

**REFLECTIONS ON DEVELOPING
AN INTEREST IN RESOLVING
ETHNIC CONFLICT**

A LONG BUT FITTING TITLE

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JAF VIII
Seminar Paper
June 1999

PREFACE

I am a relatively new student to the subject of ethnic conflict. Questions of identity and the capacity of individuals from different backgrounds to treat each other with respect and live together peacefully have been a part of my consciousness for a while. Still, my interests lacked an international perspective and focus. Spending the past semester discussing the conflict in Kosovo between Serbians and ethnic Albanians in addition to participating in the Hague Appeal for Peace, have piqued my interest in ethnic conflict.

The problems facing our society overwhelm me and at times seem to only be worsening. Is ethnic conflict the greatest problem facing my generation as we head into the twenty-first century? Avoiding an effort to rank the myriad problems with which my generation will be forced to contend, it is clear that ethnic conflict will remain on this list of ills for some time. The purpose of this paper is to reflect on my newfound interest in ethnic conflict, through an exploration of the development of my understanding of the current situation in Kosovo. As someone who enjoys resolving problems and seeks to avoid conflict, the other part of my paper will discuss practical methods of humanitarian intervention in ethnic conflicts.

An important lesson from The Hague is the prevalence of ethnic conflict not just in Eastern Europe, but in Africa, South America, and elsewhere. The absence of any concrete discussion of ethnic conflicts around the world in this paper should not be interpreted as my placing more value on solving conflicts in Eastern Europe as opposed to in less developed parts of the world. However, having spent the past semester concerned with the events in Kosovo, this will be the focus. In addition, using “Kosovo”

to refer to the conflict does not include the surrounding countries that are involved, but for literary reasons “Kosovo” will be used throughout the paper.

WHAT I NEEDED TO KNOW

As the events in Kosovo began to capture my attention, it became very clear how much knowledge and information I needed to acquire before I could speak intelligently about the subject. Perhaps I had less knowledge to start with than should be expected of a college graduate, but while I knew that there were serious problems in the former Yugoslavia, I had never even heard of a place called Kosovo a few months ago. Being well trained by Robert Payton, I began by asking the first ethical question, what is going on? The NATO bombings began on March 24th, and my interest in the region was sparked soon thereafter. With the aerial attack escalating the ethnic cleansing of Kosovar Albanians by Slobodan Milosevic, the presence of this crisis quickly became the obsession of the United States media. As a grandson of Holocaust survivors from Eastern Europe, knowledge of an ethnic group in Europe being forcibly removed from their homes struck a chord.

With a very basic understanding that some terrible things were going on in Kosovo, the next logical question became finding some explanation for the causes of this problem. It did not take much searching to learn that a man named Milosevic and his wife were significant players in this region. A nationalist with little to no human compassion, this man used the NATO bombing as a justification for orchestrating the mass removal of Albanians from Kosovo by cruel and violent means. With parents who both committed suicide, one can assume this man has a drastically different

psychological disposition than most heads of state. However, without undermining the detrimental role Milosevic has played in the region, a more complex understanding of the conflict should get beyond the actions of one man.

Basic knowledge about the history of the region helped me to look beyond Milosevic at additional reasons for the conflict in Kosovo. Starting in 1389 and fast-forwarding to the 1980s and early 1990s gives me a skewed time line but a sufficient starting point. The Cold War served to simply place all the tension based on ethnicity in Yugoslavia on hold, and when it ended, old problems quickly resurfaced. Having not read any comprehensive historical texts, my contextual knowledge base developed through newspaper articles, television, and discussions with people from the region at The Hague. This background information included not just history, but also insights into the cultural attitudes of the Serbs, why Kosovo was such a significant place in the region, and how the NATO bombing in some ways unified the Serbian people.

Discussion of my quest to become informed requires a critique of the media's control over this process. While texts from academia may provide more credible information, most citizens, including myself, typically get their information from newspapers and television. This reality will inform how citizens understand ethnic conflict and think about possible solutions.

