

A Christian American from Texas living in Serbia

The author of this editorial, Randall A. Major, moved to Yugoslavia in 1986. He is a Baptist Minister and a graduate of Baylor University.

"Although I am an American citizen, born and raised in San Antonio, Texas, I have lived, studied and worked in Yugoslavia (Serbia) for almost thirteen years now. I initially came to help a friend build his house in a village near Novi Sad. Subsequently I fell in love, got married and established my family here. I have been working at the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Novi Sad as a language instructor for about nine years.

In my time here, I have come to love the people of this nation, and I am very proud of my new home here. I have friends among many of the nationalities who live here in Vojvodina and have an enormous range of friends, from farmers to university professors. Life here has always been a challenge, dealing with the languages, with the economic crises, with the nearby wars. However, it has been overwhelmingly rewarding. My life was peaceful and full of love and companionship, until Wednesday, March 24, 1999. That evening, NATO bombs began to fall on my second homeland, and on the town I call home. How could anyone decide to stay here in the midst of NATO air strikes, among a people the western press claims is committing "ethnic cleansing"?

There are two reasons for my being here. My daughter Sara was born at 2:30 a.m. on Monday, March 22, 1999 in the local hospital. My wife and daughter came home on the very day the bombing started. They are doing well, but they are obviously in no condition to travel. Moreover, in a state of war, it is very hard to find a means of transportation which is adequate to their needs. The wisdom of sitting in a metal container with a heat signature at this time and place is also questionable. There are also the technical problems of registering my daughter when I dare not step out of the house. You cannot cross borders with an unregistered baby. On the other hand, I am not sure I would leave even if those conditions were met. My life, my apartment, my work, my family, many of my friends--they are all here. I am a loyal resident of this country. I teach, I translate, I do whatever I can to make my community a better place to live in, just as I would if I were living somewhere in the USA. I have been met with open arms and embraced by the people of this land. Leaving them in this hour of need does not seem right. In the end of all things, my son Luka and my daughter are half-Serb.

As the bombs and rockets rip the land each day, I find myself reflecting about why this is happening. Knowing that I have freedom of expression in my homeland, I have decided to share my reflections. I find my thoughts following two lines of analysis. I would like to express them both in this editorial.

First Line - Citizens of Serbia

From the standpoint of the people who live here, shock was generally the first feeling experienced when the attacks began. Now, we are all appalled at what is taking place. The long

term friendship between Serbia and the USA was destroyed when the first bomb fell. It is true that the Serbs have a traditional friendship with the Russians, but that is not to overshadow their remarkable ties to the US throughout this century. The media have a way of sidelining that fact, but the history books bear it out. People here feel betrayed by a traditional ally -- the US.

Yet, the Serbs have a history of fighting against greater powers. The Ottomans, the Austro-Hungarians, and the Germans. Now the Germans are being allowed to take part in a new campaign against the Serbs. The Hungarians have allowed NATO to use their airspace, as have the Croats. The raids are being launched from NATO air bases in Italy. Seen in terms of the Second World War, none of that comes as a great surprise. It also comes as no surprise that, now that NATO has invaded a sovereign state for the first time in its fifty year history (the cynics here say it was only a matter of time), people here are not in a panic. They have faced the "big guy on the block" before, have taken some beatings, won some victories, and survived. They feel they will survive this as well.

In the past, the attackers were always neighbors. The current air strikes prove that the world has become indeed a Global Village, in the most pessimistic sense of that phrase. President Clinton says that we have vital interests in the Balkans, and he is striking Yugoslavia as easily as if it were a next door neighbor. The difference this time is that there are relatively few (are there ever too few?) civilian casualties. The advanced technology of the NATO pact is allowing precision strikes on military and nonmilitary targets. (Blowing up an old soap factory and a defunct cable factory seem to be the questionable targets in Novi Sad itself). A famous Serb author, Svetislav Basara, has written that such advanced technology was not created for humane purposes. He claims that human casualties are to be avoided because a dead enemy is a dead consumer for the global market. You cannot sell fancy western products to corpses. While cynical, there is a ring of truth to this. Thus, the Yugoslavs feel they are being attacked because they refused to sign an agreement that was being sold to them by America, one which would ensure a "global" way of life, but one which would put NATO forces on their sovereign territory. These forces would necessarily include American troops, by the way, no matter what the White House is currently claiming about its unwillingness to include ground forces in this particular package. When one reads the document signed by the Kosovar Albanians in Paris, this becomes apparent. It contains Annex B which states that NATO would have the right to move freely throughout Yugoslavia. In earlier times, signing such a document would be called a "capitulation", and from a territorial stance "annexation".

