

Degraded Capability

Phil England

Degraded Capability: The Media and the Kosovo Crisis

Philip Hammond and Edward S. Herman, eds £14.99
ISBN 0-7453-1631-X Pluto Press

"While the role of the journalist is to present the world in all its complexity, giving the public as much information as possible in order to facilitate a democratic debate, the propagandist simplifies the world in order to mobilise the public behind a common goal."¹

The conclusion to be drawn from *Degraded Capability* is that during NATO's 78-day bombing of Kosovo, Serbia and Montenegro from March 24th-June 10th 1999 the media overwhelmingly acted in effect as a propaganda machine. As a collection of writings by a variety of experts, *Degraded Capability* provides a necessarily patchwork look at the coverage of the war and a good deal of cross-referencing is necessary. It is nevertheless a major contribution to understanding the truth behind the many fictions of the war and how these were maintained. In conjunction with a reading of Phillip Knightley's chapter on Kosovo (provocatively titled "The Military's Final Victory") in his classic history of the war correspondent, "The First Casualty",² a picture starts to emerge of the mechanics of media management: blanket coverage of NATO sourced news, lack of investigation and contextualisation, large scale omission and the plain old peddling of lies. Whilst Knightley provides a roller coaster of a ride through the British media's coverage of the war, Hammond and Herman provide the back-up detail and context in a way that is rigorously researched and referenced and also look at how the war was covered in the US, other NATO countries, Russia and India.

The illusion of saturation coverage

"The British Ministry of Defence has a manual, updated after every war, which serves to guide the way it will handle its relationship with the media in wartime... It follows basic principles: Appear open, transparent, and eager to help; never go in for summary repression or control; nullify rather than conceal undesirable news; control emphasis rather than facts; balance bad news with good; and lie directly only when certain that the lie will not be found out during the course of the war."³

The military's apparent openness is operated in conjunction with the principle of 'security at source'—exactly what information is released is strictly controlled.⁴ For the British media there were three main sources of news: NATO spokesman Jamie Shea in Brussels; Defence Secretary George Robertson and ministers such as Robin Cook; and Tony Blair's press secretary, Alistair Campbell.⁵

"It was vital to try to hold the public's interest on our terms," Campbell said reiterating one of the MoD's cornerstone principles.⁶ So when Newsnight's Kirsty Wark interviewed NATO Commander, General Wesley Clark on the day NATO attacked the train at Varvarin, for example, "(she) failed to ask a single question about civilian casualties. Instead she appeared to be egging him on to commit ground troops."⁷

When Campbell was called in to overhaul NATO's "Media Operations Centre" (MOC) three weeks into the war he insured that, "The reporting of every correspondent writing about Kosovo was monitored and if necessary instantly rebutted. NATO's line on every likely aspect of the war was developed, polished and rehearsed. There was

even a section of the MOC which spent its time dreaming up pithy phrases for Shea to insert into his briefings with the hope that they would appeal to the headline writers and to television producers looking for a good sound bite."⁸

It seemed to work. In a post-war assessment report Jamie Shea declared his pride at the way NATO was able to "occupy the media space", so that "nobody in the world who was a regular TV viewer could escape the NATO message."⁹

NATO proved to be one of the least reliable sources of information. Henry Porter in *The Observer* (4/7/99) described "an almost universal concern among editors about the level of accuracy of NATO briefings... It became clear about four weeks into the war that NATO high command was either concealing the truth or, despite its sophisticated intelligence gathering equipment, had little idea of what was happening on the ground... There seemed to be a pattern of obfuscation that was supported in moments of embarrassment by a flow of artfully drafted semi-admissions." Yet NATO continued to enjoy virtually blanket and predominantly uncritical exposure.

