

# **Victory by Spin? Britain, the US and the Propaganda War over Kosovo**

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*This article considers whether NATO won the war in Kosovo by spin, tricking Milosevic into believing that a ground invasion was imminent. It argues that during the conflict over Kosovo the propaganda war for public opinion was perceived by British and US governments as vitally important. NATO elites attempted to address (at least) eleven different audiences with a message appropriate to each. The two key audiences were, first, NATO public opinion which had to be reassured of the legitimacy of NATO's war against Kosovo and was also unsettled about the prospect of deploying ground troops. Simultaneously, NATO attempted to communicate to the second audience, Milosevic and the Serb elite, a more aggressive message that it would take whatever steps were needed to prevail. Using various 'political skills' NATO escalated the propaganda war against Milosevic while attempting to pacify domestic opinion and this may well have played an important role in the capitulation of the Serb leader.*

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Our enemy, as spokesmen, was Milosevic's media machine but our judge and jury was the Western media.

*Alastair Campbell, Prime Minister's Press Secretary, Speech to the Royal United Services Institute, July 1999.*

This article critically reviews three leading positions on the role of public opinion and the media in foreign policy and argues that public opinion places both perceived and real constraints on the British and US governments.<sup>1</sup>

Two key audiences are identified which the British and US governments attempted to manage. The first of these is NATO public opinion which had to be reassured of the legitimacy of the conflict and its misgivings about the use of ground troops soothed. This had to be achieved while simultaneously communicating to the second key audience – Milosevic and the Serb elite – a more aggressive message that NATO would take whatever steps were necessary to prevail. In this propaganda war, the media become a vital battleground in the struggle to shape the views of important audiences.

NATO expected that Milosevic would capitulate to its demands over Kosovo after a few days of bombing in March 1999. The use of ground troops was ruled out to reassure NATO public opinion and ensure the unity of the Alliance. All NATO governments to varying degrees, had problems in selling their involvement in the Kosovo War to domestic public opinion. To have threatened to use stronger force, including ground troops, from the start of the bombing campaign may have provoked an adverse reaction from NATO public opinion and jeopardised the image of a united NATO alliance. The image, if not the reality, of NATO unity was important if the Alliance was to credibly threaten Milosevic to back down.<sup>2</sup>

When the Serb leadership refused to agree to terms NATO was left with the problem of how to increase pressure on Milosevic to negotiate when the threat of a ground invasion had been ruled out. The British Labour government took the lead in reviving the threat of a ground invasion. The US President, Bill Clinton, shifted the US position on ground troops from opposition to a ground assault to not ruling out the possibility of an invasion. If NATO could credibly threaten Milosevic with a ground invasion and military defeat then he might capitulate without NATO needing to use further force and endangering their soldiers' lives. On 3 June 1999 Milosevic accepted NATO's terms.

Several reasons have been advanced for the capitulation of Milosevic – the success of diplomacy, Russian pressure, NATO bombing and the indictment of the Serb leader by the International Criminal Court. This article investigates whether NATO intended to launch a ground assault and if the Serb leadership capitulated because NATO spun them into believing that they would launch a ground invasion. Did NATO overcome the Serbs by winning the propaganda war and spinning Milosevic into believing that a ground invasion was imminent?

#### FOREIGN POLICY: PUBLIC OPINION, THE MEDIA AND KOSOVO

There has been debate over whether public opinion and, therefore, the media are important in the formulation of foreign policy.

1. *Right-wing realists* argue that politicians are only constrained by public opinion because they *perceive* it to be important. In reality, they argue, politicians could safely ignore public opinion. Right-wing realists are elitists and they argue not only that public opinion is not important but also that it should not be important in the formation of foreign policy. Foreign policy is seen rightfully as the preserve of political elites and should be free from the 'interference' of uninformed public opinion. They fear that public acknowledgement of the influence of domestic opinion would encourage unwanted public pressure on foreign policy-making. Therefore even if public opinion were important, it would be necessary for the political elites to keep up the public pretence that it was not. A second reason why right-wing realists do not want to acknowledge the influence of public opinion is because they believe this exposes the state's weakness to an enemy. If Milosevic believes, for example, that inflicting casualties on British or American soldiers will lead to their public's demands for withdrawal then this may encourage attacks on those troops. This explains why Britain's 'Palestine syndrome' – which is comparable to the US's 'Vietnam syndrome' – has been alluded to through fiction (which is deniable) rather than in open public debate – for example, Douglas Hurd's short story on Bosnia in *The Observer* 31/1/93. If public opinion is unimportant then the role of the media in affecting domestic public opinion is also unimportant.<sup>3</sup>
2. *Left-wing realists* argue that the media is an important agent for controlling domestic public opinion but presents this as an unproblematic achievement in capitalist states. The state is seen as an all-powerful monolith which is impervious, let alone vulnerable, to the influence of public opinion and this leads to pessimism about political activism and opposition to dominant discourses.<sup>4</sup> By concentrating on the power of the state and the media they underestimate the resistance of public opinion to manipulation and the constraint this puts on policy-making.
3. *Postmodernists* argue that in the radically new era of postmodernism/globalisation that both public opinion and the media count in the formulation of foreign policy.<sup>5</sup> A supportive media first, mobilises public opinion behind the state. Second, helps the state convince the 'enemy' that it should capitulate or face defeat. According to Michael Ignatieff, 'Virtual war is won by being spun'.<sup>6</sup>
4. *The argument* presented here sits more easily with the actors' own accounts of their actions. It is argued that there is evidence during the post-1945 period that public opinion was an important and 'real' (and not just perceived)

constraint on US and British foreign policy and is not the recent development that postmodernists claim. NATO achieved its victory by a combination of spin to sustain the support of various domestic and international audiences as well as to shape Milosevic's perception that there was a credible military threat of a ground invasion. Since Milosevic seems to have believed that domestic public opinion was a key NATO vulnerability,<sup>7</sup> so the Alliance needed to demonstrate its support, or at least acquiescence in NATO policy, in order to persuade the Serb leader to negotiate. Demonstrating the support of public opinion is a way of communicating determination to the enemy. The war was fought partly out of the need to sustain NATO credibility and the continuing need to spin a powerful *image* that can be used to project the Alliance's power around the world. Following from this, and contrary to left-wing and right-wing realists, it is argued that the state is vulnerable to the influence of domestic opinion even when the political elite is not deeply divided. Consequently, the media is seen as playing an important part in the manipulation of opinion.

