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On humanitarian bombing

Andrew Chitty

Since World War II the United States has dropped bombs on twenty-one different countries. That is an average of one new country every two years. In the last two years the rate has been higher, with first-time bombings of Afghanistan, Sudan and Yugoslavia, plus a return trip to Iraq. If things continue in this way, we can expect that the USA will find about five new countries to bomb in the next ten years.

There is surely only one way to explain this pattern as a whole: by seeing the bombing of foreign countries as the means whereby the USA has gradually extended its military domination over the world. Each bombing, beyond and above its immediate motives, is a way of signalling to the rest of the world that the USA is willing to use extreme force to punish any country that defies its will or threatens its interests. In turn, it is hard not to connect this military expansionism with the expansionism inherent to capitalism, the economic system that has made the USA its home. The country that bombs the most other countries is also the one whose products have invaded the most other markets. Of course the declared aims of the bombings have been very different to all this: stopping the spread of communism (China, Korea, Vietnam), preventing international terrorism (Libya, Sudan, Afghanistan), upholding the principle of national sovereignty (Iraq, 1991), preventing the spread of new weapons (Iraq, 1998–99), and so on. But it has never been hard to see the hard reality of US geopolitical and economic interests behind the high-minded justifications.

In that light, it should not be difficult to begin with an instinctive opposition to the bombing of Yugoslavia: first, out of revulsion for the massacres of ordinary human beings that all bombing inevitably and repeatedly produces; second, out of a sense that no state has the right to impose its will on the whole world by violence just because it has the military capacity to do so; third, out of an understanding that American-model capitalism is the most powerful creator of economic inequality that the world has ever known; and finally, out of a sense that something absolutely new and very ominous is happening here. For the other twenty countries bombed by the USA were all Third World countries, where bombing, however many thousands it killed, did not seriously endanger the postwar security arrangements between the great powers. By contrast the twenty-first country is a European one, inbetween Germany and Greece, with close links to one of those great powers, and the air war against it has been launched in total disregard of those security arrangements – for this is the significance of Nato’s decision to attack it without any reference to the UN Security Council.

With regard to massacres, the record speaks for itself. At the time of writing (25 May), Nato has been bombing for two months. It has progressively widened its targets from air-defence systems and command centres to road and rail bridges, factories, oil refineries, ministries, buildings owned by Milosevic’s family and political allies, power

stations, prisons and now apparently water utilities – these last perhaps on the grounds that they supply water to the Yugoslav army. The bombing has killed over two hundred civilians (and maybe several times that figure) in accidental, though by now entirely predictable, hits on the houses, trains, refugee columns, buses, market places, embassies or hospitals they were in, and in a deliberate attack on a staffed television station. Nato has now admitted to using missiles made with depleted uranium, which poison the area where they explode with radioactive dust and therefore cause more deaths by lung cancer. Claims that it is using cluster bombs, even in densely populated areas, have proved true. It has been suggested in some news reports that the next step is the ‘area bombing’ of whole sections of cities; according to other reports this is, in effect, happening already. Meanwhile, if only a fraction of the stories brought out of Kosovo by the 800,000 people who have fled it since the bombing began are true, it has provoked a multiplication of the expulsions and murders of Kosovan Albanians – which it was supposed to halt – out of all proportion. In the year before the Nato attacks maybe half a million Albanians were expelled from their homes and two thousand killed in the escalating war against the KLA. In the two months since the attacks began another million have been dispossessed, and perhaps thousands more killed. In short, the attacks have turned a humanitarian crisis in Kosovo into a humanitarian catastrophe. If anything, the scale of the murders there has increased as the bombing has widened, making this war, like every other, a competition in violence.

Let us accept that the USA began this bombing campaign – and, although it wears a Nato badge and has British cheerleaders, it is an American campaign, diplomatically prepared, politically initiated, militarily directed, and executed in practice almost entirely by Americans – not in order to reassert its military supremacy over Western Europe or to extend its influence in the Middle East, as some have argued, but in order to prevent the civil war in Kosovo from erupting into a conflagration that would drag in the surrounding areas and ultimately destabilize its client states in the region. This does not attribute to the USA a disinterested concern to protect human populations in general from repression, for how could such a concern be consonant with its active support for the regimes in Turkey, Indonesia and Colombia, which in the last few years have been engaging in campaigns of repression at least as violent as anything that Yugoslavia was doing before the Nato attack? But it does at least suggest that the USA wanted to bring an end to the cycle of killings and dispossessions in Kosovo. It is not difficult to see that in terms of its own aims the USA’s war so far has been completely botched, for instead of stabilizing the area it has greatly increased the chances of civil war in Montenegro and Macedonia. Meanwhile it has utterly alienated the populations of Russia, Greece and China, and as the USA’s geopolitical interest in being seen to defeat Yugoslavia, tempered only by its determination that none of its servicemen shall die in the process, has gradually taken precedence over its original war aims, it has increasingly alienated opinion among its own allies in Nato. The longer the war continues in its present vein, the further each of these processes will go.

