enough to undo a broad diplomatic effort to generate a particular threat. This was certainly true in the Kosovo case—when NATO publicly disavowed all ground options, it unwittingly set itself a high threshold for any later efforts to signal a credible ground threat.

The claim that a NATO ground threat caused Milošević's retreat rests on three elements. First, Clinton publicly announced on May 18 that "we have not and will not take any option off the table,"³⁰ which proponents argue marked a significant revision of NATO's policy on the war.³¹ According to this interpretation, Clinton's efforts to signal a willingness to launch a ground campaign were pressed at the end of the war by a delegation led by Russian envoy Viktor Chernomyrdin and Finnish President Martti Ahtisaari, who met with Milošević on June 2 and 3 and warned him that NATO was likely to shift to a ground war.³² Proponents of the ground threat argue that Milošević could not have ignored such a blunt warning, particularly from Russia, his most important supporter.

Second, some analysts argue that the war had inadvertently put the alliance's future at risk, thus adding weight to the threat of ground operations.³³ Because NATO had committed itself to achieving a military success in Kosovo, these analysts contend, it would do whatever was necessary to win.

Third, NATO took concrete steps that, proponents maintain, increased the credibility of its ground threat. The most prominent of these was its decision in late May to increase its number of troops in the theater to 50,000, which could

30. Quoted in Katharine Q. Seelye, "Clinton Resists Renewed Calls for Ground Troops in Kosovo," *New York Times*, May 19, 1999, p. A10.

31. Daalder and O'Hanlon, *Winning Ugly*, p. 233.

32. See Judah, *Kosovo*, pp. 274–279; Daalder and O'Hanlon, *Winning Ugly*, pp. 166–174; and Hosmer, *Why Milosevic Decided to Settle When He Did*, p. 46.

33. Daalder and O'Hanlon, *Winning Ugly*, p. 159; Hosmer, *Why Milosevic Decided to Settle When He Did*, p. 42; and interview with U.S. National Security Adviser Samuel Berger, *Frontline*, February 22, 2000, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/kosovo/interviews/berger.html>.

have formed the nucleus of an invasion force. NATO also authorized improvements to the main road between Albania and Kosovo,³⁴ which some observers interpreted as another signal that NATO was preparing to launch a ground assault.

NATO's Weak Ground Threat

In this section, I offer three counterarguments that challenge the supposed significance of NATO's ground threat, a threat that at best the alliance only weakly communicated. First, NATO spokespersons and officials from its member states frequently undercut the threat. Second, much of the evidence cited as favoring a credible ground threat comes from postwar interviews of uncertain value. Third, NATO's conduct of the war signaled a strong aversion to casualties, and a ground assault would have entailed an obvious risk of significant (and possibly high) loss of life for NATO forces. Participants' accounts of the diplomacy just prior to Milošević's surrender suggest that the ground threat did not play a role in his decision to give in.

A POORLY SIGNED THREAT

Some analysts have interpreted President Clinton's May 18 declaration that all strategic options were on the table as an unmistakable signal of U.S. intentions to move toward a ground war.³⁵ Interestingly, although British Prime Minister Tony Blair had publicly agitated for a ground option since mid-April, his efforts had no discernable effect on the other European NATO members.³⁶ They all agreed, however, that U.S. intentions on the matter were of ultimate importance.

It is highly debatable whether the Clinton administration intended to press NATO for approval of a ground strategy. The lack of private diplomacy between NATO and Yugoslav officials suggests that Milošević had to rely on the West's public signals to ascertain NATO's intentions. To the extent that this was true, the Clinton administration's largely subtle signs that it was supposedly preparing to shift to a ground war strategy were unlikely to overcome the many signals to the contrary; nor were they likely to surmount NATO's pro-

34. Priest, "A Decisive Battle That Never Was."

35. See Daalder and O'Hanlon, *Winning Ugly*, p. 156; Hosmer, *Why Milosevic Decided to Settle When He Did*, pp. 112–113; and Judah, *Kosovo*, p. 270.

36. Daalder and O'Hanlon, *Winning Ugly*, p. 132.

foundly risk-averse record of conduct. In addition, some U.S. officials, NATO spokespersons, and members of the media indicated that there was considerable opposition to a ground campaign.

LACK OF PUBLIC AGREEMENT AMONG U.S. OFFICIALS. During the air war, there was ambivalence within the Clinton administration about the prospect of a ground invasion. On June 3, the day that Milošević began discussions with NATO commanders on his surrender, one reporter wrote that “the Pentagon’s senior commanders remain strongly opposed to mounting a ground invasion to drive Serbian forces from Kosovo.” Both the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Hugh Shelton, and the vice chairman, Gen. Joseph Ralston, argued that there was “insufficient domestic and international political support for sending ground troops into Kosovo.”³⁷ Similarly, Secretary of Defense William Cohen said that although President Clinton may have discussed plans for a ground force, “our commitment is to the air campaign.”³⁸ Such statements by senior U.S. officials greatly undercut the threat of a ground war, especially given the threat’s unmistakable vagueness. And this was the chorus being heard at a time when Milošević would supposedly have found the ground threat to be at its most credible. Congress was also sending mixed signals. In late April, it voted 249 to 180 to prohibit funds for ground troops unless Clinton first sought congressional approval for such a change in policy.³⁹ Furthermore, Congress’s reservations were noted abroad; Secretary of State Albright sometimes found herself in the awkward position of having to explain to U.S. allies why Congress had taken this vote while at the same time passing resolutions in support of U.S. troops.⁴⁰

NATO’S UNDERCUTTING OF THE THREAT. In response to questions on the possibility of a ground campaign, NATO officials consistently stressed that one was not being considered, that the air campaign was working, and that the members of the alliance supported the current course of action. Although willing to offer token support to the U.S. position that all options were on the table,

37. Steven Lee Myers, “U.S. Military Chief Firm: No Ground Force for Kosovo,” *New York Times*, June 3, 1999, p. A16.

38. “Clinton May Discuss Ground Option with Joint Chiefs: Cohen,” Agence France-Presse, June 2, 1999.

39. Charles Babington and Juliet Eilperin, “Clinton Signals Raids May Last 3 More Months: House Votes to Require Assent for Ground Troops,” *Washington Post*, April 29, 1999, p. A1.

40. Interview with U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, *Newshour with Jim Lehrer*, June 10, 1999, transcript no. 6447.

NATO spokespersons inevitably counterbalanced such expressions with words of confidence for the air war. Consider, for example, the comments of chief NATO spokesman Jamie Shea on May 27.

As I have always made clear, NATO keeps all of the options on the table, we have plans for all eventualities and those plans have not been torn up and thrown away. But having said that, it is SACEUR's view, and it is the view of all NATO governments, that the air campaign is working, it is increasingly effective, and provided it is maintained with the same intensity, with the same unity, it will produce the results that we want with the Yugoslav forces being forced to withdraw. And as I have said, the whole focus of our planning at the moment is not on an invasion force but on a Peace Implementation Force, and there we are moving ahead expeditiously. So nobody is asking for any change of strategy. The whole view of the Alliance is that the present strategy, providing we stick with it, is going to do the job. We haven't gone into any other scenarios.

When asked if General Clark had presented other options to the North Atlantic Council, Shea responded: "No, he hasn't presented other options to the NAC, we have not gone into any detailed discussion of any other option apart from pursuing the current strategy, which we are all committed to."⁴¹

Two days later, NATO spokesman Peter Daniel denied the suggestion that NATO was contemplating a shift to a ground campaign. "The strategy has not changed. I think you have heard from this podium, and the question has been posed on many occasions before. The air campaign, we think it will work. . . . There is no change."⁴² Given that a ground war would clearly be a last resort, such statements undermine any impression that NATO thought that its current strategy was failing and that a dramatic escalation was necessary.

In an interview after the war, Cohen explained why he believed that convincing the American public and U.S. allies of the need for a ground campaign would have been a difficult if not an impossible task.