THE INFORMATION PROBLEM

The process of gathering information about Kosovo revealed the extensive skepticism with which I view the media. Without journalists in Serbia, it was hard to know the verity of any information about what was really going on there. How much

damage was being caused to Serbia? How many civilians were killed? Were the Serbian people supportive of Milosevic or was there active opposition to his regime? NATO's own interest in maintaining support for their efforts from the Western world heightened my reluctance to accept the information I received. As refugees fled into Albania and Macedonia, and journalists flooded the camps, evidence of ethnic cleansing became clear. Still, the extent of the damage and deaths caused by the NATO bombings has been largely unavailable to the general public. With the unique opportunity to learn about Sonja Licht's noble efforts in Serbia through George Soros' Open Society Fund, and speak with young people from Kosovo at The Hague, my access to information certainly exceeded that of the average American with an interest in Kosovo.

With the peace process tentatively underway, it will be interesting to note the decline in media coverage and public interest in Kosovo. As the media inevitably drifts away from the refugee crisis and moves on to more important matters like presidential primaries and such, how will concerned citizens stay informed? Is there a relationship between the extent of media coverage on an ethnic conflict and the extent of support available for addressing that conflict? A larger question concerns why Kosovo got so much attention to begin with, while worse situations in less developed parts of the world are never given comparable media coverage. The influence of the media is a reality in our world, but recognizing this fact is critical to considering how people think about ethnic conflicts in the world.

BEYOND BEING INFORMED

Over the past ten months, I have felt more informed about current events than ever before. What were unique about Kosovo and a few of the other central topics of the Fellowship year (y2k, Hurricane Mitch), were the freshness, naivete, and impartiality that I initially possessed. Even at twenty-two years of age, there are few issues receiving public attention about which I do not have some preconceived ideas. Knowing so little about Kosovo just a few months ago, it is interesting and informative to trace the evolution of my thinking. Equipped with a basic understanding of the conflict in Kosovo, the next logical step was to begin forming opinions about appropriate action steps. Shadowing this process, the rest of the paper will shift from how I acquired information, to my thoughts about what needed to be done in Kosovo and what should be done in the future.

STAGES OF CONFLICT

Not only is a cultural and historical framework necessary to think about appropriate methods of humanitarian intervention in ethnic conflicts, but the ways that the conflict has manifested itself influences what, if any types of action will be productive. For example, is the purpose of intervening to stop violence that is currently occurring, or is it an effort to prevent a potential outbreak of violence? When was the most recent such outbreak between the groups in conflict and how did it end? What efforts have been taken, short of direct intervention, to create a peaceful settlement between the groups in conflict? If violent acts are occurring, how severe are the actions

and who are the people suffering? Concrete knowledge of where the conflict is at informs an effective attempt at humanitarian intervention.

The leadership of the groups in conflict will be an additional factor on any intervention strategy. From an American perspective, what is our relationship with the political leaders in the region? Is there a rebellion movement that is seeking to supplant the leadership in place? What democratic structures exist in the area of conflict and who are leading them? The essential question of whose interests will be served by intervening lies behind all of these questions.

In Kosovo, the situation preceding the start of the NATO bombings touches on many of the above questions. Tension between the ethnic Albanians in Kosovo and the Serbians to the north have been present for centuries. Before the NATO bombings, Milosevic had been stoking the flames of this tension by revoking the autonomy of Kosovo in 1989, and through direct violent actions against the Albanian people in Kosovo. At the same time, the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) had done their fair share to resist any Serbian presence in Kosovo, declaring the need and fighting for their own autonomy. The “Western world”, which many say is just a code word for the United States, had been trying to mediate this tension for some time. The final attempt at peaceful mediation before the bombing was the Rambouillet Document, which can be depicted as a peace attempt predestined to fail. Based on the assumption that Milosevic would reject a requirement to secede his authority to an international presence, NATO was then able to use this refusal to cooperate as a justification for direct intervention.

