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SERBIAN INFORMATION OPERATIONS DURING OPERATION ALLIED FORCE

by

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Preface

Like most people, I viewed the Kosovo war through CNN and the Internet. As I watched the war unfold, I was struck by several images. NATO seemed caught in a perpetual reactive mode, struggling to rationalize why Serbia had not capitulated and explaining numerous collateral damage incidents. Images from Belgrade, even from the foreign press, appeared extremely one-sided, full of images of bombed apartments but devoid of any reports or images of Serbian "ethnic cleansing". I soon came to see these images as a deliberate information operations campaign being waged by Slobodan Milosevic.

While NATO eventually prevailed in Operation ALLIED FORCE, the war lasted far longer than the alliance's leaders predicted. It also exacted a heavy political toll in the form of strained relations within the alliance and with China and Russia. It is my opinion that NATO's inability to achieve information superiority is largely responsible for this outcome.

My objective is to examine Serbia's information campaign and learn why it was able to prevail in an information war against a technologically superior alliance. Using these lessons, I hope to develop recommendations that, if enacted, will help the US or NATO achieve information superiority in the next war.

This research project would not have been possible without the help of my research advisor, Major Mary Willmon, who provided guidance, focus, and a host of references that immeasurably improved my research. I would also like to thank Ms. Diane Simpson and the Air University Library staff for helping me master the numerous research databases used to assemble this paper.

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Abstract

This research paper examines Serbian information operations (IO) during Operation ALLIED FORCE, its impact on domestic and international public opinion, and NATO force employment strategy. It also provides recommendations on planning and executing information operations for future conflicts.

Due to limited availability of unclassified information and my desire to keep this paper unclassified, the primary focus of this paper is on Serbia's control and use of the broadcast media, newspapers and the Internet as offensive and defensive IO weapons. Using current US information operations doctrine as a common analytical framework, it first examines the various informational instruments of power used by the Milosevic regime. It then analyzes how Serbia used control of the domestic media and an experienced propaganda machine to gain and maintain support within Serbia and negate NATO messages concerning atrocities committed by the Kosovar Albanians. Next, the paper discusses how Milosevic used these same propaganda tools, along with manipulation of foreign media covering the war from Belgrade, to influence international public opinion in an effort to exploit existing fissures within the alliance and to affect its strategy. Additionally, it analyzes how Serbia used the Internet to promulgate its propaganda message and to conduct primitive information attacks against NATO information systems.

Based on this analysis of Serbia's IO effort, the paper concludes by offering recommendations that, if implemented, could prevent a future enemy from using these IO

instruments against the US or a US-led coalition. It specifically addresses the need to develop a comprehensive IO plan and integrate it into the Joint Force Commander's overall campaign strategy before hostilities commence. It identifies the need for a more prepared, responsive and credible public affairs team capable of quickly countering enemy propaganda. Whenever possible, this counter-propaganda campaign should make liberal use of intelligence collection platforms or special operations forces that can provide visual confirmation of enemy atrocities. Finally, the paper recommends more aggressive use of offensive IO in future conflicts. This includes early use of lethal and non-lethal means to neutralize the enemy's propaganda machine while using US psychological operations and public affairs to effectively convey the US or Allies' message to the enemy population.

Part 1

Introduction

When regard for the truth has broken down or even slightly weakened, all things remain doubtful.

—St. Augustine

On March 24, 1999, air and maritime forces of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization launched the initial strikes of Operation ALLIED FORCE against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. This massive air campaign, the largest offensive operation in NATO's history, was intended to compel the government of President Slobodan Milosevic to accede to the terms of the Ramboillet Accords. The terms of this agreement included the withdrawal of Serbian military and police forces from the province of Kosovo, the deployment of an international peacekeeping force to the war-torn province, and most importantly the end to Serbia's program of "ethnic cleansing" of Kosovar Albanians. After 78 days of sustained air operations and intense diplomatic pressure, the Milosevic government finally agreed to terms similar to Ramboillet, and it appeared that the US-led alliance had achieved an overwhelming victory through aerospace power.

While this military onslaught was ongoing, another, more subtle war was being waged. Recognizing that Yugoslavia's military forces were no match for NATO firepower, the Milosevic regime decided instead to employ its informational instruments of power in an asymmetrical attack against NATO's strategy and resolve. Throughout the operation, Serbia

aggressively used its total control of internal media, its manipulation of foreign journalists, and the world-wide reach of the Internet to shape domestic and international opinion to achieve its political goal: Maintaining the sovereignty and territorial integrity over all of Yugoslavia, including Kosovo. In short, Serbia prevailed in a war for information superiority against the United States and NATO.

How did the tiny, politically isolated Serbian nation achieve information superiority over the most powerful military alliance in history; a collection of states with arguably the most robust media and information systems in the world? Why was NATO, and the US in particular, unable to use these formidable informational instruments of power to influence events within Serbia, isolate it from its political allies, or even foster unity of purpose within the alliance? What lessons can be learned that will enable NATO and the US to more effectively wage information operations in the future?

This paper will attempt to answer these questions by analyzing Serbia's information operations campaign during the Kosovo war. Due to limited available unclassified information and my desire to keep this paper unclassified, I will focus primarily on the IO disciplines of psychological operations, information assurance, public affairs and counter-propaganda. Section II will provide a brief overview of pertinent information operations doctrine to provide a conceptual framework for understanding Serbia's IO campaign. It will also describe the strategic and operational objectives of Serbia's Information campaign. Building on the framework and objectives, Section III provides a detailed analysis of Serbia's IO campaign. Specifically, it discusses how it used its monopoly of the domestic media to maintain popular support for its incursion into Kosovo and its defiance in the face of NATO air strikes. Next, I will describe how the Serbs manipulated foreign journalists covering the war in Belgrade to control information

being broadcast to the rest of the world in an effort to undermine NATO credibility and resolve. I will then discuss how the Serbian government and its supporters exploited the Internet to convey its message to a worldwide audience. Finally, using the lessons learned from Serbia's IO campaign, Section IV will identify steps to be taken by the US and its allies in planning and employing IO to help attain information superiority in the next crisis or conflict.

Part 2

Slobodan Milosevic and the Informational Instrument of Power

The news media and other information network's increasing availability to society's leadership, population, and infrastructure can have a significant impact on national will, political direction, and national security objectives and policy.

