

Cynical Myths and US Military Crusades in the Balkans

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Misleading propaganda frequently plays a significant role in modern warfare, especially in democratic countries where the need to generate public support for a military venture is crucial.¹ In retrospect, the material often seems laughably crude. Most people today justifiably snicker at the World War I British, French, and later, American propaganda that portrayed Germans as bloodthirsty Huns who bayoneted babies and raped nuns. Even some of the more sophisticated efforts in later wars were simplistic and misleading. Contrary to Washington's portrayal, Ho Chi Minh was primarily a Vietnamese nationalist, not a Soviet puppet trying to undermine "free world" regimes (most of whom were far from that ideal) throughout Southeast Asia.

The dominant myths surrounding US-led military interventions since the fall of the Berlin Wall are no more accurate or honest. Some examples of misleading spin or outright falsehoods are well known, especially the Bush administration's campaign to convince the American people and the international community that Saddam Hussein's regime possessed a sizable arsenal of weapons of mass destruction and was on the verge of achieving a nuclear weapons capability. Other fallacious myths that boosted public support for war efforts still circulate as though they were true. An example from the 1990–1 Persian Gulf War was the account that a tearful young girl, Nayirah, gave to a congressional committee about how invading Iraqi troops in Kuwait pulled babies from hospital incubators and watched them die on the

1. John J. Mearsheimer, *Why Leaders Lie: The Truth about Lying in International Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 6–7, 55–60.

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cold floor. The witness was actually the fifteen-year-old daughter of the exiled Kuwaiti ambassador, a point that was never disclosed to the committee or the media covering the hearings, and her story has since been totally debunked.² But it had served its purpose. Nayirah's account became the most potent piece of evidence that Saddam was the moral equivalent of Adolf Hitler, and several members of Congress cited that incubator incident as a major reason why they supported military action against Iraq.

Nowhere was the role of misleading propaganda and the creation of false history more pervasive and corrosive than in the Balkan wars of the 1990s. And unlike the Bush administration's now discredited accounts of the lead-up to the Iraq war, the Balkan myths appear to be as prevalent today as when they were first created. That situation is unfortunate on two counts. First, it inhibits the formulation of intelligent, realistic, and equitable policies regarding current Balkan issues. Second, the success of such a campaign of disinformation creates the irresistible temptation for officials and policy lobbies to try the same techniques during future international crises.

The corrosive myth-making regarding the breakup of Yugoslavia began early and continued throughout the 1990s. It operated on both a macro and a micro level, with a distinct target—the Serbs. At the macro level, US and European officials, the Western news media, ethnic lobbies, and much of the foreign policy community spun a Manichean melodrama. In that melodrama, the Serbs in general, and Serbia's leader Slobodan Milosevic in particular, were almost entirely responsible for the breakup of Yugoslavia and for the violence that followed, especially in the secessionist states of Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. The Serbs became the arch villains, while Croats and Bosnian Muslims became the innocent victims. (That same pattern would occur later in the decade with the insurgency in Serbia's restive, largely Albanian Muslim province of Kosovo.)

Soon, the terms "aggression" and "genocide" were tossed about in a disturbingly casual fashion with respect to the conduct of Serbian military forces in both Croatia and Bosnia. It became fashionable to portray the fighting in those two countries not as civil wars but as premeditated aggression by the

2. John R. MacArthur, *Second Front: Censorship and Propaganda in the Gulf War* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1992), 47–77.

government in Belgrade using the largely Serbian Yugoslav national army. Such terminology persisted even as Yugoslavia fragmented and the notion of a national army was little more than a historical memory. The characterization minimized, if not ignored, the large role played by ethnic militias comprising inhabitants in the newly minted states of Croatia and Bosnia.

Beyond the mischaracterization of the fighting as external aggression, it was not long before pundits compared Milosevic to modern history's most notorious practitioner of genocide, Hitler, and the conduct of Serbian military forces in Bosnia to Nazi Germany's rampages.

