

# Kosovo Chaos Undercuts Clinton 'Success'

**Exclusive:** President Bill Clinton's Kosovo war of 1999 was loved by neocons and liberal hawks the forerunner for Iraq, Libya, Syria and other conflicts this century but Kosovo's political violence and lawlessness today underscore the grim consequences of those strategies even when they "succeed," writes Jonathan Marshall.

By Jonathan Marshall

The insatiable appetite of America's bipartisan foreign policy elites for military intervention, despite its record of creating failing states in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Syria and Yemen, traces back to the marriage of liberal and neoconservative interventionists during the Clinton administration's 78-day bombing of Serbia to create the break-away state of Kosovo in 1999.

One scholar-advocate has called NATO's campaign "The most important precedent supporting the legitimacy of unilateral humanitarian intervention." Even Sen. Bernie Sanders was proud to support that use of American power, ostensibly "to prevent further genocide."

But Kosovo, which is still not recognized as an independent state by nearly half of all UN members, and which still relies on 4,600 NATO troops to maintain order, is hardly a showcase for the benefits of military intervention. With an unemployment rate of 35 percent, Kosovo is wracked by persistent outbreaks of terrorism, crime, and political violence.

Following a series of violent street protests and wild disruptions of parliament, the leader of the radical nationalist party, VetÅ«vendosje, announced on Feb. 19, "This regime is now is in its final days. They will not last long."

That day, members of VetÅ«vendosje set off tear gas cannisters in parliament and tussled with police in the latest of their many protests against an agreement reached by the government last summer to grant limited powers to the country's Serbian minority, in return for Serbia's recognition of Kosovo. Opposition lawmakers also rail against endemic corruption and the country's under-performing economy.

Two days earlier, at least 15,000 Kosovars gathered in the central square of Pristina, the country's capital, to demand the government's resignation. In January, thousands of protesters clashed with police, hurling Molotov cocktails, setting a major government building and armored police cars on fire, and

wounding 24 police officers.

“The aim of this protest was to overthrow the government with violence,” the government said in a statement. The U.S. ambassador chimed in, “Political violence threatens democracy and all that Kosovo has achieved since independence.”

This violence gets little attention from the American media in part because, unlike the Ukrainian demonstrators who overthrew their democratically elected government in 2014, Kosovo’s protesters are targeting a pro-Western government that eagerly seeks membership in the European Union.

But it’s no wonder that Kosovo’s political fabric is so rent by violent confrontations. The rump state was created by a violent secessionist movement led by the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA). That guerrilla band of Albanian nationalists was covertly backed by the German secret service to weaken Serbia. Its terrorist attacks on Serbian villages and government personnel in the mid-1990s prompted a brutal military crackdown by Serbia, followed by NATO’s decisive intervention in 1999.

During the fighting the KLA drove tens of thousands of ethnic Serbs from Kosovo as part of an ethnic cleansing campaign to promote independence for the majority Albanian population. It recruited Islamist militants, including followers of Osama Bin Laden, from Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Afghanistan and other countries.

President Bill Clinton’s special envoy to the Balkans, Robert Gelbard, called the KLA “without any question, a terrorist group,” and a Council on Foreign Relations backgrounder added, “most of its activities were funded by drug running.”

None of that, however, stopped Washington from embracing the KLA’s cause against Serbia, a policy spearheaded by the liberal interventionist First Lady Hillary Clinton and Secretary of State Madeleine Albright. Without authorization from the United Nations, NATO began bombing Serbia in March 1999, killing some 500 civilians, demolishing billions of dollars’ worth of industrial plants, bridges, schools, libraries and hospitals, and even hitting the Chinese embassy. (“It should be lights out in Belgrade,” demanding *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman. “Every power grid, water pipe, bridge, road and war-related factory has to be targeted. Like it or not, we are at war with the Serbian nation.”)

Following Serbia’s capitulation, according to Human Rights Watch, “elements of the KLA” engaged in “widespread and systematic burning and looting of homes belonging to Serbs, Roma, and other minorities and the destruction of Orthodox churches and monasteries. This destruction was combined with harassment and

intimidation designed to force people from their homes and communities. By late-2000 more than 210,000 Serbs had fled the province . . . The desire for revenge provides a partial explanation, but there is also a clear political goal in many of these attacks: the removal from Kosovo of non-ethnic Albanians in order to better justify an independent state.”

Former KLA leaders, including its political head Hashim Thaçi, went on to dominate the new Kosovo state. A 2010 report by the Council of Europe declared that Thaçi, who was then Kosovo’s prime minister, headed a “mafia-like” group that smuggled drugs, guns and human organs on a grand scale through Eastern Europe. The report’s author accused the international community of turning a blind eye while Thaçi’s group of KLA veterans engaged in “assassinations, detentions, beatings and interrogations” to maintain power and profit from their criminal activities.

