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Three Unwritten Rules of the Serbian War

By Josef Joffe

It was "a splendid little war," exulted the Secretary of State, "begun with the highest motives, carried on with magnificent intelligence, favored by that fortune which loves the brave." That was John Hay after the Spanish-American War of 1898, but it could have been Madeleine Albright, celebrating victory over Serbia's Slobodan Milosevic.

Yet was it a victory? NATO has been very slow to publish a post-mortem, and for good reason. Reports oozing out of NATO headquarters in Brussels now say this: In 78 days, the West's armada in the sky achieved precious little in strict military terms. The Yugoslav army withdrew virtually unhurt from Kosovo — minus a dozen knocked-out tanks.

So should we fight such "wars of goodness" again?

This war was fought not for land or glory, but for conscience and duty. Missing was the critical ingredient of interest that sustains purpose and justifies sacrifice. And so the war obeyed three unwritten rules that almost produced a most magnificent botch-up.

Rule 1: no casualties on our side — no body bags, no blood, no tears. Strangely enough, there was also Rule 2: no casualties on *their* side, for that would have been a field day for CNN, an orgy of cruelty guaranteed to sap the sense of moral superiority animating our engagement in the first place. And then there was Rule 3: do it fast — before public opinion collapses at home.

It does not take a West Point education to grasp the futility and frustration built into such self-stultifying conditions.

Start with Rule 1. To protect its own, NATO had to bomb from 15,000 feet. But at such an altitude it is impossible to tell the difference between an army truck and a refugee bus. So the alliance ended up slaughtering those it had come to save — which didn't exactly build up support at home.

Rule 1 also rendered ground troops strictly verboten. But ground troops were precisely what it would have taken to live up to the war's highest motives: stopping the slaughter and the ethnic cleansing.

Nor was this all. Had NATO deployed ground troops right away, it would have forced Belgrade to concentrate its own forces, thus offering

lucrative targets for the West's wonder weapons. But without such a threat, Mr. Milosevic's military could evade destruction with the oldest trick in the book: dispersal and camouflage.

A note to the hucksters of high-tech: It is true that United States forces can now hit almost anything they see. Too bad, though, that they can't always see what they want to hit. Nor will the next generation of microprocessors and sensors crack that barrier — not so long as tanks can hide among trees and anti-aircraft crews refuse to switch on their search radars.

So NATO's warplanes went off to Belgrade, hitting the stuff that could neither fight back nor cower behind camouflage nets — party headquarters, power grids or the Chinese Embassy. You don't have to be a NATO-hating pacifist to denounce such strikes as excessive or plain vicious. For Rule 2 says that you can't do what the United States Air Force did to Tokyo, and its British counterpart to Dresden.

But if you have to honor Rules 1 and 2 (no casualties on either side), you obviously can't live up to Rule 3: the speedy conclusion of the war. Instead of inflicting a large shock right away, NATO could escalate only slowly, which gave the enemy plenty of time to conceal, disperse and adapt. By tying its hands, NATO accepted a long, indecisive campaign that brought about precisely what it sought to avoid — a rising tide of opposition at home.

Hence the alliance was not "favored by that fortune which loves the brave," but by sheer luck. Nor is this the end of the story. After 78 days of bombing, Mr. Milosevic's army is still intact. Even if the mounting protests against Mr. Milosevic succeed in toppling him, the hatreds he unleashed will not vanish. And so, the West is now doubly stuck — in Kosovo as well as in Bosnia. For how long? How about 30, 40 or 50 years?

There are no "splendid little wars" anymore, and so Kosovo will surely end up as the first and last "good war" NATO has ever fought. □

**A little self-interest
never hurts a
military effort.**

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