#### TWO KEY AUDIENCES: TWO DIFFERENT MESSAGES

The British, US and other governments attempted to communicate the appropriate message to at least 11 different audiences. But there were important contradictions in the contrasting messages that the British and US governments (and other countries in the NATO Alliance) attempted to send out to the *two key audiences*. *NATO public opinion* had to be reassured of the legitimacy of the campaign, the 'evil' of the Milosevic regime and the Alliance's determination to win. While NATO attempted to communicate to *Milosevic and the Serb elite* a more aggressive message that it would triumph and take whatever steps were necessary for it to prevail, 'This conflict was a conflict of perceptions. At the heart of the campaign were efforts to mobilise and to sustain domestic and international support and to demonstrate resolve to Belgrade'.<sup>8</sup> This was problematic because the two audiences might pick up the message intended for the other audience, creating problems for the coherence of NATO's propaganda strategy.

There was also varying tolerance between various NATO countries on the extent to which their publics would tolerate NATO bombing operations, particularly those that involved civilian casualties. If NATO was too belligerent in its threats and use of force, including the threat of ground troops and war, this might produce a backlash among public opinion against not only ground troops but the whole NATO operation. Even the knowledge that NATO was considering plans for a ground option may have been too much for some publics to bear and this caused politicians to put constraints on the NATO

military.<sup>9</sup> There was an incentive for NATO politicians to tell their various publics what they wanted to hear and for NATO policy to reflect the lowest common denominator to maintain Alliance unity.

NATO's failure to back up previous threats of force with action and divisions within its ranks may have undermined the credibility of its threats of force.<sup>10</sup> The British Defence Select Committee argued:

...The war should never have needed to have been fought. It was, we believe, the *impression* of the lack of unity and resolve in the Alliance at the outset which led Milosevic to think he might get away with calling NATO's bluff.<sup>11</sup> (my emphasis)

Given the differences of opinion within the NATO alliance and the sensitivities of public opinion the 'mixed messages' that NATO was giving out may have been politically unavoidable. The initial decision of the British and US governments to rule out the use of ground troops has attracted considerable criticism for reducing NATO's threat against Milosevic and therefore the pressure on him to negotiate. There have been critics within the US military who wanted the projection of maximum determination by more widespread bombing earlier in the campaign to force the enemy to capitulate.<sup>12</sup> It could be argued that only by initially ruling out a ground war and instituting a limited bombing campaign could NATO unity be preserved.<sup>13</sup> After the end of the war Alastair Campbell, Tony Blair's Press Secretary, drew the threads of NATO strategy together,

...That NATO could win militarily was never really in doubt. The only battle we might lose was the battle for hearts and minds. The consequence would have been NATO ending and losing the war. Keeping public support, keeping the alliance united, and showing Milosevic that we were united, was what we were all about.<sup>14</sup>

The problems of addressing these two key audiences simultaneously are illustrated by NATO's initial decision to bomb the Serbs justifying it as a humanitarian effort to prevent ethnic cleansing in Kosovo. While this may have been an effective way of presenting and selling NATO's actions to sceptical domestic public opinion, there appear to have been few illusions among NATO political elites that this is what the bombings would achieve. The bombing was just NATO's initial gambit in its attempt to coerce Milosevic to negotiate. The Defence Select Committee concluded, '...that much of the time the strategies of coercion and the tactics of denial did not sit easily together, sending some confusing signals both to the Serbian leadership and to NATO's own publics, as well as dividing the military efforts of the Alliance in a less than efficient way'.<sup>15</sup> The Committee also found,

'None of our witnesses has seriously offered the view...that an air campaign could directly inhibit the activities of Milosevic's ethnic cleansers'.<sup>16</sup>

...The Alliance, we believe, was at times hamstrung in pursuing an effective campaign against targets of strategic value while it continued to maintain publicly that it was attacking only forces or facilities involved either directly or indirectly in ethnic cleansing. Politicians demanded that this was to be *presented* as a campaign of *denial*, not a *war* against Serbia. By doing so, they may have confused Belgrade as well as NATO commanders.<sup>17</sup> (my emphasis)

NATO military elites appeared oblivious to the propaganda advantages of claiming that the NATO bombings would prevent ethnic cleansing. They expected the rhetoric of politicians to coincide with what the military were doing on the ground.<sup>18</sup>

#### THE ELEVEN AUDIENCES

While the British and US governments addressed two key audiences a total of eleven, sometimes overlapping, audiences in all might usefully be identified.

##### *Domestic Audiences*

1. *Domestic Public Opinion* – the acquiescence of domestic public opinion was important if NATO was to sustain its bombing campaign and make a credible threat of the use of ground troops in Kosovo. Public opinion would have to be reassured that the campaign was necessary and legitimate. At the same time, if the political elite was too belligerent in its threats against Milosevic this might provoke concern about casualties to 'our boys' and a backlash amongst domestic opinion against ground troops which could rule out even the threat of the use of troops. As in previous conflicts, because public opinion mattered the media were seen to play an important role in sustaining domestic support and thereby contributing to the war effort.
2. *The Military and Military Families* – have influence in two ways. Firstly, because they have relatives in the armed forces and stand to lose so much from war, public opinion is likely to pay particular attention to their concerns. Secondly, because it is from army families that the armies tend to recruit disproportionately, military families have an influence both on public opinion but also directly on the army.<sup>19</sup>

3. *Party Opinion and Bipartisanship* – conflict between political parties or within the governing party can stimulate a wider debate in the media and amongst public opinion making the task of management more difficult.