Editorial control—the myth of a liberal media

All the British newspapers except the *Independent on Sunday* (whose editor, Kim Fletcher, was replaced shortly after the war by Janet Street Porter—an ex-columnist and TV presenter/producer without any background in news reporting) took a pro-war stance in their editorial columns. As Hammond asserts, the fact that this included the liberal press is one of the things that distinguished Kosovo from previous military campaigns. Whilst the conservative papers supported the war, at least they voiced some doubts about the wisdom of the action. *The Guardian* and *The Independent*, on the other hand, seemed sold on the moral purpose of the devastating air campaign.¹⁰ This was in spite of the fact that throughout the war *The Guardian* received around 100 letters a day about the bombing campaign, the overwhelming majority of which were against it.¹¹

Evidently it was considered important to neutralise what might be a significant site of opposition. How was this achieved? John Pilger claims that at the beginning of the Kosovo campaign, "Editors were called to the Ministry of Defence [MoD] and handed their guidelines" though he gives no source or grounds for this remarkable assertion.¹² Even in the absence of such direct control, Knightley reasons that "in wartime (the media) considers its commercial and political interests lie in supporting the government of the day."¹³ Then there is the ongoing compromise brought about by the media's all-too-cosy relationship with power. Eve Ann Prentice of *The Times*, for example, says that foreign editors are too close to the Foreign Office, that they dine together etc.¹⁴

Guardian staff were certainly acting as NATO apologists through their control of emphasis. In an interview with BBC Radio Scotland, Hammond gave the following example of a report on the bombing of a bridge in Varvarin in Serbia. "The *Reuters* report from the scene was headlined 'NATO Bombing Wreaks Carnage on Serbian Town Bridge.' But by the time that same report appeared in the following day's *Guardian* newspaper the headline had subtly changed to 'Planes Buzzed Overhead and then Death Came.' *The*

Guardian had shifted from an active to a passive sentence construction and any sense of NATO bombing wreaking carnage had disappeared. Instead there were innocuously buzzing planes and death appearing somehow out of the blue."¹⁵

The fact that even John Pilger, a highly respected, award-winning journalist, had difficulty getting published during the war¹⁶ suggests that voices of opposition were being stifled. The day after he finally had a piece published in *The Guardian* his factually accurate work was rubbished by the paper's diplomatic editor, Ian Black.¹⁷

Broadcasters who failed to follow the NATO script were subject to personal attacks from politicians. BBC Radio 4's John Humphries, for example was criticised for asking awkward questions during the war. His suggestion that NATO had replaced one type of ethnic cleansing with another in February this year brought him up for criticism again. BBC governors upheld the complaint by NATO secretary general, Lord Robertson and concluded that "The tone of his questioning was inappropriate at times, and the frequency of interruption was ill-judged."¹⁸

Hammond, though, suggests that this is largely a ritual and that, in the words of the BBC's first Director General, Lord Reith, "they know that they can trust us not to be really impartial."¹⁹

Sheep, frothers, cheerleaders and veterans

Robert Fisk of the *Independent* identified two types of journalists during the war—the "sheep" and the "frothers." The sheep were in the main a flock of young, ambitious, and often freelance reporters who faithfully reproduced the NATO line. The frothers were more likely to be staff writers who often became "cheerleaders and advocates" for the war. Thomas Friedman of the *New York Times*, for example: "Every week you ravage Kosovo is another decade we will set your country back by pulverising you," Friedman said. "You want 1950, we can do 1950. You want 1389? We can do 1389 too."²⁰

Such emotive writing raises the disturbing question of to what extent the media coverage not only ensured domestic support for the war (and stifled opposition) but also influenced the course of the war itself? Disturbingly, a UN survey of officials with experience in the Yugoslav area found that 75% believed the media had played a part in determining the course of the war.²¹

News of the carnage, destruction and havoc wreaked by the NATO bombing—and celebrated by the frothers—was strictly unwelcome. Veterans that stayed in Belgrade to find out what was happening on the ground were criticised for being dupes for Serbian propaganda. The BBC's John Simpson was singled out for criticism by Clare Short. "I said what I bloody well wanted," he said in *The Guardian* by way of response. "I find it ludicrous and offensive to suggest that I was this glove puppet for Milosevic."²²