Prime Minister Thaçi and the Kosovo government strenuously denied the allegations and succeeded for years in resisting accountability. Their American friends were eager to put the past behind as well. In 2012, Madeleine Albright and a former Clinton special envoy to the Balkans bid to take control of the country’s state-owned telecommunications company despite widespread allegations of corruption, the attempted assassination of the telecommunications regulatory chief, and the murder of the state privatization agency’s chief.

No one seemed immune from corruption. A study of the European Union’s own legal mission to Kosovo suggested that its members may have taken bribes to drop investigations of senior Kosovo politicians for rampant criminal activity.

In 2014, a three-year E.U. investigation concluded that “senior officials of the former Kosovo Liberation Army” should be indicted for war crimes and crimes against humanity, including “unlawful killings, abductions, enforced disappearances, illegal detentions in camps in Kosovo and Albania, sexual violence, other forms of inhumane treatment, forced displacements of individuals from their homes and communities, and desecration and destruction of churches and other religious sites.”

Under tough pressure from the United States and E.U., Kosovo’s parliament finally agreed last summer to permit a special court to prosecute former KLA leaders for war crimes. The court will begin operating this year in The Hague.

“The sad thing is that the United States and European countries knew 10 years ago that Thaçi and his men were engaged in drug smuggling and creating a mafia state,” said one European ambassador last year. “The attitude was, ‘He’s a bastard, but he’s our bastard.’”

Whether delayed justice will clean up Kosovo's "mafia state," and whether belated granting of rights to the Serbian minority will ease or aggravate Kosovo's explosive ethnic tensions, remain to be seen. One thing's for sure: a great many people have died in the name of this great "humanitarian intervention," and many more are still suffering for it. Kosovo is no Libya or Syria, but neither is it any kind of showcase for the benefits of U.S. armed intervention.

Jonathan Marshall is author or co-author of five books on international affairs, including *The Lebanese Connection: Corruption, Civil War and the International Drug Traffic* (Stanford University Press, 2012). Some of his previous articles for Consortiumnews were "[Risky Blowback from Russian Sanctions](#)"; "[Neocons Want Regime Change in Iran](#)"; "[Saudi Cash Wins France's Favor](#)"; "[The Saudis' Hurt Feelings](#)"; "[Saudi Arabia's Nuclear Bluster](#)"; "[The US Hand in the Syrian Mess](#)"; and "[Hidden Origins of Syria's Civil War.](#)" ]

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## KLA Country (A Forewarning from Kosovo)

**From the Archive:** President Clinton's 1999 air war on Serbia supposedly to stop genocide in Kosovo became the model for neocon/liberal hawk "humanitarian" wars this century. But as Kosovo descends again into political violence the war also foreshadowed what can go wrong, as Don North reported in this prescient story from 1999.

By Don North (Originally published on Aug. 12, 1999)

Serbia was the NATO's victory in Kosovo expelled the Serb military and stopped the brutal "ethnic cleansing" of the province's Albanian majority. But in a post-war inspection, I found that the pro-Albanian Kosovo Liberation Army is quickly establishing itself as the real power on the ground, sowing the seeds for more violence and corruption ahead.

In effect, the ethnic Albanian guerrilla force emerged from hiding after the Serb withdrawal in June 1999 to claim the spoils of a war in which the KLA never won a battle. Ignoring commitments to disband as a military force, the KLA instead asserted its power by dividing the province into seven KLA regions. The KLA set up roadblocks in areas supposedly under the control of NATO's "KFOR" occupation troops, a clear message to Serbs that the KLA was the province's new master.

Since then, the KLA has been blamed for a new round of "ethnic cleansing," a

systematic campaign to transform Kosovo into an ethnic Albanian territory by terrorizing Serbs and Gypsies and driving them into exile. The revenge attacks have included mass murders, destruction of property and the razing of Serb religious shrines.

Even as 37,000 NATO peacekeepers fanned out across Kosovo, the scene on the ground suggested that little could be done to preserve Kosovo as a multi-ethnic home for both Serbs and Albanians. Tens of thousands of Serbs fled with the retreating Serb army and many others have left since the NATO troops arrived. The present Serb population may be fewer than 30,000, down from a pre-war estimate of about 200,000.

The emerging reality is far removed from President Bill Clinton's soaring rhetoric about his hopes for a land free from "anyone who seeks to use racial, religious or ethnic differences to promote hatred." From the moment I arrived in the provincial capital of Pristina on June 14, 1999, it was clear that Kosovo was headed in the opposite direction.

Like other provinces of the former Yugoslavia, Kosovo fast was becoming a place controlled by an intolerant ethnic organization seething with nationalism and revenge. In effect, NATO's air war had created a new Albanian Republic of Kosovo to take its place beside the Balkans' other ethnic territories: Croatian Bosnia, Muslim Bosnia and the Serb Republic.

