

October 2005

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Recommended Citation

Hendrickson, Ryan C., "Crossing the Rubicon" (2005). *Faculty Research and Creative Activity*. 4.
http://thekeep.eiu.edu/polisci_fac/4

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Crossing the Rubicon

Ryan C. Hendrickson examines the chain of events leading to Operation Deliberate Force, NATO's first air campaign in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and their significance ten years on.

Early in the morning of 30 August 1995 NATO aircraft launched a series of precision strikes against selected targets in Serb-held Bosnia and Herzegovina. This heralded the start of Operation Deliberate Force, NATO's first air campaign, that lasted for two-and-a-half weeks, shattered Bosnian Serb communications and effectively ended the "out-of-area" debate that had dominated intra-Alliance discussions on NATO's role since the end of the Cold War.

Although extremely controversial at the time, a decade on it is clear that Operation Deliberate Force and the judicious use of air power was critical to bringing the Bosnian War to an end with enormous political consequences and obvious benefits for Bosnia and Herzegovina. In addition, though subsequently overshadowed by Operation Allied Force, the Alliance's much longer air campaign in Kosovo in 1999, Operation Deliberate Force may have contributed more to NATO's post-Cold War transformation than any other single event.

In spite of Bosnia and Herzegovina's eventual importance to NATO, the Alliance was slow to join international efforts to end fighting in the former Yugoslavia. When violence erupted in 1991, first the European Community and then the United Nations took the lead in seeking to halt the conflict and restore peace and stability. At the time, the United States had just led a UN-approved coalition to drive Saddam Hussein's Iraq out of Kuwait and there was great optimism about the United Nations' potential to promote a "new world order".

The Bosnian War proved an extremely sobering experience for the United Nations and all international institutions that became involved in negotiations to end the conflict. The UN Protection Force (UNPROFOR), which eventually grew to 38 000 troops, was tasked with delivering humanitarian assistance to those in need and providing "safe areas" in which civilians should not be harmed. But it was expected to remain politically neutral and was not mandated to enforce a particular settlement, since no settlement had been agreed. The phrase that encapsulated UNPROFOR's predicament at the time was that the United Nations' blue berets were "peacekeepers with no peace to keep".

While UNPROFOR struggled to achieve its objectives, NATO was itself seeking to come to terms with the end of the Cold War. In 1991 at their Rome Summit, NATO heads of state and government agreed to a New Strategic Concept, enabling the Alliance to go beyond collective defence and to conduct new security missions, including peacekeeping, conflict-prevention and crisis-management activities. In this way, in 1994 and the first half of 1995, NATO used force in limited strikes against Bosnian Serb military targets in response to violations of various UN Security Council Resolutions. Under the military guidance of Supreme Allied Commander, Europe, General George Joulwan, the Alliance also helped police a UN arms embargo against the whole of the former Yugoslavia and economic sanctions against Serbia and Montenegro.

NATO's early forays into Bosnia and Herzegovina failed to change the political realities on the ground and prompted many analysts to question the Alliance's relevance in the post-Cold War security environment. Many perceived NATO's role in the Balkans as especially troubling, given the extent of the humanitarian suffering taking place in what was after all NATO's backyard. In an oft-repeated refrain, both NATO supporters and NATO critics argued that the Alliance would have to go "out of area" or it would go "out of business".



Progress report: Admiral Leighton W. Smith, Commander of Allied Forces Southern Europe, provides an update on Operation Deliberate Force, NATO's first air campaign (© AFSOUTH)

As international media maintained blanket coverage of the conflict, dissatisfaction grew with the international community's piecemeal and inadequate response. Although most UNPROFOR soldiers served with distinction and 167 lost their lives in the course of the mission, UNPROFOR's inability to influence the dynamics of the conflict enabled the Bosnian Serbs to make a mockery of the UN mission. Indeed, both NATO Secretary General Willy Claes and his predecessor Manfred Wörner became increasingly outspoken about the United Nations' inability to end the crisis and the need for NATO to take on a greater role. Despite this, the Allies themselves were unable to build the necessary political consensus for a more robust approach during 1994 and the first half of 1995 and continued to debate the most appropriate course of action.