—Joint Pub 3-13, *Joint Doctrine for Information Operations*

Fundamentals of Serbia's IO Campaign

At first glance, it may be difficult to view Serbia's manipulation of the media and exploitation of the Internet as a coherent information operations campaign. Some journalists such as ITN's Julian Manyon, who covered the war from Belgrade, even found NATO's depiction of "Belgrade's formidable propaganda machine" laughable.[1] Indeed, Serbia's efforts to shape domestic and international opinion seem primitive compared to modern IO concepts of cyber-weapons and computer network attacks. However, IO is about more than computers and electronic warfare. It is an all-encompassing strategy that integrates the use of informational instruments of power with traditional military warfighting disciplines to achieve strategic and operational objectives.

When viewed through the framework of US joint information operations doctrine, the scope of Serbia's IO campaign becomes clear. Joint Publication 3-13, *Joint Doctrine for Information Operations,* provides such a framework. It defines Information Operations as "actions taken to affect adversary information and information systems while defending one's own information

and information systems to achieve strategic and operational objectives."[2] Additionally, it divides IO into two separate but complimentary categories; offensive and defensive.

Offensive information operations are defined as "the integrated use of assigned and supporting capabilities...to affect adversary decision makers and achieve or promote specific objectives."[3] While many people think of offensive IO as computer viruses, electronic warfare, and physical attacks on enemy information systems, it also includes traditional military disciplines such as psychological operations (PSYOP). PSYOP are actions to convey selected information to foreign audiences to influence their emotions, shape their attitudes, and ultimately affect the behavior of their government.[4] PSYOP "weapons" include (but are not limited to) radio, television, and other media, such as the Internet.

Another closely related discipline of offensive IO is Public Affairs (PA). The purpose of PA is to provide timely information to interested external and internal audiences. According to Joint Pub 3-13, PA's primary mission is to expedite the flow of *accurate* information to these audiences and specifically states that it will not be used to provide disinformation.[5] However, in less scrupulous hands, PA can be used for more sinister purposes, such as spreading propaganda and disinformation to a domestic or foreign audience.

Defensive IO comprises the other half of joint information operations doctrine. Simply put, it is the protection of one's own information and information systems from an enemy's offensive IO efforts.[6] Joint Pub 3-13 focuses on more benign and technical means to protect information, such as information assurance, OPSEC, information security, counter-deception, and counter-propaganda. However, defensive IO can also include more "low tech" means, such as achieving information assurance by physically denying an adversary access to your domestic audience.

Viewed through the prism of these fundamentals, Serbia's actions to influence internal and external perceptions of the NATO bombings and events within the Kosovo province can be interpreted as a deliberate IO campaign. Unable to militarily resist NATO air power, Serbia turned to asymmetric means to undermine NATO's resolve and strategy. As Milosevic's politically powerful wife, Mirijana Markovik, stated to an American reporter in the early days of the war, Serbia was simultaneously engaged in two wars: a bombing war and a media war, adding that she thought her husband should become more involved in the media fight.[7]

Milosevic's Informational Instruments

Markovik advised her husband wisely. While the feeble Yugoslav Air Force was no match for NATO, the Milosevic regime possessed powerful instruments for conducting offensive and defensive IO. These resources included a proven propaganda machine, control of media reporting within Yugoslavia, and a domestic audience receptive to the government's message.

Contrary to popular belief, Slobodan Milosevic did not simply inherit a centralized, tightly controlled, media bureaucracy. The central government's grip on the media was loosened in the early 1970s when economic and political turmoil led to a shift in the balance of power from Belgrade to the various republics and autonomous regions. As part of this shift, the media and other cultural institutions increasingly came under the control of regional governments dominated by various ethnic groups. Coupled with continuing economic hardships, regional nationalist organizations used the media to promote the "uniqueness" of their ethnic group and promulgate stereotypes and prejudices of others. This undermined a central tenet of Yugoslavism, which stressed similarities and suppressed divisive factors among the South Slav ethnic groups, and ultimately contributed to the violent break-up of Yugoslavia.[8]

As the unraveling of the Yugoslav confederation accelerated after Tito's death in 1980, nationalist leaders increasingly used the media as a propaganda tool to amplify ethnic divisions and promote their group's claims to sovereignty. While all ethnic groups used the media for propaganda purposes, the Serbs, led by Milosevic, proved to be especially adept.

Drawing on historical images and myths of Serbia's repeated subjugation by foreign powers such as the Ottomans, Nazis, and the Croatian *Ustashi,* Milosevic presented an image of the Serbian nation as the "perpetual victim." Appealing to ethnic pride, he called on the Serb people to unite and reclaim their "dignity and rights," as well as all territory populated by Serbs.[9] In making these appeals, Milosevic made masterful use of television. Movies and documentaries were produced glorifying Serbia's heroic defeat by the Ottomans at Kosovo Polje and its ultimate triumph over Nazi occupiers and their *Ustashi* cohorts. Powerful speeches, such as Milosevic's 1987 proclamation to Serbs living in Kosovo that "no one shall beat you (the Serbs) again," became a staple of the Serbian Radio and Television Service (RTS).[10]

Just as the media was used to propagate the image of the glorious but victimized Serb people, it was also used to denigrate the rights of other ethnic groups. For over ten years prior to ALLIED FORCE, the increasingly ultra-nationalist Serb media presented negative stereotypes of ethnic groups and promulgated rumors and lies of alleged atrocities committed against "the Serb People" by these groups. Croats, for example, were portrayed as neo-Nazis who had entered an unholy alliance with the Vatican to create a fourth Reich in the former Yugoslavia. Albanians were depicted as backward, illiterate enemies of Christendom and were often implicated, by rumor and innuendo, in the rape and murder of Kosovar Serbs.[11] In this highly charged, ethnically divisive climate, rumors promulgated by "official" news reports were regarded as fact. Building on the Serb's self-image as the perpetual victim, these crimes, whether real or

imagined, were portrayed as crimes against the *Serb people* and a threat to their continued existence.