NATO found the KLA militants willing to give lip service to the rules of the international occupation but grudging in their follow through, if not outright defiant. In some areas, Russian KFOR troops considered friendly to the Serbs – have come under sniper fire.

In the French-patrolled town of Mitrovica, about 50 miles north of Pristina, a KLA-backed mob stormed across a bridge toward a Serb neighborhood. The mob was pushed back by French troops, with one French soldier seriously injured. Angered by the failed march, KLA leader Hashim Thaci denounced the French troops as "undemocratic and arrogant."

I witnessed another typical confrontation between a young KLA leader and a U.S. Army colonel in the small village of Kacanik, about 50 miles south of Pristina. The KLA had set up illegal checkpoints on the road, prompting Col. Joe Anderson of New York City, the 82nd Airborne commander in the area, to complain to the young KLA commander, Xhabir Zharku.

"I'll make it simple for you," Anderson declared. "If we find anymore checkpoints here, we're going to apprehend your people. I'm telling you as commander in this zone, it's not authorized. So we can do it easy or do it hard.

But the next checkpoint we come across of any kind, we will apprehend your people. Understand what I'm saying?"

But Xhabir Zharku appeared unfazed by Anderson's threat. Sitting behind a large desk under the red Albanian flag with a black double-headed eagle crest, the KLA commander defended the use of roadblocks. "These checkpoints are only to register returning residents for health reasons," Zharku argued.

"That role is not authorized," Anderson countered.

"I took the mines," Zharku responded. "Nobody gave us help, and we fought in the mountains. These are our people and this is our country and that means we control it."

"But you don't control it," said Anderson. "For the fifth time, you have no authority for checkpoints. And if I don't have your cooperation, I'll move you out, too. I'll say it one more time, you can assist your people, but security and law enforcement is KFOR's job."

In the weeks that followed, KLA militants only continued to stir up more trouble. On July 23, 1999, unidentified gunmen believed to be KLA guerrillas massacred 14 Serb farmers, ages 18 to 63, who were harvesting a field near Gracko, a small farming village just south of Pristina. Overall, about 30 Serbs a week were dying at the hands of revenge-seeking Albanian Kosovars, human rights observers estimated.

In early August, Human Rights Watch blamed KLA members for a string of murders, kidnappings and beatings directed against Serbs and Gypsies. Though Human Rights Watch did not accuse the KLA leadership of directing the violence, the group condemned the KLA high command for not taking action to stop it.

Beyond the evaporating hopes for a multi-ethnic Kosovo, chances also are disappearing for a multi-party democracy in an Albanian-run Kosovo. The KLA has begun asserting broad authority over the province's economy, politics and security. The KLA seems intent on establishing a one-party Kosovo not unlike the old communist regimes of Serbia and Albania.

As the KLA's consolidates its control, non-violent Albanian Kosovar leader Ibrahim Rugova reportedly fears for his life because of threats from the KLA. The KLA's new dominance could make the idea of free elections in the future a farce.

Since the June cease-fire, an open border with lawless Albania also has allowed organized-crime gangs to relocate in Kosovo, where new opportunities exist because of the shattered society and the prospects of a golden shower of

international aid.

The chaos has allowed KLA warlords to expand heroin smuggling routes that run from the Middle East through Kosovo to Europe. Interpol estimated that 40 percent of the heroin traffic into Europe transits Kosovo, a figure that is expected to increase.

The very thin blue line of United Nations police totaling only about 300 in mid-August (1999) with the eventual goal of about 3,000 is arriving to find a Kosovo already in the grip of KLA-connected criminal gangs.

Even Albanian journalists are appalled by what the KLA is doing.

In an interview with *The New York Times*, Baton Haxhiu, editor of *Koha Detore*, an Albanian-language daily, said, "The only political group with any structure is the KLA. They use it to take power, backed by a police they alone will control. It will be hard to turn Albania into Kosovo, but I expect very easy to turn Kosovo into Albania. Each day it is becoming more dangerous to think and speak independently." [NYT, July 29, 1999]

Besides foreshadowing more trouble in the region, the KLA's actions have undercut one of President Clinton's chief arguments for U.S. policy in the troubled region, a determination to end the region's ethnic violence.

Even as this new reality becomes apparent, however, Clinton has continued to single out Serb leader Slobodan Milosevic as the villain responsible for the region's "ethnic cleansing."

"I do not believe we should give reconstruction aid to Serbia as long as it rejects democracy and as long as Mr. Milosevic is in power," Clinton asserted on July 30, 1999, during a visit to Sarajevo, the capital of nearby Bosnia. "We have had enough of ethnic cleansing. I did not involve the United States in Bosnia or in Kosovo to hurt Serbian people. We took a stand for the humanity of all people, and against anyone who seeks to use racial, religious or ethnic differences to promote hatred."

