

VIEWPOINT  
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# Down to Earth in the Balkans

Only safe havens can rescue the Kosovo refugees from a human catastrophe

**E**VER SINCE THE DAWN OF THE AERO AGE, BOMBING HAS been vastly overrated. No modern war has been decided by ordnance from the sky. In our century, the value of this currency of power has dropped faster than the bombs themselves. In World War II, 2 million tons of bombs fell on Germany; Vietnam received 6 million.

In neither case did bombs turn the tide. Flying Fortress-es and Wellington bombers hardly put a crimp into Germany's war-making potential, nor did they separate the *Volk* from their *Führer*. Ho Chi Minh prevailed, and after 30,000 sorties in the Gulf War, it was General Schwarzkopf's boys on the ground who drove Saddam's army from Kuwait.

Today, Slobodan Milosevic is not impressed. But airpower, as the Kosovo war shows, remains the great temptress. This time, the generals always insist, bombs *will* work—cleanly, efficiently, without risk to ourselves. What about yesterday's flop? Oh, that was the old stuff, they'll invariably retort. Now, you see, targeting precision has soared by 278%, there are "seeker munitions" that will find and kill tanks all by themselves, and this nifty "earth penetrator" will slice through nine meters of concrete before exploding on Saddam's desk.

This time, though, our fascination with airpower has brought not only frustration, but tragedy. NATO unleashed its bombers and cruise missiles to punish an evil man and to save the innocents. Yet a few days into the campaign, the alliance was faced with the bloodiest paradox imaginable. Instead of stopping the "ethnic cleansing," NATO's strikes accelerated, perhaps even triggered, the mayhem.

As Bill Clinton put it in his Norfolk speech last week, "500,000 Kosovars have been pushed from their homes," while the Serbs are hunting down the very negotiators who talked peace with them in Rambouillet. We wanted to do well, and we reaped the worst. What next?

First, as much as the Western mind overrates the marvels of military technology, we should not pooh-pooh them either. It took six weeks in 1991 before the allied air campaign enabled General Schwarzkopf's ground troops to finish the job in the next 100 hours. Soon, the bombers *will* cut the supply lines; they will either destroy Serb tanks or drive them into hiding. Serb troops won't be able to move on bloody-mindedness alone once they are cut off from their ammo and fuel trucks. Bombs may not break wills, but they *do* destroy tank farms, command centers and fortifications. They *will* "degrade his capabilities," as the impersonal mil-speak has it.

But that will take time, and time, alas, has almost run out for the doomed Kosovars. If the West is serious about saving them, it will have to say the frightful G word. Only ground troops can do the job in time; only they can save the lives of those we are bound to defend.

A "real" war in the Balkans? No. The West does not have the stomach for it because hardheaded, strategic interest is lacking. Nor can the allies, least of all the Europeans, field the requisite 200,000 troops a 1998 NATO study foresaw in case peace had to be enforced against Belgrade's will. Savoring all those "peace dividends" has added flab, not muscle, to Europe's armies. Finally, even if the West mustered such a force, it would take at least three months to put it into the field. How many Kosovars will still be left to be rescued?

But there is an alternative. It is called "safe havens." Protected zones for the Kosovars will at least stop the killing, and they can be held with far fewer troops than 200,000—in fact, with precisely those 12,000 NATO would-be peacekeepers already deployed in Macedonia. Another 30,000 are stationed in Bosnia.

The West has done it before, and with fewer troops: for Kurds in Northern Iraq after the Gulf War. It was the same kind of treacherous geography, with craggy mountains and bad roads. There was a despot just as ruthless as Milosevic, and with a far larger army. And yet, coupled with the no-fly zones, the safe-haven strategy averted precisely the human catastrophe unfolding in Kosovo right now.

Safe havens are fundamentally different from peace enforcement. It is the difference between defense and offense, between sheltering civilians and hunting down (and destroying) enemy battalions. Tactically, it can be done with fewer forces, and psychologically, it puts the onus on Mr. Milosevic. *He* would have to attack NATO, not the other way round. Will he shift to guerrilla warfare? Perhaps, but this would not be like Tito vs. the Germans. Belgrade's irregulars would be operating not like "fish in the water," but amid a murderously hostile Albanian population.

If the West felt morally compelled to act two weeks ago, it is doubly bound now that the attacks have apparently multiplied the mayhem. Caught between an air war that doesn't quite work and a land war it dare not unleash, the West must above all shield those it sought to save. Safe havens also have a strategic advantage. They will buy time for an alliance that leaped before it looked. ■

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