Throughout the 1990s, Milosevic successfully used the media to deepen ethnic divisions and rally public support for his goal of a "Greater Serbia." During its war with Croatia, for example, Serbian TV ran hours of stories showing the mass graves of Serbian World War II heroes being desecrated along with detailed accounts of genocide and ethnic cleansing perpetrated by the other side.[12] For many Serbs, these images provided ample justification for "retaliatory" violence and ethnic cleansing against Croatia, establishing a propaganda strategy that their leaders would later use against the Bosnian Muslims and Kosovar Albanians.

The Serbian propaganda machine was made possible by near total control of the domestic media. Initially, following the devolution of authority from the central government to the republics in the 1970s, independent newspapers flourished throughout Yugoslavia. During the subsequent economic hardships, many of the smaller, more liberal papers folded or were taken over by the ultra-nationalists.[13] As the nationalists consolidated power, the surviving newspapers quickly fell under state control. Most liberal papers open to diverse views and opinions, such as *Nin*, were censored and ultimately shut down. More importantly, the nationalists seized control of television, the primary means to reach the mostly-illiterate countryside.[14]

In 1998, the Milosevic regime increased its monopoly on information by placing restrictions on the domestic media reporting and controlling access to foreign broadcasts. Targeting the last vestiges of independent media left in Serbia, the parliament passed the "Public Information Law," giving the government the authority to make arrests or impose crippling fines on any publication or broadcaster found guilty of "offending the dignity and reputation of a person" or of publishing "untruths." It also prohibited local broadcasters from rebroadcasting foreign

programs, effectively removing Serb language radio and television programs produced by the BBC, the Voice of America, and Radio Free Europe for local airwaves.[15] These draconian measures laid the foundations for Serbia's defensive information operations during the first days of the Kosovo war.

In his drive to reassert total control over Kosovo, Milosevic's propaganda and domination of the media would have been ineffective without a third component of Serbia's informational instrument: a receptive domestic audience. The Serbian people, including those opposed to Milosevic, consider Kosovo to be the spiritual cradle of Serbian Christendom and the center of the medieval Serbian Empire.[16] The tale of the Serbian defeat at Kosovo Polje forms the basis for epic poetry that has been passed down orally from generation to generation. This collective memory and mythology is so powerful that most Serbs share the belief that Kosovo would be Serbian even if not a single Serb lived there. Thus, they see Kosovar Albanians, who comprise 90 percent of the province's population, as usurpers of a land "whose soil is so soaked with the blood of valiant Serbs that it could not possibly belong to another state."[17]

With this pre-existing antagonism between Serbs and Albanians, Serbian nationalists found a receptive local audience for their propaganda. Beginning with his dramatic, televised pledge in 1987 to protect the Serbian minority from the "persecution of the Albanian majority," Milosevic engaged in a fierce propaganda campaign to reintegrate the Kosovo province into a greater Serbia.[18] Albanians became the scapegoats of the Serb media. They were implicated by the press in the rape of Serbian women, forcing them to bear Albanian children and contributing to the Albanian "population explosion." The Albanian separatist movement was labeled as a campaign of genocide against the Serbian nation, sponsored by the "terrorists'' allies in Iran, Croatia, or the United States.[19]

This combination of a receptive audience conditioned to believe nationalist propaganda, a near total control over the domestic media, and a propaganda machine with over 10 years of "combat experience" gave Milosevic a formidable IO capability. It gave him "local information superiority" before the first NATO bomb fell, and the capability to project this power beyond his borders.

Notes

[1] Quoted in Goff, Peter et al. *The Kosovo News and Propaganda War* (International Press Institute: Vienna, 2000). On line. Internet, 3 February 2000. Available from http://www.freemedia.at/ KosovoB_Manyon.htm.

[2] Joint Publication 3-13. *Joint Doctrine for Information Operations*, October 199, p. I-1.

[3] Ibid., p. viii.

[4] Ibid., p. II-4.

[5] Ibid., p. II-4 (italics added). See also Hubbard, Zachary "Information Warfare in Kosovo." *Journal of Electronic Defense*, November 1999, Vol. 22 No. 9, p. 58.

[6] *Joint Doctrine for Information Operations*, p. III-1.

[7] Stephens, Connie L. "The Revolution in Military Affairs: Reinventing U.S. Strategic Communications in the Era of Slobodan Milosevic." *Chairman of the Joint Chief of Staff Strategic Essay Competition* (Washington DC: National Defense University, 1998), p. 6.

[8] Spyros A. Slofos provides a detailed account of the role of the media in the disintegration of Yugoslavia in "Culture, Media, and the Politics of Disintegration and Ethnic Division in Former Yugoslavia." See Allen, Tim and Jean Seaton, eds. *The Media of Conflict: War Reporting and Representations of Ethnic Violence* (New York: St Martin's Press, Inc., 1999), pp. 163-4.

[9] Allen, p. 167.

[10] Stephens, p. 6.

[11] Allen, p. 168-9.

[12] Stokes, Gail. "The Devils Finger: The Disintegration of Yugoslavia." Excerpt printed in *International Security and Military Studies*, Air Command and Staff College textbook, (Maxwell AFB, Air Command and Staff College, 1999), pp. 76-77.

[13] Allen, p. 170.

[14] Rogel, Carol. "A War of Myths, Propaganda and Balkan Politics." *The Break-up of Yugoslavia and the War in Bosnia* (Westport, Greenwood Press, 1998), p. 12.

[15] Stephens, pp. 4-5

[16] Allen, pp. 169-170.

[17] Rogel, p.45.

[18] Allen, p. 170.

[19] Ibid., p. 174.

Part 3

War by Other Means--An Analysis of Serbia's Information Campaign

The supreme importance in war is to attack the enemy's strategy. Next best is to attack his alliances.

—Sun Tzu

Serbian Objectives and Strategy

As the Ramboillet talks collapsed in early 1999 and it became clear that war with NATO was inevitable, Serbia wasted no time in launching its IO campaign. While no specific data is available from Belgrade, an examination of Serbian actions and propaganda clearly illustrate Serbia's strategic objectives for this campaign. The first objective was to prevent the partitioning of Yugoslavia through the creation of an autonomous Kosovar republic. The second was to consolidate Serb power in Kosovo by crushing the paramilitary Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA). To accomplish these objectives, Serbia had to first achieve three operational objectives: (1) Maintain domestic support for Serbian actions in Kosovo and defiance to NATO attacks. (2) Promote division and undermine the resolve of the NATO Coalition. (3) Gain and maintain popular support from abroad within NATO countries and Russia. To fulfill these objectives, Serbia turned to its proven offensive and defensive informational instruments of power.

