

JEREMY SCAHILL

AMERICAN HYPOCRISY

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This essay originally appeared at AlterNet at www.alternet.org

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The Bush administration acknowledges there is such a thing as international law. But, predictably, it is not being invoked to address the US prison camps at Guantanamo, the wide use of torture, the invasion and occupation of sovereign countries, the extraordinary rendition program. No, it is being thrown out forcefully as a condemnation of the Serbian government in the wake of the attack on February 21 by protesters on the US embassy in Belgrade following the Bush administration's swift recognition of the declaration of independence by the southern Serbian province of Kosovo. Some 1,000 protesters broke away from a largely non-violent mass demonstration in downtown Belgrade and targeted the embassy. Some protesters actually made it into the compound, setting a fire and tearing down the American flag.

"I'm outraged by the mob attack against the U.S. embassy in Belgrade," fumed Zalmay Khalilzad, the US Ambassador to the United Nations. "The embassy is sovereign US territory. The government of Serbia has a responsibility under international law to protect diplomatic facilities, particularly embassies." His comments were echoed by a virtual who's who of the Bill Clinton administration. People like Jamie Rubin, then-Secretary of State Madeleine Albright's deputy, one of the main architects of US policy toward Serbia. "It is sovereign territory of the United States under international law," Rubin declared. "For Serbia to allow these protesters to break windows, break into the American Embassy, is a pretty dramatic sign." Hillary Clinton, whose husband orchestrated and ran the 78-day NATO bombing of Serbia in 1999, said, "I would be moving very aggressively to hold the Serbian government responsible with their security forces to protect our embassy. Under international law they should be doing that."

There are two major issues here. One is the situation in Kosovo itself (which we'll get to in a moment), but the other is the attack on the US embassy. Yes, the Serbian government had an obligation to prevent the embassy from being torched and ransacked. If there was complicity by the Serbian police or authorities in allowing it to be attacked, that is a serious issue. But the US has little

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moral authority not just in invoking international law (which it only does when it benefits Washington's agenda) but in invoking international law when speaking about attacks on embassies in Belgrade.

Perhaps the greatest crime against any embassy in the history of Yugoslavia was committed not by evil Serb protesters, but by the United States military.

On May 7, 1999, at the height of the 78 day US-led NATO bombing of Yugoslavia, the US bombed the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, killing three Chinese citizens, two of them journalists, and wounding 20 others. The Clinton administration later said that the bombing was the result of faulty maps provided by the CIA (Sound familiar?). Beijing rejected that explanation and alleged it was deliberate. Eventually, under strong pressure from China, the US apologized and paid \$28 million in compensation to the victims' families. If the US was serious about international law and the protection of embassies, those responsible for that bombing would have been tried at the Hague along with other alleged war criminals. But "war criminal" is a designation for the losers of US-fueled wars, not bombers sent by Washington to drop humanitarian munitions on "sovereign territory."

Beyond the obvious hypocrisy of the US condemnations of Serbia and the sudden admission that international law exists, the Kosovo story is an important one in the context of the current election campaign in the United States. Perhaps more than any other international conflict, Yugoslavia was the defining foreign policy of President Bill Clinton's time in power. Under his rule, the nation of Yugoslavia was destroyed, dismantled and chopped into ethnically pure parastates. President Bush's immediate recognition of Kosovo as an independent nation was the icing on the cake of destruction of Yugoslavia and one which was enthusiastically embraced by Hillary Clinton. "I've supported the independence of Kosovo because I think it is imperative that in the heart of Europe we continue to promote independence and democracy," Clinton said at the recent Democratic debate in Austin, Texas.