But NATO leaders have failed to condemn the ethnic Albanian attacks on Serbs with the same vigor. Taking a more philosophical view after the 14 Serb farmers were killed, British KFOR commander, Gen. Mike Jackson, explained that "attitudes or thinking can't be changed with a soldier."

Since the early 1990s, Milosevic and the Serbs earned themselves the role as the region's "black hats," blamed for the bulk of ethnic violence in the historically divided Balkans. But there was always plenty of blame to go around for the tit-for-tat ethnic fighting.

Still, the prevailing anti-Serb attitude within the international community helped explain why there was so little protest in 1995 when the Croatian Army marched through U.N. lines and expelled several hundred thousand ethnic Serbs from a Serb enclave in Croatia. Thousands of Serb civilians were killed in that round of "ethnic cleansing."

Milosevic and the Serbs became the heavies again when they confronted a rebellious Albanian majority in Kosovo.

Fearing the loss of another piece of historic Serb territory, Milosevic cracked down on the province's autonomy and appealed stridently to Serb nationalism. As tensions mounted, the ethnic Albanians, who had become the overwhelming majority of Kosovo's population, resisted Serb authority.

By early 1998, the KLA had emerged as a troublesome guerrilla force best known for its tendency toward terrorism and its connections to the heroin trade. During 1998, I traveled with KLA forces and felt sympathy toward their resistance to Serb repression, though troubled by many of their tactics.

The KLA's chief accomplishment was to provoke a harsh counterinsurgency campaign by the Serb army and police forces that sent the KLA reeling in a string of bloody confrontations. But the Serbs also took aim at suspected KLA supporters. In some of the worst abuses, Serb soldiers stepped aside and allowed Serb paramilitary thugs to terrorize the Albanian Kosovars.

By spring 1998, villages considered sympathetic to the KLA were put to the torch, with civilians suffering rape, torture and executions. KLA guerrillas fled into Albania and into the mountains. An uneasy truce existed through the winter, but the KLA regrouped in early 1999. The Serbs retaliated with more brutality.

Led by the United States, NATO demanded the right to intervene inside Yugoslavia and issued what amounted to an ultimatum to Milosevic. When Milosevic balked, NATO launched an air campaign on March 24 against Serb targets in Kosovo and throughout Serbia.

NATO's bombings raised Serbia's nationalistic passions even higher. On the ground, Serb forces inflicted widespread atrocities against ethnic Albanians, while NATO jets accidentally killed thousands of civilians as "collateral damage." All told, about one million Kosovars fled as refugees, roughly one-half of the province's pre-war population.

Faced with unrelenting NATO air attacks and political pressure from his Moscow allies, Milosevic finally capitulated in June, winning only NATO's assurance that Kosovo would remain part of Serbia. Yet, as Milosevic's forces retreated,



the KLA quickly advanced toward strategic towns and roadways.

Though considered ineffective in waging guerrilla warfare or when matching up against the regular Serb army, the KLA finally was benefiting from more professional leadership. The KLA had come under the command of a U.S.-trained Croatian Army general, Agim Ceku, who had assisted the 1995 ethnic cleansing of Serbs from Croatia. Besides sharing his experience with the KLA, Gen. Ceku organized a purge of moderate Albanians from the KLA's ranks.

NATO troops also rushed to take up peacekeeping positions, supposedly to protect the civilian populations, both Serb and Albanian. When I reached Kosovo on June 14, 1999, British Gen. Mike Jackson was touring the Serb neighborhoods of Pristina, urging the residents to stay. But many Serbs doubted that NATO could protect them from KLA revenge, a suspicion that was grounded in reality.

Crisscrossing Kosovo, I found that the pattern of law and order in NATO's five occupation zones varied depending on the nationality of the KFOR troops. There were frequent reports of Italian and German troops virtually ignoring their peacekeeping duties in favor of the KLA.

In the southwestern town of Prizren, thousands of armed KLA troops marched in from Albania as the small 200-man force of the German 12th Panzer Division stood aside. In film clips shown on TV in Pristina, some German soldiers were seen embracing the KLA guerrillas. When Albanian youths stoned a busload of fleeing Serb civilians, the Panzer troops did not unshoulder their rifles.

A BBC-TV crew told me that Albanians torched 20 Serb homes in the western city of Pec as Italian KFOR troops, resplendent in their parrot-feather plumes, looked on. Half of a group of 200 Serb refugees returning from Montenegro immediately decided to turn back.

The British seemed sincere in their peacekeeping efforts but less than aggressive. In Pristina, British troops tried to disarm about 50 KLA fighters holed up in one apartment building. Three hours of negotiations led to a standoff with the KLA guerrillas allowed to keep their AK-47s and the British explaining that the goal was to "disarm" the KLA's "command and control," rather than just collect guns.