NATO's inertia was, in part, a reflection of UNPROFOR's composition. Many Allies including Canada, France and the United Kingdom, had deployed their own peacekeepers in UNPROFOR and feared that a more robust approach towards the Bosnian Serbs would produce a backlash against their troops. Meanwhile, the United States, which did not have troops on the ground, was pushing a "lift and strike" policy – lifting the arms embargo against the entire region that penalised in particular the Bosnian Muslims and striking the Bosnian Serb targets from the air.

To be sure, US diplomatic pressure for change remained cautious. The deaths of 18 US Army Rangers in an ambush in October 1993 in Mogadishu, Somalia, which effectively ended the UN peacekeeping mission to Somalia, continued to cast a long shadow over policy-making. Senior US officials and Pentagon planners had no intention of becoming engaged in another poorly planned operation risking combat casualties where clear national security interests were not at stake. Moreover, CIA analysts estimated that it would take thousands of ground troops to restore the peace.

The turning point was the Srebrenica massacre of mid-July 1995. The single greatest atrocity of the Wars of Yugoslavia's Dissolution that resulted in the deaths of close to 8000 Bosnian Muslim men and boys, shocked world opinion and galvanised Washington to steer NATO in a new direction. In US President Bill Clinton's White House, National Security Advisor Anthony Lake, who according to Ivo Daalder's *Getting to Dayton: The Making of America's Bosnia Policy* (Brookings Institution Press, 2000) had long advocated a more robust approach, took the lead in pushing the Allies in a new direction.

The United States was not alone in urging a new, more robust Allied approach to the Bosnian War. Attitudes towards the Bosnian Serbs had been hardening even before the Srebrenica massacre especially after UN peacekeepers, many of whom were French, were taken hostage in May 1995. In this way, French President Jacques Chirac was equally vocal about the need for a radically new and more interventionist policy.

One critical policy change introduced in early August 1995 was a reworking of the "dual-key" arrangement, which had been established in 1993 to govern the use of force by NATO. The arrangement required that NATO military action be approved by both UN and NATO officials. Until August 1995, Yasushi Akashi, the UN Secretary-General's Special Representative in Yugoslavia, held the United Nations' key. After Srebrenica, Akashi's key was given to UNPROFOR's military commander, French General Bernard Janvier. The NATO key was held by Admiral Leighton W. Smith, Commander of Allied Forces Southern Europe in Naples.

The event that triggered Operation Deliberate Force took place on 28 August 1995, when a Serb mortar fell upon a market place in Sarajevo, killing 38 civilians and injuring 85 others. With General Janvier away at that time, British Lieutenant-General Rupert Smith turned the UN key in coordination with Admiral Smith, indicating that the Bosnian Serbs had yet again violated a UN Security Council Resolution and that this time NATO would respond with force.

Operation Deliberate Force was launched as soon as the last UNPROFOR troops left Bosnian Serb territory. The bombing was briefly interrupted due to a cease-fire negotiated by General Janvier on 1 September, but it resumed in the early hours of 5 September. Almost all the then 16 NATO Allies contributed in some way to the campaign, which involved a total of 3515 sorties and the dropping of 1026 bombs at 338 individual targets. There were no NATO casualties, though a French Mirage 200K was shot down on the first day of the campaign and the crew captured by the Bosnian Serbs.

The judicious use of air power was critical to bringing the Bosnian War to an end

Among the many individuals involved in Operation Deliberate Force, NATO Secretary General Willy Claes played an especially influential role behind the scenes. Although Claes' personal political problems in Belgium have cast a shadow over his legacy and obliged him to leave NATO after less than a year and a half in office, he can take much credit for ensuring that the Alliance saw Deliberate Force through to a successful conclusion.

