

One year after Operation Allied Force, some strange notions have taken root.

Nine Myths About Kosovo

By Rebecca Grant

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VICTORY through airpower was a seductive slogan in the US around the time of World War II, but this is not the time to re-embrace that myth." Thus warned a *Los Angeles Times* editorial in June 1999, just as Operation Allied Force was ending.

Actually, we've witnessed the emergence of a new and different crop of myths—numerous untruths and half-truths which have clouded the role of aerospace power and the outcome of the air campaign. Over the past year, doubters have made many claims about what NATO's airmen did and did not do. They've made it look as though the operation was more failure than success.

It is fashionable now to claim that allied airmen did not hit Yugoslav tanks or artillery, that it took a Kosovo Liberation Army ground offensive to push Slobodan Milosevic's Serb army forces out of hiding, that airmen shied away from operating at low altitude for reasons of personal safety, and that pilots mostly hit decoys instead of real targets. In extreme cases, doubters have said that the air war was just too immaculate and broke the rules of "just war."

Operation Allied Force was a hard-won success for NATO. Diplomacy and determination played their roles in resolving the Kosovo crisis, and, even now, Kosovo's long-term fate remains unclear. However, as the top



USAF photo by SRA Jeffrey Allen

"The past year has seen the operational lessons of Kosovo become encrusted with old myths about airpower and warfare. Each myth touches on deeper questions about strategy and military force and reflects pre-existing beliefs and doctrines." An Air Force F-16 at Aviano AB, Italy, just before an April 4, 1999, mission.

NATO commander, US Army Gen. Wesley K. Clark, told Congress, the one indispensable condition for victory was the success of the air campaign.

Unfortunately, the past year has seen the operational lessons of Kosovo become encrusted with old myths about airpower and warfare. Each myth touches on deeper questions about strategy and military force and reflects pre-existing beliefs and doctrines. Each myth also represents a potential stumbling block in consider-

ing how to allocate national resources and lay plans for maintaining national security in the future.

Myths often contain grains of truth, but the myths about aerospace power and Allied Force threaten to distort the findings from this unusual campaign. If these myths were to be credited, one would have to conclude that aerospace power is nothing more than a flashy, unreliable tool of military force. No leader would long rely on such a force to protect national interests.

Myth 1: Kosovo proves that the “halt phase” strategy is a non-starter.

Since the mid-1990s, defense plans have called for the air component to rapidly halt invading enemy ground forces in a regional conflict. Yugoslav regular military and special police forces had been engaged in fighting with the Kosovo Liberation Army for a year before the start of Allied Force, making it too late to prevent an “invasion.” However, in March 1999, another contingent of Yugoslav army forces massed and began Operation Horseshoe, Milosevic’s attempt to drive the ethnic Albanian population out of Kosovo.

At first glance, Operation Horseshoe seemed to be a chance to prove

or disprove the halt phase theory. One such opinion came from the commandant of the US Army War College, Maj. Gen. Robert H. Scales Jr. He concluded, “The Serbian dash into Kosovo demonstrates the particular futility of attempting to pre-empt an enemy force using airpower alone.” Scales went on to suggest that land forces made better tools for strategic pre-emption.

The mythmakers might believe that the halt phase failed, but the facts were that, for political reasons, there was no opportunity for NATO airpower to halt or reverse the drive of the Yugoslav army. Long-standing intentions called for

a few days of bombing on a limited set of targets. From the operational perspective, it was too late for a halt phase operation. With refugees, the Kosovo Liberation Army, and Yugoslav forces colliding across Kosovo, the situation had long since become a morass of close combat without a traditional front line. NATO did not have enough forces in theater to provide 24-hour coverage of Yugoslav troops on the move. Attacks on mobile ground targets did not begin until the second week of April. NATO’s desire for a limited air campaign took the halt phase strike option off the table before it could even be considered.

Myth 2: Air attacks on fielded forces ultimately were of no importance to the outcome of the war.

This is a myth of classical proportions, for it reaches back as far as the earliest employment of airpower in World War I. The stalemate on the Western Front led to a desire to attack the arms-producing industries that fed the war and to target the morale of the enemy’s nation. Yet even in 1918, airpower also proved its value in strikes against enemy airpower, army troops, command posts, lines of communication, and rear-area supplies.

In every conflict since, theater commanders have tasked air to attack fielded forces, from World War II to Korea and Vietnam. In Operation Desert Storm, ground order of battle targets made up 65 percent of the targets in the air tasking order of Central Air Forces. These included 33,560 of 51,146 total targets.