#### *NATO Audiences*

4. *NATO Domestic Opinion* – was perceived by both Milosevic and NATO to be of great importance and had not been prepared for a long campaign or ground war.<sup>20</sup> The US, with its ‘Vietnam Syndrome’, but also Germany and Italy were reluctant to be drawn into a ground war in Kosovo. The Greek population were strongly opposed to NATO actions over Kosovo. The NATO political elites had to be mindful not only of how statements and initiatives played amongst their own public opinion but also public opinion in other NATO countries. If the US and Britain were too aggressive towards Milosevic they could provoke an adverse reaction in other NATO countries jeopardising the unity of the Alliance and thereby reducing the pressure on Milosevic. In view of the constraints operating on Clinton, Blair launched a media offensive in the USA to win support for the ground option.<sup>21</sup>
5. *NATO Political Elites* – there is evidence that while some NATO political elites publicly opposed a more aggressive stance against Milosevic in private they were sympathetic to ‘toughening up’ NATO’s stance. They could not risk public statements to this effect for fear of upsetting public opinion and producing a backlash which might undermine NATO credibility. By the Washington Summit the Germans felt they could not bring public opinion with them to support a ground war.<sup>22</sup> The Italians, were reported to have assured the British that their calls for bombing pauses were for domestic reasons and did not reflect their true views.<sup>23</sup> The Greeks also tried to project different messages to different audiences, they privately supported NATO but were publicly critical.<sup>24</sup> Even the threat of a ground war by the US could unravel the alliance. The threat of a NATO split was averted at Washington by agreeing to a fresh review of the ground war option, thereby keeping it off the Summit agenda.<sup>25</sup> The French also feared a domestic backlash and did not want this review made public.
6. *NATO Military Elites* – wanted clear objectives and a high degree of autonomy over decisions on the appropriate degree of force to be deployed to achieve NATO’s goals, whenever they could be discerned.<sup>26</sup> The NATO military appeared to be confused by the politicians’ signals to different audiences. On the one hand the politicians appeared to be

saying that the bombing raids were designed to prevent ethnic cleansing while on the other they were saying that they were intended to coerce the Serbs to negotiate.<sup>27</sup> NATO member governments restrained the military because they were ‘...looking over their shoulder at public opinion, [and] insisted on keeping tight control of what targets could be hit.’<sup>28</sup> The politicians’ emphasis on political priorities tended to conflict with the US military’s perceptions of what kind of force and tactics were necessary to communicate a clear and strong threat to the enemy and force Milosevic to capitulate. These conflicting interests exacerbated tensions in civil–military relations. The French reigned in the US generals and attempted to assert stronger political control over the military campaign although the US carried out its own freelance operations to circumvent these constraints.<sup>29</sup>

7. *Kosovo Public Opinion* – the British and US governments favoured and sought to shore up the moderate Albanian Kosovo politicians who favoured autonomy over the Kosovo Liberation Army and UCK which sought independence.

#### *‘Enemy’ Audiences*

8. *Milosevic and The Serb Elite* – the British and US governments wanted to maximise the threat to Milosevic and the Serb elite in order to coerce him to back down and negotiate over Kosovo. According to the British Defence Select Committee *‘the key factor in this campaign was the need to understand the Milosevic regime’s perceptions and to identify the levers that could be used to influence those perception.’*<sup>30</sup>
9. *Serb Armed Forces* – attempts were made by the US to leaflet and demoralise the Serb army, driving a wedge between them and their political masters.
10. *Serb Domestic Opinion* – NATO was caught between, first, portraying Milosevic as the enemy and the Serb public as fellow victims of his power and, second, attributing to Serbs responsibility and therefore guilt for their government’s actions in Kosovo. The limited bombing campaign ‘did enable the Alliance to emphasise that it was fighting the Serbian regime and not the populace as a whole – an important message in this political war.’<sup>31</sup> NATO hoped that the bombing campaign would crack Serb morale and encourage protest against Milosevic. NATO’s bombing of Serbia’s state-owned broadcasting organisation was partly to ‘dismantle the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia’s propaganda machine which is a vital part of President Milosevic’s control mechanism’.<sup>32</sup>

The effort to crack Serb morale appeared to have a 'limited impact'.<sup>33</sup> The problem of demonising only Milosevic was that when NATO bombs hit civilians it was killing what it defined as innocents.<sup>34</sup> The use of bombing to persuade the Serbs to turn against Milosevic could actually involve bombing directed at civilians – which is illegal – in the hope that they will respond to the misery of war and destruction by rising up against their leaders. In order for NATO to justify the bombing of civilians to their domestic audience they would have to be portrayed as having some sense of collective guilt for the repression carried out by their political leaders rather than as victims of Milosevic.<sup>35</sup>

#### *International Audiences*

11. *International Opinion* – winning international support for NATO's action was an important way of legitimising it in the eyes of domestic public opinion but also important to put pressure on the Milosevic regime to negotiate. The acquiescence of the Russian political elite in NATO's actions would remove the threat of a wider East–West confrontation and reduce the leverage of the Serbian political elite in their resistance to NATO.

#### DIFFERENT AUDIENCES, APPROPRIATE MESSAGES

In the age of instant, global communication it might be thought that the ability of politicians to communicate different messages to different audiences is redundant. But there is some evidence that this is what politicians continue to attempt to do in Britain and the US.

Politicians attempt to sell a policy to different audiences in several, overlapping ways:

- *Secrecy and strong insulation* – this is a situation where political leaders may expect their message to a particular audience to be kept secret. Meetings of the cabinet, military or secret services are kept private and although there is the danger of leaks there is some possibility of credible denial. There is evidence that a Cabinet meeting to discuss the possibility of war on Iraq was a dialogue rather than, as it was spun to the press, Blair facing down Cabinet opposition. In this way, an attempt is made to pacify Cabinet misgivings about a war while the public image is of a resolute and 'strong' Prime Minister.<sup>36</sup> What politicians of different countries were communicating privately to each other was sometimes at odds with their public message in particular over support for the use of force.<sup>37</sup>

