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## Words Bring Bombs: US Decision-Making Prior to Operation Allied Force

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## Introduction

The first American bombs began to fall on Pristina, Kosovo at 8 p.m.<sup>1</sup> That night, March 24, 1999, 250 US military aircraft participated in the opening strike of Operation Allied Force—an international, coalition effort to end Serbian leader Slobodan Milošević’s violent persecution of Kosovar Albanians.<sup>2</sup> Following seventy-eight days of NATO bombing, Milošević conceded: Serbian troops withdrew, and Kosovo was granted self-rule under international supervision. Allied Force combined the efforts of the United Nations (UN), the Contact Group, and NATO to achieve a political outcome through military force. In the United States, prior to the strikes, senior government officials battled over whether to commit to military intervention. Historical precedent, political views, reports of war crimes, and multilateral goals in the region all influenced US officials’ decisions. Throughout the decision-making process, disagreement between US military and civilian officials created confusion and delayed the use of force. Retracing the US government’s decision to support military intervention, however, shows that international pressure was a significant factor in unifying US civilian and military officials. Political considerations and international reputation, alongside agitation from pro-intervention US officials, overcame domestic disagreements in the US—ultimately resulting in the decision to conduct airstrikes.

In the context of current events, a case study of Allied Force comments on a crucial issue for US officials: how can military and civilian leaders better—and more quickly—reach a consensus on use-of-force decisions? Given Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022, US officials—and international bodies like NATO—once again face decisions concerning the use of force, the

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<sup>1</sup> Benjamin Lambeth, *NATO’S AirWar for Kosovo* (Santa Monica, California: RAND, 2001), 20-21.

<sup>2</sup> Gregory Ball, “1999 - Operation Allied Force,” Air Force Historical Support Division, accessed April 25, 2022, <https://www.afhistory.af.mil/FAQs/Fact-Sheets/Article/458957/1999-operation-allied-force/>.

effectiveness of limited military intervention, and the inevitable strife between the institutions and personalities of civilian and military officials. Reexamining Allied Force, with a specific focus on the interaction between the State Department and the Department of Defense, shows the need for quicker alignment of civilian and military policy positions in order to have more control over the direction of the international community. Disagreements and lack of communication between civilian and military officials leading up to US airstrikes in Kosovo demonstrate the need for a more effective central mediator between the State and Defense departments, and for increased interagency pre-planning with regards to international crisis response.

## Background

The area of Kosovo has been subject to rival territorial claims stretching back seven centuries.<sup>3</sup> Kosovo, located in the Balkans, most notably borders Albania and Serbia. Kosovo's geographic position has fueled conflict, as it is jointly occupied by Serbs and Albanians—which has led to ethnic conflict that is further compounded by divides between Christianity and Islam. Kosovo is viewed—by both Serbs and Albanians—as culturally significant, and it is related to Serbia's attempts to distance itself from historical connections to Ottoman Turkey. While ethnic violence was tempered by the unification of the Balkans under Yugoslavia, its dissolution in 1992 reignited open conflict between various ethnic groups in the region. The Serbian government began a trend of using military force to politically and socially marginalize

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<sup>3</sup> The historical roots of ethnic violence between Serbs and Albanians in Kosovo stretch back to a battle between the Ottoman Empire and Moravian Serbia in 1389 CE. A brief summary of relevant historical context was published by the U.K.'s Select Committee on Foreign Affairs. U.K. House of Commons, Select Committee on Foreign Affairs, *Memorandum by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office: Kosovo: History of the Crisis*, prepared April 20, 2000.

Albanians who inhabited Kosovo—a trend that remained consistent throughout the 1990s.<sup>4</sup>

By the time of Allied Force, violence in the Balkans had already commanded international attention for nearly a decade. Slobodan Milošević, a Serbian politician, sought to use that violence as a means of purging Albanians from Kosovo. Milošević came to power as a Serbian nationalist during the 1980s. By the time of Allied Force, Milošević had rose within the Serbian Communist League, and was elected as President of Serbia.<sup>5</sup> He further drove his nationalist Serb agenda after the dissolution of Yugoslavia, and he was a significant political agitator during a series of Balkan civil wars beginning in 1991.<sup>6</sup> Milošević's consistent aggression in Kosovo were largely an attempt to counter Albanian movements for Kosovar independence.