With only slightly greater subtlety, Clinton administration officials also equated Milosevic personally, and Serbian conduct in general, with Hitler's beastly actions. In her memoirs, United Nations ambassador and later secretary of state Madeleine Albright concedes that the horror of the Holocaust was not repeated in the conflict that raged in Bosnia during the early 1990s, but she argues that "there were parallels." High on that list were "the campaigns of brutality launched by Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic." According to Albright, Milosevic's "cruelty was manifested in his manipulative actions, which spurred Serb forces to employ terror, rape, and indiscriminate violence against his Balkan foes."³

Inflated casualty statistics became the staple of government statements and media accounts to provide evidence for the "villainous Serbs" thesis. To this day, many accounts of the Bosnian conflict cite the figure of two hundred fifty thousand (or sometimes even three hundred thousand) fatalities — with the implication that the vast majority of victims were Muslims. Yet analyses by groups as diverse as the International Committee of the Red Cross, the BBC, and the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute have all concluded that the number of fatalities was much lower. (The BBC investigation, for example, put the figure at just over ninety-seven thousand).⁴ It is important to note the organizations making those calculations had no stake in the struggle and exhibited no evidence of bias or a hidden agenda. Conversely, the principal source for the two hundred fifty thousand figure was the Muslim-controlled Bosnian government in Sarajevo, which had an obvi-

3. Madeleine Albright, *Madame Secretary: A Memoir* (New York: Miramax Books, 2003), 177–8.

4. "Bosnia War Dead Figure Announced," BBC, 21 June 2007, news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/6228152.stm.

ous incentive to inflate the number. Yet both at the time and ever since, the United States and European Union governments contend that two hundred fifty thousand people (usually portrayed as innocent civilians) died in the conflict, as though that point cannot be disputed.

The biggest blow to the credibility of the larger figure came in January 2010, when the Office of the Prosecutor (OTP), International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY)—an organization sometimes accused of harboring an anti-Serb bias—completed its comprehensive assessment of the number of victims. That study concluded that the total number of deaths was 104,732, and the breakdown of that total into ethnic categories underscored just how inaccurate and misleading were the official accounts on which the North Atlantic Treaty Organization governments based their policies. The estimated number of victims was as follows: Muslims, 68,101; Croats, 8,858; Serbs, 22,779; and others, 4,995.⁵ Although the OTP study did not try to differentiate between civilian and military casualties within ethnic groups, it did provide such an overall breakdown. That portion of the analysis concluded that 40.2 percent of victims were civilians and 59.8 percent were military fighters, indicating that the total number of Muslim civilians killed in the Bosnian conflict was only about 27,000. While the deaths of innocents are tragic in any setting, that number is a far cry from the inflammatory figure of more than a quarter of a million. And it is not even remotely comparable to the Holocaust.

It is not just an issue of numerical accuracy. One of the principal arguments that the fighting in Bosnia constituted genocide was the extent of fatalities—especially civilian fatalities. The lower figures contained in the OTP report undermine that argument. Such a level of bloodshed is hardly surprising in a war that went on for more than three years. Indeed, there were conflicts taking place elsewhere in the world at the same time, most notably in Sierra Leone, in which casualties were far greater. Yet there was no concerted campaign to portray those episodes as genocide demanding US-led military intervention.⁶ The inflated figure for the Bosnian war served a political purpose. It was part of a propaganda campaign to build up pressure for

5. International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia, Office of the Prosecutor, “Bosnia and Herzegovina: Death Toll,” The Hague, January 2010, www.icty.org/sid/10591.

6. Doug Bandow, “NATO’s Hypocritical Humanitarianism,” in *NATO’s Empty Victory: A Postmortem on the Balkan War*, ed. Ted Galen Carpenter (Washington, DC: Cato Institute, 2000), 31–47.

the United States and its NATO allies to intervene on behalf of the Muslim faction in Bosnia and to justify that intervention in retrospect.

The genocide theme worked so well with regard to the Bosnian war that proponents of intervention in Kosovo in 1998 and early 1999 on behalf of Albanian separatists were able to use it in a situation with far fewer casualties. Despite cries of genocide in the Western media, and repeated claims that as many as ten thousand Albanian Kosovars had been killed, it appears that only a little more than two thousand people perished in the nearly two years of fighting between Serbian forces and Kosovar insurgents. Carla Del Ponte, the chief prosecutor for the ICTY — and no friend of Serbia — told the UN Security Council that investigators “had found 2,108 bodies” in some 195 sites.⁷ And that more modest total included Serbian victims, both military and civilian. The actual number of Albanian noncombatants who died was probably under one thousand. If that level of violence constitutes genocide, virtually any conflict between two or more groups of different races, religions, or ethnic backgrounds qualifies. If the term is used so promiscuously, though, it debases the horror of true cases of genocide, as in Europe during the Nazi era, Cambodia under Pol Pot, and the slaughter in Rwanda.