South of Pristina, near Gnjilane, the U.S. Marines from the 26th Expeditionary Force took "disarming" more literally. They stopped a force of 160 KLA guerrillas heading to the village of Zegra. The Marines seized more than 100 AK-47s and assorted other weapons. In another incident, Marines confiscated KLA weapons prompting a torrent of insults from nearby Albanians.

In the 82nd Airborne's territory, Col. Anderson deployed his 4,000 troops with a

clear goal of establishing law and order and grabbing as many of the KLA's guns as possible. He showed me a large warehouse where his troops had stacked a motley collection of weapons taken from the KLA. But many rifles were rusted and the AK-47s were in disrepair, suggesting that the KLA was keeping its best weapons.

One KLA sub-commander promised to deliver his weapons to the warehouse but had second thoughts. "He decided he would keep his guns against the orders of his senior commanders and mine," Anderson said. "It's an indication that discipline within the KLA ranks is beginning to break down, when subordinates decide to buck their commanders' orders."

Or it was a sign that the KLA commanders were willing to surrender only their old and useless weapons. Other times, NATO succeeded in forcing only cosmetic changes on the KLA. For instance, KFOR's rules prohibited KLA forces from swaggering around villages in their combat fatigues. But many KLA guerrillas simply switched to wearing civilian black shirts, trousers and berets, making them look a bit like a Hitler youth group and still very intimidating.

Whatever the sincerity of NATO's peacekeeping, however, KLA-backed Albanian revenge swept across Kosovo, with widespread reports of beatings, murders and destruction of ancient Serb monasteries. In Vetina, in the American sector, Capt. Mat McFarlane of Burke, Virginia, said the revenge begins after dark.

"It starts about nightfall," McFarlane told me. "Homes or barns burning, and shootings. We respond with mobile or foot patrols and try to apprehend the lawbreakers and seize their weapons. There's really no pattern to it, just Serbs and Albanians staking claims to territory and blaming each other for the violence. They seem to have grown up in an environment of threats and killings as a way of life."

In Pristina, a few blocks from my apartment, a prominent Serb economic professor and two colleagues were brutally murdered, even as British paratroops patrolled the streets in armored personnel carriers and on foot. The three victims were tied up with duct tape and bludgeoned to death with a hammer.

Other times, the reprisals targeted the small businesses and media outlets that hold a community together. The Vocar market, near Pristina's Grand Hotel, was run by friendly Serbs who sold groceries at a fair price. But in early July, the store closed after a rock was hurled through its plate-glass window.

The Serb-run Media Centar at the Grand Hotel was another target. Computers and fax machines were stolen. KLA hooligans took over the hotel lobby, got drunk and began looting. The Media Centar's director, Radovan Urosevic, soon left for

Greece, while his partner, Milivoje Mihalovic, editor of Radio Pristina, turned off the mikes and headed north to Serbia.

Another facet of the Albanian revenge has been to target Serb religious sites. British troops found the Fourteenth Century Monastery of Svete Trojice in Suva Reka completely destroyed. Serbian Orthodox priest Sava Jajic led me to another ancient monastery, a 15th Century structure in Devik, that had suffered KLA looting.

One of the nuns, Sister Anastasia, described how guerrillas from the local KLA chapter smashed religious icons that were several hundred years old. She pointed to a large oil painting of a favorite Orthodox saint which had been defaced by a KLA activist who had carved the group's initials in Albanian "UCK" into the painting with a bayonet.

Father Sava, known as the "cyber-monk" for his informative e-mails sent around the world, protected Albanians in his own monastery in Decani during the Serb "ethnic cleansing" campaigns. Because of that, he has seen Albanians return the favor by defending the monastery from retaliation.

"If they [the KLA] are going to kill the monks, they [the KLA] must kill us first," said Shaban Bruqi, an Albanian villager. "They [the monks] saved us."

On July 2, 1999, Father Sava joined with a small group of Serb and Albanian leaders issuing a joint statement seeking reconciliation.

"We want to realize our joint goal of a civil society in Kosovo, a society where no one has to fear for his life, his family, his job or his home because of his ethnicity or belief," the communique read. "The road to reconciliation will be long and difficult. There is no such thing as natural hatred among people in Kosovo."

But that night, a less-forgiving attitude was on display in Pristina. Celebrating the ninth anniversary of an Albanian declaration of independence for Kosovo, thousands of Albanian Kosovar youths drove through the streets waving Albanian flags and firing AK-47s. The shooting continued until 3 a.m.

Despite the best hopes of many well-intentioned citizens from both ethnic groups and the brave peacekeeping efforts of some NATO troops, the future of Kosovo seems headed in a very different direction than Father Sava or President Clinton might hope.