It became clear to me that it [a ground war] was going to be a very hard sell, if not impossible, to persuade the American people that we were going to put up 150,000 or 200,000 American troops to go in on the ground. . . . The chiefs were split [as well]. There was strong opposition within the ranks as such. If you look at the terrain, you can understand why. I have seen it, and I think it would

41. NATO briefing, May 27, 1999, <http://www.nato.int/kosovo/press/b990527a.htm>.

42. NATO briefing, May 29, 1999, <http://www.nato.int/kosovo/press/b990529a.htm>.

have been a very difficult campaign. There were bridges [which] could have been dropped, with Milosevic's forces up in the hills just zeroing down on our forces. There could have been substantial casualties. And if we had started to suffer substantial casualties, I am convinced it would have turned into quite a contentious issue up on the Hill. . . . It was never a close call in getting a [European] consensus to put land forces in. There may have been one or two countries that said they'd be supportive. But out of 19 total, I doubt very much whether we could have gotten the consensus. I'm convinced we could not have. . . . I think it's easy to sit on the sidelines and say, if only we had led, they would have followed. But none of those people were part of these conversations. We found strong opposition. . . . It would have been very difficult to get the support of countries that were under enormous domestic pressure to not even participate in any way in Kosovo. . . . Those who said if we had only led . . . fail to appreciate the intensity of the opposition within those countries.⁴³

Given that Cohen's meeting with other NATO defense ministers on May 27 probably made him the last senior member of the administration to consult directly with the allies on possible escalation to a ground war, his words must be given considerable weight.

MEDIA FAILURE TO NOTICE A MAJOR SHIFT IN U.S. POLICY. In their coverage of Clinton's May 18 statement that all options were on the table, the media either dismissed it as a minor development, effectively ignored it, or raised questions about the serious obstacles to a ground war that had yet to be confronted. Under the headline "Clinton Resists Renewed Calls for Ground Troops in Kosovo," one reporter noted that "administration officials insisted that the President's comments did not signal a change in policy."⁴⁴ Another reported that "Clinton's more aggressive stance was designed principally as a stick in public diplomacy, seeking to encourage Milosevic to embrace a still-evolving settlement offer."⁴⁵ Still another reporter wrote that "there is little enthusiasm in the USA for expanding the war," and that Germany, Greece, and Italy were resolutely opposed to the idea.⁴⁶ The *Times* of London all but ignored the announcement, burying it in an article that focused on Germany's resistance to a

43. Interview with U.S. Secretary of Defense William Cohen, *Frontline*, February 22, 2000, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/kosovo/interviews/cohen.html>.

44. Seelye, "Clinton Resists Renewed Calls for Ground Troops in Kosovo."

45. John F. Harris, "Clinton Says He Might Send Ground Troops," *Washington Post*, May 19, 1999, p. A1.

46. David J. Lynch, "Weight of History Plays into Allies' Views on the War," *USA Today*, May 20, 1999, p. 6A.

ground war.⁴⁷ Similarly, the *Financial Times* couched it in the middle of an article on NATO's uncertain unity.⁴⁸

CNN began its May 18 world report by noting that Clinton's aides had reaffirmed his opposition to a ground force.⁴⁹ The *NewsHour with Jim Lehrer* mentioned the event only in passing.⁵⁰ Three days later, in a broad review of Clinton's strategic options, a correspondent wrote that "the White House has ruled out an invasion force."⁵¹ Such coverage hardly suggests that Clinton's announcement clearly signaled a turn toward a ground intervention, as proponents have claimed. Instead, it seems that Clinton's policy shift has been retrospectively credited with more significance than it deserves.

Even at the end of the war, the media continued to report credible signals that the Clinton administration was averse to a ground operation. A day before final negotiations with Milošević began on June 2, a statement from Clinton that Europe would provide most of the peacekeeping troops needed to enforce a settlement "reinforced impressions that Washington was opposed to a ground invasion of Kosovo."⁵² On June 2, with Milošević on the cusp of surrender, the *New York Times* published an article titled "Clinton and the Joint Chiefs to Discuss Ground Invasion." Although the headline sounds threatening, the text revealed that the White House had "repeatedly tried to avoid public discussion of combat forces, fearful of public opinion polls that show[ed] there [was] little appetite for such a venture."⁵³ The following day, General Clark was not invited to a well-publicized discussion between Clinton and other senior commanders concerning NATO's strategy, because senior Pentagon officers feared that he would be a vocal proponent of a ground oper-

47. Michael Evans and Ben Macintyre, "Bonn Cripples Cook Plan for Ground Troops," *Times* (London), May 19, 1999, p. 21.

48. "NATO Tries to Counter Divisive Impression," *Financial Times* (London), May 19, 1999, p. 2.

49. *Worldview* opened with a statement that "President Clinton's aides say his position has not changed on the use of ground troops. He is opposed. But that's not what Mr. Clinton said Tuesday." The report also noted that German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder had called the ground option "unthinkable." *CNN Worldview*, May 18, 1999, transcript no. 99051804V18.

50. *Newshour with Jim Lehrer*, May 18, 1999, transcript no. 6430. Clinton's announcement did not merit coverage on the program beyond three sentences in the news summary.

51. Jane Perlez, "3 Options for Washington, All with Major Risks," *New York Times*, May 21, 1999, p. A12.

52. "Clinton Seeks to Calm U.S. Fears over Troops," *Financial Times* (London), June 1, 1999, p. 20. For a similar conclusion, see John M. Broder, "Clinton Declares Most War Cleanup Is Europe's Task," *New York Times*, June 1, 1999, p. A1.

53. Jane Perlez, "Clinton and the Joint Chiefs to Discuss Ground Invasion," *New York Times*, June 2, 1999, p. A14. This article has also been cited as evidence of a mounting ground threat.

ation.⁵⁴ Thus, even at the climax of the war, the Clinton administration's signals regarding the possibility of a ground war were mixed at best.

DUBIOUSNESS OF EVIDENCE FROM PARTICIPANTS

Some of the key evidence that analysts have used to buttress their position that the Clinton administration was preparing to escalate to a ground war was either given on background or collected after the conflict. Daalder and O'Hanlon, for example, have frequently cited interviews with administration sources who claim that the administration was nearing a decision to endorse a ground campaign.⁵⁵ There are at least two reasons to question the usefulness of such statements. First, these sources have an incentive to counter the widespread impression that they had neither the resolve nor a plan that would guarantee victory. Second, the private nature of their statements means that they could have had only a very limited effect on Milošević's perception of the threat's credibility, as Daalder and O'Hanlon note.⁵⁶ Thus, although such statements may provide insight into the intentions of the U.S. government, they are of no value for signaling purposes unless they resulted in a policy shift or public statement.

Consider, for example, the closed-door meeting on June 2 with National Security Adviser Samuel Berger that Daalder (who was formerly with the National Security Council) and a few other former U.S. officials attended. At this meeting, Berger reduced NATO policy to four core elements: "First, we will win. Period. Full stop. There is no alternative. Second, winning means what we've said it means. Third, the air campaign is having a serious impact. Fourth, the president has said that he has not ruled out any options. Go back to 1: We will win."⁵⁷ A number of ground threat proponents draw heavily on this meeting, and on Daalder's interpretation of it, to support their position. Two articles in particular are most frequently cited as evidence that NATO had all but decided to escalate to a ground war.⁵⁸ A piece by Steven Erlanger relies almost entirely on Berger's comments to suggest that a decision on a ground war was imminent, and it prominently cites Daalder's belief that the Clinton ad-

54. Ben Macintyre, "White House Snubs Hawkish General," *Times* (London), June 3, 1999. See also Steven Lee Myers, "U.S. Military Chiefs Firm: No Ground Force for Kosovo," *New York Times*, June 3, 1999, p. 16.

55. Daalder and O'Hanlon, *Winning Ugly*, pp. 158–160.

56. *Ibid.*, p. 160.

57. Quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 158.

58. Steven Erlanger, "NATO Was Closer to Ground War in Kosovo Than Is Widely Realized," *New York Times*, November 7, 1999, sec. 1, p. 6; and Priest, "A Decisive Battle That Never Was."

ministration had decided that a ground campaign would be necessary.⁵⁹ Dana Priest cites the Berger meeting as key evidence that “Clinton was thinking seriously about the ground option.”⁶⁰ This is a surprisingly narrow foundation on which to build a case, however, in part because those involved should not have been reluctant to discuss actions they took that they argue ultimately led to victory.

It is true that Berger’s comments might suggest to some that a ground war was in the offing. Yet it is striking that Berger, speaking privately to a group of former U.S. officials, chose such a circuitous route to explain the administration’s commitment to wage a ground war, if it became necessary. Given that the chief purpose of the meeting was almost certainly to generate reports that the administration was considering a ground option, it again highlights the question of why neither Clinton nor any of his senior administration officials availed themselves of even one of the host of channels open to them to signal their commitment to a ground campaign.