After the fall of Yugoslavia, Bill Clinton—America's newly elected, and domestically focused, President—became saddled with a growing international crisis. The United States first became involved in the Balkans in 1993, as a part of a UN peacekeeping force aimed at containing the spread of violence from a civil war in Bosnia.<sup>7</sup> The Bosnian War was resolved through the Dayton Accords, in 1995, which was negotiated by then US Assistant Secretary of State Richard Holbrooke.<sup>8</sup> Milošević was a signatory of the agreement, and proved to be much more difficult to diplomatically court four years later, in the

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<sup>4</sup> US Department of State, "US Department of State Annual Report on International Religious Freedom for 1999 Serbia-Montenegro," September 9, 1999.

<sup>5</sup> In 1997, Milošević assumed the title of President of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, which refers to head of State of Serbia and Montenegro—even though Yugoslavia dissolved in 1992.

<sup>6</sup> The Council on Foreign Relations' *Foreign Affairs* published a contemporary piece on Milošević's rise to political power in 1993. Aleksa Djilas, "A Profile of Slobodan Milošević," *Foreign Affairs* 72, no. 3 (Summer, 1993): 81-96.

<sup>7</sup> John Pomfret, "FIRST US TROOPS ARRIVE IN BALKANS," *The Washington Post*, July 6, 1993, accessed March 16, 2023.

<sup>8</sup> US State Department, National Museum of American Diplomacy, "Diplomacy Ends a War: The Dayton Accords," accessed March 16, 2023.

failed negotiations that prompted Allied Force. During the Bosnian War, and leading up to Allied Force, the Clinton administration was hesitant to commit US troops to the region, but recurring violence in the Balkans showed the need for more sustainable and enduring intervention. Recognizing the short-lived effectiveness of previous interventions led directly to a change in US policy—resulting in the deployment of 16,500 US troops as a part of a NATO peacekeeping force in 1996.<sup>9</sup> In the following two years, however, underlying tensions between Serbs and Muslim Albanians in Kosovo continued to foment.

## Renewed Violence

In January 1998, US officials received word about military buildups near Kosovo. Milošević—adhering to his hard-liner, nationalist stance—sought to crush the revival of an armed, Kosovar Albanian-led independence movement.<sup>10</sup> Serb military mobilizations, which threatened to break the Balkans’ unstable peace, worried officials in the US State Department. Madeleine Albright, then US Secretary of State, was especially concerned. Inevitably, as had occurred in the past, government crack-downs in Kosovo equated to the targeting and killing of innocent civilians. Alarmed by news of Milošević’s plans, Albright began crafting a diplomatic response.<sup>11</sup>

Albright’s reaction was shaped by both personal experience and political disposition. As an infant, in 1939, she was driven from her birthplace in Czechoslovakia by the Nazis.<sup>12</sup> Sixty years later, nearly to the day, she found herself attempting to prevent Milošević, another violent authoritarian, from persecuting a

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<sup>9</sup> Steven Bowman, “Bosnia: US Military Operations,” CRS Issue Brief for Congress, July 8, 2003.

<sup>10</sup> Chih-Hann Chang, “The Clinton Administration’s Intervention in Kosovo,” 122.

<sup>11</sup> Bill Woodward and Madeleine Albright, *Madam Secretary* (New York: Hyperion, 2003), 380.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

minority ethnic group. As Secretary of State, Albright's personal connection to the Holocaust drove her interventionalist policies. In the summer of 1998, she publicly stated that "we are not going to stand by and watch Serbian authorities do in Kosovo what they can no longer get away with doing in Bosnia."<sup>13</sup> Albright relied on the precedent of the Clinton administration as additional justification for intervention.