- *Niche audience, limited coverage* – although a message is made publicly the media coverage may mean that a particular audience is more likely to receive that communication. For example, a different tone, language and message may be given to a regional party conference than given by the party leader in a broadcast to the nation. Language which may have resonance with party members may not be interpreted in a similar way by a national audience who cannot read the nuances or body language. Debates in the House of Commons are not necessarily well reported in the British press – particularly in the tabloids – and few members of the public are likely to have the time or inclination to peruse Hansard. The British government may use arguments and language appropriate to the House of Commons audience, for example emphasising the importance of the Kosovo War for NATO credibility, that might not appeal to a more popular audience where humanitarian arguments may have more resonance and selling power. While in his broadcast to the nation, Blair did not use the NATO credibility argument.
- *Metaphor and fiction* – members of the British foreign policy elite may use metaphor and fiction to communicate their views about the impact of military casualties on British public opinion without broadcasting their concerns either to the British public or potential enemies. The intelligence community has used hypothetical examples to discuss sensitive areas of policy. Douglas Hurd used fiction to communicate his anxiety over the impact of casualties on British public opinion.<sup>38</sup> The foreign policy community has its think tanks, clubs and publications which facilitate intra-elite communication without its discussions necessarily becoming part of a wider public discourse.
- *Niche media* – The variety of media allows politicians to address or target niche audiences, using arguments and language appropriate to the particular audience. The British Labour government were able to address Labour party opinion by targeting articles at left-wing periodicals or even national newspapers. For example, in order to sell the war to the left NATO's campaign against Milosevic was compared to the struggle against fascism in the Spanish civil war (notably in the left-wing *New Statesman and Society* magazine).<sup>39</sup> A different approach may be taken with the tabloid or right-wing press where a more jingoistic message may be better received. In this way different faces can be presented to different audiences.
- *Equivocation and the mass audience* – equivocation refers to the intentional use of imprecise language. Audience research indicates that people interpret the same communications in different ways, this is facilitated by the differential access that people have to the media, the ideological lenses of the audiences and in their skills to 'decode' media messages. An astute

politician can play on this and encourage contrasting audiences to interpret the same political communication in the ‘appropriate’ way by deliberately using ambiguous or coded language and symbolism. The political actor may be equivocal before the whole audience, or a large part of it, but then afterwards reinforce the appropriate interpretation of that message to the appropriate audience, encouraging that audience to believe that they are getting the authentic version.

The build up of ground forces in May 1999 was portrayed by NATO to domestic public opinion as a purely practical measure so that it could mount a peace-keeping effort following a settlement. On the other hand it was simultaneously intended to communicate to Milosevic the increasing threat of a ground invasion.<sup>40</sup> Collins has suggested that Clinton’s use of the term ‘Kosova’, preferred by Kosovan Albanians, rather than Kosovo, the term in Serbian and international use, may have had a ‘tremendous symbolic impact’ on the Serbs since it implied support for increased Kosovo Albanian autonomy if not independence.<sup>41</sup> This coded threat was probably lost on much NATO public opinion.

- *Power and interpretation* – a powerful political communicator, such as the state, can attempt to over-power opposition and the media and impose their definition of a particular message to different audiences. In times of apparent national emergency the state can more easily justify its control of information, secrecy and censorship as in the national interest, using this to dominate the media debate. The careful sifting of evidence can reveal the tactics and manoeuvres by which political elites operate but these – such as the use of metaphor, fiction, coded language and ambiguity – are specifically designed to allow the elites to impose whichever interpretation of the message currently suits them.

#### BRITAIN’S PALESTINE SYNDROME AND THE ESCALATION OF THE PROPAGANDA WAR

Clinton’s reluctance to deploy ground troops for a more robust role in Kosovo can be explained by the United States’ adverse experiences in Vietnam, Beirut and Somalia. By contrast Tony Blair – who had initially ruled out a ground invasion – led hawkish opinion within NATO in favour of the deployment of ground troops in Kosovo.<sup>42</sup> On 23<sup>rd</sup> March Tony Blair told the House of Commons,

...We do not plan to use ground troops in order to fight our way into Kosovo, for the very reason that I gave earlier. I do not know whether that is what the hon. Gentleman is suggesting, but it would take a huge

commitment – possibly more than 100,000 ground troops – and that is why we have said that that is not our plan.<sup>43</sup>

Polls suggested that Blair had the support of a plurality, and at times a majority, of public opinion. Nevertheless, he was also disproportionately concerned with the risk of casualties and their impact on public opinion.<sup>44</sup> It has been argued that Britain has a ‘Palestine syndrome’ which is comparable to the ‘Vietnam syndrome’. The British government were constrained by the ‘Palestine syndrome’ – a reasonable fear amongst the political elite that the loss of British troops would result in a powerful public reaction demanding withdrawal – but not in the same way that the US President was constrained by the ‘Vietnam syndrome’. The British did not suffer a defeat on the scale that the US did in Vietnam. The ‘Palestine syndrome’ is not publicly acknowledged and as salient a part of British political discourse as the ‘Vietnam syndrome’ is in the US.<sup>45</sup>

This means that the British government was more able to threaten a ground war without the political backlash which a similar threat was likely to meet in the US. As the British Chief of Defence Staff, General Sir Charles Guthrie, said of the US: ‘We were not hawkish, but we were able to talk about ground options more freely than they were...’<sup>46</sup> In effect Blair, more than Clinton, could afford politically to play the hawk in order to revive the threat of a ground invasion against Milosevic and significantly bolster NATO’s image of determination in the ‘propaganda war’.

There had been no detailed NATO planning for the contingency of an opposed ground invasion between August 1998 and April 1999 and the British were not enthusiastic about the ground option.<sup>47</sup> Less than five weeks after the British government had ruled out a ground invasion Tony Blair performed an about turn and became the most hawkish NATO advocate of a land attack. Gradually the British governments’ position shifted towards advocating a ground invasion: ‘An idea developed that they would creep towards troops by blurring the difference between soldiers as peace-keepers and as war-makers. It would be suggested that ground forces could be deployed into “a semi-permissive environment”’.<sup>48</sup>

The credibility of British threats against Milosevic would be enhanced by strong domestic support. The public would have to be persuaded through a propaganda campaign that British policy and NATO actions were necessary and legitimate. Although British public opinion was more likely than US public opinion to tolerate the idea of a ground war, there was still reason for elite concern that British public opinion might not tolerate excessive Serb civilian casualties or acquiesce in a ground war. Neither domestic nor NATO public opinion had been prepared by political elites for a ground war.