NATO’S AVERSION TO CASUALTIES AND OTHER RISKS

At every stage of the war, NATO’s measured conduct reflected a strong interest in avoiding military casualties. This lends further doubt to the argument that NATO was moving toward a ground campaign, because a contested invasion

59. By far, the meeting with Berger is the largest piece of the ground war puzzle in Erlanger’s article. Berger is the only senior U.S. official quoted by name on the issue. Without this meeting, Erlanger’s case, at least as reported in the article, rests on a few scattered observations that are open to interpretation: reluctant contingency planning by the alliance for a ground war; Clark’s reinforcement of the Tirana-Kukes road; Britain’s preparations to call up 30,000 reservists; and a statement from the U.S. ambassador to NATO expressing confidence that he could bring the other alliance members on board if given “five or six days.” The first two of these points are dealt with elsewhere in this article; the last two are poor indications of the alliance’s intent. At the same time, Erlanger frequently notes that most senior U.S. military officers opposed an invasion and that Clinton repeatedly asked Prime Minister Blair to stop agitating for a ground option. Based on the information presented in the article, Erlanger’s case is remarkably thin, especially when one considers that he was writing several months after the war. For other reservations on Erlanger’s article, see Posen, “The War for Kosovo,” p. 74, n. 84.

60. Priest, “A Decisive Battle That Never Was.” Priest, like Erlanger, emphasizes Britain’s endorsement of a ground war. Blair’s support for a ground option, however, is not strong evidence that such a major shift in strategy was imminent, because he had supported a ground strategy for some time with little discernable effect. At the same time, Priest does not confront other NATO members’ long-standing reservations. With the addition of Clark’s opinion that the ground threat played a role in Milošević’s surrender, this forms the foundation of Priest’s case that the invasion threat was credible and effective. Clark, in *Waging Modern War*, offers little evidence to support his conclusion that the ground threat was effective, and his opinion has probably been cited largely because of his prominence in the campaign. Thus, Priest’s assertion that Milošević had decided that NATO was “on the brink” of launching a ground attack rests on a weak foundation.

would have likely led to considerable loss of life. The reasons for avoiding combat losses were clear. Allied casualties could have weakened NATO's unity, which in turn could have had serious political repercussions. To avoid such losses, NATO consistently flew sorties at altitudes higher than 15,000 feet,⁶¹ a decision that considerably inhibited military effectiveness.⁶² As Posen has observed, "Serb ground forces . . . continued to profit greatly from NATO's tactical conservatism until the end of the war."⁶³ Some alliance members were willing to risk sorties at lower altitudes to increase their effectiveness (as one French official commented, "In war, deaths are necessary."), but the Clinton administration's aversion to casualties forestalled such a change in policy.⁶⁴

Clinton's decision on April 4 to deploy twenty-four AH-64 Apache helicopters to the Balkan theater provided a public demonstration of NATO's strategic indecision and risk aversion.⁶⁵ General Clark requested the Apaches within days of the start of the war, believing that they would allow his forces to attack enemy tanks and APCs more aggressively.⁶⁶ The Pentagon approved the request with great reluctance, and the first Apaches arrived in the theater on April 21.⁶⁷ Yet, despite the significant investment in both time and money, the helicopters were never sent into combat, largely because of senior officers' fears that their use could lead to excessive losses. Clark later proposed using the Apaches to shoot Hellfire missiles at Serbian military targets from the Albanian side of the border, a mission that he saw as "risk-free," but the Pentagon also turned down this request.⁶⁸ General Shelton was quoted in mid-May as stating that the Apaches would be kept out of action until the risk of using

61. Daalder and O'Hanlon, *Winning Ugly*, p. 122. Posen states that "Serb air defenses largely kept NATO aircraft at higher altitudes for the duration of the war." Posen, "The War for Kosovo," p. 61.

62. Although it became known only after the war, there were a number of serious deviations from U.S. military doctrine, deviations that inhibited combat effectiveness and, as some argue, served to lengthen the campaign. See U.S. General Accounting Office, *Kosovo Air Operations: Need to Maintain Alliance Cohesion Resulted in Doctrinal Departures*, GAO-01-784 (Washington, D.C.: GAO, July 2001). The GAO report identifies seven "significant departures" that it argues were "largely the result of the NATO alliance's desire to maintain alliance cohesion." *Ibid.*, p. 2.

63. Posen, "The War for Kosovo," p. 61.

64. Daalder and O'Hanlon, *Winning Ugly*, p. 122.

65. This deployment is sometimes cited as one of NATO's efforts to signal its willingness to use ground forces. See Byman and Waxman, "Kosovo and the Great Air Power Debate," p. 26, n. 69; and Clark, *Waging Modern War*, p. 405.

66. Benjamin S. Lambeth, *The Transformation of American Air Power* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2000), p. 207; and Clark, *Waging Modern War*, pp. 227-228.

67. Daalder and O'Hanlon, *Winning Ugly*, p. 231.

68. Clark, *Waging Modern War*, p. 321.

them had been reduced “to the very minimum.”⁶⁹ The Apache deployment cost \$254 million (excluding costs for mission rehearsals and base construction) and required hundreds of C-17 transport sorties.⁷⁰ This episode was broadly reported in the international press, in part as a result of leaked military correspondence.⁷¹ Clark later said that “the Europeans . . . looked at the Apaches as a litmus test of the American commitment to the operation,” and that they considered the deployment “an embarrassment.”⁷² Even if the final decision not to use the Apaches was tactically wise, this episode strongly signaled that the United States and NATO lacked the will to take aggressive action.

THE GROUND THREAT AND FINAL NEGOTIATIONS

Although the record of Chernomyrdin’s and Ahtisaari’s negotiations with Milošević over acceptance of a peace proposal on June 2 and 3 is incomplete, it seems all but certain that Chernomyrdin privately suggested that NATO might undertake a ground campaign if the war continued.⁷³ Yet it also appears that this subject was not a major element in the negotiations, as the recollections of a number of key players make no mention of it. Former U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott’s account of the conflict does not indicate that any Western official discussed the ground threat in any capacity with any party.⁷⁴ Nor did Ahtisaari’s account of the meeting’s highlights (as communicated privately to Talbott immediately following the session’s conclusion) mention either the discussion of, or Milošević’s concern over, a NATO ground threat.⁷⁵ More significantly, Ahtisaari’s memoirs do not indicate any reference, by any party, to the possibility of a ground campaign during these negotiations.⁷⁶ According

69. Quoted in Molly Moore and Bradley Graham, “NATO Plans for Peace, Not Ground Invasion: Refugees’ Return Is Allies’ Focus,” *Washington Post*, May 17, 1999, p. A1.

70. Lambeth, *The Transformation of American Air Power*, p. 209.

71. Clark, *Waging Modern War*, pp. 319–320.

72. *Ibid.*, pp. 303, 305.

73. Chernomyrdin told U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott that he feared Milošević might give NATO no option but to invade Serbia. Strobe Talbott, *The Russia Hand: A Memoir of Personal Diplomacy* (New York: Random House, 2002), p. 313. Talbott reports that Chernomyrdin tried to use the prospect of a ground war to elicit flexibility from both the United States and Yugoslavia. Interview with Strobe Talbott, New Haven, Connecticut, March 4, 2002.

74. Talbott, *The Russia Hand*, chap. 12. The sole reference to a ground war in the chapter is Talbott’s reporting of Chernomyrdin’s opinion that one was possible and that it would be “a disaster for everyone.” *Ibid.*, p. 313.

75. *Ibid.*, p. 328. Talbott’s discussion of this meeting with Ahtisaari, however, is brief. Talbott also reports Ahtisaari’s opinion that Chernomyrdin’s endorsement of NATO’s terms was “a crucial factor” in Milošević’s decision to capitulate. *Ibid.*

76. Martti Ahtisaari, *Tehtävä Belgradissa* [Mission to Belgrade] (Helsinki: Werner Söderström Osakeyhtiö, 2001), chap. 13. From Ahtisaari’s account, it appears that the Serbs were chiefly con-

to Ahtisaari, Milošević accepted the peace proposal “surprisingly easily.”⁷⁷ In his concluding chapter, Ahtisaari writes, “I am still of the opinion that no matter what the actual damages from the bombing were, the air campaign served its purpose well. . . . I am positive that Milošević would not have accepted, without negotiation, the proposal I took to Belgrade, if the bombing had not done its job.”⁷⁸

The absence of discussion of a NATO ground threat during these meetings is striking. The talks offered Milošević the chance to discern the perspective of a man—Ahtisaari—who only recently had received an extensive and confidential briefing from high-ranking U.S. policymakers. If Milošević feared a ground invasion, how could he have declined this opportunity to try to learn more about the Clinton administration’s thinking on this crucial issue? Even if Ahtisaari only confirmed Milošević’s fears, Milošević could have publicized this information in an effort to sow dissention within NATO’s ranks.