The rule of thumb is that Commanders in Chief always want to target adversary ground forces that are active in the battle area. In Kosovo, the Yugoslav ground forces were burning houses and driving out refugees, so the pressure to target them came from all sides. Ultimately, one of NATO’s major goals was to inflict damage on the Yugoslav army and degrade its ability to threaten Kosovo’s population. Targets like military barracks, ammunition dumps, and lines of com-



DoD photo

“One of NATO’s major goals was to inflict damage on the Yugoslav army. Targets like military barracks, ammunition dumps, and lines of communication also made up a significant fraction of fixed targets. It is just a myth to claim that these attacks were of no importance.” A bombed-out storage depot used by Yugoslav forces.

munication also made up a significant fraction of the fixed targets.

The case can be made that NATO should have prepared earlier to sustain air attacks on Yugoslav army forces, but it is just a myth to claim that these attacks were of no importance. Indeed, the serious point that emerges from this myth is that command of aerospace power includes

identifying ground force targets and that this is part of the joint forces air component commander’s job for the CINC, from Day 1. Responsibility lies with the air component, not just with the land component. In the end, it was the combination of pressure on the armed forces and attacks on major strategic targets that made the air war effective.

Myth 3: The Yugoslav army got away unscathed.

Within days of Milosevic's capitulation, Serbian generals told Western newspapers their army had lost only 13 tanks to NATO airmen. *The Sunday Times of London* reported that the 11-week NATO bombing campaign did almost no damage to Serb fielded forces in Kosovo. Many were eager to demonstrate that the claims of aerospace power were exaggerated.

Serb propaganda played directly into a powerful myth that aircraft are not good at destroying mobile ground targets. Behind that myth is the premise that it takes ground forces to achieve decisive results against enemy armies and that air plays only a supporting role, scoring an occasional lucky hit or two, but without the weight and mass central to a campaign of maneuver and fires.

Clark ordered a survey of the evidence of what the air war had done to Milosevic's army. A team of experts reviewed the remaining battlefield evidence, overhead imagery, pilot

mission reports, gun camera video, and all other sources in what must surely have been the most thorough review of data in the history of warfare. To count as a validated "hit," the report had to be confirmed by two or more sources. Validated hits on targets within two kilometers of each other were counted as a single hit. Despite the stringent criteria, Clark's team found that NATO airmen tallied 974 validated hits on tanks, Armored Personnel Carriers, artillery pieces, and trucks.

Raw numbers aside, the percentages also made clear the Yugoslav army sustained heavy damage. Official data show that the Yugoslav army in Kosovo lost 26 percent of its tanks, 34 percent of its APCs, and 47 percent of the artillery to the air campaign. In Desert Storm, the Iraqi army lost 41 percent of its tanks to airmen, 32 percent of its APCs, and 47 percent of its artillery pieces, according to DoD's official report.

The aggregate numbers for Desert

Storm were higher, but, by percentage, airmen of Allied Force inflicted significant damage on the Yugoslav army. In addition, military facilities such as barracks and ammunition depots comprised about a quarter of the fixed or strategic target list.

Clark made these findings public in September 1999. He sent teams to NATO capitals to brief the assessment to allied leaders. Still, in December 1999, *The Washington Post* reported that airmen "did not manage to destroy a large part of the Yugoslav army in Kosovo."

Asserting that the Yugoslav army got away unscathed simply doesn't square with the evidence. During the Cold War, planners believed a division that lost 25 to 30 percent of its equipment and forces would not be effective in combat. By these standards, the Yugoslav army suffered significant attrition. More important, its forces were hunkered down and not in positions to mass for maneuver under the cover of allied aircraft.

Myth 4: Decoys were a major problem.

Doubts about what NATO airmen did to the Yugoslav army echoed in another myth: that NATO airmen hit a significant number of decoys instead of real targets. Here, again, Serbian spokesmen bragged about their use of decoys and pictures of two even made it into the Pentagon's quick-look assessment of Allied Force.

Dealing with decoys is old news. By World War II, belligerent nations were masters of the art of decoys as they attempted to foil aerial reconnaissance and bombardiers. In Seattle, Boeing had a B-17 bomber plant covered with burlap houses and chicken-wire lawns to simulate a housing complex. Picking out decoys became a fine art for photo interpreters. In the Pacific, the Japanese used decoy techniques to camouflage trains and mobile anti-aircraft gun emplacements. Decades later, decoy Surface-to-Air Missile sites became a specialty of the North Vietnamese.