Tony Blair justified British policy towards Kosovo to the House of Commons primarily as a humanitarian intervention, air strikes 'will have as its minimum objective to curb continued Serbian repression in Kosovo in order to avert a humanitarian disaster.' Blair also justified intervention on the grounds of European self-interest and NATO credibility. The recent war in Bosnia showed how civil war and instability spilled over into the rest of the Balkans and affects the rest of Europe, creating refugees and threatening Europe's strategic interests. Furthermore, after issuing threats and warnings to Milosevic NATO could not walk away without destroying its credibility.<sup>49</sup> Some have argued that NATO credibility was the primary reason for the war on Kosovo, it was important for NATO to take action in order to maintain the credibility of its threats and therefore its power to coerce future challengers.<sup>50</sup> Blair did not use the NATO credibility argument in his television address to the nation and NATO political elites may have felt that 'NATO credibility' rather than 'humanitarian intervention' and self-interest may have been too abstract a concept to sell the conflict to public opinion.<sup>51</sup>

Averting 'humanitarian disaster' and preventing genocide was the only way of taking military action in a way that could be justified in international law. The failure of NATO to act earlier to prevent Serb aggression in Bosnia was used to justify 'preventative' action in Kosovo.<sup>52</sup> The British Defence Secretary, George Robertson, told the House of Commons on the day the air campaign started, that action was taken to avert a humanitarian disaster and prevent ethnic cleansing.<sup>53</sup> Political micro-management of the military campaign and an insistence on 'precision bombing' by NATO was intended to minimise civilian casualties, either to Serbs or Kosovo Albanians, and maximise the legitimacy of NATO's operations in the eyes of domestic public opinion.

The humanitarian justification for British and NATO policy went hand in hand with the demonisation of Milosevic/Serbs and the exaggeration of the atrocities that their forces were committing. The debate over the extent of the atrocities carried out by the Milosevic regime is partly a debate over the extent of the humanitarian crisis and, therefore, what measures could be justifiably used by NATO against the Serb regime. The more repugnant the Milosevic regime the greater degree of force could be legitimately used against it by NATO. The extent of the refugee problem galvanised domestic support for NATO's bombing campaign.<sup>54</sup> As Diana Johnstone has argued the war was sold by reducing it to a morality tale with villain and victims, '...This effect was most rapidly produced by analogy with highly charged contemporary historical symbols: Hitler, Auschwitz, the Holocaust.'<sup>55</sup>

While NATO fostered an exaggerated impression of the extent of Serb atrocities to domestic opinion, it was sufficiently equivocal in its use

of language so as to be able to simultaneously to defend itself against charges of exaggeration from domestic critics. On 13 May 1999 Tony Blair said:

...Thousands executed, tens of thousands beaten, 100,000 men missing. One and a half million people driven from their homes...A just war against the most evil form of genocide since my father's generation defeated the Nazis.<sup>56</sup>

The US state department issued a figure of 500,000 Kosovar Albanians missing feared dead although this was reduced by the Defence Secretary to 100,000 missing who 'may have been murdered.'<sup>57</sup> Some reports have suggested 10,000 or less civilians were murdered.<sup>58</sup> There is also doubt as to whether Operation Horseshoe – an alleged plan by the Serbs to ethnically cleanse Kosovo in the Spring of 1999 – is a NATO fabrication or not.<sup>59</sup> NATO also exaggerated the military effectiveness of its air strikes and the number of Serb tanks destroyed.<sup>60</sup> Reporters Sans Frontieres argued that NATO's information was 'scarcely better' than that coming from Belgrade.<sup>61</sup>

The Labour government's robust policy towards Milosevic created problems within the NATO Alliance. Britain's hawkish stance and Blair's image as a 'tough' leader and also threatened to embarrass Clinton by making him look soft endangered the appearance of British–American unity.<sup>62</sup> Clinton asked Blair 'in strong terms, to stop his government's public campaign for a ground option.'<sup>63</sup> It also 'caused domestic problems for allies and made the Russians unwilling to help out diplomatically.'<sup>64</sup> There are problems with demonising the enemy, a US state department official argued, "Our quandary is that the demonization of Milosevic is necessary to maintain the air attacks, but each time we denounce him, it's harder to shake hands with him."<sup>65</sup> One report claimed that the US Government used the term "genocide" less than Britain anticipating that a deal may have to be cut with the Serb leader.<sup>66</sup>

#### THE MEDIA AND BRITISH OPINION

The Labour government perceived domestic public opinion to be important in convincing Milosevic of Britain and NATO's determination to prevail. The media was seen to play a vital role in shaping domestic opinion and this explains the state's attempts to crush debate and alternative opinion – as it had in previous conflicts. According to the British Defence Select Committee Report 'The whole campaign was designed with one and a half eyes on media perceptions.'<sup>67</sup> Tony Blair later complained that 'Milosevic had charge of the media agenda' and argued for NATO to attack the Serb 'propaganda machine'. A Serb TV station in Belgrade was bombed by NATO.<sup>68</sup> The attack on the British media at the end of the war by the Prime Minister's press

secretary, Alastair Campbell, indicated the Labour government's concern about the impact of the media on British public opinion and whether it would be supportive of a land war against the Serbs.<sup>69</sup>

The argument that the media play an active rather than 'impartial' role in war is not recent in origin but a perennial argument of those wishing to censor the media. The Labour government fought its 'propaganda war' for the support of domestic public opinion against journalists who attempted to maintain 'impartiality' and were critical of the government's line. These critics were remarkable because they were exceptional, according to Hammond, '...every British newspaper except the *Independent on Sunday* took a pro-war line in its editorial column'.<sup>70</sup>

Journalists responded to government attacks by arguing that they were sceptical about the information coming from the British government because at times NATO did not always tell the truth. Governments had a habit of lying during previous wars, lies which were only exposed after the war was over. Even a supporter of the war, Michael Ignatieff concludes, 'The public at home did its best to decode the messages they were receiving and to winnow out the small grain of truth from the chaff of disinformation on both sides'.<sup>71</sup>

British political elites have established bipartisan approaches to military interventions in order to minimise party conflict, thereby limit public debate and contain the influence of public opinion. The Labour government therefore had an incentive to keep the Conservative Opposition consulted and pacified in order to minimise the threat to bipartisanship. While there was some right-wing, isolationist, criticism of the governments' policy in Kosovo the Conservative leadership chose to make more limited criticisms of the conduct of the campaign rather than of NATO's objectives.<sup>72</sup> The Labour government responded to Conservative criticism by suggesting that it undermined the morale of the military and emphasising the importance of 'resolve and determination' for seeing the conflict through.<sup>73</sup>