Defensive Information Operations

Information Assurance

To achieve information assurance, Serbia resorted to a tried-and true strategy of media crackdowns and counter-propaganda. Using the recently passed Public Information Law, the government quickly crushed the remaining independent media outlets. On March 28th, Serb police raided the offices of "the last independent radio station in Yugoslavia," B-92.[1] The station manager was arrested and replaced with a government official. A few days later, the station was closed. Print journalists fared no better. The publishers of five independent newspapers were arrested, and those who remained free were forced to submit reports through government sensors before publication.[2] Additionally, the Information Ministry issued an edict to all reporters requiring them to refer to NATO as "criminals" in all broadcasts.[3] Those who defied the regime were dealt with harshly. Slavko Curuvij, editor of the independent *Dnevni Telgraf* and an outspoken opponent of both Milosevic and his Kosovo policy, was gunned down outside his apartment during the first week of the war.[4]

In addition to crackdowns on domestic journalists, the Serbian government sought to further isolate the Serb people from outside reporting. As soon as the bombs started falling, Serbian authorities cut off incoming transmissions from western television networks, particularly from NATO countries.[5] Recognizing that many Serbs would still be able to access these networks via satellite or Internet broadcasts, the regime launched a fierce counter-propaganda campaign to undermine their credibility. The BBC, CNN, SKY, and other foreign news sources were constantly portrayed as "tools of the aggressors" and supporters of the KLA.[6]

Public Affairs/Counter Propaganda

Achieving Information Assurance enabled Milosevic to prosecute the next phase of his defensive IO campaign: an aggressive public affairs and "counter-propaganda" campaign intended to demonize NATO while rallying domestic support for continued resistance to NATO. Tapping into nationalist sentiment and traditional images of Serbia as the eternal victim, the regime portrayed the Kosovo conflict as a battle for the national survival of the Serb people. When the NATO attacks began, state television promptly aired martial footage complimented by the showing of *Battle of Kozara*, a stirring film about Yugoslav partisans' triumph over the Nazis. Following these films Milosevic addressed the nation, claiming "what is at stake here is the freedom of the entire country" and that NATO's true objective was to occupy the entire country.[7] Subsequent broadcasts included emotive images of Kosovo as the ancient Serb homeland interspersed with doctored images showing its capital, Pristina, as a burned-out wasteland from NATO carpet bombing.[8] These images galvanized the Serbian people's support for the regime, inoculating them against NATO public affairs messages concerning Serbian atrocities. Indeed, even long-time opponents of the regime expressed vehement opposition to ALLIED FORCE and pledged solidarity with Milosevic and his call to "defend the homeland."[9]

Throughout the war, the domestic media carefully controlled the information flow to the local population. News reports covered civilian casualties in Serbia, but no Army losses were reported. Instead, they were treated to a steady stream of reports on scores of NATO planes being shot down, hospitals being bombed, ecological disasters such as an alleged 20km oil slick on the Danube, and abundant footage of anti-US and anti-NATO protests held around the world. There was never any mention of Kosovars being killed or displaced by Serb Forces. Instead, the Serb people were told that their forces were simply responding to the widespread terrorism of the Kosovo Liberation Army and its sympathizers.[10]

Offensive Information Operations

Having easily achieved information superiority at home, Milosevic focused his informational instruments on the international audience. Using tactics similar to his defensive IO strategy, he used media control and propaganda to conduct psychological operations against world public opinion to undermine support for NATO and fulfill his strategic objectives.

Foreign Media Control

As ALLIED FORCE commenced, Milosevic quickly extended his umbrella of control over the foreign press covering the war from Belgrade. Police moved quickly to harass and detain foreign reporters. Several TV and newspaper journalists were arrested and held as spies. For example, Hanspeter Schnitzler of Germany's SAT 1 TV network was arrested, beaten, and held in solitary confinement for 26 days.[11] Reporters who were allowed to remain free were subject to frequent harassment. CNN's Brent Sadler found his tires slashed by Serbian Army officers, who then threatened him and his cameraman by holding out a gun and two bullets and saying, "these are for you."[12] The Serbian government also culled the foreign press corps to make them more manageable: by the end of the second week, over 20 journalists were forced to leave within 24 hours because their reporting was considered "biased". Another 100 were denied extensions on their visas, a "polite" way of asking them to leave as well.[13]

For those journalists who remained, the Serbs imposed tight restrictions on what images and reports could be broadcast from Belgrade. Initially, as in DESERT STORM, journalists broadcast images of NATO air strikes from their hotel rooftops. However, Milosevic apparently decreed "there will be no Baghdad Circus here" and dispatched his secret police, who promptly detained over 40 journalists (holding many of them overnight) and confiscated their equipment.[14] Following this round-up, Serb authorities shut down their overseas transmission site and forced

them to use the RTS building instead, where their tapes and reports could be carefully scrutinized by Serb Army sensors. Reporters were also forced to register with the government press center and could not leave Belgrade without escort.[15]

Propaganda and Disinformation

As a result of these media controls, western reporters became a weapon in Milosevic's offensive IO kit bag. They were only allowed to see what the Yugoslav government wanted them to see, and could only view NATO battle damage as part of government-organized junkets chaperoned by the Yugoslav Army. The sites they were allowed to visit were carefully selected for maximum propaganda value, such as their trip to the F-117 crash site.[16] Similar footage of downed Yugoslav aircraft, damage to Serb military targets, or ground combat and ethnic cleansing in Kosovo were not allowed to be collected. Instead, reporters were mostly confined to visiting sites of NATO collateral damage, where they were treated to the images of bodies lying in craters, old and young people wailing over the loss of a loved one, and their angry shouts of "You criminals! Why have you done this to us?"[17]

Yugoslav officials also used these journalists to disseminate the regime's viewpoint to the outside world. Yugoslav officials quickly figured out that live interviews were better received by the western media than recorded statements and English-speaking government officials were soon lining up to be interviewed by the captive press corps.[18] Some Serbs, such as the notorious paramilitary leader Arkan and the Yugoslav Ambassador to the UN, became regular fixtures on the major US television networks as well as the BBC, MSNBC, Fox News, and Sky.