Within the Clinton administration, Albright's ideas fit into larger foreign policy goals. Assertive multilateralism was the term—coined by Albright—used to describe Clinton's diplomatic mechanism for promoting human rights, democracy, and peace.<sup>14</sup> This described the use of international partnerships to leverage the US' military, political, and economic power with the global impact of international governing bodies.<sup>15</sup> Applied to the Balkans, intervention in Bosnia had been multilateral, and other policy makers—like US Defense Secretary William Cohen—agreed that international coalitions were the only viable method for producing sustainable political outcomes in Kosovo.<sup>16</sup> Milošević's aggression challenged Clinton's assertive multilateralism, especially as Milošević's posturing against Kosovo turned into action.

Within a short time, Albright's concerns about renewed ethnic violence were validated. American news sources, on March 5, reported on Serb bombardments of Albanian civilians in two Kosovar villages.<sup>17</sup> The military operation was reported as "the first time that Serbian authorities [had] used the army in operations against" Kosovar independence fighters.<sup>18</sup> Upon receiving the news, international politicians weighed in as well, meeting with

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<sup>13</sup> Thomas Lippman, *Madeleine Albright and the New American Diplomacy* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 2000), 247.

<sup>14</sup> Mark White and Elpida Katasavara, "The Aerial War in Kosovo," in *The Presidency of Bill Clinton* (London: I.B.Tauris & Co, 2012), 207.

<sup>15</sup> Richard Ponzio, "Madeleine K. Albright: An Assertive Multilateralist for Just Security," *Stimson Center*, March 30, 2022.

<sup>16</sup> William Cohen, interviewed by PBS Frontline News, accessed April 25, 2022.

<sup>17</sup> Reuters, "Clashes in Kosovo leave at least 22 dead," CNN News, March 5, 1998.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

Milošević in an attempt to cease hostilities.<sup>19</sup>

The initial international response was led by the Contact Group. This coalition consisted of the US, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Italy, and Russia—serving as an intergovernmental body for crisis management in the Balkans.<sup>20</sup> Issuing two statements in March, the Contact Group called for the ending of violence between Serbs and Kosovar Albanians, and more importantly, requested that the UN dispatch a human rights investigation mission.<sup>21</sup> The United Nations Security Council published Resolution 1160 at the end of the month, which showed support for a peaceful outcome in Kosovo, but fell short of intervening besides enacting an arms embargo.<sup>22</sup>

In the US, Secretary Albright thought little was actually being accomplished. Albright met with Sandy Berger, Clinton's National Security Advisor, on April 23. After stating that the current steps taken were unacceptable, Albright asserted that Milošević would not engage in a diplomatic solution until he “felt threatened.”<sup>23</sup> Berger defiantly opposed the State Department's desire for NATO to begin planning an aerial bombing campaign.<sup>24</sup> Albright acknowledged the goal of political settlement, but took a realist approach towards Milošević, believing he would only respond to military force.<sup>25</sup> While Albright sought to, in her own words, “implant some spine” into US policy, Pentagon officials refrained from supporting military intervention.<sup>26</sup>

Senior military officials had begun their careers in the Vietnam era. Formative experiences from the Vietnam War, and its

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Christoph Schwegmann, “The Contact Group and Its Impact on the European Institutional Structure,” EUISS, June 1, 2000.

<sup>21</sup> Office of the High Representative, “Contact Group Statement on Kosovo – Bonn, 25 March 1998,” accessed April 25, 2022. And Contact Group, “Statement on Kosovo,” US Department of State, March 9, 1998.

<sup>22</sup> United Nations, “Resolution 1160,” UNSC, March 31, 1998.

<sup>23</sup> Woodward, *Madam Secretary*, 383.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 383.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 383-384.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 383.

painful conclusion, created a generation of skeptical and blunt general officers. Albright and the State Department received the bulk of their pushback from military officials like General Hugh Shelton and Lieutenant General (LTG) Michael Short. Shelton and Short's objections were two-fold: 1) concerns over being sucked into a protracted ground conflict, and 2) lack of confidence in a limited air strategy. In Summer 1998, LTG Short, NATO's Joint Air Force Component Commander, was contacted by General Wesley Clark, NATO's Supreme Allied Commander. Tasked with planning a series of airstrikes, Short wanted "to go for the head of the snake" and use maximal force to end the conflict quickly.<sup>27</sup> General Shelton, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, agreed—believing that the military should utilize every element of force in order to achieve success. Applying lessons from Vietnam, Shelton also believed that use of force must be supported by other instruments of power, and should be supported by Congress.<sup>28</sup> However, NATO initially shelved Short's plan in favor of a more diplomatic, phased approach.