Opinions about what should be done with Kosovo were divided as long as I have lived here. Some said the Albanians were welcome here. Some said they should behave more like normal citizens. (There are some 100,000 Albanians living in Belgrade. On Sunday, some of them staged a protest against the bombing. This was warmly greeted by the Serbs.) Some said that Kosovo should be partitioned off and given to Albania. Others claimed that Kosovo should be swept clean of Albanians and resettled by Serbs. There was no consensus. When that first Tomahawk crashed into Serbia on Wednesday night, all divisions ceased. Kosovo will now be dealt with the way the government here feels it should with the whole-hearted backing of the general populace. NATO has rushed in where even fools do not dare. By declaring war on the Serbs, NATO has set the current humanitarian problem in motion. There were always problems in Kosovo, but the NATO strikes are clearly at fault for the fact that tens of thousands of people are on the road out of the country tonight. Whatever people here thought of Milosevic's regime

before (and there are always varying opinions about politicians), they now back him as their commander-in-chief. Just as people would in any other country.

There is also a sense of frustration here about the fact that Russia, China, India, and Greece are being ignored so blatantly. The news broadcasts from the UK and US keep showing government and NATO leaders talking about how they have the support of the "International Community". Clearly, they have redefined the term "International Community". For NATO leaders that means anyone who agrees with them. Anyone who dissents is marginalized. One can presuppose that the tens of thousands of people protesting in the streets all over the world are also not a part of the International Community. Turning a deaf ear to opposition is not one of the hallmarks of democracy, and is certainly incongruous with what we Americans consider to be the "American Way".

The stance of international justice also seems to have gotten muddled for those of us who reside here. In the first place, the Serbs have been hit by NATO twice before. Once in Croatia and once in Bosnia. This newest wave of bombing proves that NATO has something personal against the Serbs. No one can answer the logical question of why the Serbs are always the ones to be Satanized by NATO and the western media. An analogy will help to clarify the situation: when the Serbs attacked Vukovar and it was left in ruins, they were labeled "war criminals". On the other hand, pictures are now coming out of Prishtina (the capital of Kosovo). The NATO bombers have inflicted irreparable damage to the town, leaving it looking very much like Vukovar. How will the NATO leaders be labeled for that? The devil in me doubts that they will be labeled little other than "heroes".

The enormous spirit and tremendous sense of humor among the Yugoslavs is overwhelming. True, many are frightened, in hiding from the explosions which seem to come from nowhere. But overall, the spirit of these people is far from broken. They understand that NATO could have destroyed 600 targets in two days, but that the demands of psychological warfare dictate that it be drawn out over a longer period. The unease of knowing when and where the bombs will come is supposed to generate feelings of uncertainty and discontent. Such tactics are failing miserably here, and the majority of the people have decided to ignore that particular element of the game. Each day there are concerts in Belgrade's main square, people move about their lives and jobs with additional care, but life has very much gone on here, as if to spite what they see as the childish tactics of the war technicians in Brussels. One of the most startling things I have heard these days was the comment of a young friend of mine. "They can take my life," she said, "but they cannot take away my dignity." Her dignity is more important to her than her fear of cruise missiles. That gives cause for reflection.

Second line - A Citizen of the United States

This is not about divided loyalties, a lack of patriotism, or schizophrenia. I have always loved my country, and I love it today. I still feel it is the greatest place on earth. As an ex-patriot, I am in a position to see many of the beauties of the United States from an objective distance, and thereby my love for my homeland is perhaps even stronger than for many of the people who live in it. Moreover, I am one of the representatives of that country for, though I am only a private citizen, my work brings me into contact with thousands of people. For many of them, I am the only American they have ever met, or will meet, and their impression of the United States often depends on their impression of me.

Though I am no political or legal expert (I am just a humble English teacher), the situation in which I find myself demands that I ask the question of what the justification for these air strikes can be. Article One of the NATO statute clearly states that the organization's members are not to use their military might against any sovereign state, unless that state attacks them. Yugoslavia has attacked no one. Yet, since Wednesday, NATO has been pounding a variety of targets all over Yugoslavia. Logically, an organization which violates its own founding principles must cease to exist as an organization, or it must reformulate its founding principles. Perhaps there was a secret meeting where NATO suddenly amended its statute so as to allow it to attack at will, to crush countries who have rejected their offers of membership, for example. Or, perhaps they should reconstitute themselves under a new name. NATO ceased to exist as a legal entity at 7:55 p.m. on March 24.