But those who sought NATO military intervention to achieve Kosovo’s forced separation from Serbia did not shy away from exploiting such a toxic term, and they repeatedly blurred the concepts of genocide and ethnic cleansing. When challenged later about the modest casualty total, they typically argue that the intervention prevented a genocide that the Milosevic government intended to carry out and that probably would have occurred absent Western intervention. The alleged “intention” factor played an important role in US policy making. Albright recalled that she “laid down a marker” in 1998—little more than two years after the Dayton Accords ended the fighting in Bosnia: “We are not going to stand by and watch the Serbian authorities do in Kosovo what they can no longer get away with in Bosnia.”⁸

However, no credible evidence has emerged that Belgrade had even a plan for comprehensive ethnic cleansing, much less genocide. Indeed, what ethnic cleansing did take place occurred mostly after NATO launched massive air

7. Quoted in George Kenney, “Kosovo: On Means and Ends,” *Nation*, 27 December 1999.

8. Albright, 381.

strikes on Serbia. But the false image was extremely potent and served the objectives of those who favored Western intervention for the purpose of creating an independent Kosovo.

A variety of macro and micro incidents were used to buttress the case that what occurred in Bosnia was bloody ethnic cleansing at best and outright genocide at worst. Sometimes an allegation had a kernel of truth. The mass graves uncovered following the battle at Srebrenica certainly constituted evidence of a wartime atrocity at the hands of Bosnian-Serb forces. Although even in that case, the actual number of casualties, much less how many of the victims were Muslim fighters and how many were civilian noncombatants, may never be known with clarity.

Other episodes used to support the genocide narrative amounted to gross distortions or outright fiction. One of the more famous incidents was the searing television image of an emaciated prisoner, Fikret Alic, ribs showing, looking out at reporters through strands of barbed wires in what the media identified as a Serb-run detention camp. That image was quickly exploited to evoke the historical memory of abused prisoners in Nazi concentration camps. The reality involving the Bosnian prisoner and other inhabitants of the camp was less shocking and rather peculiar. Indeed, the “concentration camp” was apparently little more than an assembly center for civilians who wished to get out of the way of the fighting whenever it flared. Far from being prisoners behind barbed wire, they were apparently free to come from and go back to nearby villages.

But it wasn’t merely that reporters got the story wrong. Far more troubling were the indications that they manipulated camera angles and shaded their accounts to convey a deliberately misleading impression.⁹ More than a year later, the distorted account was still pervasive, helping to drive the narrative about Bosnia and strengthen the case for Western military intervention. A prime example of that continuing effect was a lengthy story by Steve Coll in the *Washington Post Magazine*, with the evocative title “In the Shadow of the Holocaust.”¹⁰

9. Peter Brock, *Media Cleansing: Dirty Reporting, Journalism and Tragedy in Yugoslavia* (Los Angeles: GM Press, 2005), 246–56.

10. Steve Coll, “In the Shadow of the Holocaust,” *Washington Post*, 24 September 1994.

Another flagrant distortion was the accepted account of the Markale marketplace massacre in Sarajevo in February 1994. The Bosnian government immediately accused Serbian secessionist forces of responsibility, and Western governments and news outlets embraced that version with little or no skepticism. Yet evidence soon emerged that the Muslim government probably shelled the market, either inadvertently or as part of a deliberate effort to generate greater outside hostility toward the Bosnian-Serb cause and secure NATO military intervention. Yet even when it became apparent that the Serbs probably were not responsible for the atrocity, Western opinion leaders continued to circulate the original, highly suspect version.¹¹

Indeed, that version has never truly gone away; it remains part of the distorted narrative of the Balkan wars. The same is true of the second act of mass bloodshed in the same marketplace in August 1995. Bill Clinton blithely states in his memoirs that “Bosnian Serbs lobbed a mortar shell into the heart of Sarajevo, killing thirty-eight people.”¹² But the evidence regarding responsibility for that explosion is at least as murky as the circumstances surrounding the earlier episode. Since the immediate impact was NATO’s decision to launch three days of incessant air strikes against Bosnian-Serb positions, it would appear that the Muslim-led government had a more plausible motive than did the Serbs. But neither US officials nor most journalists were inclined to ask hard questions.