The government opposed a vote in parliament on the war, according to an 'insider', because 'You give ammunition to the Serbian propaganda machine if you let them say there was opposition in the British Parliament'.<sup>74</sup> An opinion poll for the *Daily Telegraph* suggested that 48% to 34% thought the Conservative criticism of NATO had been unpatriotic and 52% to 38% thought it was unjustified.<sup>75</sup> Conservative newspapers tended to support the war in editorials but were critical of its handling by the Labour government.<sup>76</sup>

Opinion polls indicated that while the British public supported NATO bombing raids, initially by 2 to 1, there was less support for the deployment of ground troops. The evidence could also be interpreted to suggest that opinion in support of British policy was soft and fluctuating rather than hard and firm. Opinion poll evidence has been used by supporters of 'robust'

intervention in Bosnia and now Kosovo to demonstrate public support for the aggressive deployment of ground troops. But whether this opinion is strong enough to sustain more than a swift war and minimal casualties is open to question.

The fluctuation of British public opinion in the polls on Bosnia and Kosovo suggests volatility and not the firm majority for ground force which could sustain a prolonged and bloody ground war. British public opinion shifted quickly over Northern Ireland from interventionism to withdrawal, although it is part of the UK with a majority of its inhabitants identifying with Britain. But this assumes that the British government would not be able to frame the conflict in a way that could appeal to public opinion persuade it to support a more robust intervention.

#### THE UNITED STATES' 'VIETNAM SYNDROME'

The debate over US policy towards Kosovo is a dispute about Clinton's room to manoeuvre under various political constraints. While Daalder and O'Hanlon acknowledge that Clinton faced a hostile Congress, a sceptical public and needed to maintain NATO unity they argue that the US President could have done more to argue the case and build support for more aggressive action. '...Most polls showed clear, though hardly overwhelming or impassioned, majorities of the US public supporting NATO's air campaign.'<sup>77</sup> Steven Kull has argued that US public opinion would have supported a more robust intervention by the the US President.<sup>78</sup> These critics contrast Clinton's timidity and preference to avoid casualties at almost any cost unfavourably with the British government's more 'robust' stance on US ground troops.<sup>79</sup>

Defenders of Clinton's approach to the Kosovo conflict argue that his caution was justified, emphasises the problems of winning Congressional and public support for a more robust policy. There was domestic polarisation between Republicans and Democrats in particular over the unsuccessful impeachment of President Clinton. According to Robert Singh, 'Rarely have such visceral distrust and enmity between the White House and Congress accompanied an American military operation.'<sup>80</sup> The 'Vietnam syndrome' is a salient issue in the US in a way that the 'Palestine syndrome' is not in British politics. The spectre of Somalia also hung over the US President then the US withdrew after eighteen soldiers had been killed.<sup>81</sup>

Clinton's attempts to reassure domestic opinion that he would not go to war over Kosovo while threatening Milosevic with military action was therefore more problematic than for the British Prime Minister. Defenders of Clinton would emphasise that the President's assessment of public and political opinion was not just a perceived constraint but a real one that

could not be easily overcome. Even Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright, who favoured intervention acknowledged the lack of public enthusiasm for deploying troops.<sup>82</sup>

Singh argues that the evidence suggests that American public opinion favoured limited military action for humanitarian reasons but if casualties occurred support for ground troops disappeared.<sup>83</sup> Milosevic, apparently shared this view of Clinton's predicament, believing that US public opinion would not sustain an on-going bombing campaign let alone a ground invasion.<sup>84</sup>

The US is the key power in the NATO alliance. For most states in NATO 'it would have been inconceivable to engage in forced entry into Kosovo without the participation of US ground forces.'<sup>85</sup> The British could safely threaten a ground attack in the knowledge that they could only launch such an attack with US co-operation. The US, on the other hand, had the military capacity for unilateral action if it so desired (although having allied support might be useful in selling US policy domestically).

Between August 1998 and April 1999, NATO did not even plan for the possibility of a ground war in Kosovo. This may well have been because of the fear of NATO political elites that such plans would leak and embarrass them with domestic opinion. On 24 March 1999, Clinton declared that he would be prepared to deploy troops to keep peace in Kosovo but not to fight a war. For Clinton's critics this was a major blunder that took the pressure off Milosevic to negotiate.<sup>86</sup> Clinton's defenders would argue that he had to rule out the ground option to maintain NATO unity, reassure the US electorate, Congress and the Pentagon that he was not contemplating another Vietnam-style debacle. Clinton feared military casualties and 'was terrified of American public opinion' even though the US media was sympathetic to the war.<sup>87</sup> Such were the concerns about the impact of US casualties on public opinion that although Apache helicopters were sent to Kosovo they were not used. NATO planners reportedly feared that even one downed US pilot could turn US opinion against the war.<sup>88</sup>

There does not seem to have been any great enthusiasm at the NATO Washington summit on 24–25 April 1999 for a ground war and there were reports that NATO leaders had ruled out the option.<sup>89</sup> The governments of Germany, Italy, France and particularly Greece all had problems with bringing their publics behind an escalation of the conflict.<sup>90</sup> Even the threat of a ground war by the US could unravel the alliance. A NATO split was averted at Washington by an agreement to a fresh review of the ground war option, thereby keeping it off the Summit agenda.<sup>91</sup> The French feared a domestic backlash and did not want the review made public. While the US did not see the point of the review unless it was made public so that it increased

the pressure on Milosevic. The British wanted to make sure the ground troops option, or the threat of it, remained 'a live one' so the initiative was leaked to the *Washington Post*.<sup>92</sup> The British Chief of Defence Staff later argued that NATO was 'coming from different places...We obviously had to go with what the market could bear.'<sup>93</sup>

By the end of May there were contradictory reports about the willingness of NATO countries to support the deployment of combat troops (contrast the reports on Germany in the *Washington Post* 27 May 1999 with the *New York Times* 2 June 1999). According to Michael Ignatieff, NATO's public displays of political unity were a façade which Milosevic attempted to crack in order to stimulate NATO public opinion's resistance to the conflict. By the end of the campaign Alliance cohesion was beginning to crumble and this explains why NATO settled for less than total victory.<sup>94</sup>

#### CREATIVE AMBIGUITY: INCREASING THE PRESSURE

When the bombing campaign failed to bring swift results Clinton shifted to a more aggressive position and would not rule out any option, including a ground war.<sup>95</sup> By adopting a more 'creatively ambiguous' position on the deployment of ground troops Clinton hoped to present different faces to two different audiences: to threaten the use of ground troops to force Milosevic to capitulate while at the same time reassuring a sceptical domestic public and political opinion. This, arguably, deliberate ambiguity makes it difficult to discern Clinton's 'real' intentions about the use of ground troops. The US President's refusal to rule out a ground invasion appears to have been as far as he was willing to go with his threats in public statements. Contemporaneous reports suggest that Clinton was opposed to a ground invasion<sup>96</sup> and there was also considerable ambiguity within the US administration and bureaucracy.