## US Domestic Strife

Conflict between the State Department and US military advisors grew alongside NATO military tensions. Growing resentment between General Shelton and General Clark created confusion within the chain of command, and continued disagreement led to breakdowns in communication that later spanned Allied Force's entire planning and operational period. Particularly, chaos stemmed from Clark frequently contacting Albright, while circumventing and excluding Shelton and Cohen.<sup>29</sup> As the consensus in America became more complicated, Albright's insistence on intervention began to gain international traction.

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<sup>27</sup> Michael Short, interviewed by PBS Frontline News, accessed April 25, 2022.

<sup>28</sup> Henry Shelton, interviewed by Denis Ventriglia, November 17, 2001.

<sup>29</sup> Henry Shelton, interviewed by the Miller Center, Presidential Oral Histories, May 29, 2007.



On September 23, the UN Security Council issued a demand for the cessation of hostilities in Kosovo.<sup>30</sup> Beforehand, international politicians, such as French Prime Minister Leonel Jospin, rejected ideas for US intervention in the absence of a UN mandate.<sup>31</sup> Now, however, the US had officially gained multilateral support. The next day, NATO Defense Ministers met to approve two “activation warnings,” which authorized “an increased level of military preparedness” to wage an aerial bombing campaign in Kosovo.<sup>32</sup> These changes in international military posture resembled the threats Albright desired for compelling Milošević to diplomacy.

As NATO inched closer to employing military force, Albright flew to Brussels for a meeting with NATO Secretary General Javier Solana and Holbrooke.<sup>33</sup> In an effort to avert NATO airstrikes, Holbrooke had been meeting with Milošević in Serbia. Holbrooke was a key player in the Clinton administration’s resolution of the Bosnian War, and—once again—was the chosen diplomat for dealing with Milošević when conflict resumed in 1998. American news outlets emphasized the importance of events during the first week of October. “Holbrooke’s failure to reach a political agreement,” *The Washington Post* reported, “has left NATO governments facing a moment of truth they have long dreaded.”<sup>34</sup> Just as Pentagon officials worried, it became clear that, eventually, the threat of military force must become action in order to be taken seriously. Albright’s belief that Milošević needed to feel threatened, it seemed, was driving NATO towards violence.

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<sup>30</sup> United Nations, “Security Council Demands All Parties End Hostilities and Maintain a Ceasefire in Kosovo,” UNSC, September 23, 1998.

<sup>31</sup> Lippman, *Madeleine Albright and the New American Diplomacy*, 155.

<sup>32</sup> US Department of Defense, “Report to Congress: Kosovo/Operation Allied Force After-Action Report,” January 31, 2000, A-2. And Javier Solana, “Statement,” NATO, September 24, 1998.

<sup>33</sup> William Drozdiak, “Allies grim, Milošević defiant amid Kosovo uncertainty,” *Washington Post*, October 8, 1998.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

## Increasing International Pressure

Holbrooke returned to Belgrade for another round of meetings on October 10. Meanwhile, US officials were growing impatient for acquiring a diplomatic agreement. Cohen issued a statement warning that “time for a diplomatic solution” was running out, and Cohen gave Milošević a one-week negotiation deadline.<sup>35</sup> These threatening remarks were bolstered by Cohen’s efforts to rally congressional support. While Cohen had originally been opposed to “getting sucked into another Bosnia-like commitment,” he was charged with persuading Congress to support the US mission in the Balkans.<sup>36</sup> Having served as both a US Representative and a Senator, Cohen’s connections in Congress made him an excellent fit for attempting to bridge the divide between the executive and legislative branches.