In a lengthy postwar interview, Chernomyrdin similarly failed to mention any role of a NATO ground threat.⁷⁹ Although Chernomyrdin may have thought that a ground attack was approaching,⁸⁰ it is also true that he and

cerned with the sequence of events leading to a cessation of bombing, the timing of UN approval, and the agreement’s relation to Rambouillet. At the conclusion of the meeting, Milošević foreshadowed how he would spin the Yugoslav withdrawal, saying he would “accept the proposal as a peace proposal.” *Ibid.*, p. 190.

77. *Ibid.*, p. 241.

78. *Ibid.*, p. 265. There is no mention of a ground threat in this chapter either. Ahtisaari’s intimate involvement in the final stages of the negotiations gave him a highly privileged perspective, and his failure once again to discuss the ground threat suggests that he did not consider it important. In the book, Ahtisaari makes only four references to the possibility of a NATO invasion, two of which refer to Schröder’s perspective on the matter. The last (and most significant) of these four references comes at the conclusion of his conversations with Talbott in advance of the negotiations in Belgrade, when Ahtisaari writes that “[Milošević] would have to choose either peace or the bombing and an approaching [*tulossa oleva*] ground war.” *Ibid.*, p. 179. Ahtisaari’s choice of words here is striking, especially because the issue never resurfaces in the memoir. His account of the climactic negotiations later in the book is more relevant, however, than this isolated and undefended opinion of NATO’s intention to wage a ground war.

79. Interview with Viktor Chernomyrdin, *Frontline*, February 22, 2000, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/kosovo/interviews/chernomyrdin.html>.

80. Hosmer points out that Chernomyrdin, while “defending his role as peacemaker . . . implied that . . . a land campaign could have provoked a Russian confrontation with NATO that would have brought the world to ‘the brink of a total conflagration.’” Hosmer, *Why Milosevic Decided to Settle When He Did*, p. 46; quoted from Alberto Stabile, interview with Viktor Chernomyrdin, *Rome la Repubblica*, June 11, 1999. Similarly, he later stated that “NATO has a plan for carrying out a ground operation. But before that—in June and July—the bombing will still go on.” “Chernomyrdin Warns against Failure of Kosovo Peace Plan,” Interfax News Agency, June 8, 1999. Stephen Biddle argues that Russia’s belief that a ground war was looming was “the pivotal factor” in Milošević’s change of heart. Biddle, “The New Way of War? Debating the Kosovo Model,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 81, No. 3 (May/June 2002), p. 143. Although Russia’s policy shift was probably the

Yeltsin had a powerful interest in convincing their pro-Slav constituencies that Milošević was losing the war. In this light, Yeltsin's change in policy could be more easily portrayed as peacemaking born of necessity. Moreover, the Russian leadership did not lack reasons to abandon the Yugoslav leader, which Milošević must have recognized. His endorsement of the attempted coup against Mikhail Gorbachev in August 1991 had permanently scarred his relationship with Yeltsin.⁸¹ Oleg Levitin, a former official in the Russian foreign ministry, claims that the Russian leadership was in Milošević's camp due to "above all, inertia."⁸² Tim Judah argues that "Russian officials detested Milošević because he humiliated them, just as he did Western officials, by making promises to them and signing agreements which he had no intention of keeping."⁸³ At one point during Chernomyrdin's negotiations with Talbott shortly before Chernomyrdin and Ahtisaari flew to Belgrade, Yeltsin grew so frustrated with the continuing impasse that he told his envoy: "I don't care what you have to do, just end it, it's ruining everything."⁸⁴ Chernomyrdin promised Talbott in April that "we [the Russians] will not leave any room for maneuver by Belgrade" and that they would "keep working on Milosevic as though we were converting him to another faith."⁸⁵ As long as Milošević refused to surrender, Russia's relations with the United States would continue to deteriorate, and this was ultimately too high a price to pay.

Although the details of his decision calculus remain a matter of speculation, Milošević would have been most unwise to rely on the Russian perspective when Russia had just openly sided with NATO.⁸⁶ This is especially true given the many credible indications that both the United States and NATO wanted to avoid a ground war. If the alliance was genuinely prepared to invade, it had strong incentives to openly and credibly threaten to do so—and to deliver that

most significant development immediately preceding Milošević's decision, NATO's threat of continued bombardment was the main cause. There were many possible motivations for Moscow's change of heart that do not involve a NATO ground threat (as I explore elsewhere). Talbott suggests that Russia's shift was in part due to Yeltsin's concern that, if the war continued, political considerations would prevent him from attending the Group of Eight summit on June 18. Talbott, *The Russia Hand*, p. 317.

81. Judah, *Kosovo*, p. 272.

82. Oleg Levitin, "Inside Moscow's Kosovo Muddle," *Survival*, Vol. 42, No. 1 (Spring 2000), p. 135. Levitin was directly involved in Russia's Balkan policymaking from 1990 to 1999.

83. Judah, *Kosovo*, p. 272.

84. Quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 274.

85. Quoted in Talbott, *The Russia Hand*, p. 310.

86. According to Talbott, Milošević "hated" Chernomyrdin, which probably did not enhance Chernomyrdin's credibility in Milošević's eyes. Interview with Talbott, March 4, 2002.

threat sooner rather than later, in the hope that the threat alone would be sufficient to end the conflict. The only new and reliable information that Milošević gleaned from his meeting with Chernomyrdin was that his hope of Russian intervention had evaporated. Yeltsin's rebuff, especially one delivered so publicly, was a serious blow to the Serb leader.

Obstacles to a Ground War

NATO (or the United States, if it chose to act alone) never undertook most of the actions required to prepare for a ground operation. The media broadly discussed the need for an alliance consensus before moving forward with a ground war, but a number of prominent member states maintained their opposition to the idea until the very end of the war. The alliance expressly stated that the deployment of 50,000 NATO peacekeepers late in the conflict was not a prelude to a ground operation; regardless, many more troops and a large amount of additional equipment would have had to have been in place before the publicly discussed minimum forces needed for the operation were ready. Milošević could rest assured, therefore, that an invasion was far from imminent.

LONG TIME FRAME FOR MOBILIZATION

Although plans for a NATO invasion were never finalized, most estimates of the size of the force that would have been required were between 140,000 and 200,000 troops.⁸⁷ Shortly after the bombing began, public estimates suggested that "up to 200,000" would be needed.⁸⁸ Later in the conflict, a range of 150,000 to 175,000 was more commonly heard.⁸⁹ Even a very risky scenario presented

87. Clinton cited the 200,000 estimate immediately after the peace agreement. *Newshour with Jim Lehrer*, June 11, 1999, transcript no. 6448. Clark called the initial estimate of 140,000 combat and support troops "far too little" and believed that the number could approach 200,000. Clark, *Waging Modern War*, pp. 284, 339.

88. John F. Harris, "Advice Didn't Sway Clinton on Airstrikes," *Washington Post*, April 1, 1999, p. A1; "The Fog of War," *Times* (London), April 1, 1999; Charles Bremner and Michael Evans, "NATO Draws Up Plans for an Invasion," *Times* (London), April 2, 1999; and Roger Cohen, "Elite Forces Standing By If Air Power Won't Work," *New York Times*, April 3, 1999, p. A7. One estimate of 100,000 troops did not take into account Milošević's ability to double the number of Yugoslav troops in Kosovo with reinforcements from Serbia, a likely development that NATO planners took into consideration. See "Turning the Tide of War," *Financial Times* (London), April 8, 1999, p. 27. Another estimate of 75,000 troops was based on the assumption that Kosovo had been rendered a "nonpermissive environment," meaning that the air strikes had greatly reduced the number of Yugoslav units controlling Kosovo. See Harris, "Advice Didn't Sway Clinton on Airstrikes."

89. Perlez, "Clinton and the Joint Chiefs to Discuss Ground Option"; William Drozdiak, "Chirac, Schroeder Urge Group of Eight to Discuss Milošević Offer," *Washington Post*, May 20, 1999, p. A25.

by a former U.S. Army colonel, envisioning an airborne attack similar to the 1989 U.S. invasion of Panama, assumed that it would take weeks to get a smaller force into position.⁹⁰ Given Clinton's and the Joint Chiefs' reservations regarding a ground war, it is all but certain that the president would have opted for a larger force.