"In short, the myth that decoys mattered reveals another face of doubt about aerospace power." A Yugoslav MiG-29 fighter shot down by NATO forces.

In short, the myth that decoys mattered reveals another face of doubt about aerospace power. Scales asserted that these dummies "proved effective at spoofing aerial observers

and image interpreters." Yet Clark's survey found that in Allied Force, NATO airmen hit just 25 decoys—an insignificant percentage of the 974 validated hits.

Myth 5: The KLA offensive had a major impact.

Unlike the previous two myths, this myth assumes that NATO airmen did have an impact—but that it took a surrogate ground force, the Kosovo Liberation Army, to make the air campaign a success. Retired Army Lt. Gen. Theodore G. Stroup Jr., writing in *Army Magazine*, distilled the view: “Milosevic lost his nerve when ground power—in the form of the Kosovar offensive and the capability of Task Force Hawk to take advantage of the offensive to illuminate the battlefield with its intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance assets—first unlocked the full capability of airpower.” The myth, therefore, is that it takes ground power to make aerospace power effective.

This myth is a complex one. During the last phases of the Cold War in the 1980s, the Army and Air Force joined hands in what the Army named AirLand Battle Doctrine. NATO planning centered on defense against a large Soviet and Warsaw Pact ground force that would initiate the war. The whole effort hinged on using airpower to make up the shortfall in ground fires in both deep battle, where only aircraft could reach, and in close battle, where the line had to be held. Classic joint doctrine still focuses on how the air and land components of the joint force work together to identify, prioritize, and attack targets.

In addition, the Army is the undisputed master of intelligence preparation of the battlefield. That is the art and science of finding the targets in the ground order of battle. Only the Army mans and trains forces for this intricate task. The surest way to pick out key enemy ground force targets is to rely on an experienced Army cell that uses information from counterbattery radars, airborne systems, like Guardrail, and fused Air Force and Navy data to compile a detailed picture of the opposing ground force.

NATO began Allied Force with just a broad sketch of the deployed Yugoslav ground order of battle. When Milosevic’s forces surged through Kosovo, the picture changed hour by hour. While the alliance surged to deploy more aircraft to the theater

and begin intensive operations against ground forces, piecing together the ground order of battle also became a major task. By mid-May, NATO had three times more strike aircraft than it had at the outset, and thus it had a stronger ability to target ground forces. Army analysts at the Combined Air Operations Center, located at Vicenza, Italy, made a major contribution to this effort.

Over the months, as analysts tried to sort out what had happened and why, they developed a view that KLA operations had, in effect, replicated AirLand Battle and had drawn the Serbs out of hiding. While this is a powerful doctrinal credo for the US military, there is little evidence to support this conclusion.

First, the KLA primarily used guerrilla tactics in its ongoing confrontations with the Yugoslav army forces and special military police. According to *Kosovapress*, a quasi-official Kosovo Albanian news agency which published running accounts of KLA activity, the KLA kept up operations in several areas across Kosovo, particularly where enclaves of ethnic Albanian refugees remained. Typical of KLA actions was an early May encounter; a KLA commando unit reported it had skirmished with Serb forces near Junik, on the Albanian border. The KLA claimed it had killed at least seven Serb soldiers and reported several cross-border shellings from Serb artillery. Another report, chronicling actions in the south near the border with Macedonia, claimed destruction of a Serb police “Passat” car and its passengers.

The principal KLA offensive was launched May 26, 1999. According to Operative Communique No. 79 from Hq. General Staff of the KLA: “The KLA has organized and ordered an operation code named ‘Arrow’ to begin along the political boundaries of Albania with the specific goal of eliminating Serb units in and around the Albanian border.” Operation Arrow was limited to one sector, and even so, it was not a success. A US intelligence official, in fact, claimed the KLA was “creamed.” The KLA forces came under heavy Serb artillery fire, and while some

areas changed hands, no major gains were claimed by the KLA. The KLA itself kept publicity to a minimum. Despite that, some concluded that this offensive must have been what made Allied Force effective. *USA Today*, for example, maintained, “Capitulation came only after the KLA belatedly shooed the Serb troops out of hiding and into the deadly sights of NATO planes.”