In retrospect, the question that remains for me is just how severely was the Milosevic regime treating the ethnic Albanians *prior* to the start of the bombing, and how

intense was the fighting between the KLA and his regime? What was not anticipated by the US/NATO was that the bombing would escalate the removal of the ethnic Albanians from Kosovo by Milosevic, but it is unclear to me the extent that this was going on previous to the direct aerial assault. Since the bombing and subsequent ethnic cleansing is what prompted my interest in Kosovo, and given my uncertainty about the specifics of the situation previous to the bombings, it is difficult to postulate on a recommendation for intervention before March 24th. The main point here is to emphasize the relationship between the form that an ethnic conflict has taken and the methods of humanitarian intervention that might be used to resolve it.

THE BOMBING IS FOR REAL, NOW WHAT DO YOU THINK?

The halting of the aerial attack just a few days ago makes it an interesting time to process my assessment of the situation while the bombings were ongoing. As reports of what the Serbian military was doing to ethnic Albanians began to permeate the media, it became increasingly difficult to claim that nothing should be done. If there are any lessons from the past century, the most significant may be that the kinds of human atrocities reportedly being done to the ethnic Albanians cannot be tolerated. Whether out of a commitment to non-violence or to isolationism, it became hard to justify ignoring Kosovo. What complicated my opinions was an increasingly strong belief that the humanitarian reasons for intervention proclaimed by the US and NATO did not paint the entire picture.

The desire of NATO to assert themselves as the leader of the “international community” instead of the UN seemed to be a significant piece of understanding this

puzzle. The United States, through their neglect of paying dues to the UN and refusals to support and abide by international laws, has expressed their dissatisfaction with the amount of control that they have when the UN takes the lead. Perhaps the US government seized the events in Kosovo as an opportunity to position NATO at the forefront of dealing with international crises. Panelists at The Hague Appeal for Peace from International Alert and the Helsinki Citizens Assembly, in addition to others, explained how it was widely accepted that an aerial attack would exacerbate the treatment of ethnic Albanians by the Milosevic regime. Surely the United States had access to this information, but chose to ignore it and proceed with the bombing campaign. Recognizing that the gap in my argument is a clear picture of the extent of violence before the bombing began; it is still necessary to wonder whether we would be faced with such a severe refugee crisis if another form of intervention had been pursued.

Once the bombings began, it became implausible for NATO to “stop the bombing” before an agreement was reached. As reports streamed in of mass murders of fighting-age Kosovar men, rapes of women, and the complete obliteration of homes and villages, the bombing *had* to continue because NATO could not admit to having underestimated the consequences of their actions. An admission of this sort would undermine the credibility they sought. As the implementation of the current peace agreement begins to take shape, the argument will surely be made that the bombing indeed worked and is a strategy that should be employed in other regional conflicts. If peace is maintained in the former Yugoslavia, other attempts to resolve ethnic conflicts may emulate this strategy. It is indeed incredible to consider the amount of damage the bombs were able to cause with relatively few casualties in comparison to wars of similar

scale. But the questions that need to be answered over time concern the costs of the bombings. Did alternatives exist that could have prevented or curtailed the refugee crisis caused by the bombing that is certain to be a problem for years to come? Will there be substantial efforts to rebuild the infrastructure in Serbia destroyed by the bombs? Even more importantly, if Milosevic remains in power, is it correct to deem the campaign a success? Most importantly, what kind of progress was made in resolving the ethnic conflict between ethnic Albanian Kosovars and Serbs?

SO WHAT ARE THE ALTERNATIVES?

Any critique of the NATO bombing should require a concrete discussion of alternatives. Having perused some of the academic literature on resolving ethnic conflict, it seems very difficult to get beyond specific situations to offering meaningful general guidelines for how to deal with ethnic conflict. But by pointing out some of the guidelines suggested by academics and practitioners, alternatives to the bombing campaign in Serbia arise.