Such a deployment would have provided Milošević substantial warning of an impending invasion. General Clark initially expected that a ground offensive would require sixty days of planning, followed by ninety days for the deployment.⁹¹ As the air campaign progressed, the figure of seventy-five days to deploy the necessary forces was most commonly heard.⁹² From Milošević's perspective, it should have been obvious that a ground invasion would require a lengthy buildup. The media could be counted on to report the start of the necessary preparations. The experience of the U.S.-led coalition in the Gulf War gave Milošević a useful example of the kind of military mobilization he could expect. In that conflict, starting from the point at which Gen. Norman Schwarzkopf's "minimum deterrent force" of 40,000 troops was in place in Saudi Arabia, the United States and its allies needed five months to assemble the forces and equipment necessary to launch a ground offensive against Iraq.⁹³

During the war in Kosovo, NATO engaged in few of the logistical preparations necessary for the deployment of a large invasion force. Alliance ground forces reached a wartime high of 27,000 troops on May 12, although increases were discussed.⁹⁴ A NATO announcement on May 25 that the alliance would deploy 48,000 troops to the region in preparation for expected peacekeeping

Steven Lee Myers, "Cohen and Other Ministers Size Up Possible Ground Force," *New York Times*, May 29, 1999, p. A6; and Alexander Nicoll, "Allies Jockey over Troops Commitment," *Financial Times* (London), May 28, 1999, p. 2.

90. Robert Killebrew, "Objective: Kosovo: How Would a Ground War Work? Here's One Scenario," *Washington Post*, April 25, 1999, p. B1. Killebrew's proposal would have required NATO to invade with an attacker to defender ratio of well under 3:1. If the United States undertook an invasion, it would almost certainly have employed sufficient force to assure victory, and the Pentagon would probably have insisted on it.

91. Clark, *Waging Modern War*, p. 285.

92. *Ibid.*, p. 302. On May 28, Clark received a report from the army's deployment planning team that cast doubt on whether the heavier elements of the force would be more than partially deployed after seventy-five days had passed. *Ibid.*, p. 331.

93. Bob Woodward, *The Commanders* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991), pp. 345-346; and U.S. News and World Report, *Triumph without Victory: The Unreported History of the Persian Gulf War* (New York: Random House, 1992), p. 147. The Gulf War is not a perfect analogy for an invasion of Kosovo. The two conflicts differ considerably in their proximity to port facilities and to U.S./NATO bases, in addition to other factors.

94. Cordesman, *Lessons from the Air and Missile Campaign in Kosovo*, p. 13. Daalder and O'Hanlon report a slightly lower figure of 25,000. Daalder and O'Hanlon, *Winning Ulsks*, pp. 222-223.

duties is often taken as a suggestion that the alliance was committed to a ground invasion if necessary. For example, Lambeth claims that NATO's "actions spoke louder than its words. . . . [The deployment] made for an undeniable signal that a NATO ground presence of more than token size was forming in the theater."⁹⁵ If the deployment was intended as a threat of an impending ground campaign, however, official statements on the move expressly eliminated this as a possibility. On May 23, NATO spokesman Jamie Shea "categorically" denied that the deployment was the core of an invasion force. According to Shea, it represented merely the beginnings of a future peacekeeping contingent. He further reported that NATO members had unanimously agreed to continue the bombing campaign strategy, not to change it: "When Chancellor Schröder says no to ground troops, he's saying no to an invasion force, and that's what every NATO government is saying no to."⁹⁶ Moreover, if Shea's statements were a cover for the deployment of the core of an invasion force, that cover would have been blown before even half of the necessary troops had been sent.

News reports further undercut any threat of a ground offensive based on this initial deployment, emphasizing that the additional troops would be necessary for peacekeeping regardless, and therefore they might as well be used to pressure Milošević.⁹⁷ Also, the deployment would not have obviated the need to confront the other obstacles to an invasion that would have remained.

THE ABSENCE OF NATO CONSENSUS ON A GROUND OPERATION

Even if the United States had publicly announced a commitment to invade Yugoslavia, as a member of NATO it would still have needed the unanimous support of the alliance. NATO procedures for crisis management are clear on this point.⁹⁸ In fact, the Clinton administration would have had to obtain a consensus at five different stages of NATO's policymaking process.⁹⁹ (The process

95. Lambeth, *The Transformation of American Air Power*, p. 192.

96. CNN *Late Edition*, May 23, 1999, transcript no. 99052300V47. See also "Ground Troops at Kosovo Border Not Meant for Invasion Force: U.S.," Deutsche Presse-Agentur, May 22, 1999.

97. Neil MacFarquhar, "Clinton Decision in Keeping with Some Expert Views," *New York Times*, May 23, 1999, sec. 1, p. 10.

98. The relevant chapter of the handbook is available online at <http://www.nato.int/docu/handbook/2001/hb0703.htm>.

99. Correspondence with Col. William Morton (Canadian Army), director of NATO policy, Canadian Armed Forces, January 24 and 25, 2002. Colonel Morton served as the deputy military representative for the Canadian joint delegation to NATO headquarters in Brussels during the war. According to Colonel Morton, to escalate to a ground campaign, the national military advisers would first have had to agree that ground forces were required. This step would have been neces-

differs greatly from the one in place during the Cold War. In that case, a sudden Soviet invasion of Western Europe would have allowed the SACEUR, who had predelegated authority to use NATO forces, to execute any of a number of contingency plans.¹⁰⁰) Although the United States is the dominant member of the alliance, it could not assume that NATO's other members would agree to such a strategic escalation. More important, in making its case to the other members, the United States would have afforded Milošević time to gauge whether the alliance could stomach a ground war.

On June 10, the day NATO halted the bombing campaign, Secretary of Defense Cohen confirmed the administration's understanding of this need for a consensus and explained why the United States had avoided bringing up the issue of a ground operation in any substantive way.

As we've indicated so many times before, under this scenario at least we were constrained because we had to have consensus. We were not about to take unilateral action. We had to have a consensus of NATO. NATO had one consensus—that was for the application of air power. There was no consensus for the application of ground forces in a nonpermissive environment. . . . You saw just a few weeks ago, once the element of whether ground forces would go into a nonpermissive environment [was raised], you suddenly saw some question of division within the alliance itself. Had that taken place at the very beginning, we would have seen Milosevic carrying out his campaign of ethnic terror and purging at the same time that NATO countries would have been still debating the issue of who would participate and who would not. . . . Ultimately [the air campaign] has proved successful.¹⁰¹

The lack of NATO consensus on launching a ground war was evident both in the days immediately before Milošević's submission and intermittently during the weeks prior. For example, in early June, Pentagon spokesman Kenneth Bacon stated, "I don't believe anybody feels that there is a consensus among NATO allies to send a ground invasion force to Kosovo. . . . Nobody is talking,

sary prior to any serious increase in the military resources deployed to the theater. The SACEUR would then have had to produce a concept of operations (CONOPS), which both the Military Committee (MC) and the North Atlantic Council would have had to approve. Finally, the plan of operations (OPLAN) would also have to be passed by both the MC and the NAC. Of course, the initiation of the process would have implied an expectation of a consensus in favor at each of these five stages. Still, according to Colonel Morton, it is far from inconceivable that disagreements about either the OPLAN or other elements of the strategy could have derailed the process at any stage.

100. Correspondence with Col. William Morton (Canadian Army), director of NATO policy, Canadian Armed Forces, April 4, 2002.

101. *CNN Live Event*, June 10, 1999, transcript no. 99061006V54.

except the press, at this stage, about sending an invasion force to Kosovo."¹⁰² With his May 18 announcement that all military options were still on the table, Clinton may have been trying to communicate a veiled threat to the Serbs, but his own administration was actively fostering the impression that substantial political obstacles remained and that such an escalation was not imminent. At one point, Clinton suggested that a main reason Milošević held out for seventy-eight days was the latter's hope that the alliance would fracture.¹⁰³ If a proposal to escalate the war effort floundered or failed, it would have boosted the Serbs' morale, as well as demonstrated the limits of NATO's resolve. Worse, it could have reduced or even undone the alliance's commitment to continued bombing. Daalder and O'Hanlon argue that generating support for a ground war among the allies could have succeeded.¹⁰⁴ Although this may be true, it is also true that such an effort would have been a serious setback had it failed—a possibility that could not have escaped Clinton's consideration.

The arguments against a ground invasion have not been adequately laid out, in part because no NATO policymaker has wanted to undermine the image of NATO's unity or revisit the divisive issue in the aftermath of what was ultimately a successful intervention. A European case against invasion could have been easily mounted, however. Such a policy brief might have included the following points.