A similar situation occurred with respect to Kosovo. The notion that there were numerous mass graves in Kosovo where Milosevic’s forces buried thousands of innocent victims became a part of Western lore about that conflict. But the evidence for such extensive atrocities is midpoint between slim and nonexistent. Former State Department official George Kenney, at one time a strong proponent of Western military intervention in the Balkans, subsequently contributed to the debunking of those accounts. Kenney cites an address that Clinton administration national security adviser Sandy Berger delivered to the Council on Foreign Relations in which he mentions a purported mass grave in the village of Ljubenic, which supposedly contained “as many as 350 bodies.” Kenney noted that the Italian general in charge of

11. David Binder, “Anatomy of a Massacre,” *Foreign Policy*, no. 97 (Winter 1994–5).

12. Bill Clinton, *My Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004), 669.

the site had told the press several days earlier that the exhumation had been completed and that only seven bodies had been found. Kenney observed acidly, “All press mention of Ljubenic ceases after that point.”¹³

The fizzling of the Ljubenic genocide story was not an aberration. Kenney cited an *El Pais* news report about a broader blow to the charges of genocide in Kosovo: “Spanish forensic investigators sent to Kosovo had found no proof of genocide. The team, which had experience in Rwanda, had been told to expect to perform more than 2,000 autopsies in one of the areas worst hit by the fighting, but it found only 187 bodies to examine. No mass graves and, for the most part, no signs of torture.”¹⁴

If the news media had taken a more skeptical view of the genocide allegations from the beginning, instead of being a vehicle for hyping those allegations, US and NATO policy regarding Kosovo might have turned out differently. An example of how misleading media coverage and biased US policy reinforced each other during the Balkan wars is an account that Albright gives in her memoirs about her reaction to an especially graphic atrocity story in the *New York Times*. Recalling a meeting in the White House Situation Room on 30 September 1998, she describes her reaction:

On the table in front of us was a photograph from that morning’s *New York Times*. In the center of the photo was the image of a dead body, skeletal in appearance, mouth open, seeming to issue a last silent cry. The body was one of eighteen women, children, and elderly awaiting burial in the Kosovo town of Gornje Obrinje. Several days earlier, Serb police had found fifteen of the victims hiding in a gorge and murdered them. Three men, including a ninety-five-year-old paralytic, were burned to death in their homes. Another sixteen civilians were found shot or hacked to death in nearby villages. This was Milosevic’s answer to the United Nations and NATO.

How such an inflammatory account affects policy could not have been more apparent. Albright went on to write, “That morning, as I looked at the photo and read the accompanying story, I thought again of my vow not to allow a repeat of the carnage we had witnessed in Bosnia. There several

13. Kenney.

14. *Ibid.*

hundred thousand [*sic*] people had been killed. In Kosovo, the current toll was several hundred. For most, it was not too late, but we had to summon our resolve.”¹⁵ In short, the *New York Times* story reinforced her already strong inclination to confront the Serbian government with maximum pressure.

Exaggerations and outright falsehoods were not the only components of the mythology that built up around the Balkan wars. There also were key omissions in media coverage and government comments about the fighting whenever such information might contradict the prevailing narrative. One flagrant case was the lack of attention paid to the violent struggles between Muslim and Croatian forces in Bosnia. Some of the worst fighting—and accompanying atrocities—occurred on that leg of the triangular civil war.¹⁶ The extensive bloodshed, and the destruction of the historic bridge in the bitterly divided city of Mostar, was one example of that phase of the Bosnian war.

The intensity of Croat-Muslim fighting was not surprising. Most Croats were as determined as the Serbs to secede from the unstable multiethnic amalgam that was Bosnia. (Indeed, as the least numerous ethnic faction, the Croats probably had an even greater incentive than the Serbs to exit from a political entity where they were likely to have little power or influence.) They wanted the region in which they had the largest presence (Herzegovina) to merge with neighboring Croatia.

Yet coverage of that aspect of the fighting in US and European media outlets was meager, and Western officials rarely commented on it. One suspects that the underlying reason was that extensive Croat-Muslim violence did not fit into the narrative of Serbian brutality against Muslim victims. Journalist Peter Brock accurately describes that simplistic analytical prism as “only Muslim victims, only Serb perpetrators.”¹⁷

A subtle manifestation of that bias was evident in the use of favorable terminology for one group and disparaging terms for another. Another example of the underlying bias was selectivity in publishing shocking images. Nikolaos Stavrou’s early analysis of coverage in a major Eastern US newspaper illus-

15. Albright, 388.

16. For a solid historical account of the fighting, see Charles R. Shrader, *The Muslim-Croat Civil War in Central Bosnia: A Military History, 1992–1994* (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 2003.)