Understand the scale and scope of the conflict. While this information is difficult to gather and verify, my experience learning about Kosovo taught me that it may be the most important part of devising an intervention strategy. This guideline speaks in part to the oft-asked question of “Why Kosovo?” Why not Rwanda, or Sri Lanka, or Eritrea? Intervention should occur only when there is a high probability that it will work to ease the conflict on some level. Again, considering whose interests may be served through intervention cannot be avoided. Knowing very little about the Gulf War, it appears that US intervention had a great deal to do with our own economic interests in controlling that

region. It is hard for me to imagine a world in which my country does not pursue its own agenda through foreign policy, but I can imagine a world where US interventions in ethnic conflicts are sensitive to potential outcomes and impact of intervention on the people involved. The US or any other country should not be involved in areas where they know little about the dimensions of the conflict.

Intervene in ethnic conflicts only when the commitment will be long-term. One should not have to look much further than Israel or Ireland to accept this notion. Just when significant progress seems to have been made, new leaders can emerge who inflame old conflicts, words or actions can be misinterpreted, or economic circumstances can rekindle subsided tensions. Declining efforts to assist the refugees in Albania, Macedonia, and elsewhere, or ignoring the stifled economy of Serbia due to the destruction of the bombing would be aberrations from this principle. The inevitable fading attention of the media has unfortunate implications, and I wonder how much of an investment of time and energy will be required one year from now for the average citizen to find out what is happening in Kosovo and Serbia. This shift in the public's attention can result in declining commitments by intervening governments.

Understand the importance of leadership. Without much knowledge about Tito, it is amazing that one man seems to have been able to maintain a measured degree of stability in such a hostile, tense environment. Watching Milosevic in action (and unfortunately it appears that I will continue to have this opportunity), it is also frightening how much influence one person can have on situations of ethnic conflict. But is an appropriate intervention strategy to focus all efforts on removing one individual from power? Who would replace Milosevic if he was removed, and what would happen if no

leaders emerged? Does the United States have any interest in Milosevic remaining in power? Does the United States or NATO have the right to put a leader in place who is charged with building a democracy? As time passes and the fate of Slobodan Milosevic unfolds, some of these questions may become more relevant than others, but the overarching significance that leadership plays in ethnic conflict remains true.

People talking to each other and making decisions through debate and compromise is ultimately how things get done. If the individuals in these situations refuse to compromise, lack compassion for others, insist on total control, or have a host of other personal shortcomings, then serious problems can ensue. The leadership of nations is a tenuous issue to handle from the outside, but the critical role it plays in ethnic conflict cannot be overlooked.

Seek to create opportunities for individuals of different ethnic groups to work together towards a common interest. This shared interest does not have to be as complex as economic interests, which are often unequal among ethnic groups in conflict, but can be much simpler. Learning how to surf the net, playing soccer, painting a mural or building a playground are examples of projects that can bring people together. In many ways the specific outcomes of these kinds of projects are not as important as the interaction that occurs while the project is happening. Voluntary actions and associations for the public good can break down stereotypes and build the personal relationships that may be the most critical part of addressing ethnic conflict. However, this strategy is limited in that it works best during more peaceful stages of an ethnic conflict.

In Ethnic Conflict and International Relations, Stephen Ryan develops the “contact hypothesis,” which offers an extended discussion of this guideline. The general

idea is to create opportunities for people of different ethnicities to interact. His guidelines are that they require working closely together, are pleasant and rewarding experiences for both parties, and serve common goals. The contact theory is expanded to include contact “plus” forgiveness, economic development, confidence building, and education for mutual understanding. While each “plus” strategy has its strengths and weaknesses, Ryan shows how individuals working together can contribute to the calming of ethnic tensions in meaningful ways.

Build support for a strengthened international authority capable of dealing with ethnic conflicts both before and after they arise. This guideline is extremely complex because it involves so many more issues than just how to deal with ethnic conflict, but the apparent competition between the UN and NATO discussed above is troublesome. Is the United States willing to sacrifice some of its own power to lend credence to an international authority that could promote the American principles of justice and equality on a global level? For example, the establishment of an International Criminal Court (ICC) would be one form of an international authority with the power to confront the perpetrators of ethnic conflict in a systematic fashion. Why does the United States not support the formation of the ICC? The Hague Appeal for Peace was adamant that the UN was in need of serious reform, and it is an unfortunate reality that the US seems resistant to many of these reforms.