Rather than a multi-cultural society living in peace, Kosovo likely will be dominated by KLA gunmen determined to purge the province's centuries-old Serb ethnic presence. As a consequence of NATO's military intervention, Kosovo

appears to have traded the brutality of Serb paramilitary thugs for the brutality of like-minded Albanians.

With corrupt warlords vying for control, Kosovo seems headed for a future that resembles more Albania or Chechnya than some Western-style democracy.

**Don North is a veteran war correspondent who covered the Vietnam War and many other conflicts around the world. He is the author of a new book, *Inappropriate Conduct*, the story of a World War II correspondent whose career was crushed by the intrigue he uncovered.**

Other historic reporting on the Kosovo crisis from Consortiumnews.com:

"Why Kosovo?" by Don North. Originally published Nov. 6, 1998. The early days of the war and what the two sides were fighting over.

"Irony at Racak: Tainted U.S. Diplomat Condemns Massacre" by Don North. Originally published Jan. 26, 1999. An American condemnation of a Serb massacre in Kosovo recalls U.S. ambivalence about massacres in Central America.

"Wag the Dog in Reverse" by Mollie Dickenson, Originally published May 4, 1999. Bill Clinton's political crisis over sex distracts from a real war in the Balkans.

"Television Wars" by Don North, Originally published May 4, 1999. NATO intentionally bombs a Serb TV station.

"Target Yugoslavia" by Robert Parry, Originally published May 4, 1999. The Clinton administration tries out high-tech info-war tactics on the Serbs.

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## Clinton's Experience: Fact and Fantasy

**From the Archive:** Hillary Clinton's win in Saturday's Nevada caucuses and her big lead in South Carolina restore her status as Democratic frontrunner but lingering doubts about her honesty and her coziness to Big Money continue to dog her path to the White House, a problem that Barbara Koeppel identified during Clinton's first run in 2008.

By Barbara Koepfel (First published on April 15, 2008)

The problem for presidential candidate Hillary Clinton is how to stop kicking herself in the leg. Although she's scored real achievements over the years, when repeating her 35-years-of-experience mantra, she pushes the facts too far.

By now, her gaffes on Tuzla, Bosnia, where her claims of "landing under sniper fire" and "running for cover" are well-known. Ditto her lines on Northern Ireland where Nobel Peace Prize winner Lord Trimble of Lisnagarvey, Ireland, said she was "a wee bit silly" for exaggerating the part she played in bringing peace.

But if we reality-check some other claims, what *can* we say of her 35 years, on which she hopes to distinguish herself from Sen. Barack Obama, who has actually logged more years in elected posts, counting his years in the Illinois legislature?

To start with, for 14 of the 35 years that she's counting, Clinton was a full-time corporate litigator in Little Rock, Arkansas, at the Rose Law Firm. Further, for her White House years aside from her work as chair of the President's Task Force on Health Care Reform she served as First Lady, not policy maker.

While First Lady in Arkansas, she did, as she claims, help "transform the education system." Teachers and others there agree that, as chair of a commission to re-write Arkansas' deplorable education standards, she was effective. Among other things, the new norms raised teacher salaries and amounts spent per pupil, and reduced class size.

Since Arkansas ranked 49th out of America's 50 states in most educational measurements, and dead last in the percent of students who went on to college, the base was so low that any gains would be good. But it's a fact the numbers improved.

Add to the fact column her work on child welfare boards, like the Children's Defense Fund and the Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families.

#### **Dubious Claims**

Other claims, however, are downright dubious, if not terminal twaddle. Let's start with her now-impassioned concerns for workers' rights. This is surely an eyebrow-raiser, since her record on labor issues is roughly zero.

For example, she was on WalMart's Board of Directors from 1986-1992, a company legendary for its low wages and union busting. Not surprisingly, her official biography omits this six-year stint.

Nor does she mention it when she woos blue-collar workers. In an effort to expunge the WalMart connection, Clinton returned its \$5,000 campaign contribution to her in 2005.

According to Sam Ortega, a Wall Street Journal reporter and author of *In Sam We Trust: The Untold Story of Sam Walton and How Wal-Mart is Devouring America*, the company fiercely fought any union attempts to organize WalMart workers threatening, spying on and firing supporters, all illegal acts.

Ortega writes that, during a Teamsters' campaign at a distribution center, "Sam Walton bluntly told them he'd take away their profit-sharing if they voted for the union."

Further, Ortega says many workers "remember his (Walton's) threats with perfect clarity." He adds that one worker, Larry Havener, recalls, "He told us if the union got in, the warehouse would be closed."

Worse, Ortega writes, "union activists were soon laid off, always for some other stated reason, of course." Moreover, "Walton asked all employees to call John Tate the company's chief union-buster if they noticed anything that smacked of union activity," Ortega notes.

#### **Low Wages**

WalMart's devotion to low wages seems not to have lost Clinton any sleep. Ortega notes that in 1988 two years *after* Clinton joined the Board an Arkansas state senator publicly attacked the company for "dumping its overhead on state taxpayers, saying many of its near minimum-wage workers made so little they had to get by on public assistance."