Although the United States is a highly valued ally, Europe should not fight a major war in its own backyard at Washington's behest, especially when poor U.S. strategic guidance has led to the present *débâcle*. Although Russia has tolerated the air campaign, a NATO threat to invade could compel it to intervene more directly on Yugoslavia's behalf. Preemptive Russian deployments to Serbia could pose serious difficulties for the alliance. The risk of significant casualties as a result of an invasion is unavoidable; this would not be a reprise of the Gulf War. Although Milošević has defected from UN-sponsored agreements in the past, he will be deterred from doing so in Kosovo by NATO's newly demonstrated willingness to apply sustained military force. In addition, even a successful invasion could lead to an unmanageable occupation, both because Yugoslavia's population is well armed and because many Serbs support Milošević's nationalist agenda. Further, it is conceivable that the United States would withdraw from Serbia in short order, leaving the responsibility for a difficult peacekeeping operation to Europe. At the same time, the air campaign is going well and continues to pose few risks to our servicemen and women. It

102. Pentagon briefing, Federal News Service, June 2, 1999.

103. *Newshour with Jim Lehrer*, June 11, 1999.

104. Daalder and O'Hanlon, *Winning Ugly*, p. 223.

has minimized Milošević's ability to seize the initiative and promises success at a much lower cost if only we remain patient.

These arguments are speculative and represent debatable analysis. It is important to recognize, however, that it would not have been necessary for these arguments to change the policy of the United States in order to prevent a NATO ground war. Maintaining a core of member states opposed to an invasion would have been sufficient to prevent a NATO ground operation.

Public accounts of intra-alliance diplomacy probably gave Milošević ample reason to believe that NATO was far from reaching a consensus on the need for a ground war. Lamberto Dini, the Italian foreign minister, steadfastly opposed an invasion. Even Italy's support of continued bombing was uncertain; at one point Dini publicly suggested replacing the bombing campaign with a blockade.¹⁰⁵ Germany similarly opposed an invasion and was a reluctant partner in the air war. A German official even felt compelled to declare, "We are not Great Britain. . . . This war [the air campaign] is not an easy sell to a people whose pacifist feelings are still strong."¹⁰⁶ In mid-May, Schröder stated that "Germany believes that sending in ground troops is unthinkable. That is our position, and it won't change in the future."¹⁰⁷ These strong statements stand in marked contrast to Clinton's cautious discussions of possible military options.

NATO's internal divisions were also tellingly demonstrated at a May 27 meeting of its five principal defense ministers (Britain, France, Germany, Italy, and the United States). Lambeth argues that this gathering was "pivotal in getting the allies to come to closure once and for all on the need to begin serious preparations for a land invasion."¹⁰⁸ Other reports, however, are less conclusive (Cohen's own postwar perspective is presented above). Judah reports that Cohen opposed undertaking preparations for a ground war and instead preferred an intensification of the air campaign. The French thought that it was already too late to launch an invasion before winter. The Germans and Italians reiterated their concerns.¹⁰⁹ The meeting's only concrete result was an agreement that a decision on the ground war needed to be reached soon, and that the decision would have to be unanimous.

105. "Italian Foreign Minister Again Proposes 'Blockade' of Serbia," BBC Monitoring Europe, April 7, 1999.

106. Quoted in Roger Cohen, "Allies and Russia Planning Statement on Kosovo Force," *New York Times*, May 6, 1999, p. A22.

107. Quoted in "NATO Tries to Counter Divisive Impression." See also Michael R. Gordon, "NATO's Battle Within: Is Leadership Missing?" *New York Times*, May 20, 1999, p. A14.

108. Quoted in Lambeth, *NATO's Air War for Kosovo*, p. 48.

109. Judah, *Kosovo*, pp. 270-271.

Could the United States have conducted a ground war with only British support? From a material standpoint, the answer is yes. Indeed, there are indications that such a move was considered.¹¹⁰ A British-American ground force composed largely of Americans, however, would have set a dangerous precedent; a coalition of only two of the alliance's members would have escalated the most serious military action in NATO's history. In such a scenario, the United States might well destroy NATO in attempting to save it. In any case, Clinton's opponents in Congress and reluctant officers in the Pentagon would, if anything, be more opposed to an operation in which the United States took almost all of the risks and incurred the greatest loss of life. It is all but unthinkable that Clinton would have taken such action without at least trying to win the support of the other NATO members.

Other Arguments against the Ground Threat

In this section, I outline additional reasons to believe that the ground threat played no more than a minimal role in Milošević's decisionmaking. His surrender only days before NATO's publicly discussed deadline to begin preparations for a ground offensive indicates that his decision did not depend on NATO's willingness to fight on the ground. Indeed, Milošević was exactly the type of leader most likely to challenge a vague threat. Finally, I explore the possibility that the ground threat was no more than a bluff.

NATO'S "DEADLINE" AND MILOŠEVIĆ'S INCENTIVE TO HOLD OUT

The media reported that a NATO decision to launch a ground operation against Yugoslavia would have had to have been made no later than mid-June.¹¹¹ Any later and the Balkan winter would have been a serious impediment. Some analysts interpret this deadline as lending additional credence to NATO's latent ground threat, because it meant that NATO's window of oppor-

110. Clinton may have been suggesting this when he stated that he had decided to intervene. *Newshour with Jim Lehrer*, June 11, 1999. Berger also suggested that the war would be won "in or outside NATO." Daalder and O'Hanlon, *Winning Ugly*, p. 160. In a later interview, Berger offered a different perspective, arguing that "one reason we ultimately prevailed . . . was because we did it on a multilateral basis. I don't know that we would have had American public support for a unilateral American ground intervention into Kosovo. It was very important to us for this to be done as a NATO action." He further states that "an equally good school of thought says that Milošević would have loved to get us into a ground war." At other points in the interview, Berger endorses a ground action, but only under NATO auspices. *Frontline*, February 22, 2000.

111. Seelye, "Clinton Resists Renewed Calls for Ground Troops in Kosovo"; and Rupert Cornwell, "Two Weeks for NATO to Set Invasion Date," *Independent* (London), May 16, 1999, p. 18. Most accounts of the war, including Clark's memoir, accept this deadline as significant.

tunity to decide to invade would soon close.¹¹² There is, however, an alternative perspective. If Milošević had held out only a little longer, and NATO had made no concrete moves to launch a ground attack, then his fears of such an attack would have been considerably reduced. Although NATO was capable of mounting a winter ground offensive, the task of convincing reluctant allies to support such a move would have become increasingly difficult once the prime opportunity had passed. Furthermore, the Pentagon was bound to resist a ground campaign even more when the conditions were less favorable.

If Milošević's greatest fear was a ground invasion, then he could have learned a great deal about NATO's resolve by enduring another week or so of punishment.¹¹³ Having called NATO's bluff, he might even have found himself in a much better bargaining position. Although the air campaign was accelerating, the damage to Milošević's forces continued to be light. Given that his strategy largely depended on the emergence of dissent within the alliance, the timing of his surrender is an indication that he believed that the Clinton administration would not soon press for a ground campaign.

Milošević was not a fainthearted leader, having defied the West for years on a wide range of issues. He had played a key role in triggering the conflict in the Balkans, partly after realizing that the West's diplomatic posturing during the sieges of Vukovar and Dubrovnik in 1991 was not followed by action.¹¹⁴ And his depredations against the Kosovar Albanians after NATO began the bombing campaign in 1999 constituted a bold act of defiance of the West, one undertaken for a highly uncertain benefit. Those who dealt with Milošević agree that he was a risk-acceptant and aggressive leader. Holbrooke recalls him as being "smart, evasive, and tricky."¹¹⁵ Former U.S. Secretary of State Warren Christopher describes him as "tough" and "aggressive."¹¹⁶ General Clark considered

112. At the same time, others undercut the idea that the approach of winter established a de facto deadline by which planning and preparations for a ground operation would have to begin. Pentagon spokesman Kenneth Bacon reiterated this point: "There is no deadline for any of these plans. We know how to deploy troops in the winter; we've proven that in Bosnia before." Quoted in Myers, "U.S. Military Chief Firm: No Ground Force for Kosovo." When Hillary Rodham Clinton visited Albanian Kosovar refugees in Macedonia in late May, a NATO official opined that she "will be able to visit them next spring, too." Quoted in Perlez, "Clinton and the Joint Chiefs to Discuss Ground Invasion." Still, mid-June was broadly accepted to be a turning point in the war.