Cohen’s position on Kosovo was a result of changing international support and considerations of America’s role in global affairs. Like many other politicians, Cohen vehemently opposed unilateral action by the US, which he believed was politically unsustainable.<sup>37</sup> However, with the Security Council’s demands in September, and NATO’s intention to conduct airstrikes, Cohen believed that America needed to prepare to make good on NATO’s threats.<sup>38</sup> Despite “great reluctance on the part of most members of Congress to commit American forces,” Cohen encouraged his peers in NATO to “be willing to take strong action, and consider all of the options.”<sup>39</sup>

Cohen’s concern over empty threats was resolved on October 13, as NATO Secretary General Solana issued a public statement. Remarking on Holbrooke’s continued contact with Milošević, Solana stated that the diplomatic progress that had been

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<sup>35</sup> Brent Sadler and Reuters, “No progress reported in Kosovo talks,” CNN News, October 10, 1998.

<sup>36</sup> William Cohen, interviewed by PBS Frontline News, accessed April 25, 2022.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

made was a result of international pressure. To “maintain this pressure in order to ensure that the process [continued],” Solana reported on the North Atlantic Council’s decision to commence airstrikes within the following 96 hours.<sup>40</sup> NATO had declared its intent, and was preparing to force Milošević to the bargaining table through military force.

NATO’s commitment to action dramatically affected Milošević’s decision calculus. NATO, backed by the US military, intended to finally make good on its threats. But merely hours after Solana’s announcement, Holbrooke responded with unexpected news. Speaking from the Hotel Hyatt in Belgrade, Holbrooke stated that he and Milošević had reached an agreement for a peaceful resolution of the “Kosovo issue.”<sup>41</sup> NATO’s escalation raised the stakes for both Serbia and the US, and yet, it seemed that Albright’s plan for steady brinkmanship had offered a path for a diplomatic resolution.

## **A Short-Lived Peace**

Although NATO’s finger remained on the trigger until early 1999, events in Kosovo seemed quiet. Much like the previous January, however, Serbian police forces crept back into northern Kosovo—testing the political climate of the region and international community.<sup>42</sup> Local tension from these operations spilled over into widespread violence.

On January 16, 1999, US Ambassador Bill Walker spoke to a group of reporters. Without hesitation, he communicated clearly: “it’s hard to find words to say anything about it. This is about as horrendous an event as I’ve seen.”<sup>43</sup> Serb police forces had

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<sup>40</sup> Javier Solana, “Statement to the Press,” NATO, October 13, 1998.

<sup>41</sup> Office of the High Representative, “OHR SRT News Summary, 13 October 1998,” accessed April 25, 2022.

<sup>42</sup> US Department of Defense, “Report to Congress: Kosovo/Operation Allied Force After-Action Report,” January 31, 2000. A-4-5.

<sup>43</sup> Associated Press, “(V) Kosovo: Massacre Site Visited,” January 16, 1999.

executed forty-five civilians, in the village of Račak, Kosovo.<sup>44</sup> The next day, *The Washington Post* broke the news in the mainstream American media circuit: “Villagers Slaughtered in Kosovo ‘Atrocity.’”<sup>45</sup> Consistent reporting, from sources like *The Washington Post* and Associated Press, mobilized Albanian émigrés in the US. Since early 1998, Albanian-Americans had been organizing demonstrations and awareness campaigns to encourage US action.<sup>46</sup> As Milošević’s aggression continued, so too did Albanians’ lobbying efforts in the US.

Amid international outrage, the Račak massacre sparked an immediate reaction in the State Department. On January 19, US national security principals quickly convened to discuss how to respond to the massacre.<sup>47</sup> The meeting—which included Albright, Shelton, and Cohen—was intended to resolve the ongoing disagreements over intervention that had impeded US crisis response. Cohen and Shelton voiced concerns about committing to a NATO peacekeeping mission, but Albright leveraged new events in Kosovo to make her case. After four days of near continuous debate, US policy makers came to an agreement, and then delivered their consensus to Clinton. Despite previous policy differences, Račak galvanized US policy in Kosovo.<sup>48</sup> The State Department, backed by NATO calls for airstrikes, emerged from the meeting with the winning policy.<sup>49</sup> With a sufficient consensus, Albright once again turned her attention to international partners.