Second, in making the decision to bomb Yugoslavia without a specific resolution from the United Nations, NATO cast the UN aside as a totally marginal institution. The NATO members knew that if they put up a resolution in the Security Council to bomb Yugoslavia, the Russians and Chinese would veto. Their excuse for the air attacks is Yugoslavia's non-compliance (as they describe it) with earlier resolutions. This means that NATO will now have a free hand to attack any country which refuses to comply with a resolution. Tonight, on the sixth night of bombing, the UN has taken no firm action to reestablish its authority. The Russian representative to the UN has tried to pass several resolutions to stop the bombing, which are now all being vetoed by the US. Catch 22. The only conclusion I can draw as an average citizen is that the UN must either react to what is happening, or lose all credibility as a political factor in the world. That will destroy fifty odd years of hard work and enormous expense, and will certainly not make the world a better place.

Furthermore, as Americans we tend to think of the cost per value aspect of any exchange. The United States, with a population of about 250 million, the most powerful country to have ever existed, has already spent billions of dollars of the taxpayers' money blowing up military targets in Yugoslavia, a country with a population of about 8 million. The taxpayers' money is also causing "collateral damage" to schools, hospitals, and private homes, right in the heart of Europe. All of this is inconceivably illogical. Are President Clinton and Madeleine Albright telling us that our enormous economic and diplomatic power could not be used to convince an ally to remain an ally? That is clearly a fantasy. The problem rather seems to lie in the fact that, somewhere in the planning rooms, a program was drawn up to set the Balkans up in a manageable way. With the Serbs being the largest ethnic group in the Balkans, it is clear that their country must be atomized, they must be disunited so that they are no longer a regional power in Europe. In Paris, the Serbs were presented with a *fait accompli*. "Agree to NATO presence, or we are going to blow up your army and kill your citizens." If one looks at the events of the past decade, this idea is at least worth consideration. In terms of buying power, those tax dollars may have been better spent on an intensive study of the problem, a detailed analysis of the history and characters of the peoples involved, and a carefully planned negotiation process.

I do not believe that President Clinton has ever been to Kosovo. I do not believe he has ever seen the beauty of the 800 year-old monastery of Gracanica, which was also damaged by the air attacks. He never saw the mosques, the synagogues, the cathedrals and patriarchates. I have come to doubt he ever really sat down and talked with Albanians from Kosovo, or with Serbs from Kosovo, to find out what they really wanted. I am convinced that he could have come to

Yugoslavia, sat down with the parties in the conflict, and convinced them there was a peaceful way out. I would contend that, as the highest representative of the most powerful nation on earth, he had a responsibility to do so, if one of the vital interests of the United States is to ensure peace in Europe and in the world as he claims. Rather, without a clear understanding of the mentality of the people who live here, after analyzing piles of statistics and military data instead of the moral and spiritual state of the people of Yugoslavia, he decided for violent action. He thus put the lives of American military personnel in grave danger, with very little or no authorization from the American people. In doing so, he violated the principles of the Presidency, the principles upon which the UN and NATO were founded, and ultimately he was unfaithful to the American people. I am not angry at him. I feel misled and betrayed by him and certain individuals in his administration. With such actions and policies, the present administration is making the world an unsafe, even dangerous, place for all citizens of the United States. That is clearly not in the interest of the average US citizen.

Let us be clear again: I am not trying to justify the Yugoslav authorities or any of their actions. That is their business, and their experts must work on presenting a clearer picture of their vision of their own country. BOTH sides should have sat down and worked on a proper solution, that is obvious. What I am saying is that the people of Yugoslavia, and especially the Serbs, are not genocidal monsters as they are being depicted by the Clinton administration and the western media. Please heed the words of one who has lived and is still living among them, even when they are at war with my own country. These are a broad-minded and loving, if stubborn, people. They have criminals, and they have saints. They are an invaluable part of the vast cultural heritage of Europe, and they deserve respect, support and encouragement as they struggle to become a vital part of a thriving Europe. They do not deserve to be showered with the wrath of the Clinton administration and its dependence on its ephemeral military strength.

The Future

The situation is infinitely complicated here, and it would require volumes to explain all the intricacies of the Gordian knot called the Balkans. It seems that President Clinton has made the same mistake as one of his political forebears, Alexander the Great. Unable to untie the knot, he simply took his sword and hacked it in two. And we know the ultimate fate of Alexander and his Empire, and of all empires which place might above right. Perhaps it is not too late, but a major turnabout is due.

To the sounds of air-raid sirens, tonight I will bathe my baby daughter and put her to sleep. I will continue to teach my five and a half year-old son to read and count. And I will teach both of my children to live by the principles upon which America, and all western civilization, was founded. I will do this because I believe the greatness of our culture is not in its material wealth or military power. It is in its commitment to principles, justice and morality.

Tonight, light a candle and whisper a prayer for us, will you? We will do the same for you."

Peace on earth, good will to men.

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