



JAMES BISSETT

**THE TRAGIC BLUNDER
IN KOSOVO**





The bombing of Yugoslavia in the closing days of the 20th century has raised disturbing and unresolved issues about international security that must be addressed. Hailed as a victory for the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, the bombing, on closer analysis, can be seen as an unmitigated failure with far-reaching implications for world peace. Canada must demand more of its political leaders before they lead us into another war.

Canada's participation in this undeclared war against a sovereign state was carried out without public awareness or debate in Parliament. The bombing was conducted without the approval of the United Nations Security Council and was a direct violation not only of the UN Charter but also of Article 1 of the NATO Treaty itself, which requires NATO to settle any international dispute by peaceful means and to refrain from the threat or use of force, "in any manner inconsistent with the purposes of the United Nations."

Foreign Minister Lloyd Axworthy and Defence Minister Art Eggleton have assured us this flagrant violation of international law was necessary to stop ethnic cleansing and human-rights violations against the Albanian population of Kosovo.

Six months have passed since the end of the bombing. Now the war is over, it's time for sober analysis about why it was fought. The public has been bombarded with NATO propaganda, not only about the reasons for the intervention but also about its results. I believe we have been subject to duplicity and misleading information. The first casualty of the war in Kosovo has been the truth.



Our political leaders and much of the media have said that the bombing of Yugoslavia was launched to stop ethnic cleansing and atrocities. This is a myth. All the evidence shows that there were approximately 2,000 casualties in Kosovo up to the time of the NATO bombing -- by any standard, not an extraordinary number considering that a civil war had been raging since 1993. By contrast, the number of Yugoslavian civilians killed by the NATO bombing is reckoned to be well above 2,000.

The UN estimated that close to 200,000 ethnic Albanians were displaced before the NATO air strikes -- again, a deplorable figure but not surprising given that these people were driven from their homes as a result of the civil war. After the NATO bombs began to fall, more than 800,000 Kosovars were forced to flee from Serbian retaliation and from NATO bombs. So much for humanitarian intervention.



Following a UN resolution, the Yugoslav government in November, 1998, allowed 1,300 Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) observers into Kosovo in an attempt to monitor and de-escalate the fighting. As far as I know the official OSCE report was never published. Had it been, we could verify the allegations that ethnic cleansing and atrocities were serious enough to warrant military intervention. The failure to publish the report strongly suggests that the alleged repression in Kosovo did not justify intervention.

Moreover, a number of credible OSCE observers have publicly stated that in the weeks leading up to the bombing they witnessed no murders, no deportations and nothing that could be described as systematic persecution. One of these observers, the former Czech foreign minister, Jiri Dienstbier, has further testified that NATO was fully aware that bombing would force the Serbs to expel Kosovar Albanians as a military tactic. Yet our political leaders continue to tell us the bombing was designed to prevent -- not cause -- ethnic cleansing.

The immediate reason for the air strike was the Serbian refusal to sign the infamous Rambouillet Agreement -- a 57-page document that called for a referendum on autonomy in Kosovo and provided access to NATO forces to all of Yugoslavia. No sovereign state could possibly have accepted such conditions. This document was not made public until well after the bombing was under way. The chairman of the French National Assembly's defence committee did not receive a copy until June 3, after the Serbs had already accepted the terms of the ceasefire! I doubt any Canadian member of Parliament has bothered to request a copy. In any case, the Rambouillet document, drafted by the Americans, was clearly designed to ensure a Serb rejection. NATO needed its war.

The bombing began on March 25, 1999. NATO expected Yugoslavia to capitulate in a matter of days. When this did not happen and the bombing was extended to more and more civilian targets, public support in some NATO countries began to wane. The alliance found itself in trouble: None of its objectives had been achieved and the bombing was creating a humanitarian catastrophe and pulverizing a modern European state.



A negotiated settlement was essential. But NATO had to save face. Although it had in effect excluded the Russians through the insulting terms of Rambouillet, the alliance now turned to Moscow to get it out of the jam it found itself in. Former Russian prime minister Victor Chernomydrin persuaded NATO to drop the two most objectionable conditions, the referendum and access for NATO troops to Yugoslavia. NATO made further concessions --acknowledging Yugoslav sovereignty over Kosovo, putting the occupation of Kosovo under UN auspices, and letting Yugoslav troops guard Serbian holy sites.