With a few guidelines to work with, some uncertainty may remain over what alternatives there were to bombing Serbia. Further, given the chance to look into the future it may turn out that bombing was in fact the appropriate means of intervention. But, if the international policing force moves into Kosovo and successfully returns the

refugees to their homes, I will inquire whether we could have stabilized Kosovo *before* bombing Serbia for over two months. If Milosevic remains in power for a substantial amount of time or someone like him steps in, I will argue that no progress will have been made and the chance of another serious conflict erupting will remain on the horizon. In fact, I will argue that the bombing campaign worsened the situation because it created a refugee crisis that the world must deal with and left Serbia in ruins. If a policing force was sent into Kosovo in March or even earlier, perhaps these two disasters could have been avoided and conflict in the area could have been mitigated.

WHAT ABOUT PHILANTHROPY?...AND BUDDHISM?

As a student of philanthropy, this paper would not be complete without some direct engagement of the subject. What role can philanthropy play in addressing the problem of ethnic conflict? Alluded to earlier, philanthropy has the capacity to bring people together and provide opportunities to work together for the common good. Habitat for Humanity provides an excellent example of a program that accomplishes this desired outcome. Where these kinds of activities seem to fall short is in building a more systematic approach that moves beyond relationship building to creating a culture of peace.

This process still seems to fall under the rubric of philanthropy, but its execution is dependent on the participation of government and business as well. Ethnic conflict will be one of the biggest problems of my lifetime because it encapsulates so many other issues. Issues of economic justice, the establishment of basic human rights for all people, the prevalence of land mines and nuclear arms, in addition to the importance and benefits

of identity and the problems this can cause, begin this daunting list. Philanthropic acts in areas of ethnic conflict have the capacity to address all these issues, but at this point I am skeptical that they can make change on the necessary scale. Yet efforts to encourage this kind of work through financial and technical support to people in these regions who are doing real things that resist the spread of ethnic conflict must continue.

On a personal level, the process of my engagement in ethnic conflict in Kosovo and the world has forced me to challenge myself to think hopefully but realistically about how to deal with conflict. Along with my interest in Kosovo this past semester, I also had the opportunity to study Buddhism, another subject I knew next to nothing about just a few months ago. Buddhists believe in non-violence to an extent that may seem difficult to grasp. They say that even cooking vegetables is in some ways an act of violence because by boiling a carrot, you are killing the bacteria which was living on that carrot. While most Buddhists do not resist performing “veggie murder,” they emphasize the need for an awareness of this act and expressions of thanks and appreciation for all life. How boiling carrots relates to ethnic conflict may not be readily apparent, but the purpose is to explore what it means to practice non-violence.

The lives of Martin Luther King and Mahatma Ghandi serve as powerful testaments to the ability to build a culture of peace through non-violent means. But how do you deal with Slobodan Milosevic non-violently? How do you negotiate with someone who has no regard for human life? The notion that violence breeds more violence is an argument I have a hard time refuting. But is there any way to deal with Milosevic that does not result in people suffering, and possibly dying? Pursuing non-violent means, which in this case would have meant leaving him alone, would have left

Serbs killing Albanian Kosovars and vice versa. But should the outside world send its soldiers to a foreign region to possibly die in an effort to mediate a local conflict? Ethnic conflicts complicate this question because it is not always clear just who is being oppressed and who is doing the oppressing, and for which side it is appropriate to fight. At one of the sessions at The Hague Appeal for Peace, Mary Kaldor from the Helsinki Citizens Assembly explained how a “policing” force in Kosovo would not have to take sides. She concluded her presentation by asking if dying for humanity has become a new form of humanitarianism. Exploring every option that can avoid having to answer this difficult question should be a rule of humanitarian intervention in ethnic conflicts, but in many situations this may indeed be the ultimate question.

Ethnic conflict is a problem that is not going away and I have been brought into the fold of people concerned with how to deal with it. This paper has surely benefited me more than anyone else, but has enabled me to explore how I came to this conclusion. Holding onto the conviction that people with different backgrounds and beliefs can live together in peace allows me to be hopeful in the face of so many examples that prove me wrong.