"We were aware that those pictures would come back and there would be an instinctive sympathy for the victims of the campaign," said Tony Blair explaining why NATO had bombed the Yugoslavian TV station, RTS killing 16 and wounding 16 more in an incident that Amnesty International has identified as a war crime.²³

"What was hidden was almost everything on the receiving end ... the hatred it inflamed in Kosovo, the fear and trauma of the civilians in

Serbian cities and towns, the despair and confusion, the destruction of people's jobs, hopes and future."²⁴

Atrocities

"Although all the right is seldom on one side, the media will present the war in stark terms of good and evil. The evil side will be demonised, its leader depicted as mad, bloodthirsty, and subhuman, a modern day Hitler."²⁵

Knightley's history of the war correspondent shows that demonisation of the enemy is common to all wars. It's a process which allows for critical debate to be silenced, awkward facts to be overlooked and provides a clear justification for military action.

Atrocity stories provided the rationale for NATO's massive scale military intervention in Kosovo, Serbia and Montenegro. Seth Ackerman and Jim Naureckas of Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR) note how the conflict in Kosovo was characterised as being entirely one sided. Any discussion of Albanian nationalists' violence as early as 1982 or later KLA actions which provoked the repression by the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia was ignored by the press.²⁶

Edward Herman and David Peterson cast doubt on one of the key events that prompted the "international community" into action—the Racak massacre in January 1999. The head of the OSCE verification team in Kosovo (whose history brings his objectivity seriously into question) described it as "a massacre ... a crime against humanity" and his report went via CNN around the world. But forensic studies revealed that the dead were more likely to have been KLA—rather than civilians killed—in "exchanges of small-arms fire and 'savagely fighting'" which were in fact filmed by an invited Associated Press film crew.²⁷

During the war Knightley says: "The pressure on the media in NATO countries to produce atrocity stories was intense." Yet many such reports turned out to be false. Up to 700 bodies were said to have been buried in a mass grave at the Trepca mine. "Trepca—the name will live alongside those of Belsen, Auschwitz and Treblinka," said *The Mirror* in June 1999. One month later the UN International Criminal Tribunal for Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) announced that investigations had revealed that there were no bodies in the mines.²⁸

Widely reported claims by American Defence Secretary William Cohen (CBS, 16/5/00) that over 100,000 "may have been murdered" turned out to be unfounded. By November 1999 the number of bodies exhumed by the twenty forensic teams who were brought in to provide body counts had reached 2,108 including KLA as well as civilians.²⁹ Massacres after the bombing campaign by the KLA were downplayed by the media.

Democracy, justice and NATO War Crimes

Another example of "omission on a grand scale" is the unreported fact that the NATO bombing campaign against Kosovo was illegal. This is now widely recognised (again, even the British government's own Foreign Affairs Select Committee has found this to be the case³⁰). It broke numerous international laws and agreements including the Geneva Conventions, the UN Charter and NATO's own constitution, and flagrantly over-rode the authority of the UN. Furthermore it was undemocratic in that, for example, Tony Blair did not consult Parliament before committing Britain to the NATO action.³¹

There is uncertainty about the final number of people that NATO killed. NATO officials have said that Human Rights Watch's (and the Yugoslavian government's) estimates of around 500 civilians

killed by NATO were reasonable.³² However General Joseph W. Ralston, Vice Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff has said that the estimate of civilians dead was "less than 1,500."³³ The FRY government estimates a total of 1,002 army and police killed or missing³⁴ and the UN says that another 10-15,000 civilians were wounded.³⁵

General Wesley Clark admitted to the BBC's Mark Urban that NATO was targeting civilians. In a campaign which involved over 38,000 combat sorties and 10,484 strike sorties, NATO deliberately destroyed infrastructure (bridges, roads, railways, water lines, communication facilities, factories, industry), health care, education, agriculture and the environment, as well as sites of historic and cultural importance.