If that were true, one could expect the review of hits scored against ground mobile targets to show a strong correlation with KLA activities and an upswing in vehicles struck. However, the after-action assessments showed no strong correlation. For example, the highest number of kills on military vehicles came on May 13, nearly two weeks before Operation Arrow. Tank hits peaked at seven on May 30, APCs at 11 on June 8, and mortars at 13 on June 3. Hits on artillery pieces crested at 34 on June 1, but the second-highest count for a single day was 29 on May 27.

Across the five categories, the only suggestion of a correlation comes in hits on artillery, but the results are not conclusive. Hits on artillery rose to 15 on May 25, 12 the next day, and 29 on May 27, dropping off to 13 on May 28 and just three on May 29. The best three-day period for hits on artillery came long after Operation Arrow, between June 6 and June 8, when NATO claimed a total of 61 validated hits.

Many factors contributed to the hit rates. After May 13, better weather and more forces in theater allowed allied airmen to rack up more than 65 percent of the total hits. From May 25 onward, a steady period of good weather helped; they claimed 45 percent of total hits in the last 16 days of the campaign. The KLA launched attacks along the Albanian border, but NATO registered hits all across Kosovo.

Without substantial evidence of coordination, the notion that the KLA offensive is what made NATO’s air campaign effective must be treated as a myth. It is possible for airmen to find and hit targets without army forces in place.

Myth 6: Threat of a ground invasion worked.

This myth suggests that Milosevic folded his cards not because of 78 days of air attacks but as a result of speculation in the press about a forthcoming ground offensive. “To the extent there was victory, it became possible because the Administration did escalate its public wrestling with the idea of possible ground intervention,” concluded Michael E. O’Hanlon of the Brookings Institution. This myth is the final echo of the assumption that a joint force is only effective when there are boots on the ground.

In reality, NATO was never close to preparing for a ground invasion. Albania welcomed ground forces, but Macedonia refused to let its territory be used to stage such an attack across international borders. Few NATO allies supported the idea, and opinion in the US Congress was against it. A ground campaign “would have meant 150,000 to

200,000 troops, most of which would have come from us,” as Secretary of Defense William S. Cohen later said. “It became very clear to me that it was going to be a very hard sell, if not impossible, to persuade the American people.”

Politics was not the only factor constraining the NATO ground option. It also made good operational sense to let the air campaign have the time it needed to apply pressure. Clearly, that was the view of Army Gen. Henry H. Shelton, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Shelton, responding to a reporter’s question just after Belgrade threw in the towel, explained his view of the situation.

Said Shelton: “I think all of us understand that if the decision had been made to send in ground troops, we still would have had an air campaign, and that air campaign would have lasted probably at least as long

as this one has lasted, if not longer. ... You wouldn’t send in your ground troops until you’d started to pound the capabilities” Milosevic had in Kosovo.

The Department of Defense’s quick-look report on the war said, “US and allied leaders decided that execution of a phased air operation was the best option for achieving our goals.”

Whisperings about ground forces took a back seat to NATO’s main agenda: Make the air campaign work. The Western alliance’s 50th anniversary summit in April focused on cementing allied agreement to intensify and stick with the air campaign. Leaders of the alliance were determined to prevail and eventually said they would not take any option off the table. However, it was the NATO air campaign that was the prime tool of military action.

Myth 7: Operation Allied Force validated joint doctrine.

Myth No. 7 took shape as bland and harmless praise for jointness. For example, the DoD report described Allied Force as “a real-world laboratory for gaining insights into the capabilities envisioned in Joint Vision 2010” and remarked on how “we successfully integrated air, land, and sea operations throughout the conflict.”

The attempt to read and critique Allied Force as an air–land–sea operation does not comport with common sense. There are very few combat lessons here for traditional combined

operations. The “land operations,” presumably the deployment of the AH-64 Apache attack helicopters to Albania, never resulted in combat operations. The maritime force under the US Navy’s Sixth Fleet was a major player, but its efforts comprised Tomahawk Land Attack Missile strikes and generation of carrier air wing sorties as part of the allied air campaign.

Joint doctrine is a guide for commanders, not a ready-made analytical framework for assessing campaigns. With its emphasis on combined opera-

tions, joint doctrine naturally speaks best to how the components work together. The components do not get an equal share of the action in every campaign. In fact, the modern definition of jointness should be that the components do not have to be equally balanced to achieve results.

Operation Just Cause, the invasion of Panama in 1989, had more lessons about land force and airborne operations. Operation Allied Force was an aerospace campaign, and its major lessons lie with aerospace doctrine, not validation of a vision.