Another problem plaguing the company was the use of child workers some as young as nine by its foreign suppliers: When shown photos of children in Saraka, a Bangladesh sweatshop that made WalMart-label shirts, the company claimed ignorance.

But in 1990, the Saraka plant had a fatal fire killing some 25 children, the year *before* WalMart contracted with the company. An NBC News report said the child workers were locked in the factory until they finished each day's production.

Moreover, despite her long-term concern for health care along with child welfare, Clinton's signature issues she stayed on the Board although Ortega says WalMart insured fewer than 40 percent of its workers.

Why? Perhaps it was Clinton's \$15,000 annual WalMart salary, which rose to \$45,000, for her service at four meetings a year, at a time her husband earned just \$35,000 as Governor. Perhaps it was her corporate lawyer role at the conservative Rose Law Firm in Little Rock, where she worked from 1978 until the couple moved to the White House. Perhaps it was Arkansas' "right-to-work" fundamentalism that made her mute. Whatever the motive, today's worries for working-blokes' concerns ring hollow.

Then there's NAFTA (the North American Free Trade Agreement), which passed on her husband's watch in 1994. Critics worried then, and insist now, that it caused the loss of hundreds of thousands of U.S. manufacturing jobs. Later, candidate Clinton claimed to have doubted NAFTA's merits from the start. But the record indicates otherwise. In 2004, she praised NAFTA as "good for New York and America."

#### **Health-Care Choices**

But more than any others, Clinton's claims about her desire to improve health coverage and care through her efforts as chair of President Clinton's health care task force are seriously flawed.

History and numbers tell the story best. In 1993, health care was a crisis for the U.S. public: 37 million Americans had none, and millions more had very little. Thus, public opinion polls ranked it as the number-two concern, second only to the economy since the country was in a recession.

A majority wanted universal health care: Even many providers and the American Medical Association initially favored some form of universal plan. The universal model adopted in Canada and most Western European countries, called the single-payer system, is not socialized medicine, as insurance companies repeat by rote.

Governments do not tell patients which doctors to see. Nor do they dictate what doctors may or may not do. Instead, it's a payment mechanism, like Medicare: The government pays the health care bills directly, rather than the insurance companies.

This way, overhead costs linked to billings are slashed: In 1993, when First Lady Clinton launched her health-care task force, a hospital official in Windsor, Canada, told me his costs associated with billing the Government for patient services accounted for just 9 percent of the hospital's budget, while the average U.S. hospital spent 14 percent a big difference in a multi-million-dollar budget. In Canada, the savings left huge sums for covering patient care.

Did Clinton's task force examine the single-payer option? Alas, it was never on the table. According to Vicente Navarro, a physician and professor of health and public policy at Johns Hopkins University, and a member of Clinton's task force, he tried repeatedly to get it considered, and failed.

In a 2007 CounterPunch article, "[Why Hillary's Health Care Plan Really Failed](#)," Navarro writes that although he promoted the views of the single-payer community (unions, grassroots organizations and many providers) "they were heard but not heeded. I had the feeling I was in the White House as a token."

#### **Mixing Single-Payer**

Why such disdain for the system used in most industrialized nations? Navarro says Bill Clinton was pushing the managed-competition model, backed by the insurance industry, where the companies "have full control over health-care providers." As proof, he writes that Bill Link, vice president of Prudential, stated that "For Prudential, the best scenario for reform would be ... managed competition."

The plan that Hillary Clinton's task force ultimately sent to the Senate failed to pass, but not, Navarro insists, because of "bad timing" or the "excessive generosity" of the plan's proposed benefits, as is generally believed. Rather, it died because President Clinton and Hillary Clinton refused to send a plan that was truly universal, and one around which the public could mobilize.

Thus, no plan was approved and insurance companies continued to control and prosper from the U.S. health-care model.

Fourteen years later (at the time of this article), another 10 million were uninsured and millions more were under-insured often impoverished by serious or even not-so-serious illnesses.

Again, why? Why rule out even a cursory discussion of single-payer models?

Navarro says Hillary Clinton told him a single-payer plan was not politically possible. But to pass NAFTA, the President twisted every congressional arm he needed to make the deal. So, why couldn't he use the bully pulpit to mount the same push for universal health care an issue on which most of the public agreed? One answer could be contributions from the insurance industry and those connected to it: According to the Center for Responsive Politics (CRP), over Bill Clinton's career, insurance industries rank among the top 20 donors, while law and the financial firms are among the top 10 the sectors often tightly linked to the insurance industry.

Fast forward to 2008 and, based on CRP figures, the industry continues its generosity, this time to Hillary Clinton giving \$913,000 to date. Obama has benefited too, with \$700,000.