In addition to manipulating the foreign press, Milosevic used his own media sources to present Serbia's view of the war to an international audience. Through its EUSat communications link, RTS was able to reach all of Europe and was even rebroadcast in the US

on CSPAN.[19] Using this forum, Milosevic sought to undermine NATO's moral and legal authority through an endless stream of carefully scripted messages. First, playing on the US and NATO's aversion to collateral damage, Serb radio and TV repeatedly challenged allied claims of precision strikes by reporting on "barbaric and criminal" attacks on civilian industries, the interruption of basic services to the Serb people, and graphic accounts of death and privation.[20] Second, Serbian news commentators repeatedly questioned the legality of NATO's action, reminding the international audience that Serbia was exercising its right to suppress terrorism and prevent secession within its sovereign territory. Therefore, the commentators claimed, by attacking Yugoslavia, NATO had committed an aggressive, criminal act in contravention of its founding principles as a defensive alliance.[21]

Serbia also used its propaganda weapon to undermine the core rationale of NATO's involvement, the ethnic cleansing of Kosovo. By controlling the media and their broadcasts, Milosevic denied NATO a means to get "ground truth" reporting on atrocities inside Serb-held territory. This enabled the Serb media to launch counter-accusations: Huge columns of refugees were indeed fleeing Kosovo, Serb reporters conceded, but they were fleeing NATO's "humanitarian" bombing, not Serb military forces.[22] Additionally, to substantiate their claim of benign intentions towards Kosovar Albanians, Serb TV broadcast images of Serb troops aiding the displaced Kosovars and of Milosevic chatting amiably with Ibrahim Rugova, a leader in the Albanian community.[23] The Serbs further undermined the credibility of the US-led alliance by equating NATO support for Kosovar Albanians with support for the KLA, whom many NATO members, including the US, had previously labeled a terrorist organization. Serb media repeatedly played archived clips from Western diplomats condemning the KLA and US State Department Spokesman James Jolly's comments that the "presence of Serbian troops in Kosovo

was legal and legitimate."[24] They also aired experts from German, French and Swiss reports linking the KLA with international organized crime and the European cocaine and heroin trade.[25]

Another critical aspect of Serbia's IO campaign to discredit NATO was the exploitation of collateral damage incidents. Using the tightly controlled western press, images of civilian casualties were beamed to the international audience within hours of the strikes. These pictures, accompanied by heart-wrenching eyewitness accounts, were disseminated through western and Serbian media, along with claims by the Milosevic regime that the civilian attacks had been deliberate.[26] These images energized both pro-Serbian and anti-war activists throughout Europe and Russia, leading to marches and demonstrations against the US and NATO. This public outcry helped politicize and lengthen NATO's target selection process, in some cases removing entire categories of "civilian" targets from strike consideration.[27]

Fear of collateral damage, heightened by Serbian propaganda also restricted NATO weapons use. For example, on May 8th, a cluster bomb intended to attack a Serbian airfield malfunctioned and damaged a clinic and a market place instead. NATO was again confronted with images and reports of innocent civilians being killed. The subsequent outcry over this accident led to a presidential-level proscription against the use of cluster munitions for the rest of the war.[28]

The IO Offensive takes to the Web

Serbia's effort to disseminate its propaganda was aided by western television and newspapers, many of which used Serb media sources in their reporting. Serbian propaganda was fused into reports from many liberal and conservative media forums opposed to NATO involvement for various reasons.[29] However, many of these reports reached only "niche" markets and because of the perceived political bias of their authors, they suffered from the same

credibility problems as Serbia's own broadcasts.[30] To reach a wider audience, Serbia turned to a new medium for its offensive IO effort: The Internet.

Within the first two weeks of the war, ten Internet sites, all in English, appeared on the Web. While some of these sites were privately owned, most were operated by the Federal Information Ministry, the Yugoslav Army, and Belgrade University. Additionally, the government clandestinely seized the web address of B-92, which had been renowned since 1997 as "the source of independent reporting inside Yugoslavia." After this seizure, anyone going to that web site seeking the truth would see government propaganda supporting Milosevic's stance against NATO instead.[31]

Like the print and broadcast media, the Serbian Information Ministry sought to control the content of these web sites. Information Minister Nikola Markovic issued a series of "suggestions" to the webmasters. Specifically,

> He appealed to the Internet users to respect netiquette by sending short messages without offensive words. Messages need to be sent to target groups with as many pictures of crimes as possible, adding that foreigners are mostly interested in amateur video recordings since these represent authentic recording from the field. The truth must reach influential people, politicians and business people. That is why messages must be sent to them via e-mail.[32]

As NATO gradually severed Serb Radio and TV communications with the outside world, these Internet sites became the regime's primary propaganda instruments. The sites repeated the same messages delivered to Serb TV audiences: NATO's action was illegal and immoral; NATO aggressors were intentionally and unjustly targeting Yugoslav civilians; Serb security measures in Kosovo were solely to deter Albanian terrorists; and NATO policy makers were fractious and fumbling.[33] These sites also contained children's drawings depicting life under NATO bombing and video recordings of destroyed towns with dubbed sounds of an air raid siren.[34] Additionally, webmasters posted articles and editorials from respected western reporters and politicians critical

of NATO's bombing campaign.[35] Serbian leaders also took to the cyberwaves, appearing in on-line chat-rooms and answering e-mail. In some instances, this medium enabled the Serbs to make a greater impact on public opinion than their television interviews, as a Florida housewife attested:

> When I saw (paramilitary leader Arkan) on TV, I turned him off because he sounded a bit over the edge. But in the chat rooms when you're just reading his statements, I saw him in a totally different light. I became furious with our government for invading his territory.[36]

Internet e-mail became the primary means for both the government and individual Serbs to alert the media on collateral damage incidents. For example, within 15 minutes of the Chinese Embassy bombing, STRATFOR, a private open-source intelligence company, received five e-mails from people living in the neighborhood describing the attack.[37]

E-mail also became an integral part of Serbia's early warning network: As NATO aircraft took off from bases in Italy and other locations, spotters outside the airbase would e-mail aircraft types, numbers, weapons loads, and tail numbers to a Serb web page. This information, along with poor pilot communications security, provided indications and warning to Serbian air defense operators.[38]

Besides using the Internet for public affairs and propaganda purposes, Serbs also used it to conduct information attacks against NATO countries. In the first week of the bombing, one Serbian individual sent over 2000 virus-laden e-mails a day into the NATO computer system.[39] The alliance's web page also came under cyber attack during the second week, as Serbian computer users managed to temporarily disable the site by bombarding it with ping-attacks, which overwhelmed the system with more queries than it could handle simultaneously.[40] While there is no evidence that these attacks were orchestrated by the Milosevic regime, these Serb-originated attacks forced NATO to devote resources to enhancing computer security, and

resulted in a DoD-wide ban on accessing Serbian web sites to prevent them from conducting site mapping.

