

## ***KOSOVO'S DANSE MACABRE***

**By Michael Ventura**

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It has been a bloody, telling season, this final spring of the century and millennium. Each headline forces the surrender of another illusion. We don't know where to turn, so we turn in circles, as though in a macabre waltz. The record of realizations reads like a casualty list -- which, in fact, it is.

Item: On March 30, President Clinton told Dan Rather we "should not be surprised that what has happened on the ground has happened. It was always obvious it was going to happen." Oh? Then why were no preparations made for the catastrophe of the uprooted Albanians? At almost the same moment, NATO spokesman Jamie Shea was exposing Clinton's shameless lie: "Even we have been shocked by the sheer enormity of what is going on in Kosovo at the moment." [All facts in quotes are from *The New York Times*.]

Item: Our high-tech attack machines don't work well against the small army of a very poor country ... if it happens to be raining. Weather described as "foul" has been used to excuse the fact that in one month of massive bombing we could confirm the destruction of only 30 Yugoslav tanks. On April 28, General Clark, the American NATO commander, admitted: "If you actually added up what's there on any given day, you might actually find that Milosevic has strengthened his forces." And the weather blamed for this failure? Scan the reports and you read only of "overcast skies," "clouds," "fog and rain" -- normal spring weather for most of the northern hemisphere.

But our "smart bombs" often do no better in good weather. April 6, after a day of clear weather: "NATO experts reviewing photos of Monday's targets found they were unable to confirm the destruction of a single tank or military vehicle." Flash forward to May 7: While admitting that the bombing has "failed to stop Serbian forces ... from driving most of the 1.8 million Albanians ... out of their homes," NATO suddenly claims to have destroyed "200 tanks and other armored vehicles, artillery pieces and trucks" -- though no proof was offered. "We are grinding down their morale," said a General Jertz, while the same report contained this statement: "Senior NATO and American intelligence officials have said they had seen evidence that Serbian army morale had actually risen."

Item: On April 8 we read that "tens of thousands of Kosovo refugees waiting to cross the border here vanished in the middle of the night .... No one knows what happened to them." Eighty thousand people! And they remained invisible to us until they "reappeared" (so the report read) *nine days later*. Clearly our intelligence and surveillance techniques are not functioning as advertised.

Item: Three inexperienced American soldiers disobeyed or forgot their orders (or got lost); they were surrounded, held captive for a month, released; their commanders and the media have been calling them "heroes," so impoverished has our idea of heroism become.

Item, March 31: "The Joint Chiefs of Staff and NATO generals recognized that bombing alone had *never* [my italics] successfully driven out a dug-in land army, but some senior officials in the Administration believed that Mr. Milosevic would fold under withering airstrikes." Well, we have proved ourselves incapable of "withering" airstrikes. And those "senior administration officials" now turn out to have been President Clinton,

Secretary of State Albright, and Secretary of Defense Cohen -- who got into Kosovo against the strong advice of their own military and intelligence services. In fact, it turns out that on January 19, when Secretary of State Madeleine Albright presented her bombing plan, the president wasn't even at the meeting. "His lawyers were starting their arguments on the Senate floor against his removal from office," and he was working on his State of the Union address, which he would deliver that night.

So: Clinton lies about Monica Lewinsky; the nation spends a year preoccupied with his lies; in that year China steals precious atomic secrets, American foreign policy falls apart all over the globe, and we end by blundering into a war that is causing untold suffering to hundreds of thousands in Kosovo and Yugoslavia while demonstrating nothing but the powerlessness of our power -- and, in the process, ruining the reputation of NATO, destabilizing Albania, Macedonia, and possibly Greece, alienating Russia (with Yeltsin actually threatening a world war -- something that our media tried to underplay in every way) and losing all hope of defusing Russia's remaining nukes. Recall that we promised Russia that NATO would be used only in defense; but NATO is attacking a country very close to the Russian border. Recent joint statements with Russia are meant to patch this up, but read the full reports and you see that no agreements have been reached. And then we bombed the Chinese embassy because the CIA's map was two years out of date.

Do the words "criminal negligence" ring a bell? Yet the Clinton administration will be our leadership for another year and eight months.

Item, April 17: This war "was launched, in President Clinton's words, 'to protect thousands of innocent people in Kosovo from a mounting military offensive.'" But as of April 28 the figures were these: 700,000 Kosovars were refugees in Albania and Macedonia, while another 820,000 were homeless and hungry in their own country -- and no one knows how many have been massacred. I know of no other instance in American history in which our endeavor has failed so spectacularly, so quickly, so helplessly.

And how has this happened? In a television interview General Clark, the American commander of NATO, was asked if what was happening in Kosovo was a war. He said, "'War' is a legal term." He called Kosovo an "operation."

Well, "war" *is* a legal term, as used in the Constitution of the United States: Article 1, Section 8, states unequivocally that Congress has the power to declare war. Congress, and only Congress. The president's foreign policy powers are defined in Article 2, Section 2: "He shall have Power, by and with the Advice and Consent of the Senate, to make Treaties, provided two-thirds of the Senate present concur; and he shall nominate, and by and with the Advice and Consent of the Senate, shall appoint Ambassadors, and other public Ministers and Consuls ...." And that's all. The president does not have the power or the right to commit troops to a foreign war on his (or her) own.

For most of the 20th century -- in Vietnam, for instance -- we've chosen to ignore our Constitution. This has been a deliberate, conscious, repeated choice, made by Republicans as well as Democrats, liberals as well as conservatives. We have willingly thrown away our birthright as citizens, and today a million and a half Kosovars are paying the price.

I pass on the words of a 14-year-old student, Kyra Scemama. Her teacher, Karen Grant, asked what was meant by Elie Wiesel's phrase, "in a world without god and without man." Kyra wrote:

"In a world of men who have tied themselves so tightly to the arm of an almighty thing and have lived their lives only for God, it becomes impossible to exist once your Everything leaves you to the lions. The cannibal lions who snarl with the sanctions of themselves. God died in their souls. A God who was their love and their mercy, their faith and all that made them men. But the lions have left us with little for they have buried us all in their bellies, and the growling in their stomachs mirrors the screams of our hearts as we pack up the bread crumbs of another man's dream."

Kyra's paragraph is more poem than prose, its literal sense suggestive, not expository. But the tense music of her words, and their tortured and tortuous implications, are the true music of the end of the "American century" and the Western millennium. We who have willingly kissed off our constitutional birthright know more than we will ever admit about "the cannibal lions who snarl with the sanction of themselves." We have mistaken ambition for desire, greed for freedom, security for peace. We have elected the lesser of two evils over and over, and have reaped evil in return. In Kyra's terms, our love and our mercy and our faith was all that made us human beings, and we have sacrificed them to the lions. And now America is a lost and wounded lion, afraid of itself, afraid of everyone else, trapped within its inventions, with a soaring stock market, one and a half million refugees, and one more unconstitutional war. We have so little faith in our own policies that we are afraid to risk a single American life, while we kill others. The "American century" is ending in humiliation, cowardice, and incompetence.

I can't ask Kyra's generation to forgive us, but I pray they learn to understand us, root out our mistakes, find mercy and love and faith on their own terms, and leave us behind.

We cannot expect respect for the history we've created, and we have no right to ask for mercy from the people to whom we've bequeathed such a world. What will be said of us, when the Kosovo war is ended, will be like what the Roman historian Tacitus wrote of his Empire's occupation of Britain: "They make a devastation and call it peace."

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