17. Brock, 59.

trated both points. For example, photographs published in that newspaper “showed a gaping omission: no Serbs were shown suffering or being killed, their churches destroyed or villages burned.”¹⁸ Indeed, the vast majority of photos showed only Muslim victims.

A glaring example of a double standard was the Western reaction to Operation Storm, the military offensive that the Croatian government launched in August 1995 against rebel Serbian forces in the Krajina region of Croatia. That operation ultimately led to the flight or expulsion of some two hundred thousand Serbian inhabitants—in some cases involving families that had lived in the region for centuries.

One would think that this action constituted ethnic cleansing at least as much as anything Serbian forces had done in Bosnia. The United States and its allies viewed matters somewhat more cynically. Washington supported Zagreb’s offensive, with President Clinton admitting that he “rooted” for the Croatian action. The reaction of NATO governments and the Western media was markedly different from their pervasive condemnation of the other episodes of ethnic cleansing. In his memoirs, Bill Clinton’s spin is that Operation Storm was the first serious military defeat that Serbian forces had suffered, and that “it could prove helpful in resolving the conflict” throughout the former Yugoslavia.¹⁹ He does not mention the unfortunate fate of Serbian civilians in the region.

Critical statements or news stories about Operation Storm were noticeable by their rarity. Indeed, Washington and its allies apparently assisted Croatia’s military plan, including by providing important intelligence data. Referring to Operation Storm and a similar subsequent offensive by Muslim and Croatian forces in Bosnia that sent secessionist Serbian units into retreat from northern portions of Bosnia, an anonymous State Department official contended that those actions were beneficial because “they cleaned up the map.”

According to the accepted mythology, only Serbs engaged in distasteful ethnic cleansing. Whenever other ethnic groups in the former Yugoslavia did so, it was merely self-defense or map cleaning. That distorted interpretation

18. Nikolaos A. Stavrou, “The Balkan Quagmire and the Western Response,” *Mediterranean Quarterly* 4, no. 1 (1993): 28.

19. Clinton, 667.

has not gone away. In April 2011, *Washington Times* columnist Jeffrey Kuhner portrayed Operation Storm in extremely sympathetic terms.²⁰ It is another case in which a thoroughly one-sided perspective has become imbedded in the national and international narrative about the Balkan wars.

Another double standard was the inattention to, if not whitewashing of, atrocities that Muslim forces committed in Bosnia and that the notorious Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) committed in Kosovo. Some of the revelations involving the KLA are truly horrific. An investigative report for the Council of Europe released just before Christmas 2010 confirmed long-standing rumors that the KLA was involved in the trafficking of human body parts, including killing Serbian prisoners to harvest their kidneys and other organs.²¹

Two aspects of the report were especially damning. First, the author and lead investigator was Swiss senator Dick Marty, a highly respected champion of human rights. Second, the report specifically named Kosovo prime minister Hashim Thaci as being an accomplice in those atrocities—as well as being involved in other criminal activities, including drug trafficking and politically motivated murders. Thaci, of course, vehemently disputed the Marty report, but experts who followed his career since his guerrilla days, when he was known as “The Snake,” found the allegations all too credible.

During the mid- and late 1990s, Clinton administration officials and their supporters in Congress, the think tank community, and the news media typically portrayed the KLA’s secessionist war as a morality play featuring noble Albanian Kosovars and their evil Serbian oppressors. The most notorious expression of a romanticized view of the insurgents was Senator Joseph Lieberman’s assertion that the United States and the KLA stood for the same goals and values—especially freedom, democracy, and human rights.

After the US-led air war against Serbia, which lasted seventy-eight days and killed at least five hundred and possibly well over one thousand Serbian civilians, NATO compelled Belgrade to relinquish control of Kosovo. As related in the memoirs of both Clinton and Albright, the justification for

20. Jeffrey Kuhner, “The Coming Balkan War,” *Washington Times*, 19 April 2011.

21. See Ted Galen Carpenter, “Empowering the Body Snatchers,” *National Interest Online*, 30 December 2010, nationalinterest.org/blog/the-skeptics/empowering-the-body-snatchers-washington%E2%80%99s-appalling-kosovo-4650.

that action against a sovereign state were the Milosevic government's alleged plans to ethnically cleanse the province of its Albanian inhabitants.

