

“America Neglects Accountability for Military Acts,” *Baltimore Sun*, August 7, 2000.

James Ron

WHEN nationalists launch a war of secession, they rarely think of burned villages, destroyed cities and refugee columns. Their payback comes during the war, however, since many lose their lives or watch family members die.

Yet when U.S. leaders launch hostilities, they suffer few consequences. If the United States wants to act globally, it must hold itself accountable, even when the victims are not U.S. citizens.

Last year, I interviewed ethnic Albanian refugees fleeing Serbian forces in Kosovo. They lost their homes because the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) had tried to free the province from Serbian rule. The KLA had attacked Serbian forces but then couldn't protect non-combatants from retaliation.

A few months later, I spoke with Chechens fleeing Russian bombardments in Grozny, the destroyed capital of Chechnya. Again, their loss had been sparked by guerrilla resistance against Russian forces. Squatting awkwardly in refugee camps and hospitals, I recorded tales of horror for my employer, an international human rights group. Often, I thought of the men who started these wars of secession. Did they still think it was worth it?

Recently, I learned something about rebellion here in Baltimore from "Dave," an Albanian-American student who didn't want to use his real name. He was headed to Kosovo for the summer to work for an aid organization and wanted to tell me his plans.

Dave was intrigued by a more adventurous summer activity planned by a cousin and some friends, who were going to join a band of militants seeking to expand Kosovo's borders. The idea was to smuggle guns into ethnic Albanian villages in Serbia and Macedonia and then to start a new shooting war.

Their goal was a united Albania.

Dave's friends, strangely enough, were inspired by the Chechen rebellion against Russia. If a few hundred Chechens could take on mighty Russia, why couldn't ethnic Albanians go another round with Serbia?

When Dave's friends thought of war, they saw an Albanian flag flying proudly over a united and strong homeland. My version of the scenario, however, included burned homes, children's corpses and frightened refugees. After all, Grozny had just been flattened by Russian artillery. What kind of inspiration was that?

Enthusiastic young men often get big ideas, and these were no different. They were excited by the prospect of war, thinking of the glory they would earn on the battlefield. Although they wouldn't say so explicitly, they were willing to risk the lives of the civilians they purported to represent. In the long run, they believed, Albanians would be better off.

U.S. politicians indulge in similar thinking, but run none of the risks. "Winning Ugly," a new book published by the Brookings Institution, a Washington think tank, clearly demonstrates that U.S. leaders were terribly negligent when planning last year's air war against Serbia.

No preparations were made for refugee flight and no ground troops were positioned to intercede if Serbia retaliated against civilians. NATO pilots were ordered to stay at high altitudes to avoid Serbian anti-aircraft missiles, making it impossible for them to effectively target Serbian forces on the ground. As a result, the world's most powerful war machine stood by as about 1.3 million ethnic Albanians were driven from their homes.

If Dave's cousin and friends begin a new round of fighting this summer, they may pay with their lives. When U.S. strategists launched their war against Serbia, however, they took no real risks. No U.S. soldiers were on the ground, U.S. pilots were high in the air and Kosovars don't vote in U.S. elections or contribute to presidential campaigns.

Lest we think this a post-Cold War aberration, recall that the United States behaved similarly after the Persian Gulf war. Once their troops had pushed Iraqi forces from Kuwait, U.S. leaders called on Iraq's southern Shi'ite population to rise up against Saddam Hussein. Implicitly, they pledged to come to the rebels' aid.

But once the fighting began, U.S. forces stood pat as thousands of Iraqis were killed and the rebellion was crushed. Today, this terrible betrayal is rarely discussed.

In 1992, when Serbs were making threatening noises towards Bosnia, the U.S. was the first to recognize a sovereign Bosnian state. That move escalated Bosnian Serb atrocities, and triggered a Bosnia-wide war. Then, the U.S. did nothing for three long years.

The United States enjoys projecting diplomatic and military might across the globe, but prefers to let others run the real risks. In a world divided into separate nation-states, U.S. leaders can repeatedly escape accountability for international actions gone awry.

Instead of allowing the U.S. to recklessly endanger innocents' lives, we should call Congress and the administration to task. In these cases, Serbian and Iraqi troops were chiefly responsible for the killings. They escalated, however, only after the U.S. intervened and then refused to send ground troops to defend civilians from retaliation.

If hundreds of thousands of U.S. citizens had lost their lives, homes and families through official negligence, wouldn't we demand accountability? If so, why aren't Kosovars, Iraqis or Bosnians worthy of the same respect?