Notes

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[8] The Serb media was so effective at manipulating the footage that, according to one western journalist who covered the war from Belgrade, "the people really believed Pristina had been totally destroyed; so did I. I was very surprised when I later arrived in Pristina and found only a few buildings had been damaged." Schniztler, Hanspeter. "A Never Ending Story in Cell 13." On Line. Internet, 3 February 2000. Available at http//www.freemedia.at/KosovoB_Schnitzler. htm.

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[11] A detailed account of Schnitzler's ordeal can be found in Schniztler, "A Never Ending Story in Cell 13." On Line. Internet, 3 Feburary 2000. Available at http://www.freemedia.at/ KosovoB_Schnitzler.htm.

[12] Miffin, Lawrie. "Serbs Hold Foreign Reporters." *New York Times"*, 25 March 1999, p. A14.

[13] Manyon, Julian. From Goff. *The Kosovo News and Propaganda War*. On line. Internet, 3 February 2000. Available from http://www.freemedia.at/ KosovoB_Manyon.htm.

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[17] Erlanger, Steven. "Small Serbian Town Is Striken By a Deadly Accident of War." *New York Times*, 7 April 1999, pp. A1, 10.

[18] Manyon, Julian. From Goff. *The Kosovo News and Propaganda War*. On line. Internet, 3 February 2000. Available from http://www.freemedia.at/ KosovoB_Manyon.htm.

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[20] Reports of collateral damage against innocent civilians became the staple of Serbia's foreign broadcasts, which can be found on the Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS). For example, see "Civilians Killed in NATO Attack in Kursumlija" FBIS, Belgrade Tanjug News Agency, 1540 GMT, 11 Apr 99, Document ID: FTS 19940411000474.

[21] Conflict Studies Research Centre. "Reactions in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia to the Kosovo Crisis." 14 March-31 May 1999, p. 7.

[22] Ibid., p. 6.

[23] Whitney, Craig R. "NATO Generals and Civilians Clash Over Bombing TV." *New York Times*, 9 April 1999, p. 8.

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[26] For a representative account, see Erlanger, Steven, "Special NATO Pilot Was Ordered to Bomb Convoy, Belgrade Says." *New York Times*, 20 April 1999, p. 12.

[27] Priest, Dana, "Bombing by Committee," *Washington Post*, 20 September 1999, p.A1.

[28] See also NATO's press conference at http://www.nato.int/kosovo/ pres /p990508b.htm.

[29] Liberal media outlets, such as the *New Statesman* and *The World Today* were the most sympathetic to the Serbian perspective. For Example, on 19 April, the *New Statesman* asked: "Amid all the concern of the refugees, there no mention is made of the 200,000 Serbs who lived in Kosovo before the air strikes began…how many innocent civilians have been force to flee their homes by NATO's bombing? Such awkward questions about how and why we are fighting are quietly ignored?" See Born, Matthew. "Which do we believe: NATO facts or Serb Lies." New Statesman. 19 Apr 99, Vol. 12, Issue 55. (London: Statesman and Nation Publishing Company, 1999).

[30] For example, while many of the interviews with Serbian leaders were aired mainstream television and radio shows, most critical reporting on ALLIED FORCE appeared on conservative radio shows, such as The Michael Reagan Show.

[31] To counter Serbia's use of its Website, B-92 staff and supporters created a new web site in Amsterdam, www.helpb92.com, providing whatever information it could learn about the situation in Serbia and Kosovo. See Vatic, Veran "War of Words: When the bombs come, Serbia's B92 Hits the Net." *New York Times*, 29 Nov 99, pp. 34-36.

[32] "Tajung Notes New Internet Sites Against NATO Strikes." *Belgrade Tajung News Service*, 1439 GMT, 13 April 1999, FBIS, Document ID FTS19940413001460.

[33] Stephens, p. 7.

[34] "Tajung Notes New Internet Sites Against NATO Strikes." *Belgrade Tajung News Service*, 1439 GMT, 13 April 1999, FBIS, Document ID FTS19940413001460.

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[35] These sites still contain a comprehensive archive of these commentaries. For a representative example, see http://www.suc.org/kosovo_crisis/archive.html.

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Part 4

Lessons for the Next War

War plans cover every aspect of a war, and weave them into a single operation that must have a single, ultimate objective in which all particular aims are reconciled.

—Clausewitz

Serbia's skillful use of its informational instruments of power enabled it to achieve information superiority over NATO. Milosevic's control over domestic media and the international press corps inside Yugoslavia enabled him to present a one-sided, genocide-free picture of the war.[1] His ability to rapidly present this biased image to a worldwide audience through the media and the Internet forced NATO to continually react to Serb propaganda, denying the alliance the initiative in the information war. While he was unsuccessful in fracturing the alliance, his IO campaign widened rifts between NATO allies and between the alliance and Russia, undermined public support for the bombing, and led many NATO allies, such as Germany and France, to push for a diplomatic solution to the conflict. Additionally, Serbia's IO campaign complicated NATO's targeting strategy by politicizing and lengthening the target selection process. This led to restrictions on attacks against infrastructure targets, the use of non-precision weapons near populated areas, and an outright ban on the use of cluster munitions for much of the war.[2]

In short, NATO never achieved information parity, much less information dominance.[3] Despite established (US) IO doctrine, overwhelming technological supremacy and a wide

spectrum of IO capabilities, the US-led alliance lost the information war because the Serbs were more skilled and resourceful in employing their limited IO assets. Since this lesson will not go unnoticed by future opponents, it's imperative that campaign planners translate IO doctrine into a comprehensive strategy for employing offensive and defensive IO instruments. Whenever possible, this strategy development must occur before the shooting starts.