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<sup>44</sup> US Department of Defense, “Report to Congress: Kosovo/Operation Allied Force After-Action Report,” January 31, 2000. A-5.

<sup>45</sup> Guy Dinmore, “Villagers slaughtered in Kosovo ‘atrocity,’” *Washington Post*, January 17, 1999.

<sup>46</sup> Eliot Engel, “Lessons from the 1998 US military intervention in Kosovo,” *The Hill*, March 24, 2019. And Associated Press, “USA: New York: Kosovar Albanians Stage Mock Funeral,” November 12, 1998. And Associated Press, “USA: Washington: Albanian-Americans Stage Protest Rally,” March 13, 1998. And Associated Press, “USA: New York: Albanian Kosovars Stage Demonstration,” June 29, 1998.

<sup>47</sup> Woodward, *Madam Secretary*, 394.

<sup>48</sup> William Cohen, interviewed by PBS Frontline News, accessed April 25, 2022.

<sup>49</sup> Woodward, *Madam Secretary*, 395.

The Račak massacre had renewed international interest in Kosovo, and provided yet another justification for NATO involvement. Three days after rounding up consensus in the National Security Council, Albright was in Moscow. In a joint statement with Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov, Albright had been able to encourage Russia to go on the record against Milošević.<sup>50</sup> With another permanent member of the UN Security Council on board, US policy makers were confident in the renewed pressure placed on Serbia.

Other ultimatums issued by the Contact Group and NATO further compounded the US pressure. On January 28, Secretary General Solana provided four demands on behalf of the North Atlantic Council. Solana emphasized the NATO's willingness to use force, and offered a personal assessment of the situation: "What we have seen in Yugoslavia during the past decade is that it is very difficult to stop internal conflicts if the international community is not willing to use force—and when all other means have failed."<sup>51</sup> Referencing NATO's airstrike threats from the previous October, Solana continued: "We may be reaching that limit, once again, in the Former Yugoslavia."<sup>52</sup> As tensions once again boiled, it was clear to Albright, and other members of the international community, that a new course was needed to prevent endless cycles of provocation and retaliation.<sup>53</sup>

The North Atlantic Council turned to diplomacy—for the last time—on January 30, encouraging Kosovar-Albanian and Serbian leadership to convene in Rambouillet, France for peace negotiations.<sup>54</sup> The offer was supported by another threat of force: "if these steps are not taken, NATO is ready to take whatever

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<sup>50</sup> Madeleine Albright and Igor Ivanov, "Joint Statement on Kosovo," US Department of State, January 26, 1999.

<sup>51</sup> Javier Solana, "Statement to the Press," NATO, January 28, 1999.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> Lippman, *Madeleine Albright and the New American Diplomacy*, 252.

<sup>54</sup> Marc Weller, "The Rambouillet Conference on Kosovo," *International Affairs* vol. 75, no. 2, 1999, pp. 222.

measures are necessary.”<sup>55</sup> Due to NATO’s previous airstrike authorization in October, the threats were received as legitimate and effective. Although NATO provided the muscle behind the threats, only foreign ministers of Contact Group nations handled much of the negotiating.<sup>56</sup> The negotiators in Rambouillet continued through the months of February and March.

Despite some progress over the course of the conference, American diplomatic rhetoric became increasingly sharp. Secretary Albright made several public statements critical of Milošević’s perceived lack of effort and goodwill towards ending violence in Kosovo. On February 20, Albright spoke bluntly: “the Serb delegation bears the lion’s share of responsibility for the difficulties we have experienced.”<sup>57</sup> In Rambouillet, peace talks similarly grew in hostility.

In the closing days of the conference, US and Contact Group diplomats had succeeded in gaining Kosovar-Albanian approval, but fell short of gaining Serbian support. On March 19, Serb negotiators abruptly departed without signing the agreement.<sup>58</sup> Much of the Serb delegation’s complaints centered on the agreement itself as a “violation of international law” and rejected the use of military ultimatums.<sup>59</sup> However, throughout the conference, Serb military forces continued to amass on Kosovo’s border.

