NATO Goes to War

NATO’s decision to go to war contained two elements. First, there was agreement on the principle of using force. This agreement was reached in October 1998 with the North Atlantic Council’s decision to pass the Activation Order. There remained, however, considerable disagreement about what the trigger for military action should be. Hawks like Tony Blair and Madeleine Albright believed that a phased bombing campaign was a proportionate response to the Racak massacre. Subsequently, they argued that the failure of the Rambouillet and Paris negotiations made the use of force necessary. Most commentators argue that it was the diplomatic failure in France and Richard Holbrooke’s subsequent inability to persuade Milošević to accept the terms on offer that triggered the airstrikes. In fact, the perceived need to move from coercive diplomacy to limited war was triggered by the dramatic increase of Serb oppression and ethnic cleansing in Kosovo during, and immediately after, the Paris negotiations. In all likelihood, Operation Allied Force would not have begun had the Serbs not launched a massive campaign of ethnic cleansing. The disagreements within the Alliance shaped the war, a period of engagement characterised by:

- Constant debate about the appropriate military strategy and compromises between different alternatives.
- Disagreement about the way the war should be ended.
- Lack of clarity caused by the multiple channels of political and military decision-making.
- Uncertainty about the political and military objectives.
- Complex diplomatic processes aimed at ending the war.¹

General Clark, who directed the campaign, provides an excellent portrait of the uncertainty and lack of direction that characterised the war.
Clark recalls that after a meeting with President Gligorov of Macedonia in early 1998 he faxed the Pentagon warning them of potential trouble in Kosovo. The response came swiftly in the form of a telephone call from Joe Ralston:

‘Look Wes’ Ralston continued, ‘we’ve got a lot on our plates back here. We’ve got our defence bill to get through and NATO enlargement coming up in the Senate. We can’t deal with any more problems. And’ he continued, ‘the Secretary’s [of State for Defence, William Cohen] concerned that Madeleine Albright might get a copy of this’.2

Operation Allied Force was a new kind of post-Clausewitzian war; one where the military means agreed upon by the Alliance (a phased air campaign) dictated the political objectives. In theory, Clausewitzian war leaves military commanders fitting military means to political ends. In Kosovo, the exact nature of the military campaign had little effect on the outcome. Milošević’s decision to negotiate depended more on the perception that NATO was not going to go away and that help from Serbia’s Slav brothers in Russia or sympathisers in China was not coming over the horizon than it did on the bombardment per se. At the outset of the war alliance leaders insisted that the aim was to prevent ethnic cleansing in Kosovo. However, the means agreed upon by the North Atlantic Council in October 1998 (phased air strikes) could not achieve the very different objectives asked of them in March 1999. Once this became clear, the Alliance simply changed its political objectives.3

War aims

In a statement to the House of Commons on the day the campaign began, Tony Blair told MPs that the aim of the airstrikes was to, ‘avert a humanitarian catastrophe’ by stopping Serb forces continuing their ‘violent oppression’ and ethnic cleansing of Kosovar Albanians.4 A day later, Blair told an EU summit in Berlin that the military action had a specific task: ‘To damage Serb forces sufficiently to prevent Mr. Milošević from continuing to perpetuate his vile oppression against Kosovar Albanian civilians.’5 The military mission identified by Wesley Clark echoed Tony Blair’s understanding of NATO’s war aims. Clark told his subordinates that the military mission:

Is to attack Yugoslav military and security forces and associated facilities with sufficient effect to degrade its capacity to continue repression