A few days before the attack on the US embassy in Belgrade, Clinton released a Molotov cocktail statement praising the declaration of independence. In it, she referred to Kosovo by the Albanian "Kosova" and said independence "will allow the people of Kosova to finally live in their own democratic state. It will allow Kosova and Serbia to finally put a difficult chapter in their history behind them and to move forward." She added, "I want to underscore the need to avoid any violence or provocations in the days and weeks ahead." As seasoned observers of Serbian politics know, there were few things the US could have done to add fuel to the rage in Serbia over the declaration of independence —

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“provocations” if you will — than to have a political leader named Clinton issue a statement praising independence and using the Albanian name for Kosovo.

On the campaign trail, the Clinton camp has held up Kosovo as a successful model for how to conduct US foreign policy and Clinton criticized Bush for taking “so long for us to reach this historic juncture.”

Perhaps a little of that history is in order. If Kosovo is her idea of solid US foreign policy, it speaks volumes to what kind of president she would be. The reality is that there are striking similarities between the Clinton approach to Kosovo and the Bush approach to Iraq.

On March 24, 1999, President Bill Clinton began an 11-week bombing campaign against Yugoslavia. Like Bush with Iraq, Clinton had no UN mandate (he used NATO) and his so-called “diplomacy” to avert the possibility of bombing leading up to the attacks was insincere and a set-up from the jump. Just like Bush with Iraq.

A month before the bombing began, the Clinton administration issued an ultimatum to President Slobodan Milosevic, which he had to either accept unconditionally or face bombing. Known as the Rambouillet accord, it was a document that no sovereign country would have accepted. It contained a provision that would have guaranteed US and NATO forces “free and unrestricted passage and unimpeded access throughout” all of Yugoslavia, not just Kosovo. It also sought to immunize those occupation forces “from any form of arrest, investigation, or detention by the authorities in [Yugoslavia],” as well as grant the occupiers “the use of airports, roads, rails and ports without payment.” Additionally, Milosevic was told he would have to “grant all telecommunications services, including broadcast services, needed for the Operation, as determined by NATO.” Similar to Bush’s Iraq plan years later, Rambouillet mandated that the economy of Kosovo “shall function in accordance with free market principles.”

What Milosevic was actually asked to sign is never discussed. That it would have effectively meant the end of the sovereignty of the nation was a non-story. The dominant narrative for the past nine years, repeated in February by William Cohen, Clinton’s defense secretary at the time of the bombing, is this: “We tried to achieve a peaceful resolution of what was taking place in Kosovo. And Slobodan Milosevic refused.” Refused peace? More like he unwisely refused one of Don Corleone’s famous offers. Washington knew he would reject it, but had to give the appearance of diplomacy for international “legitimacy.”

So the humanitarian bombs rained down on Serbia. Among the missions: the bombing of the studios of Radio Television Serbia where an airstrike killed 16

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media workers; the cluster bombing of a Nis marketplace, shredding human beings into meat; the deliberate targeting of a civilian passenger train; the use of depleted uranium munitions; and the targeting of petrochemical plants, causing toxic chemical waste to pour into the Danube River. Also, the bombing of Albanian refugees, ostensibly the people being protected by the U.S.

Similar to Bush's allegations about Iraqi WMDs in the lead up to the US invasion, in 1999 Clinton administration officials also delivered stunning allegations about the level of brutality present in Kosovo as part of the propaganda campaign. "We've now seen about 100,000 military-aged men missing They may have been murdered," Cohen said five weeks into the bombing. He said that up to 4,600 Kosovo men had been executed, adding, "I suspect it's far higher than that." Those numbers were flat out false. Eventually the estimates were scaled back dramatically, as Justin Raimondo pointed out recently in his column on www.antiwar.com, from 100,000 to 50,000 to 10,000 and "at that point the War Party stopped talking numbers altogether and just celebrated the glorious victory of 'humanitarian intervention.'" As it turned out "there was no 'genocide' — the International Tribunal itself reported that just over 2,000 bodies were recovered from postwar Kosovo, including Serbs, Roma, and Kosovars, all victims of the vicious civil war in which we intervened on the side of the latter. The whole fantastic story of another 'holocaust' in the middle of Europe was a fraud," according to Raimondo.