(The complicated Clinton health-care plan failed in 1994, but President Barack Obama eventually pushed through a somewhat similar plan in 2010 although it still fell short of universal coverage, leaves many of the insured with high deductibles and has become a rallying point for Republican opposition to Obama and other Democrats.)

Since Bill Clinton and other Hillary supporters complained in 2008 that she was picked on by the press, she would do well if she only claimed what is legitimate. This way, the press would not have to flush out the fables.

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# Holding the EU Together

Stressed by a long recession and a new refugee crisis, the European Union granted extraordinary concessions to London to keep Great Britain from splitting away from the Continent, but the glue holding the fragile union together may increasingly be an exaggerated fear of Russia, writes Gilbert Doctorow.

By Gilbert Doctorow

On Saturday, we woke up to the largely unexpected news of a solution to Britain's demand for officially recognized "special status" within the European Union. Just hours earlier, the reporters of *Euronews* were busily explaining that there was lack of consensus among the heads of state in the European Council about the deep concessions demanded by the British government.

We were told time was running out, that the debates on Britain had pushed aside much needed discussion of the migrant crisis, also planned for the summit that began Thursday evening. For British Prime Minister David Cameron, any postponement of a deal would have jeopardized his plans for a referendum on Brexit later this spring.

After the "special status" agreement, there were mostly smiles among the high European Union officials interviewed for comments on the compromise deal. Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker and Council President Donald Tusk were visibly delighted at having pulled the rabbit from a hat. Meanwhile, the facial expressions of French President Francois Hollande and Belgian Prime Minister Charles Michel betrayed disappointment and resignation.

Though it is by no means clear that the concessions that Cameron received in Brussels will be enough to overcome the opposition from "Brexit" partisans in the U.K. and give the E.U. supporters the upper hand in a tight contest of public opinion, the concessions were, in fact, tangible, significant and immediate. For the E.U., they put in question the momentum towards ever greater unity, a goal from which the British received an express opt-out.

The settlement also allows Britain to cut benefits to nationals of other E.U. member states residing in England and so to jeopardize the freedom of movement within the E.U. that Continentals recognize as a fundamental pillar of their association.

And the settlement removed from discussion the notion of eventual universality of the euro currency within the E.U., which means there will remain a contradiction in the decision-making procedures of the E.U. perpetuating two

qualities of membership – those in and outside the currency union. Yet, visible campaigners for European federalism like Belgium's Guy Verhofstadt were on the side of granting Britain its coveted "special status" from the beginning.

So what is going on? I will call attention here to two small but revelatory signs of what, and ultimately who drove the otherwise puzzling consensus on concessions to Britain that mortgage Europe's future.

One sign is the high visibility accorded to one head of state, Dalia Grybauskaite, from start to finish in coverage of the European summit. As president of Lithuania, she is nominally a very minor figure at the far eastern border of the E.U. whose views should carry no weight in decisions taken by the "big boys" in Brussels. And yet, her entry to the summit was caught by Euronews reporters who hung on her words. And when all the work of the summit was concluded, it was a tweet from Grybauskaite that first announced the deal to the world, ahead of tweets by Council president Tusk or other participants.

The only possible relevance of Grybauskaite's featured status at the summit was her position as leader of the anti-Russian faction. From the start of the campaign to woo Ukraine into an association with the E.U. and away from Russia, through the E.U. Summit in Vilnius in 2013 that then Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich spoiled, and on to the imposition of sanctions against Russia over its "annexation" of Crimea and intervention in Donbass, Grybauskaite has been out front crying wolf over the supposed Russian threat to eastern European states.

The second and confirming sign of what drove the compromise came from none other than David Cameron in his first remarks to the press following the "British dinner" that concluded the Summit in Brussels. Cleverness is not one of Cameron's strong suits, and his comments put out for public consumption what logically should have remained behind closed doors of the Council, namely that striking a deal, one might say any deal with Britain was very important if Europe were to face the supposed threat to its security from Russian "aggression."

Thus, Cameron explicitly, and Grybauskaite implicitly tell us that this deal on Britain's relationship with the E.U. and the E.U.'s overall prospects for the future hang on one issue: the consensus view on Russia. For those of us who have hoped the genuine divisions within Europe on sanctions against Russia based on conflicting economic and security interests of Member States would lead to their scrapping wholly or partially in July, what happened in Brussels on Friday is not good news. And to those who may wonder how this particular configuration of interests came about, the strings lead back to Washington.

Doctorow is the European Coordinator, American Committee for East West Accord, Ltd. His latest book *Does Russia Have a Future?* (August 2015) is available in paperback and e-book from Amazon.com and affiliated websites. For donations to support the European activities of ACEWA, write to [eastwestaccord@gmail.com](mailto:eastwestaccord@gmail.com). © Gilbert Doctorow, 2015

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