However, once NATO took military action, the blatant double standard came into play once again. With NATO troops occupying the province, the KLA proceeded to wage campaigns of terror and intimidation against non-Albanian inhabitants. Over the course of the following months, some two hundred forty thousand people fled or were driven from Kosovo. And the victims were not just Serbs but members of other minority ethnic groups, including Bulgarians, Romanians, Greeks, Roma (so-called Gypsies), and Jews.²² Yet US and European Union officials had little to say about this massive ethnic cleansing that was taking place on NATO's watch. And the Western news media, which presented a multitude of accounts of Serbian government abuses—real, exaggerated, and fictional—against Kosovo's Albanian population during the mid and late 1990s, seemed strangely uninterested in this story. News accounts and longer analyses of the persecution of non-Albanians were rare, and in most instances couched in a way that suggested that those incidents, while regrettable, were the inevitable reaction to previous Serbian abuses.²³

There were some common features to the suffocating, one-sided myths that grew up around these various episodes. One especially troubling aspect was the role that well-funded lobbying operations played. The baby incubator story was part of a comprehensive campaign that a leading Washington, DC, public relations firm, Hill and Knowlton, orchestrated.²⁴ The Kuwaiti ruling family and other members of that country's political and economic elite spent millions of dollars to fund that effort.

Similarly, many of the accounts of the Bosnia and Kosovo struggles originated with, or were shaped by, sophisticated public relations campaigns that wealthy Albanians and Albanian Americans helped fund. In addition

22. Ted Galen Carpenter, "Kosovo and Macedonia: The West Enhances the Threat," *Mediterranean Quarterly* 13, no. 1 (2002): 23–5.

23. US Ambassador to NATO William H. Taft IV even asserted that the violence in Kosovo was largely because of the sense of insecurity *on the part of Albanian inhabitants*—the very people doing the ethnic cleansing.

24. MacArthur, 46–51, 57–65, 100–1.

to pushing their case with the news media, those interest groups cultivated close ties with influential political figures. Albanian-American individuals and groups contributed hundreds of thousands of dollars to the political campaigns of Senate majority leader and 1996 Republican presidential nominee Robert Dole. Throughout the 1990s, Dole became one of the more outspoken critics of Serbia's policy in Kosovo, and an advocate for the KLA.

Such efforts to shape the public debate and the policy process in the United States were not confined to the Persian Gulf and Balkan disputes. A more recent, equally disturbing example involved the concerted lobbying effort that the government of Georgian president Mikhail Saakashvili used to influence American perceptions of his country's feud with Russia. One of the people on Tbilisi's payroll was Randy Scheunemann, a leading foreign policy pundit and neoconservative activist. Among other roles, Scheunemann became a prominent, perhaps even the most influential, foreign policy adviser to 2008 Republican presidential nominee Senator John McCain.²⁵

Even when he was no longer personally on the Georgian government's payroll, Scheunemann campaigned tirelessly to get the United States to support Saakashvili and to take a very hard line toward Russia. That became especially important when war broke out between Russia and Georgia in August 2008 over the status of two secessionist regions in Georgia, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia. McCain, in particular, advocated measures that could have put the United States on a collision course with a nuclear-armed Russia.

More broadly, the same binary interpretation (all villainy on one side and all tragic victimization on the other) that occurred with respect to the Balkan wars surfaced again with respect to the Russian-Georgian war. The dominant narrative in the United States (and in much of Europe) was that the conflict was a case of naked Russian aggression against a tiny, peace-loving neighbor. A subsequent investigation by the European Union, as well as some inquiries by independent analysts on both sides of the Atlantic, made a solid case that the reality was far more complex, and that Saakashvili's forces fired the first salvos in the war in an effort to bring South Ossetia back under Tbilisi's control. The simplistic narrative remained dominant, though, and for a time caused a pronounced chill in US-Russian relations.

25. Matthew Mosk and Jeffrey H. Birnbaum, "While Aide Advised McCain, His Firm Lobbied for Georgia," *Washington Post*, 13 August 2008.