Following the NATO invasion of Kosovo in June of 1999, the US and its allies stood by as the Albanian mafia and gangs of criminals and paramilitaries spread out across the province and systematically cleansed Kosovo of hundreds of thousands of Serbs, Romas and other ethnic minorities. They burned down houses, businesses and churches and implemented a shocking campaign to forcibly expel non-Albanians from the province. Meanwhile, the US worked closely with the Kosovo Liberation Army and backed the rise of war criminals to the highest levels of power in Kosovo. Today, Kosovo has become a hub for human trafficking, organized crime and narco-smuggling. In short, it is a mafia state. Is this the "democracy" Hillary Clinton speaks of "promoting" in "the heart" of Europe?

It didn't take long for the US to begin construction of a massive US military base, Camp Bondsteel, which conveniently is located in an area of tremendous geopolitical interest to Washington. (Among its most bizarre facilities, Bondsteel now offers classes at the Laura Bush education center, as well as massages from Thai women and all the multinational junk food you could (n)ever wish for). In November 2005, Alvaro Gil-Robles, the human rights envoy of the Council of

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Europe, described Bondsteel as a “smaller version of Guantanamo.” Oh, and Bondsteel was constructed by former Halliburton subsidiary KBR.

Herein lies an interesting point. The Serbian government is largely oriented toward Europe, not the US. The country’s prime minister, Vojislav Kostunica, is a conservative isolationist who is not enthusiastic about a US military base on Serbian soil any more than Cuba is about Gitmo. He charged that, in recognizing Kosovo, Washington was “ready to unscrupulously and violently jeopardize international order for the sake of its own military interests.” To the would-be independent Kosovo government, however, Bondsteel is no problem.

Russia and a few other nations are fighting the recognition of Kosovo as an independent nation, but that is unlikely to succeed. Still, this action will undoubtedly reverberate for years to come. “We have in Serbia a situation in which the U.S. has forced an action – the proclamation of independence by the Kosovo Albanians – that is in clear violation of the most fundamental principles of international law after World War II,” argues Robert Hayden, Director of the Center for Russian and East European Studies at the University of Pittsburgh. “Borders cannot be changed by force and without consent – that principle was actually the main stated reason for the 1991 U.S. attack on Iraq.”

And this brings us full circle. International law matters only when it is convenient for the US. So too are the cries for “humanitarian interventions.” And despite the extremism of the Bush administration, this is hardly a uniquely Republican phenomenon. In a just world, there would be a humanitarian intervention against the US occupation of Iraq – with its indiscriminate killings of civilians, torture chambers and widespread human rights violations. There certainly would have been such an intervention during the bipartisan slaughter, through bombs and sanctions, of Iraq’s people over the past 18 years. But that’s what you get when the cops and judges and prosecutors are the criminals. US policy has always operated on a worthy victim, unworthy victim system that is almost never primarily about saving the victims. Humanitarianism is the publicly offered justification for the action, seldom, if ever, the primary motivation. With Iraq, Bush wheeled out the humanitarian justification for the occupation – Saddam’s brutality – only after the WMD lies were thoroughly debunked. In Yugoslavia, Clinton used it right out of the gates. In both cases, it rang insincere.

If you are a victim who happens to share a common geography with US interests, international law is on your side as long as it is convenient. If not, well, tough. The UN is just a debate club anyway. Just ask the tens of thousands of Kurds who were slaughtered by Turkey with weapons sold to them by the Clinton administration during the 1990s. Or the Palestinians who live under the

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brutality of Israel's occupation. In some cases, the "victims" allegedly being protected by the US actually get bombed themselves, as was the case with President Clinton's "humanitarian" bombings of the north and south of Iraq once every three days in the late 1990s.

In the bigger picture, the Bush administration's quick recognition of an independent Kosovo has given us a powerful reminder of a fact that is too often overlooked these days: empire is bipartisan, as are the tactics and rhetoric and bombs used to defend and expand it.

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