

Tragic choices in Kosovo: Milosevic as hostage taker

From the Editors in the [April 14, 1999](#) issue

NATO gambles that it can stop the Serbs without causing a bloodbath in Kosovo." That statement, shouted from the cover of *U.S. News & World Report*, now seems to prompt an obvious response: The "gamble" was supreme folly, and NATO has on its hands the blood of butchered ethnic Albanian Kosovars and Serbs killed in bombing raids, as well as the misery of hundreds of thousands of refugees who have been ruthlessly expelled from their homes.

That, at least, is how many within our country's intellectual class, including church leaders, parse moral responsibility in the latest Balkan crisis. They're wrong.

The Kosovo catastrophe resembles nothing so much as a hostage crisis in which the lives of relatively helpless people are manipulated for the gain of a powerful assailant. For anyone concerned about the well-being of hostages who are in acute danger, the alternatives are agonizing: do nothing, and watch while body after body is thrown to the pavement; negotiate, even as the bodies continue to mount up, perhaps at an increasing tempo; take action to stop the carnage and risk getting everyone killed. There is no easy choice here, and no pundit should suggest otherwise. Nor should the assignment of primary responsibility for what happens be shifted from the assailant to the rescuer.

Since 1989 Slobodan Milosovic, under the aegis of sovereignty, has savagely manipulated Kosovar Albanians for his own political purposes. When he decided his image needed a makeover from communist functionary to nationalist hero, he manufactured the specter of an Islamic threat to Serbia from the Kosovar "Turks." When he had lost wars in Slovenia, Croatia and Bosnia, along with his trumpeted ambitions for a Greater Serbia, and his country's citizens were becoming increasingly dissatisfied with the economic chaos of their daily lives, he stirred the Kosovo pot once again.

For some ten years Milosovic waged a campaign of attrition in Kosovo, a campaign which became a military and paramilitary onslaught in the weeks prior to the NATO attacks. His genocidal intentions should have been evident to anyone who cared to look closely. Anyone who still harbors doubts about those intentions--anyone who cannot remember Srebrenica--only needs to scan the borders of Macedonia and Albania, and listen to the horror stories told by those expelled by Milosovic's forces.

The Milosovic regime hardly settled on its policy of genocide overnight, after NATO bombs fell on Serbian soil. The bombs did, however, afford Milosovic a strategic opportunity to pursue that policy openly in Kosovo--which he seized without hesitation. But it is Milosovic and his forces who are murdering Kosovars, driving them from their homes and torching their towns, not NATO.

To be sure, NATO can be vigorously criticized for its manner of negotiation and intervention. Paul Mojzes points out some of its many failings in his article in this issue. If anything, NATO is most guilty of underestimating the viciousness of the Milosovic regime. But the one who at least attempts a rescue of the imperiled should not be accused of the misdeeds of the assailant.

The pressing question now, however, is how to stop the carnage. Again, there is no easy answer. To concede to Milosovic is to concede to genocide. To press on with the battle, perhaps with ground troops, perhaps to the point of securing Kosovo's independence from Serbia, is minimally to place more lives in harm's way. The choice may seem clear at pundit central, but, as with the choice to intervene in Kosovo, for most persons of conscience this is a decision bathed in unavoidably tragic consequences.

Some of the most honest and profound words spoken during these recent weeks of unmitigated sorrow in the Balkans came from the Orthodox Church of Albania--a small group of Christians in an overwhelmingly Muslim country. "We wholeheartedly participate in the pain of those who are suffering because of injustice and violence due to the crisis in Kosovo," the church said in a March 29 statement. "We are not in a position to make eloquent speeches or easy statements in this extremely difficult situation. But interceding daily 'for those who love and hate us,' we humbly pray to the God of truth and love to perform his miracle so that peace and justice prevail over the troubled area."