Pre-conflict Planning

NATO failed to win the information war largely because it failed to anticipate and plan for it. Initially envisioned as a two-day campaign to convince Milosevic to withdraw his forces from Kosovo, ALLIED FORCE planners failed to anticipate Serbia's resolve and therefore saw little need to prepare for a prolonged IO battle.[4] Thus, IO assets were incrementally deployed to the theater, and an IO planning cell was not established until the second week of the air campaign.[5]

This failure to anticipate and plan for IO surrendered the initiative to Milosevic and violated a core principle of US IO doctrine. As Joint Pub 3-13 states, "IO planning must begin at the earliest stage of a JFC's campaign or operations planning...and must be integrated with other operations to contribute to national and military objectives."[6] Had the US and NATO attempted to shape the environment with its robust offensive and defensive IO capabilities before or in the early days of the conflict, it is possible they could have shortened the war.

In future crises, the IO cell needs to be formed and staffed during the pre-conflict stage, and IO needs to be incorporated into the Joint Force Commander's overall strategy. Additionally, since we are most likely to fight in a coalition environment, IO doctrine needs to be shared with our allies and practiced during combined exercises.[7]

Defensive IO Options

Public Affairs

When the IO cell is activated in the next conflict, it must include a skilled PA team capable of providing timely and accurate information to the media and public. Above all, the team needs to clearly convey why the US or our alliance had resorted to the use of force. During the crucial early stages of ALLIED FORCE, NATO and Pentagon spokesmen had difficulty explaining why going to war with Yugoslavia was in our national (or NATO's) interest. This was due in large part to the failure of the North Atlantic Council, (NATO's civilian leadership) to articulate the alliance's objectives until the third week of the conflict.[8] Without this critical link between interests and the fight, popular support may be difficult to sustain during a prolonged conflict, providing an adversary with an information vulnerability to exploit.

Along with clearly stating goals and objectives, the PA team must ensure timely flow of pertinent information to the public. In ALLIED FORCE, DoD provided far less operational information than they did during DESERT STORM or DESERT FOX. While the rationale behind this media restrictions was sound—to protect aircrews' lives—it led to an outcry that reporters were being spoon-fed only what the alliance wanted them to know. This blurred the distinction between the NATO and Yugoslav "propaganda machines" and helped undermine the alliance's credibility.[9] While preserving operational security is of paramount importance, information on completed operations, including battle damage assessments and imagery should be made available as soon as possible.

In addition to being timely, the PA team needs to be able to react quickly to unexpected events, such as downed aircraft or collateral damage. The NATO public affairs team often had a difficult time responding to the media's questions on these matters because they didn't anticipate

these events during the pre-conflict planning phase and thus did not know how to respond to them. In future conflicts, the PA team needs to anticipate certain types of failure and have established procedures for responding to them when they occur.[10]

However, this need for rapid response must be carefully balanced against the need to provide accurate information. Because the global media now demands information instantaneously to feed its 24-hour news networks, they exert tremendous political pressure on national and military leaders to release information before it has been vetted.[11] During ALLIED FORCE, this sometimes prompted NATO to report information on collateral damage incidents before all the facts were known. The result was often an embarrassing series of contradictory explanations, retractions, and apologies, further undermining the integrity of the alliance's information.

To gain and maintain credibility, the PA team must ensure the information they provide is free from inflation and political rhetoric. One of the primary complaints of journalists covering the war from Brussels is that NATO spokesmen were more intent on providing daily denunciations of the Serbian government and its ethnic cleansing campaign than providing details on the operation. The spokesmen's credibility also suffered from reporting on rumors as if they were fact. For example, in early April NATO reported that the Serbs had killed Baton Haxhiu, editor of Kosovo's largest newspaper. The next day, Haxhiu surfaced, alive and well, in London and NATO was forced to make an embarrassing retraction.[12] NATO was also embarrassed by exaggerated accounts of Serbian atrocities and casualties, such as claims that over 100,000 Kosovar Albanian men had been killed, when the real number was probably below 10,000.[13]

Counter-Propaganda

Since the truth is the best antidote to lies and disinformation, an articulate, credible, and responsive PA team is the cornerstone to counter-propaganda operations. Credibility, which must be established over time through consistently honest reporting, will enable the international community to distinguish your fact and the enemy's fiction.[14] While many of Serbia's lies during the Kosovo War were readily apparent, such as wildly inflated reports of downed NATO aircraft, many were more subtle. The problem for the international community was that NATO's PA gaffes, inflated "body counts," and reporting on rumors blurred the credibility difference between messages from Belgrade and Brussels. If our reporting is consistently accurate, it will come to be relied on as the truth.

Whenever possible, this truth-projection should be accompanied by visual images. Because people usually "believe what they see, and not what they hear," imagery intelligence can provide an effective counter-propaganda tool for the US and its allies to use against their enemies. During the Kosovo conflict, NATO used its national and theater reconnaissance assets to search for signs of Serb atrocities such as mass graves. However, the poor quality of many of these photos along with the arcane science of photo interpretation provided opportunities for the Serbs and other skeptics to dispute the photo's veracity.[15] Therefore, in future conflicts, it may be advantageous to use these photos as a cueing device for special operations forces (SOF). Depending on the location and threat, insertion of SOF forces to the probable site of an atrocity may allow the collection of "ground-truth" photos and other evidence for counter-propaganda purposes.[16]

Offensive IO Options

Physical Attack

Physical attack can provide the most effective method of counter-propaganda by denying an enemy the means to promulgate their lies and disinformation. Despite identifying Serbian TV as Milosevic's "instrument of propaganda and derision," NATO's civilian leadership prevented its military forces from bombing TV and radio targets until the fifth week of the war.[17] This mistake provided Milosevic ample time to spread propaganda within and beyond Serbia, sufficient time to raise questions about NATO's mission and widen fissures within the Alliance. Had these targets been attacked with precision weapons during the first few nights of the war, Serbia's propaganda machine would have been severely degraded.