113. From the time at which NATO stopped bombing (June 10), the mid-June deadline was days away.

114. David Halberstam, *War in a Time of Peace: Bush, Clinton, and the Generals* (New York: Scribner's, 2001), p. 129.

115. Richard Holbrooke, *To End a War* (New York: Modern Library, 1998), p. 4.

116. Warren Christopher, *In the Stream of History: Shaping Foreign Policy for a New Era* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 351.

the Yugoslav leader as “wily and stubborn. . . [H]e might well accept the NATO conditions in principle and then work to stall and manipulate, hoping that NATO would lose its sense of direction.”¹¹⁷

Milošević had correctly dismissed at least one NATO threat less than a year before the air war began. Following a meeting of NATO defense ministers on June 11, 1998, the alliance mounted Operation Determined Falcon. Intended to coax Milošević into restraining the Serbs in Kosovo, it consisted of a flyover by more than eighty planes along Yugoslavia’s border with Albania and Macedonia.¹¹⁸ After the war, the chairman of NATO’s military committee, Gen. Klaus Naumann, stated that Milošević had “rightly concluded” that Determined Falcon was a bluff.¹¹⁹

Even during the final negotiations in June, when NATO continued to bomb Serbia and Kosovo, Milošević sought to water down the final agreement.¹²⁰ Initially he tried to remove a clause referring to NATO command and control of the peacekeeping force, claiming that the Yugoslav parliament would never agree to it.¹²¹ On June 5, Milošević’s representatives tried to alter the arrangement so that only a partial withdrawal would have been required to secure a pause in the bombing.¹²² Finally, on June 6, they attempted to add a clause stating that retreating Serb forces would retain the right of self-defense, a change that Clark feared would later afford them room to “charge that the KLA initiated all [violent] contacts.”¹²³ None of these efforts was successful, and each delayed the end of the air attacks. Thus, even in the final days of the conflict, Milošević was still probing NATO’s resolve, searching for possible advantages, and was willing to suffer further NATO air strikes to do so.

Milošević was the sort man who would not hesitate to test a timidly delivered threat—a threat only hinted at in the press, one that many NATO members openly opposed, and one that could not be acted on for months. And no party involved in the war had a greater incentive to win. That Milošević surrendered when the ground threat was still at such an inchoate stage, and before the alliance had fully confronted the issue, indicates that it was not a key element of his decision calculus.

117. Clark, *Waging Modern War*, p. 348.

118. Daalder and O’Hanlon, *Winning Ugly*, p. 32.

119. Quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 33.

120. Posen, “The War for Kosovo,” pp. 77–78.

121. Clark, *Waging Modern War*, p. 352.

122. *Ibid.*, pp. 360–362, 363.

123. *Ibid.*, p. 362.

NATO AND THE POSSIBILITY OF ADDITIONAL CONCESSIONS

Some have argued that NATO had staked its credibility and its future on achieving all of its demands.¹²⁴ If true, this would have lent credibility to the ground threat. To be sure, many participants and observers report that the alliance was determined not to accept an unsatisfactory resolution to the conflict.¹²⁵ It seems likely, however, that NATO could have scaled back its war aims, even to the point of allowing Milošević to credibly claim victory, and still preserve the alliance. Although a retreat from NATO's stated goals would have marked a significant setback, the post-Cold War durability of the alliance had never been seriously tested, and it is far from certain that a partial or even a complete failure of the air campaign would have led to permanent fractures in the alliance. A ground war could also have led to serious divisions among alliance members. With the exception of Britain and the United States, every NATO member was reluctant to employ ground forces.

Such a conclusion, though imperfect, could have been preferable to a potentially costly and risky ground war. Although Milošević had violated UN peacekeeping missions before, there would be reason to hope that weeks of sustained bombing would weigh heavily on his mind after any settlement. Such an unsatisfactory resolution would not have meant a failure of NATO's core tenet of collective defense. One senior U.S. official even suggested that Clinton was just the man to put a measure of positive spin on such an outcome.¹²⁶

It might be argued that many interested observers believed in late May that NATO's future depended on total victory, and therefore it is plausible that Milošević did as well. Although this line of reasoning should not be dismissed out of hand, both the timing and the conduct of his capitulation strongly suggest that he was not of a like mind.¹²⁷ Similar analyses would have also proven inaccurate at earlier stages of the conflict. Most students of international politics probably thought that both confronting NATO and escalating the conflict

124. Daalder and O'Hanlon, *Winning Ugly*, p. 138; and Lambeth, *NATO's Air War for Kosovo*, p. 44.

125. Halberstam, *War in a Time of Peace*, pp. 469–470; Clark, *Waging Modern War*, pp. 264, 345; Daalder and O'Hanlon, *Winning Ugly*, pp. 158–160; and interview with Talbott.

126. On the possibility of a compromise with Milošević to end the war, an unnamed senior U.S. official said: "Clinton is a better communicator than anyone else. . . . If Nixon could sell the fall of Saigon as peace with honor, Clinton can sell this." Quoted in Jane Perlez, "Clinton's Quandary: No Approach to End War Is Fast or Certain of Success," *New York Times*, April 29, 1999, p. A16. Although the historical analogy is flawed (Nixon resigned the year before Saigon fell), the meaning is clear.

127. In addition, because such "I believed it" arguments are speculative, the evidentiary threshold for doubting them is low.

by forcing hundreds of thousands of Kosovars out of their homes were actions that clearly would not be in Milošević's interests—yet he took them regardless. NATO was not a chip to be wagered; statements by politicians that the alliance's future was at stake do not make it so. It is difficult to see how such a popular alliance would crumble as a result of a limited operation that did not go as planned, and that did not vitiate NATO's core tenet of collective defense.

THE GROUND THREAT—A BLUFF?

The possibility that Clinton's threat was a bluff has not received much consideration in the scholarly literature. If NATO and U.S. conduct suggested a bluff, this would buttress the claim that Milošević would have considered the ground threat to be an empty one.

Although a ground offensive would have dramatically increased Clinton's political risks, floating the idea of an invasion would not. The powerful incentives not to attempt such a strategic escalation were clear. U.S. and NATO officials devoted considerable effort to projecting confidence that the air campaign would lead to eventual victory. Polls released in late April 1999 showed that less than 50 percent of the U.S. public would have supported the use of ground troops if it meant significant casualties.¹²⁸ Even public support for the bombing campaign was diminishing among many of the allies, including the United States.¹²⁹

For Clinton, the prospect of leading the United States into a major land war in Europe against the advice of most of his senior officers, and in the face of mounting political obstacles, must have given him considerable pause. It is well known that Clinton's relationship with the military was not a warm one. Even his own foreign policy officials later conceded that he was "a president unwilling to exercise full authority over military commanders."¹³⁰ Even if a ground war led to a brisk NATO victory, and at the price of a few hundred NATO casualties, history's verdict might nevertheless declare that the original decision to intervene had been a serious strategic blunder. It is not difficult to imagine higher costs and worse outcomes.¹³¹

128. Perlez, "Clinton's Quandary."

129. William Drozdiak, "NATO Leaders Clash on Using Ground Troops," *Washington Post*, May 20, 1999, p. A1.

130. Jane Perlez, "For 8 Years, a Strained Relationship with the Military," *New York Times*, December 12, 2000, p. A17. Regarding Kosovo specifically, they said that Clinton's reluctance to employ ground troops was caused by "fears of casualties and protracted debates in Congress and among allies."

131. It is also conceivable that NATO might have been unable to deploy according to Clark's timetable, and find itself launching an attack during or after the onset of winter, thereby exposing the president to further criticism, even if the operation were successful.

The Russians' role was close to what one would have expected if the Clinton administration hoped to quietly bluff Milošević. Having Chernomyrdin deliver the ground threat behind closed doors added a layer of political insulation. If Milošević had revealed the threat publicly (possibly in an effort to divide the alliance), the Clinton administration could have said that it had issued no such ultimatum or that the Russians had misinterpreted Talbott's message. This argument is supported by Talbott's appearing not to have openly asked the Russians to convey a threat of invasion to Milošević. Rather he "did not discourage the Russian belief that a ground attack was being prepared."¹³² If Clinton had decided to try to quietly bluff Milošević while avoiding any damaging commitments, he probably would have acted exactly as he did. This lends weight to the argument that Milošević discounted the possibility of a NATO ground action.

Why Milošević Gave In

Milošević did not pull his forces out of Kosovo because of a NATO threat to launch a ground war. Rather, he seems to have been primarily concerned with three other factors: (1) the credible threat of continued and intensified bombing by the alliance, (2) the bombing's growing domestic repercussions, and (3) the public loss of Russia's support. It is beyond the scope of this article to assess the other possible causes of his surrender,¹³³ but these explanations all hinge on Milošević's desire to avoid future bombardment. Milošević had few military options available to him, none of which was appealing. He was incapable of mounting an attack on NATO that could plausibly lead to a result in his favor, and such an attempt would have cemented the alliance's resolve to deny him victory. Moreover, his abandonment by Russia in early June meant that he could not expect any meaningful assistance from his onetime ally.