The US President took various initiatives to increase the pressure on Milosevic by threatening a ground invasion while at the same time seeking to avoid scaring domestic and NATO opinion. He increased the pressure on Milosevic by:

- calling up reservists; arguing that 'no options are off the table';
- increasing the deployment of troops for 'civilian reconstruction';
- meeting European defence ministers to discuss ground options;
- giving the go ahead for the building of a road;
- meeting with the Joint Chiefs of Staff to discuss invasion and
- ordering 80,000 Purple Hearts.

The Pentagon was 'strongly opposed to mounting a ground invasion' but were 'not necessarily opposed to the exercise of planning such an operation.'<sup>97</sup> While on the one hand NATO was attempting to increase the pressure on Milosevic by strengthening the credibility of its' ground invasion threat, US public opinion's support for the war was waning.<sup>98</sup> By the end of May opinion polls were 'shifting alarmingly' and 'There were perhaps only ten days of viable, i.e. politically acceptable, targets left.'<sup>99</sup>

#### NATO: SPINNING TO VICTORY?

Was Clinton prepared to launch a ground invasion or were his threats and ambiguity over his willingness to launch an invasion a bluff which proved sufficient to force Milosevic to capitulate? Since the end of the war there have been attempts to claim that Clinton had decided on a ground invasion or was about to give approval for a ground invasion.<sup>100</sup> According to Daalder and O'Hanlon, '...A ground war had become a decided likelihood, even if not a certainty, by June 1999.'<sup>101</sup>

However, there does not seem to be *contemporary* evidence to support this claim.<sup>102</sup> While some have argued that Clinton had greater latitude with US public opinion to launch a ground attack, that does not seem to have been the perception of the US President and close advisers. Clinton may have had no intention of launching a ground attack but wants to claim that he did in order first, to win credit for the Kosovo victory and second, to bolster the credibility of future NATO threats in order to warn off potential future challengers to its power.

After the end of the war leading British policy-makers have been prominent in claiming that it was the 'propaganda war' and the *threat* of a ground invasion which played a prominent role in the defeat of Milosevic, even if there was not the consensus in NATO to implement this threat. While this is a self-interested argument by the British to claim credit for the success of the Kosovo campaign, evidence has been presented to justify this interpretation of events. NATO Supreme Commander Europe General Wesley K. Clark, who with Britain favoured the ground option, has also argued that there was no desire to launch a ground invasion but it was Milosevic's conclusion that NATO was 'going in on the ground' that led him to capitulate.<sup>103</sup>

The British Prime Minister and his Press Secretary both emphasised the importance of the 'propaganda war', which Blair likened to a big political campaign, in sustaining the morale of domestic opinion and creating the image of NATO determination to defeat Milosevic. Whitehall sources claimed 'that overtly public discussions about the possibility of using ground troops

were designed to keep the Serbian president, Slobodan Milosevic, guessing.<sup>104</sup> The British government appears not to have known whether the US President intended to launch a ground invasion. While publicly Clinton and the Pentagon appeared sceptical of a ground war privately he reassured Blair that he would 'do whatever it takes to win. . . We will not lose.' However, according to Rawnsley, Blair had 'no idea' whether Clinton would really commit ground troops and found him 'frustratingly unfocused, frequently confused, and fixated with American public opinion.'<sup>105</sup>

The British Defence Select Committee Report on Kosovo is ambiguous on its position as to whether NATO would or could have launched a ground invasion. While it finds that the 'threat of a ground invasion was real and credible', the report also argues that by 11 June NATO was 'already close to, if not past, the critical decision-making deadline for a forced entry ground operation.'<sup>106</sup> Lord Gilbert, a Minister of State for Defence, argued '... I think we were extremely lucky that he gave way when he did.'<sup>107</sup>

## CONCLUSION

There are various reasons given for the capitulation of Milosevic over Kosovo. This account of the Kosovo conflict has emphasised the importance to NATO of domestic public opinion and the role of the media both in sustaining domestic support but also in shaping the perceptions of the 'enemy'. The British and US governments attempted to communicate appropriate messages to a diverse range of audiences in order to shape their perceptions and achieve victory over Milosevic. The key problem in their communication strategy was attempting to placate NATO public opinion by not being too aggressive either in their actions or language. While at the same time NATO attempting to communicate to Milosevic and the Serb elite its' determination to win.

If domestic public opinion were acquiescent in NATO policy then this would help to convince Milosevic – who saw NATO public opinion as a key weakness – to negotiate. On the other hand, if NATO governments were too belligerent they might provoke outright opposition to a ground invasion, reducing the credibility of NATO's threats and its' capacity to coerce Milosevic.

To maximise domestic support for its policy in Kosovo, NATO argued that it was principally fighting a humanitarian war rather than for NATO 'credibility'. NATO underlined its humanitarian motivation by demonising Milosevic/Serbs and exaggerating the atrocities that Serb forces were carrying out in Kosovo. NATO used the media to try and subtly communicate a growing threat of ground war while simultaneously reassuring the mass public

that it was doing no such thing. There is evidence to suggest that NATO's threat of a ground invasion was a bluff but the US's ambiguous stance on this may have seeded sufficient doubt in Milosevic's mind for him to negotiate a settlement. The propaganda war and the role of the media were of vital importance to British and US attempts to win the battle for public opinion and defeat Milosevic.