The use of moralistic myths to distort debate on key foreign policy issues and to drive the United States into dubious military ventures is an extremely troublesome development. All of the episodes had some key features in common. Well-funded ethnic lobbies (sometimes even including direct involvement by foreign governments) worked hard to shape American perceptions of the underlying issues. Media accounts frequently echoed and promoted that propaganda, downplaying or ignoring evidence that cast doubts on the conventional wisdom. And US officials either were gullible enough to base Washington's policy on such distorted mythology, or cynically utilized it to justify policies that they wished to pursue for their own reasons.

There was another common thread that is disturbing. All of the prevailing myths pushed the United States toward intervention in what were otherwise parochial disputes that had little, if any, connection to important American interests. That was probably not coincidental. The various lobbies fostered those myths primarily to generate support from policy makers and key opinion groups in the United States for military intervention on behalf of their clients.

The reasons for the news media's consistently supportive role in acting as a channel for prowar propaganda are more difficult to determine. Part of it may have been sheer gullibility, especially once one party to a struggle was successfully tarred as an enemy of enlightened Western liberal values, if not evil incarnate. That is certainly what the lobbies sought and spent a considerable amount of money to achieve. But one suspects that there was a more subtle factor involved. Simple, clear struggles between good and evil make for far more exciting news stories and punditry. Complex, murky disputes are difficult to convey to readers, listeners, and viewers. There is a very real danger that the intended audience will begin to tune out, concluding that it is impossible to make sense of the situation.

A final factor is that journalists, especially those who work for the main media outlets in Washington, DC, New York, and other major metropolitan centers, greatly value their connections to policy makers, making them extremely cautious about publishing stories that dispute official accounts in the arena of foreign affairs.²⁶ That wariness is much more of a factor regard-

26. Ted Galen Carpenter, *The Captive Press: Foreign Policy Crises and the First Amendment* (Washington, DC: Cato Institute, 1995), 45–68.

ing US foreign policy than it is with respect to domestic policy, because there is far more of an elite consensus with respect to the former. Iconoclasts on current domestic policy can find refuge, even strong support, among powerful figures in the opposition party. Foreign policy iconoclasts, especially those who undermine the case for global activism, are more likely to find themselves in the journalistic wilderness.

Policy makers have an even stronger bias than do most journalists in favor of US activism abroad. Most important, the two camps mutually reinforce that tendency. Politically, it becomes difficult to advocate that the United States refrain from intervening in a conflict—especially once the images of human suffering and wartime atrocities hit television screens and the front pages of newspapers and go viral on the Internet. Skilled propagandists in lobbying organizations, the media, and government agencies themselves use those images to evoke emotionally charged historical memories of genocide and other horrible episodes. Ultimately, it is easier for even reluctant officials to go along with the crowd and embrace an activist policy that will supposedly prevent or end human rights abuses and produce a benign outcome. It is telling that President Clinton originally seemed hesitant to have the United States intervene in the Bosnian war, but ultimately shifted his position as the accounts of alleged Serbian aggression and atrocities mounted, and the lobbying efforts (including those by his wife and by Albright) intensified.

There is a need to inoculate the American people, the news media, and policy makers against embracing cynical, corrosive myths. US-led military intervention in the Balkans wars produced two utterly dysfunctional states, Bosnia and Kosovo, that have a heavy presence of criminal elements and troubling indicators of some penetration by radical Islamic elements. The Persian Gulf War led to a deepening entanglement of the United States in a volatile, hostile region, and continues to produce major foreign policy headaches for Washington.

And the same kind of effort to demonize the next adversary for the United States, Iran, is well underway. The simplistic and emotionally toxic equation of Iran with Nazi Germany, the spinning of worst-case, nightmare scenarios, however improbable they might be, regarding Tehran's nuclear program, and the idealized image of what Iran might become if only the United States would oust the current regime have already become prominent features of the

developing mythology. Ideological and ethnic lobbies are playing their usual roles, as are major portions of the news media.

Before we venture down the path leading to yet another military crusade, it would be wise to remember the huge gap between the self-serving myths and the underlying realities in the Balkan wars and other conflicts. A double dose of skepticism is warranted.

The creation of distorted accounts does not merely produce malignant policy outcomes at the time. It pollutes the informational reservoir of history. That lingering effect makes it difficult—sometimes impossible—for historians to correct the record. Even when they exercise the utmost professionalism, historians depend heavily on statements from public officials who were involved in the decision-making process and on contemporary accounts in the news media. When most of that material is inaccurate, especially when there is a systematic campaign to produce and circulate such material, historical truth becomes a casualty of war.