Although there were no indications that an effort to unseat Milošević was imminent, many observers provide evidence that disaffection with the regime

132. Ben Barber, "Milosevic May Have Been Spooked into Leaving Kosovo," *Washington Times*, July 20, 1999, p. A15. Cited in Hosmer, *Why Milosevic Decided to Settle When He Did*, p. 45. In February 2000, Talbott stated that he had "made a concerted effort to convey to Chernomyrdin . . . that the ground invasion option had not been taken off the table." Interview with Talbott, *Frontline*, February 22, 2000. Even in discussions behind closed doors with the man who would conduct the negotiations that might be NATO's best chance to get Milošević to concede, Talbott could go no further than issue a highly ambiguous threat of a ground invasion. In a more recent discussion of the conflict, Talbott does not mention any effort, at any time, to keep the alliance's military options open. Talbott, *The Russia Hand*, chap. 12.

133. The most complete examination of Milošević's other reasons to surrender is Hosmer, *Why Milosevic Decided to Settle When He Did*.

was increasing among the political elite, and that this trend would go on if the conflict continued. Hosmer observes that Serbian public opinion on Kosovo was “hawkish” in mid-March, and that the initial reaction to the air campaign was “angry defiance.”¹³⁴ By early June, however, “the Serbian citizens and political leaders . . . had increasingly come to the view that Milosevic must do whatever was necessary to get the bombing stopped.”¹³⁵ Hosmer argues that, by May, the Serbian population was “focusing increasingly on issues of daily survival” and that the situation was likely to get worse.¹³⁶

Secretary of Defense Cohen revealed on June 3 that he had sought funding from Congress to sustain the bombing through September, and that the United States was prepared to continue through to next year if necessary.¹³⁷ Even the Russians conceded that the air campaign would last until at least July, and they reported to the press on June 8 that the Serbs should “understand that no one intends to retreat.”¹³⁸ At that point, Russian envoys were conveying Washington’s threats to the Serbs, and Chernomyrdin was freely stating his opinion that NATO would not relent.¹³⁹ Talbott believes that it was “the Russians’ withdrawing all vestiges of support from Milosevic,” and not the threat of a ground war, that led to the Serbian retreat.¹⁴⁰ Given that the political and military currents were clearly going against Milošević, he decided to make the best of a rapidly deteriorating situation by accepting NATO’s offer to settle.

Posen has argued that the Serbs were given a significantly better deal in the diplomatic end game than they had been offered at Rambouillet.¹⁴¹ Although there were important differences between the two accords, there is reason to believe that the Serbs’ chief aim in both the Rambouillet negotiations and the ensuing conflict was to prevent foreign occupation of Kosovo. In his extensive treatment of the Rambouillet conference, Judah reports that the Serbs were adamantly opposed to any foreign deployments in Kosovo. Had their position been more flexible, he claims, NATO’s rights in Kosovo “could certainly have

134. *Ibid.*, pp. 49, 50.

135. *Ibid.*, p. 49. Hosmer notes a number of indicators: The rallies in support of Milošević had greatly dwindled in size, and Yugoslav journalists began expressing frustration with the war, as well as fear that NATO would “double the stakes.” *Ibid.*

136. *Ibid.*, p. 52. The Serbs’ physical hardships were increasing steadily—71 percent of Serbian citizens had reported suffering privations and food shortages by early May. *Ibid.*, p. 53.

137. Interview with U.S. Secretary of Defense William Cohen, *Newshour with Jim Lehrer*, June 3, 1999, transcript no. 6442.

138. “Chernomyrdin Warns against Failure of Kosovo Peace Plan.”

139. *Ibid.*

140. Correspondence with the author, January 15, 2002.

141. Posen, “The War for Kosovo,” pp. 79–80.

been whittled down significantly.¹⁴² Similarly, the provision for a referendum at the end of the three-year interim period could also have been renegotiated if the Serbs had been more approachable.¹⁴³ Hosmer argues that Milošević's campaign of ethnic cleansing actually led to harsher terms from NATO than he otherwise would have obtained.¹⁴⁴ Regardless, it is likely that Milošević fought primarily to avoid losing control of Kosovo and having a large NATO force at his doorstep, and not to win the subtle differences between the proposed Rambouillet agreement and the one he signed in June. The conflict's outcome was a resounding defeat for the Serbs, and the differences between the proposals at Rambouillet and the final accord, though significant, do not mean that the outcome was not a victory for NATO.

Conclusion

Contrary to the conventional wisdom, the available evidence indicates that Slobodan Milošević did not decide to surrender control of Kosovo on June 9, 1999, in part because of a supposed NATO threat to launch a ground invasion. Neither the Clinton administration nor NATO had credibly signaled such a shift in strategy. Furthermore, the alliance's preparations for a possible ground war were modest at best. NATO members' expressions of opposition to an invasion combined with confidence in the air campaign powerfully undercut possible efforts to threaten the use of ground troops. A ground action would have required months of preparation, and the timing and conduct of Milošević's surrender suggest that he had little curiosity about NATO's willingness to invade.

More broadly, the war over Kosovo demonstrates that coercive air power alone can achieve major political goals, and it thus provides a recent and important case that contradicts Robert Pape's theory of coercion. Unlike the case studies that Pape investigates at length in *Bombing to Win*, Operation Allied Force was a use of air power in the absence of a decisive ground threat. This is an important consideration, and it makes the war over Kosovo an especially useful example of coercive air power.

142. Judah, *Kosovo*, p. 210.

143. Some diplomats at the conference hoped that Milošević would no longer be in office at the end of three years, easing the way for the negotiation of a final resolution. *Ibid.*, p. 211. Regardless, the proposed agreement at Rambouillet indicated that any final resolution of Kosovo's status was subject to the "opinions of relevant authorities," language that the parties understood as leaving the door open for Serb involvement. *Ibid.*, pp. 213–214.

144. Hosmer, *Why Milosevic Decided to Settle When He Did*, p. 39.

How did this crucial element of the war come to be misunderstood? Many scholars were surprised that NATO's strategy met with success, because this outcome contradicted prominent research arguing that punishment strategies cannot succeed. This led to an effort to discern other factors that may have contributed to Milošević's capitulation, and the Clinton administration's efforts to revive the ground option made it a deceptively appealing candidate. Some observers gave newspaper articles more credence than they deserved. In addition, prior investigations relied heavily on interviews with U.S. and NATO officials to make the case that a ground war was approaching, and that Milošević understood this development.¹⁴⁵ These officials, some of whom were criticized for strategic missteps early in the war, have incentives to portray themselves as resolute policymakers at the end of the crisis. Alternatively, they may have come to believe that their determination to win had been translated into a credible threat of invasion, or that their bluff had won the day. It is not uncommon for issuers of threats to see them as more daunting than they actually are.

It is doubtful, however, that NATO's air campaign in Kosovo will be a useful model for other conflicts.¹⁴⁶ This is particularly true regarding the possible use a strategy similar to Operation Allied Force in a potential confrontation with a country that harbors groups violently opposed to the United States. Many of the advantages that were crucial to NATO's success in Kosovo could be duplicated in other situations. It is possible that the United States could find itself in a position to use air power at low risk, and some countries might consider resident terrorist organizations to be dispensable. Other aspects of the war, however, would be difficult to replicate. Milošević had isolated himself diplomatically long before March 1999. It is hard to imagine a scenario in which any Middle Eastern country would find itself similarly alone.¹⁴⁷ The United States' uphill struggle for UN authorization of military action against Iraq is a strong indicator in this regard. More important, other nations that find themselves targets of similar campaigns might have a wider array of possible military responses.

145. Both Posen and Hosmer point to examples of participants' and others' casual conclusions in this regard. See Posen, "The War for Kosovo," p. 74; and Hosmer, *Why Milosevic Decided to Settle When He Did*, p. 112.

146. Of course, NATO's strategy in 1999 was largely an ad hoc one.

147. Stephen M. Walt has recently pointed out the disaffection in the region with U.S. policies. See Walt, "Beyond bin Laden: Reshaping U.S. Foreign Policy," *International Security*, Vol. 26, No. 3 (Winter 2001/02), pp. 56–78, especially pp. 59–61. The strategic ramifications of the United States' unpopularity in the region would be telling in a coercive campaign.

Ultimately, military coercion is best understood as a strategy for which success relies on the target making a concession; in this light, the vital role played by an adversary's willingness to resist is made plainer. Among the factors that determine the outcomes of wars, a state's resolve is arguably the most difficult to predict *ex ante*. History is replete with examples of military analyses that made unfounded assumptions regarding a target's willingness to take punishment, sometimes with disastrous consequences. Military coercion is risky, and the accuracy with which one can predict the strategy's potential to succeed in any given situation is far less than the precision of the weapons now available to carry it out.