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<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 223.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 227.

<sup>57</sup> Madeleine Albright, “Press conference on the Kosovo peace talks,” US Department of State, February 20, 1999.

<sup>58</sup> US Department of Defense, “Report to Congress: Kosovo/Operation Allied Force After-Action Report,” January 31, 2000. A-7.

<sup>59</sup> US Department of Defense, “Report to Congress.” And Derek Brown, “Cloud over Kosovo,” *The Guardian*, February 18, 1999. And Charles Trueheart, “Ethnic Albanians wary of focus on Milošević,” *Washington Post*, February 18, 1999.

## Closing Diplomatic Window

The Serb delegation's departure from Rambouillet signaled a transition from a diplomacy first approach, to primarily focusing on the military to end violence in Kosovo. Following the increasing rhetoric of NATO, the UN Security Council, and US policy makers, a failure to respond to Serbia's rejection of peace negotiations would significantly delegitimize their political leverage. America's decision to respond, however, was not without debate. Between the Pentagon, State Department, and White House, the third week of March was extremely busy for US policy makers. As President Clinton stated in a public address that "the United States and our NATO allies stand ready to take decisive military action," senior military officials offered warnings to Congress about the "tremendously dangerous" possibility of US airstrikes.<sup>60</sup> American diplomats were firmly convinced that airstrikes could secure an end to Milošević's aggression, but General Shelton remained highly critical of Albright's reasoning.<sup>61</sup> However, on March 19, as a result of a unifying meeting convened by President Clinton, US policy reached a final consensus.

In the meeting, key foreign policy makers presented a series of actions to Clinton.<sup>62</sup> While officials from State and Defense pitched their opposing ideas, the President was ultimately swayed by Albright's appeal to history and the looming political fallout in the Balkans. Albright finished her remarks with reference to US influence in Kosovo and the wider international community: "the purpose of using force is to stop Milošević-style thuggery

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<sup>60</sup> William Clinton, "President Clinton: A commitment to peace in Kosovo," Clinton White House Archives, March 19, 1999. And Marilyn Rauber, "Pentagon: Kosovo Airstrikes Would Be Risky," New York Post, March 19, 1999.

<sup>61</sup> Bradley Graham, "Joint Chiefs Doubted Air Strategy," Washington Post, April 5, 1999.

<sup>62</sup> Chang, *Ethical Foreign Policy?*, 147.

once and for all.”<sup>63</sup> With this as the primary intention, Clinton chose to back NATO airstrikes as America’s plan for action.

Clinton and his advisors departed the meeting, making their rounds in Washington to secure support from Congress. That day, Clinton met with 31 representatives and senators to rally congressional backing.<sup>64</sup> Days later, the Senate offered its support by authorizing US participation in NATO airstrikes with a vote of 58-41.<sup>65</sup> Even with US backing, NATO still had to make its motion for action official.

US diplomats sought final approval from NATO, while sending a last-ditch diplomatic effort to Serbia. Richard Holbrooke met with Milošević on March 22, but to no avail.<sup>66</sup> Over the course of four hours face-to-face, Holbrooke returned to the US embassy to deliberate.<sup>67</sup> Milošević, refusing to halt Serb attacks in Kosovo, did not to concede to NATO demands. President Clinton, in response, announced that retaliatory military action would ensue.<sup>68</sup>

Foreign policy makers in other nations similarly rallied supporters to NATO’s plan. British Prime Minister Tony Blair appealed to the U.K. Parliament, remarking on the importance of NATO action “to save thousands of innocent men, women and children.”<sup>69</sup> As allied nations reached a similar consensus, Secretary General Solana made the final announcement on March 23<sup>rd</sup>. Through the power vested in him by the North Atlantic Council, Solana directed the Supreme Allied Commander of

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<sup>63</sup> Woodward, *Madame Secretary*, 406.

<sup>64</sup> Chris Black, “Clinton makes his case for Kosovo strikes to senators,” CNN News, March 19, 1999.