The UN approved the terms of this peace agreement; it remains to be seen if NATO will honour them. My guess is, having made a mess of the war, NATO will make a mess of the peace. Already, NATO's supreme commander in Europe, U.S. General Wesley Clark, has warned that NATO will prevent any attempt by Yugoslavia to return troops to Kosovo. One can hardly read this as a sign of NATO's respect for the UN.

The bombing of Yugoslavia was a tragic mistake. There have been dreadful human and financial costs. Ethnic cleansing and murder continue in Kosovo. More seriously, NATO's illegal action has fractured the framework of world security that has existed since the end of the Second World War. It has destabilized the Balkans and alienated the other great nuclear powers, Russia and China. NATO has abandoned the rule of law and lost any moral stature it might have had during the Cold War years. By forsaking diplomacy and resorting to force, NATO has reduced the democratic countries of the West to the level of the dictatorships it was created to oppose.

Canada's foreign minister would have us believe Kosovo marked a turning point in the way the international community is to react in future when human-rights violations take place within the borders of a sovereign state. We are asked to believe that the long-standing principle of state sovereignty can be overruled in the interests of humanitarianism intervention. We are asked to embrace new concepts of "soft power" and "human security." Mr. Axworthy assures us that Canada will always make its own foreign-policy decisions independently.



Lloyd Axworthy

Yet when great issues were at stake in Kosovo -- issues of life or death, of war or peace, of ignoring the UN Security Council, of violating NATO's own treaty -- Canada's voice was not heard. We eagerly joined the war without question and without consultation with the representatives of the Canadian people.

It didn't have to be this way. Another Canadian foreign minister faced a similar decision back in 1956. In the early days of the Suez crisis, Lester Pearson came out against the bombing of the Suez Canal by Canada's French and British allies and played a key role in getting the UN to halt the invasion.

If Canada is to play an effective role in international affairs it must continue to stand for the rule of law, for the UN charter and for democratic decision-making when its military could become involved in aggressive action against sovereign states.

If Mr. Axworthy is serious about pushing a human security agenda, let him demand that NATO reaffirm its adherence to the UN Charter and its commitment not to resolve international disputes by the threat or use of force. This simple reaffirmation would reassure Canadians that as we enter the new millennium we all know that the ground rules have not changed.



Ambassador Bissett was born in the small village of DELORAINE, located in the South-West corner of Manitoba close to the U.S. border and the Province of Saskatchewan. During the Second World War his family moved to Winnipeg and he received his secondary and university education in that city. It was there he became interested in Eastern European cultures and history

After pursuing postgraduate studies in history and political science he won a fellowship to study Public Administration at Carleton University in Ottawa. Upon obtaining his Masters Degree he joined the public service in 1956.

He spent 37 years as a Canadian Public Servant in the Department of Citizenship and Immigration and Foreign Affairs. He was appointed head of the Immigration Foreign Service in 1974 and became Assistant Under-Secretary of State for Social Affairs in 1980. In the early '70s he served at the Canadian High Commission in London England. He was appointed Canadian High Commissioner to Trinidad and Tobago in 1982 and served there until 1985 when he was seconded to the Department of Employment and Immigration as Executive Director to help steer new immigration and refugee legislation through Parliament.

In 1990 he was appointed Canadian Ambassador to Yugoslavia, Bulgaria and Albania. He therefore witnessed at first hand the Yugoslav tragedy to which he attributes much of the blame to Western diplomatic blundering and deliberate scheming. He was recalled from Yugoslavia in the summer of 1992.

He retired from the Foreign Service upon leaving Yugoslavia and accepted a job in Moscow as the head of an International organization helping the Russian Government establish a new Immigration Ministry and designing and implementing settlement programs for the thousands of Russians returning to Russia from other parts of the former Soviet Union. He returned from Moscow in 1997 and is enjoying retirement in Ottawa but continues to do contract work from time to time.



Ambassador Bissett is married and has 5 children and 8 grand children. He was shocked at NATO's bombing of Yugoslavia and has been an outspoken critic of the war, appearing frequently on radio and television and on speaking engagements across Canada.