The use of Depleted Uranium has left an enduring legacy of environmental contamination along with that wreaked by the destruction of oil refineries, petrochemical plants, chemical fertilizer factories, fuel storage tanks and power plants.³⁶

Shortly after the war a United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees study of the situation in Kosovo found that "forty per cent of Kosovo's water supply is of poor quality—'polluted by a range of materials including human, as well as animal corpses.' Only 12 per cent of the health facilities that existed before the NATO bombing still exist, and 60 per cent of the schools have been damaged or destroyed."³⁷

Despite NATO withholding information necessary to make a full assessment, Amnesty International has recently issued a report accusing NATO of war crimes. It recommends that the victims should be given adequate redress and that those responsible should be brought to justice.³⁸

There have also been a number of independent legal actions which have gone almost entirely unreported in the press. These include a comprehensive indictment prepared by US Former Attorney General, Ramsey Clark, for the Independent Action Center detailing 19 separate charges of war crimes, crimes against peace and crimes against humanity.³⁹ And in England the Cambridge-based Movement for the Advancement of International Criminal Law has presented a 150 page dossier based on 1,000 eyewitness testimonies to the United Nations' International Criminal Tribunal for Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) and asked for Tony Blair, Robin Cook and George Robertson to be indicted for war crimes. The report is currently being read by the ICTY Chief Prosecutor.⁴⁰

The ICTY comes under the microscope in a chapter by Mirjana Skoco and William Woodger, which allows Hammond and Herman to conclude that in its funding, choice of personnel and actions the ICTY has served as an arm of NATO.⁴¹ The ICTY relies on NATO for its evidence so that NATO's own war crimes and the massacres committed by the Croatian Army with the covert support of the US in Krajina and the KLA's subsequent massacre of Serbs, Romas and others are unlikely to be tried.

Context

One of the main things missing throughout the media coverage of the campaign was context. Here *Degraded Capability* excels by bringing this to light.

Diana Johnstone and Richard Keeble put Yugoslavia into the context of the United States' ongoing imperial 'globalisation' project, that is the expansion of free trade and the eradication of anything that stands in its way. Yugoslavia's transformation from "a medium-sized independent state, with a unique reputation in the region for resistance to foreign empires, into a series of ethnic statelets whose economic assets can be easily expropriated,"⁴² is, according to US foreign policy advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski, just part of an ongo-

ing political strategy for the US. Johnstone writes that "This involves creating a 'geopolitical framework' around NATO that will initially include Ukraine and exclude Russia. This will establish the geostrategic basis for controlling conflict in what Brzezinski calls 'the Eurassian Balkans', the huge area between the Eastern shore of the Black Sea to China, which includes the Caspian Sea and its petroleum resources, a top priority for US foreign policy."⁴³

David Chandler lays out the history of Western intervention in Yugoslavia over the last decade. Up until 1989 the US actively supported Yugoslavia's "unity, independence and territorial integrity," because her "brand of market communism was an example to the rest of the Soviet Bloc to leave the constraints of the Soviet Union and open up to Western influence." But the tide of international relations turned with the so-called end of the Cold War when the credits for its IMF-friendly, economic reform programme stopped coming and Yugoslavia suddenly found itself isolated diplomatically within Europe.⁴⁴

Chandler's focus is the diplomatic context. By taking sides with the separatists, encouraging and prematurely recognising their independence, Europe and the United States have "undermined the democratic state institutions necessary to cohere and integrate society and maintain law and order," he argues. "The breakdown of inter-ethnic co-operation in Bosnia was a direct consequence of external pressures on the political mechanisms holding the republic together within a federal framework, as opposed to the product of external invasion or a resurgence of ethnic hatreds. With US encouragement, the Muslim-led government decided to seek international recognition for independence against the wishes of the Serb community."⁴⁵