<sup>65</sup> Library of Congress, “All Information (Except Text) for S.Con.Res.21 - A concurrent resolution authorizing the President of the United States to conduct military air operations and missile strikes against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (Serbia and Montenegro).” accessed April 25, 2022.

<sup>66</sup> David Holley and Norman Kempster, “US Envoy Makes Last-Ditch Effort for Kosovo Peace,” Los Angeles Times, March 23, 1999.

<sup>67</sup> Holley and Kempster, “US Envoy.”

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> The Guardian, “Blair: ‘We must act - to save thousands of innocent men, women and children,’” March 23, 1999.



Europe, US General Wesley Clark, to begin executing airstrikes in Serbia.<sup>70</sup> During the course of Allied Force, Milošević was indicted by the UN's International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia, and agreed to withdraw Serb forces from Kosovo—but only after enduring seventy-eight days of bombing.<sup>71</sup> Allied Force achieved the political objectives of the US, UN, and NATO, yet at a severely slow pace, while demanding extensive diplomatic resources, which when ultimately ineffective, required the use of military force.

## Conclusion

US participation in Operation Allied Force was the result of a long, steady diplomatic buildup over the course of twelve months. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright was particularly worried about the humanitarian crisis generated by Serbian president Slobodan Milošević's aggression against ethnic Albanians. Despite tension within the US foreign policy system—namely between the Pentagon and State Department—growing international consensus united US policy makers. Originally managed by the Contact Group, the crisis involved intergovernmental organizations like the UN and NATO, which brought together a collection of varied political interests in the Balkans. After several diplomatic responses to Milošević, the international community feared weakening legitimacy on the eve of NATO's 50th birthday. Secretary of Defense William Cohen similarly feared for the crumbling of America's international legitimacy. Allied Force resulted from a combination of these factors, along with consistent outrage from Albanian émigrés, clear and accurate reporting by American journalists, and repeated provocation by Milošević. Spearheaded by Secretary Albright in the US, and NATO Secretary General Solana internationally, Operation Allied Force

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<sup>70</sup> US Department of Defense, "Report to Congress: Kosovo/Operation Allied Force After-Action Report," January 31, 2000. A-7. and Javier Solana, "Press Statement," NATO, March 23, 1999.

<sup>71</sup> US Department of Defense, "Report to Congress."

was a multilateral campaign that rallied global support for the use of airstrikes as a proportional and effective means of procuring a political solution in Kosovo.

Allied Force is relevant to a pressing issue in US civil-military relations: how can US civilian and military officials more effectively reach consensus on use-of-force decisions? Albright consistently pressed US military officials to support military intervention. The greatest hang-up, for officers like Short and Shelton, was the degree and manner in which the US would use the military in Kosovo. To resolve these disputes, presidential advisors, such as the National Security Advisor, should have played a greater role in mediating agendas of the State and Defense departments. Increasing communication through a central conduit, based around the President, may have more quickly aligned consensus leading up to Allied Force.

Maintaining the military's role as a tool that is subordinate to diplomatic policy is essential to the functioning of the US government and its international influence. Allied Force featured civilian policymakers advocating for military intervention, despite hesitation within the military, which shows the need for increased pre-planning concerning use-of-force decisions. Increased interagency planning for international crisis response could have better coordinated the efforts of State and Defense officials. The difficulty, however, was the presence of strong, charismatic, and stubborn personalities—all of whom were, at the same time, interacting with their foreign counterparts. Wargaming responses to international crises, such as Milošević's renewed aggression in Kosovo, could have shown a more unified front to both civilian and military institutions of US allies in NATO and the UN.

Operation Allied Force ultimately achieved its goal of forcing Milošević to withdraw Serb troops from Kosovo. However, the use of limited military force was only effective after seventy-eight days and was delayed by extensive civil-military debate in the US over the course of fourteen months. Now, learning from the lessons of Allied Force, US officials could better bridge the civil-military divide by more frequently using a central mediator for

resolving policy disagreements, and by more proactively sharing how the State and Defense departments would react to potential international crises. Being able to more quickly respond to events with a whole-of-government approach will increase US influence and effectiveness when addressing future and current global crises.