Kinetic weapons could have also been used to degrade Serbia's ability to use the Internet for propaganda purposes. Unlike the United States, where Internet Service Providers (ISPs) use robust, redundant communications networks, Serbia's four ISPs rely on three landlines and a single satellite link for international communications.[18] Had these vulnerable links been targeted and destroyed, Serbia's web access to the outside world would have been effectively severed.

Non-lethal Targeting/Computer Network Attack

In addition to kinetic weapons, non-lethal means could also have been employed to disrupt Serbia's propaganda capability. EUSat exercised this option near the end of the war by denying RTS access to its satellite broadcasting.[19] Similar means could have been used to severely degrade Serbia's access to the Internet. For instance, Loral Orion, a US firm, owned the sole satellite link used by Serbian ISPs. Under the May 1999 US trade embargo, Loral Orion could have been legally ordered to drop the link. However, the Clinton administration declined to

exercise this option, arguing that "full and open access to the Internet can only help the Serbian people know the ugly truth about the crimes against humanity being perpetrated by Milosevic."[20]

Even if severing Serbia's Internet access was politically unpalatable, computer network attack (CNA) offered other means to disrupt Serbia's propaganda pages. As the Serb hackers proved in their unsophisticated "ping" attacks against NATO, Serb web pages would have been easy targets for US CNA. Precision cyber-attacks could have been used to shut down these sites, or to exploit them by posting NATO information in place of Serb propaganda.[21] Either of these options could have enabled NATO to deny the Serb regime a vital propaganda tool while preserving Internet access for the "truth seeking" Serb people.

PSYOP/Public Affairs

While PSYOP comprised a major portion of all IO conducted during ALLIED FORCE, it could have been more effective if used as part of a coordinated IO plan and in conjunction with lethal and non-lethal attacks. While PSYOP assets such as COMMANDO SOLO were used to broadcast information to Serb audiences, they were largely ineffective due to mountainous terrain. To overcome these shortfalls, technology to improve the coverage of the EC-130, such as the use of Unmanned Aerial Vehicles as signal relays, should be studied.[22] Additionally, although only 12% of Serbian households have satellite TV access, the US should study the feasibility of developing a PYSOP capability using SATCOM broadcasts.[23]

Finally, both PSYOP and Public affairs might have been more effective if used as part of a comprehensive IO strategy that included the disruption of Serbia's broadcast capability. Such an attack might have enabled NATO to achieve information superiority over Serbia by preventing Milosevic from broadcasting his controlled images while providing NATO the ability to spread its message to the Serb people. Additionally, if Serbia's transmission capability was disrupted

then it is possible that information services, such as Radio Free Europe, may have been able to broadcast over RTS's frequency, increasing the likelihood that Serb households would receive the message.

Conclusion

In Operation ALLIED FORCE, the US and NATO were fortunate to face an opponent who did not have the ability to challenge us militarily. While Milosevic was able to win the information war, this proved insufficient to achieve his objective of retaining Serb power and presence in Kosovo. Since other potential adversaries are likely to study our performance in the Kosovo War, we may not be so lucky next time. Therefore, the US and NATO must begin planning now for the next information war by developing joint and combined IO tactics, techniques, and procedures, and integrating these into joint campaign planning and exercises. These steps, along with the recommendations outlined above, will help ensure that we attain information superiority in the next war and achieve our strategic and operational objectives.

Notes

[1] Taylor, Phillip M. "Propaganda and the Web War." *The World Today*, June 1999, Vol. 55, No. 6, p. 10.

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[3] Cordesman, Anthony H. *The Air and Missile Campaign Over Serbia*, (Washington DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 22 July 1999), p. 15.

[4] *Kosovo/Operation ALLIED FORCE After Action Report*, Office of the Secretary of Defense Report to Congress, 31 January 2000, p. 23. Internet. Online, 7 February 2000. Available from http://www.defenselink.mil/pubs/kaar02072000.pdf.

[5] Hubbard, Zachary. "Information Warfare in Kosovo," *Journal of Electronic Defense*, Nov 1999, Vol. 22, No. 11, p. 58. This sentiment also expressed by Maj Gen. James Baker, Air Intelligence Agency Director in an informal meeting with Air Command and Staff College Students on 1 February 2000.

[6] Joint Pub 3-13. *Joint Doctrine for Information Operations.* (Washington DC: National Defense University, 1998), V-1.

[7] National Defense University. *After Kosovo: Implications for US Strategy and Coalition Warfare* (executive summary) NDU 1999 Topical Symposium, 16-17 Nov 99, p. 78.

Notes

[8] The stated goals of ALLIED FORCE were: (1) A verifiable stop to all military action and the immediate end to violence and repression; (2) The withdrawal from Kosovo of Serb military, police and paramilitary forces; (3) The stationing in Kosovo of an international military presence; (4) The unconditional and safe return of all refugees and displaced persons and unhindered access to them by humanitarian aid organizations; (5) The establishment of a political framework agreement for Kosovo on the basis of the Ramboillet Accords, in conformance with international law and the UN Charter. From Hubbard, "Information Warfare in Kosovo." *Journal of Electronic Defense,* Nov 1999, Vol. 22, No. 11, pp. 58-60.

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[12] Whitney, Craig R. "Facts at Briefings Scarce, But Polemics Are Abundant." *New York Times*, 3 April 1999, p. A6.

[13] "Another Kosovo Victim: NATO Credibility." *Editor & Publisher,* 10 July 1999, Vol. 132, Issue 28. p.14.

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[16] National Defense University. *After Kosovo: Implications for US Strategy and Coalition Warfare.* NDU 1999 Topical Symposium, 16-17 Nov 99, (Washington DC: NDU, 1999), p. 58.

[17] Whitney, Craig R. "NATO Generals and Civilians Clash Over Bombing TV." *New York Times*, 9 April 1999, p. 8.

[18] If these links had been attacked, some Serbs might still be able to access the Internet using satellite telephones. However, this would have still resulted in extremely limited ability to send information out of Yugoslavia. Kahney, Leander. "Yugoslav Net at the Brink," *Wired News,* 26 Mar 1999. Internet. On line, 26 November 1999. Available from www.wired.com/news/politics/0,1283,18767,00.html.

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[23] Stephens, pp. 22-23.

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