Unlearning the Lessons of Kosovo
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What are the lessons and the legacy of Operation Allied Force? President Bill Clinton emerged from the war confident that Kosovo set a new precedent—a Clinton Doctrine—for humanitarian intervention. Yet, the failure of many to predict the course of the war should give appropriate pause to those who have been quick to draw lessons from NATO’s success.

We offer a skeptical assessment of five of the most popular post-Kosovo truths. Seekers of a new doctrine of humanitarian intervention will be disappointed. The overall verdict on Kosovo is less likely to offer new lessons than to affirm old beliefs.

NATO won. The conflict in Kosovo was two wars in one. NATO lost the first, but decisively won the second. The war it lost pitted Serbian forces against Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) fighters. Within weeks, Serbian forces were successful—if not in completely defeating the KLA, then certainly in removing 1.3 million people from their homes and thus radically altering the demographic make-up of Kosovo. The other war was fought, in President Clinton’s words, “to demonstrate the seriousness of NATO’s purpose so that the Serbian leaders understand the imperative of reversing course.” The alliance won this war without question, securing an outcome that improves markedly on the deal Yugoslav resident Slobodan Milosevic rejected at Rambouillet, France. Compared with the situation in Kosovo before, this is a major achievement that outweighs the tragedies that befell the ethnic Albanians during the air war.

Airpower Alone Worked. Considering both its effectiveness and relatively low cost, NATO’s air campaign was probably the most successful use of strategic bombardment in the history of warfare. However, the case for airpower can easily be pushed too far and often is these days. NATO could not have achieved its success against Serbian armor from the air without the support of the KLA. In addition, it is now clear that the growing drumbeat for ground forces convinced Milosevic that, even if he withstood the intensified air campaign, there was no way out of the conflict short of accepting NATO’s conditions to end its military action.
The Powell Doctrine is Dead. NATO’s success in using limited means to achieve decisive ends has led some officials to welcome the demise of the so-called Powell Doctrine—General Colin Powell’s notion that military force should not be used until all other alternatives have been exhausted, and then only decisively, to achieve clearly defined political objectives. Even in Kosovo, however, NATO did not prevail until it stepped up its war effort and talked convincingly about deploying ground forces. In other words, it succeeded as its military strategy became increasingly increasingly Powell-like.

The U.N. is Nice but not Necessary. NATO went to war in March 1999 by attacking a sovereign country. It did not do so to uphold the inherent right of individual or collective self-defense or with explicit authorization from the U.N. Security Council. Did NATO’s action set a precedent—that a U.N. imprimatur on intervention for humanitarian ends is nice but not necessary? Perhaps. But Kosovo ultimately says more about the U.N.’s continued strength than its weakness. The United Nations proved to be a central character in the intricate diplomatic minuet danced by the Americans, the Europeans, and the Russians in the weeks leading up to Belgrade’s surrender. Once Belgrade gave in, the U.N. was given political control over Kosovo. Moreover, the United Nations will have the decisive role in determining the territory’s political future. But if the United Nations has emerged strengthened from the war, it does so only in a limited way. Indeed, Kosovo has shown that the U.N. is not well prepared even to handle the postconflict civilian side of interventions.

In Military Terms, Europe Is a Dwarf to America’s Giant. Europe’s realization of its large—and growing—military inferiority has had two salutary effects. First, America may have run the war, but Europe is running the peace. Second, the Kosovo crisis and war have produced a sea change in European—especially German and Britishtattitudes on things military. The growing consensus on the need for a European defense capability is also a direct consequence of the Kosovo crisis.

So what does all of this mean for the future? President Clinton’s conviction that the world community has an obligation to stop genocide and other mass-casualty wars wherever they might occur is admirable. Far from heralding a new age of humanitarian interventionism, the war in Kosovo highlights the difficulty of pursuing such a course. The single most important lesson of the conflict is that there is no cheap, easy way to prevent genocide or mass killing. Nonetheless, if the United States is clear about the costs of intervention, it can use force in a timely and effective way in the future. A sure sign of success will be when, in the next war, Washington can prepare to use ground forces before intervening rather than a month or two into the conflict. Had the United States been politically willing and militarily able to do so in Kosovo, what was an imperfect win might well have been an unblemished victory.

References


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Endnotes