He's best on Bosnia, but stops short of any discussion of the IMF's role prior to 1989; or any treatment of the West's funding and training of military groups in Yugoslavia.⁴⁶

NATO rising—the US in Europe

Whilst the US undertook 80% of the air strikes, 90% of the electronic warfare missions, firing over 80% of the guided air weapons and launched over 95% of the cruise missiles,⁴⁷ it was important that the operation was seen to be under the auspices of NATO. "After the collapse of communism, the disbanding of the Warsaw Pact and the break-up of the Soviet Union itself, the official reason for the existence of NATO no longer existed."⁴⁸ But recently, and almost un-noticed, NATO has undergone a period of expansion with Albania, Austria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Finland, Poland, Sweden, Switzerland, Macedonia and Slovenia all becoming new members, something which the former US ambassador to Russia has called "the biggest political mistake of the post Cold-War period." The poor Eastern European members are expected to spend £22 billion on American and British military equipment to bring their arsenals up to required standards.

At a time when Chirac and other European leaders have been pushing for an independent defence force for the EU,⁴⁹ it was necessary to "assert United States domination over the still embryonic 'Foreign and Security Policy' of the European Union,"⁵⁰ "... testing US capacity to lead in European politics by maintaining cohesion of its subordinate allies."⁵¹ Johnstone and Peter Gowan argue that this was a major reason for the war. And what a blood-curdling irony to discover that at the height of the bombing NATO was celebrating its 50th birthday at a \$8 million party paid for by private US corporations.⁵²

DEGRADED CAPABILITY THE MEDIA AND THE KOSOVO CRISIS

Edited by Philip Hammond
and Edward S. Herman
Foreword by Harold Pinter



The next time

Even though the media glare has moved elsewhere, the campaign against Yugoslavia continues. NATO states have imposed economic sanctions against the country; opposition movements are being funded; and the Montenegrin leadership is being encouraged to threaten to break away.⁵³ Disturbing moves are now afoot to amend the principle of national sovereignty which underpins international law to legalise further such 'humanitarian interventions'.⁵⁴

If there are any lessons to be drawn from Knightley's study (other than his own bleak prediction that the media has lost and things can only get worse) it's that an identifiable pattern has emerged over the years for ensuring domestic compliance during wartime. In the future we must remain sceptical and not get drawn in by the media's emotive cheerleading and be prepared to dig a little deeper. Official sources must be challenged and investigative journalism encouraged. Ongoing situations outside the media glare must be monitored.

Degraded Capability opens a window on suppressed truths and the complex reality of a particular crisis. It suggests that we can't rely on the mass media to provide the "reasonably objective information that would contribute to public debate", and that therefore "the mainstream media of the 'democratic' West are failing to meet the informational needs of a genuinely democratic order."⁵⁵ If Kosovo was indeed the "most secret campaign in living memory" as historian Alistair Horne has commented⁵⁶ then *Degraded Capability* is an important milestone in the project to ascertain and assert the truth and to bring those responsible for NATO war crimes to justice.

Notes:

1. *Degraded Capability*, p.97
2. Philip Knightley, *The First Casualty: The War Correspondent as Hero and Myth-Maker from the Crimea to Kosovo* (London: Prion, 2000)
3. Knightley, p.484
4. *Degraded Capability*, p.83
5. More covert operations are hinted at. The US embassy in Britain offered newspapers pre-written stories on the war for free, "emphasising that although the US government owned the copyright to the articles, there was no need for the newspapers to tell their readers this." (Knightley pp.503-504). Richard Swift writing in *The New Internationalist* pointed out that The KLA, The Yugoslavian government and the state of Montenegro all had contracts with PR firms. (Richard Swift—Lies and the Laptop Bombardiers, *New Internationalist*, July 99. <<http://www.newint.org>>). Projects Censored (an alternative news project based at Sonoma State University, California) also noted the US government's use of private public relations consultants to "spin and distort stories" but more importantly claimed that the US government had set up the International Public Information Group to "squell or limit uncomplimentary stories regarding US activities and policies as reported in the foreign press ... that may reach the American public." (Knightley, p.504; <<http://www.projectsensored.org>>.
6. Knightley, p.513
7. *Degraded Capability*, p.133
8. Knightley, 512-513
9. *Degraded Capability*, p.85
10. *ibid*, p124
11. *The Media Guide 2000*, Edited by Paul Fisher and Steve Peak, Fourth Estate, London 1999
12. Introduction to Knightley, p.xii
13. Knightley, p.526
14. Prentice speaking at a Campaign for Peace in the Balkans conference, 10/6/00
15. Interview with Phillip Hammond, *Lesley Riddoch show*, BBC Radio Scotland, 17/7/00
16. *Degraded Capability*, p.134
17. *ibid*, p.138
18. *Guardian* 2/8/00
19. *Degraded Capability*, p.124
20. *ibid*, p.106
21. *ibid*, p.7
22. There were also a handful of journalists actually in Kosovo during the bombing. These included Eve Ann Prentice of *The Times* (who wrote a book about her experiences, *One Woman's War*, Duck Editions, London, 2000), Paul Watson, a Canadian reporter who was working for the *Los Angeles Times* and some Greek television crews.
23. Tony Blair interviewed for *Moral Combat—NATO at War*, BBC2, 12/3/00. Interesting to note also that Hammond, in an interview with BBC Radio Scotland, says that: "NATO initially issued an ultimatum to RTS saying that they must carry six hours a day of Western news or else be bombed. RTS said well, okay, we will carry the six hours if you carry six minutes of our programming, called their bluff in other words. So NATO went ahead and bombed them." *Lesley Riddoch show*, BBC Radio Scotland, 17/7/00
24. *Degraded Capability*, p.11
25. Phillip Knightley in a speech to the Freedom Forum, London 23/3/00
26. *Degraded Capability*, p 97-99
27. *ibid*, 117-119
28. Knightley, p.521-524; *Degraded Capability*, p.129-130
29. Knightley, p.523
30. Foreign Affairs Select Committee, Fourth Report: Kosovo "Report and Proceedings of the Committee" 7/6/00
31. Knightley, p.505
32. Amnesty International—"Collateral Damage" or Unlawful Killings—Violations of the Laws of War by NATO during Operation Allied Force, Amnesty International, June 2000; see also *NATO Crimes in Yugoslavia* (The White Book), published by the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, Ministry of Foreign Affairs which Amnesty International describes as the most detailed official account of the damage caused by the NATO bombing.
33. Quoted in Amnesty International, *ibid*.
34. *Reuters*, 23/3/00 quoted in AI, *ibid*
35. UNDP report quoted in Knightley, p.505
36. Independent Commission of Inquiry to Investigate US/ NATO War Crimes Against the People of Yugoslavia, International Action Center, <<http://www.iacenter.org/warcrime/research.htm>>; <<http://www.iacenter.org/warcrime/index.htm>>
37. Paul Watson, *San Francisco Chronicle* 14/5/99
38. Amnesty International, *ibid*
39. IAC—see note 36
40. <<http://ban.joh.cam.ac.uk/~maicl/>>
41. *Degraded Capability*, p.206
42. *ibid*, p.13
43. *ibid*, p.13
44. *ibid*, p.21
45. *ibid*, p.24
46. See for example Michel Chossudovsky "NATO's Reign of Terror in Kosovo" in *Variant* Vol 2, Number 10, Spring 2000
47. *Degraded Capability*, p.39
48. *ibid*, p.8
49. *ibid*, p.53
50. *ibid*, p.16
51. *ibid*, p.39
52. *ibid*, p.8
53. *ibid*, p.39
54. Foreign Affairs Select Committee, Fourth Report: Kosovo "Report and Proceedings of the Committee" 7/6/00
55. *Degraded Capability*, p.208
56. Knightley, p.501