Meanwhile from a human point of view the war has already been a disaster, regardless of how it will eventually end: a disaster for hundreds of thousands of Albanians who will now never (voluntarily) go home, a disaster for the population of Serbia who will suffer its consequences for decades, and a disaster for the stability of the world security system. It has even been a disaster for American and British society, for the public abuse of the language of morality to justify the murder of foreigners is literally demoralizing for the population that uncritically accepts it: consciously or unconsciously, it brings our moral impulses themselves into discredit.

In the light of all this, how is it possible that so many on the Left have acquiesced in, and even approved, the bombing? Why have people like Ken Livingstone and Michael Foot, Vanessa Redgrave and Günter Grass all supported it? Why, leaving aside

the effects of media censorship, has Left opposition to the war – at least in Britain – been so muted?

The answer must be the sheer scale of the atrocities that have been attributed to the Serbian forces in Kosovo, combined with the belief that anything that will stop these atrocities must be justified. This is the essence of the argument for the bombing that British liberals have been pressing from the start, and that seems to have silenced, or even won over, so many on the Left. After all, to be on the Left is to identify with the oppressed, and what clearer case of oppression could there be than that which the Kosovan Albanians are suffering? No matter – the argument goes – that many of the atrocity stories may have been invented, as was the story of the two hundred Kuwaiti babies tipped from their incubators by Iraqi troops in the Gulf War, for it doesn't need many of them to be true for the atrocities to be appalling. No matter that the Albanians have undoubtedly committed atrocities too, which the media, with their need for a simple story line (Serbs = bad, their enemies = good), have ignored, for it is not imaginable that they could be on the same scale as the Serb ones. No matter that the vast majority of the expulsions and killings have happened since the bombing began, for what had happened by then was already bad enough to justify the bombing, and if so many more crimes have been committed since, then this is only a reason to redouble the efforts to get Nato troops into Kosovo to put an end to the whole terrible business. No matter even if the bombing so far, while steadily creating its own mass of maimings and killings, has been completely ineffectual in stopping these crimes, for we have to trust the judgement of the Nato leaders that they are doing the most effectual thing they can, and that in the end it will work. No matter even if we know that the USA and its allies are not really in this for the welfare of the Albanians but for their own interests, for some-thing must be done and there is no practical alternative to what they are doing.

This is the crux of the argument for the bombing: an enormous crime against humanity is being committed against the Kosovo Albanians, something has to be done about it, and there is no alternative to what is being done. Therefore we must support it. To oppose it in the absence of alternatives is in effect to assent to that crime. The argument can be summed up in a single question: 'What would you do, then?'

It is not sufficient to respond to this argument by saying that the USA never supports a minority for longer than it suits its interests, to point for example to the way that it has repeatedly betrayed the Iraqi Kurds in the last thirty years, and to claim that in the long run the Kosovo Albanians will be worse off for American help than they were without it. It is not good enough to say that imperialist powers by their nature always destroy and never heal, and that a defeat for them is a gain for humanity as a whole that outweighs any immediate losses to the minority that they are currently



supporting. It is not enough even to point out that the longest gap in the USA's postwar bombing history – ten years without a single bomb dropped abroad – was after its defeat in Vietnam, and that the best way to guarantee the world peace from American bombs for the next ten years would be a decisive victory for Serbia in this war. These arguments are too remote and abstract. They cannot address a refugee telling the camera about the pile of corpses she has left a few miles behind her on the other side of the border, for they propose nothing in response to that story. It is such a response that the question demands: 'What would you do, then?'

Of course it is possible to imagine many less bellicose responses to the situation in Kosovo in 1998 than the one that the USA adopted with such disastrous results. It is possible to imagine alternatives open to it now apart from more bombing, and it is possible to imagine the British government pressing for those alternatives, instead of using what influence it has in trying to bounce the USA into an even more destructive ground war. Such responses, though, already concede too much. For they share with the whole argument the silent assumption that there is only one actor in question here, the United States government, and that discussion of the bombing on the part of the rest of us can only be a discussion about how best to advise the USA. Thus 'there is no other way to stop the atrocities' means 'there is no other way for the USA to stop the atrocities', and 'what would you do?' means 'what would you recommend that our government recommend that the USA do?' In turn, this assumption presupposes that the chief aim of the US government is to prevent atrocities in Kosovo. Yet everything about the US government's behaviour before and during this war (let alone over the last fifty years) tells against the idea that it has any interest in preventing atrocities, except in so far as doing so may serve its other interests. To engage in an attempt to 'think with' it about how to achieve an aim that it does not have, and cannot be expected to have, is simply to succumb to its own propaganda. The question 'what should the USA (or Britain or France) do about the humanitarian crisis in Kosovo?' contains a false assumption. The only answer to it is 'stay out' – an answer that should be interpreted not as offering advice on the best route to a shared goal but as rejecting the assumption that there is any shared goal here at all.

As to the question, 'what should you or I do about the crisis in Kosovo?', it may be that beyond demanding that our country stop bombing Yugoslavia there is very little that we can do about it. The kind of political organization that could do more does not at present exist. Perhaps it is this, even more than the capitulation of so many to war propaganda, that is the worst reflection of the state of the Left today.

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Alan Sinfield's commentary on the Andrew Sullivan Phenomenon will now appear in RP 97.