Myth 8: No one flew lower than 15,000 feet.

This myth accuses the allies of overprotecting the airmen at the expense of operational results.

The first problem with this myth is the implication that only low-altitude attacks get results. It is true that the allies did not want to lose pilots for fear of shattering the political cohesion backing the campaign. Initial restrictions reflected a desire to hold the alliance—and the air campaign—together by minimizing risks

to pilots. Low-altitude tactics had proved disastrous in the early stages of Desert Storm, and, after that, most strikes were carried out from medium altitude. During Allied Force, the initial guidelines for a 15,000-foot “floor” were put in place to reduce the risks from shoulder-fired SAMs and anti-aircraft guns.

When target identification became a problem, USAF Lt. Gen. Michael C. Short, the allied air

component commander, worked with the wing at Aviano AB, Italy, and the restrictions were soon changed. For strikes in Kosovo, forward air controllers flew as low as 5,000 feet and strike aircraft could attack from as low as 8,000 feet, at the pilot’s discretion, when necessary. Systems like the stabilized binoculars on the A-10 made very-low-altitude work unnecessary.

Myth 9: "Just war" demands that airmen shed their own blood.

Shortly after the end of the war, retired Marine Corps Lt. Gen. Bernard E. Trainor wrote that "high-tech weaponry permitted pilots to fly high out of harm's way while visiting destruction below." Trainor added, "Another troubling and similar aspect of the so-called 'immaculate' air campaign is the ability to drive an enemy to his knees without shedding a drop of the bomber's blood."

Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.), the former Presidential candidate, called the conduct of Allied Force "the most obscene chapter in recent American history" as US military forces "killed innocent civilians because they were dropping bombs from such ... high altitude."

Do pilots have to die to make it a just war? According to various myth-makers, the answer is Yes. This myth assumes that the aircrews in Allied Force took no risks and that war is not legitimate at all unless soldiers put themselves in peril, marching shoulder to shoulder to close with the enemy.

The first thing that needs to be said is that Allied Force was not an air show. It was real and dangerous combat. One analysis found that air-



USAF photo by TSgt. Blake R. Borsic

"Allied Force was not an air show. It was real and dangerous combat. One analysis found that aircrews were three times more likely to have been targeted and attacked by Surface-to-Air Missiles than was the case in Desert Storm." USAF Capt. David Easterling in an A-10 bound for combat.

crews were three times more likely to have been targeted and attacked by SAMs than was the case in Desert Storm. The Serbian air defenses resorted to canny tactics to keep alive both themselves and their chances of shooting down a NATO warplane.

More important, the validity of military action rests on principles: in this case, a reluctant decision by NATO to use force to stop Milosevic's ethnic cleansing of Kosovo. Bloodshed, or the lack thereof, is not the measure of justice in war.

These nine myths touch something much deeper than yesterday's news. Kosovo myths flourish because aerospace power still is not accepted as a leading tool in military campaigns. Myths about the centrality of ground forces and exaggerated claims about aerospace shortcomings and failures all have in common an important element: the belief that aerospace power on its own can achieve only limited results. Those who keep looking for evidence to fit the maneuver-firepower framework blind themselves to the new patterns formed by the constant use of aerospace power in a variety of joint operations.

The defense debate, rather than fo-

cus on a search for vindications of combined arms doctrine and dwelling on decades-old superstitions, should center on how to make aerospace power more effective. The air arm has long been an indispensable tool for joint operations and a primary weapon for shaping theater-level strategy. Over the last decade, joint and allied airpower formed the backbone of major offensive operations, from Desert Storm in 1991 to Deliberate Force in Bosnia in 1995 and to Allied Force in 1999. Each campaign had its political complexities, but the utility of aerospace power stood out every time.

Britain's John Keegan, perhaps the world's leading historian of military affairs, saw Allied Force as the end of the road for many airpower myths and

recanted his own longtime skepticism about airpower. "After this war, ... there will be no grounds for debate or dispute," he said. "Aircraft and pilotless weapons have been the only weapons employed. The outcome is therefore a victory for airpower and airpower alone."

Operation Allied Force was in many respects a unique and difficult campaign. But above all else it showed that aerospace power has become a tool of choice, not only for joint operations, but for operations with allies. The Kosovo crisis holds many lessons relevant to future defense planning and to programs for improving aerospace power. With that work ahead, it is time to leave the myths behind. ■

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