In his short period as NATO Secretary General, Claes showed himself to be a determined leader who was prepared to keep the North Atlantic Council in session for hours until consensus could be reached, especially in the lead-up to Deliberate Force. According to Richard Holbrooke's account in *To End A War* (Random House, 1998), Claes also actively supported both of the Smiths when the keys were turned, allowing the air campaign to proceed without additional debate from the Allies. When General Janvier negotiated a temporary cease-fire with Bosnian Serb military commanders, Claes placed considerable diplomatic pressure on him, other UN officials and the North Atlantic Council to resume the air strikes, arguing that NATO had to demonstrate greater resolve to change attitudes on the ground.

Claes' relationship with General Joulwan was also important to the success of the air campaign. When General Joulwan requested political support to use Tomahawk missiles against Bosnian Serb military positions in Banja Luka, Claes backed him. The use of the Tomahawks in the early morning hours of 10 September generated some criticism, even among NATO Ambassadors, but today is considered by military analysts such as Colonel Robert C. Owen in *Deliberate Force: A Case Study in Effective Air Campaigning* (Air University Press, 2000) to have been significant in demonstrating NATO's resolve and therefore likely to have helped bring the conflict to an end.

In the wake of Operation Deliberate Force, the Bosnian Serbs found it increasingly difficult to retain territory they had held since the early months of the Bosnian War in the face of a concerted offensive involving Croatian as well as Bosnian Croat and Bosnian Muslim forces. As a result, they were more willing to negotiate an end to the war in talks that got under way in Dayton, Ohio, on 1 November than they had been earlier in the conflict. In effect, Operation Deliberate Force helped pave the way for the Dayton Peace Agreement, which succeeded in establishing the governing framework for Bosnia and Herzegovina that remains in place to this day.

Almost a decade since it came into force, the Dayton Peace Agreement has not managed to resolve Bosnia and Herzegovina's conflict and the peace process is yet to become self-sustaining. More than 7000 troops, most of them deployed since December 2004 under the European Union's auspices, remain in the country and international administrators continue to play an intrusive role in Bosnian political life, frequently overruling local officials. Nevertheless, the Dayton Peace Agreement succeeded in ending Europe's bloodiest conflict since the Second World War, which had taken more than 100 000 lives during the previous four years. And it gave Bosnians the opportunity to rebuild their country and with it a better future for themselves.

Operation Deliberate Force also helped restore the credibility of both NATO and the wider international community. By intervening militarily in Bosnia and Herzegovina the Alliance had moved definitively out of area, that is beyond Allied territory. Moreover, NATO demonstrated that it was capable both of overseeing a successful multinational military campaign and of using force to achieve non-Article 5 objectives, that is objectives other than collective defence.

Under the terms of the Dayton Peace Agreement, NATO became involved in peacekeeping for the first time. The Alliance led a 60 000-strong Implementation Force or IFOR to oversee implementation of the accord's military aspects and ensure that the country did not slide back into war. Moreover, the Bosnian deployment generated a series of additional benefits, including, for example, the integration of some 2000 Russian troops and officers into NATO-led structures. In a move that had seemed impossible only five years earlier, these soldiers worked side by side with their NATO peers for the next seven years.

Operation Deliberate Force also heralded a much wider NATO engagement in and commitment to the Balkans. In 1999, NATO again successfully used force against Slobodan Milosevic and his military forces with a 78-day air campaign to halt ethnic cleansing in Kosovo. That campaign was followed by the creation and deployment of another NATO-led peacekeeping mission, the Kosovo Force or KFOR, which remains deployed today. And in 2001, NATO intervened in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia* in a preventive capacity to head off another war and restore peace and stability to the region.

Although it took the Allies far too long to develop the necessary political consensus to intervene effectively in Bosnia and Herzegovina, once the Alliance decided to confront the causes of the conflict, it succeeded in rapidly ending the violence and then in developing the means to build peace. In this way, Operation Deliberate Force ushered in a new era for NATO, helping set the foundation for the much larger range of non-Article 5 missions that the Alliance is involved in today, and moving NATO way beyond the sole maintenance of its own collective defence.

Ryan C. Hendrickson is associate professor of political science at Eastern Illinois University and author of the forthcoming book, "Diplomacy and War at NATO: The Secretary General and Military Action After the Cold War" (University of Missouri Press).