The Kosovo conflict was not only about shaping the perceptions of Milosevic but also the perceptions of all future challengers to NATO power. NATO's victory gave credibility to its threats and, it is hoped, this credibility would enhance its power in the world. This was not a justification for war which public opinion would find easy to understand or, perhaps, to condone. Such justifications were important because British and US politicians had good, historical reasons to be concerned about the pressure of public opinion. Audiences are not passively injected with information by the government and media but can be resistant to elite persuasion or manipulation. The account presented here of the Kosovo campaign suggests that both the British and US governments were vulnerable and making policy 'On a wing and a prayer.'<sup>108</sup>

## NOTES

1. I am grateful to the participants and organisers (Jayne Rodgers and Robin Brown) of sessions at the ECPR/IR conference University of Kent 2000 and the 'Conference on War and the Media', Department of Peace Studies, University of Bradford 2001 for their comments on earlier versions of this article. In particular, I would like to thank Piers Robinson for his generosity in providing detailed feedback that improved the quality of this piece. I am responsible for any shortcomings.
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19. Alastair Campbell (note 14) p.32.
20. Judah (note 7).
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22. Daalder and O'Hanlon (note 2) p.163.
23. Air Marshall Day quoted in *The Observer*, 18 July 1999, Daalder and O'Hanlon (note 2) p.163, p.204.
24. Foreign Affairs Select Committee, *Kosovo* (London: HMSO 2000) para. 114, Judah (note 7) p.254.
25. *The Observer*, 18 July 1999.
26. Daalder and O'Hanlon (note 2) p.221.
27. Rawnsley (note 15) p.267.
28. *The Guardian* 13 March 2000, *Washington Post*, 20 September 1999, Ignatieff (note 6) p.104.
29. *The Guardian* 15 June 1999, Ignatieff (note 6) p.103.
30. Defence Select Committee (note 8) para. 260, Collins (note 13) p.55.
31. Defence Select Committee (note 8) para. 100.
32. NATO spokesperson quoted in *The Guardian*, 18 February 2003.
33. Defence Select Committee (note 8) para. 99, 100, 257.
34. Collins (note 13) p.42.
35. Philip Hammond and Edward S. Herman (eds.), *Degraded Capability: the Media and the Kosovo Crisis* (London: Pluto 2000) p.106, Knightley (note 4) p.514–15.
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37. Judah (note 7) p.254.
38. *The Observer* 31 January 1993.
39. Vickers (note 21) p.62.
40. Rawnsley (note 15) p.269.
41. Collins (note 13) p.49, Kampfner (note 36) p.45.
42. Kampfner (note 36) p.45.
43. [www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm199899/cmhansard/vo990323/debtext/90](http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm199899/cmhansard/vo990323/debtext/90)>, Column 170 and Kampfner (note 36) p.45.
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49. See Tony Blair in *Hansard* 23 March 1999, columns 161–163, 168.
50. Michael Clarke, 'British Perceptions' in M. Buckley and S. Cummings (eds.) *Kosovo: Perceptions of War and its Aftermath* (London: Continuum 2001) p.79–80, R. Singh 'American Perceptions' in Buckley and Cummings, Foreign Affairs Select Committee (note 24) para. 73, 76. On NATO credibility as the principal reason for NATO intervention see Noam Chomsky, *The New Military Humanism: Lessons from Kosovo* (London: Pluto 1999), Mark Curtis, *Web of Deceit: Britain's Real Role in the World* (London: Vintage 2003) and Hammond and Herman (note 35) and Ali (note 16).

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52. Blair's broadcast to the nation reproduced in *The Guardian*, 27 March 1999.
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55. Diane Johnstone, 'NATO and the New World Order: Ideas and Self-Interest' in Hammond and Herman (note 35), Knightley (note 4) p.507–8, Robertson in *The Observer*, 18 July 1999, Robin Cook *International Herald Tribune* 31 March 1999, Blair in Knightley (note 4) p.507.
56. Quoted in Rawnsley (note 15) p.283.
57. Knightley (note 4) p.522, Daalder and O'Hanlon (note 2) p.111.
58. Defence Select Committee (note 8) para. 245, Daalder and O'Hanlon (note 2) p.151, see Pilger in Hammond and Herman (note 35), Judah (note 7) p.310, Curtis (note 50) pp.135–7.
59. Collins (note 13) p.46–47, Judah (note 7) p.240–41, Herring (note 16) pp.229–32, Curtis (note 50) p.140.
60. Daalder and O'Hanlon (note 2) p.153. For various reports on the ineffectiveness of the air-strikes *Daily Telegraph*, 5 March 2000, 16 October 1999, 22 July 1999, *The Guardian*, 8 July 1999, 22 August 2000.
61. Collins (note 13) p.46–7.
62. *New York Times*, 23 May 1999, Judah (note 7) p.274, Rawnsley (note 15) pp.272–74.
63. *New York Times*, 7 November 1999.
64. *Washington Post*, 19 September 1999.
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80. Singh (note 50) p.61, Daalder and O'Hanlon (note 2) p.97–98, Kampfner (note 36) pp.48–50.
81. *Washington Post* 30 May 1999.
82. Singh (note 50) p.68.
83. Singh (note 50) p.68–69.
84. Judah (note 7) p.229.
85. Defence Select Committee (note 8) para. 78, Rawnsley (note 15) p.269.
86. Daalder and O'Hanlon (note 2).
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88. *The Guardian*, 11 June 1999, 4 June 1999, Ignatieff (note 6).
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90. Judah (note 7) p.254, Foreign Affairs Select Committee (note 24) para. 114.
91. *The Observer*, 18 July 1999.
92. *The Observer*, 18 July 1999.
93. *The Guardian*, 16 March 2000.
94. Ignatieff (note 6) p.207/8.
95. See Daalder and O'Hanlon (note 2) pp.155–61 on increasing the invasion threat.
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100. *The Observer*, 18 July 1999, Foreign Affairs Select Committee (note 24) para. 115, *New York Times*, 7 November 1999, *Washington Post*, 19 September 1999.
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106. Defence Select Committee (note 8) para. 279, 266, see also para. 270.
107. Defence Select Committee, *Minutes of Evidence* para. 1065, Defence Select Committee (note 8).
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