

Kosovo and the Metaphor War

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“This war is rapidly becoming a debacle that rivals Vietnam itself.”

—Representative Dennis Kucinich¹

“Kosovo . . . is not analogous to Vietnam.”

—Senator Joseph Biden²

“The refusal to watch the repeat of Hitler’s death pageant is our duty.”

—Representative Major Owens³

“My mindset is Munich.”

—Secretary of State Madeleine Albright⁴

“People . . . say this has something to do with Hitler and Nazi Germany. That is nonsense. It has nothing to do with that at all.”

—Representative William Goodling⁵

“We act to prevent a wider war; to defuse a powderkeg at the heart of Europe that has exploded twice before in this century.”

—President Bill Clinton⁶

“There is no need to fear a return of World War I.”

—Senator John Kerry⁷

In the spring of 1999, American political leaders debated how to respond to the ongoing military and humanitarian crisis in the Kosovo region of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, where armed Serbs under the control of then-Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic appeared to be conducting an ethnic cleansing campaign against the province’s predominantly Albanian population. Six months earlier in the fall of 1998, the Yugoslav army had forced members

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of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), an armed separatist group comprised of ethnic Albanians, into the remote mountains of Kosovo, along with thousands of civilians. With winter approaching and the civilians in danger of freezing, the United States and other members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) threatened attacks against Serb forces unless civilians were allowed to return to their homes unmolested. Serbian leaders relented and drew back their forces, but in March 1999 they launched yet another military campaign in defiance of international warnings. Once again, Albanian Kosovars fled the assault, this time in even greater numbers; thousands of refugees crossed into neighboring countries, recounting stories of summary executions and forced expulsions by Serbian forces. NATO responded on 24 March 1999, after the failure of negotiations in Rambouillet, France, by bombing Serbian targets for eleven consecutive weeks until Yugoslav forces finally withdrew from the province in early June. NATO ground troops then entered Kosovo and began escorting the refugees back to their homes.

In the United States, members of Congress and the Clinton administration engaged in a sometimes-heated debate over American policy toward the Kosovo crisis. At first glance, the terms of this debate were relatively straightforward: Should the United States respond to the situation in Kosovo? If so, how should it respond? On closer examination, the empirical facts of the Kosovo crisis and the significance of these facts were as much in dispute as the question of how to respond to the crisis itself. One way in which participants in the debate sought to define the situation in Kosovo was by relating this situation to other well-known events from the past—that is, by using historical comparisons to characterize the crisis. Some of these comparisons were obvious and direct, such as Representative Dennis Kucinich's (D-OH) bald assertion that Kosovo was “rapidly becoming a debacle that rivals Vietnam itself.”⁸ In other cases, widely-recognized trigger words and phrases were used to invoke particular historical memories – such as “quagmire” for Vietnam or “never again” for the Holocaust. Four historical analogies or metaphors appeared most frequently in the speeches and statements of Clinton administration officials and members of Congress: Vietnam (referring to America's experience in the Vietnam War); the Holocaust (the Nazi attempted extermination or genocide of European Jews); Munich (the 1938 Munich conference, where the Western democracies failed to stand up to Hitler); and the Balkan Powderkeg (recalling the region's

¹ 145 *Congressional Record* H 3226, 18 May 1999.

² 145 *Cong. Rec.* S 4552, 3 May 1999.

³ 145 *Cong. Rec.* E 621, 13 April 1999.

⁴ Cited in Michael Dobbs, *Madeleine Albright: A Twentieth Century Odyssey* (New York: Henry Holt, 1999), 34.

⁵ 145 *Cong. Rec.* H 1899, 13 April 1999.

⁶ “Statement by the President to the Nation,” Federal News Service, 24 March 1999.

⁷ 145 *Cong. Rec.* S 3116, 23 March 1999.

⁸ 145 *Cong. Rec.* H 3226, 18 May 1999.

endemic instability and, specifically, the role that Balkan conflicts played in igniting World War I).

The debate over American policy in Kosovo, in other words, was to some extent an argument about the relevance of various historical comparisons to the situation in Kosovo—or what I label a “metaphor war.” By promoting certain metaphors and discrediting others, participants in the debate presumably hoped to establish what scholars in the field of political communication call “interpretive dominance”—that is, the widespread acceptance of one’s own characterization of a particular issue.⁹ Stakes in the struggle for interpretive dominance can be quite high, as M. J. Peterson explains: “Different representation can lead to the retrieval of very different analogies and thus very different conclusions about the target domain.”¹⁰ Competing interpretations of an issue, in turn, open up certain policy responses and foreclose others. If, for instance, the Kosovo crisis were successfully portrayed through direct or indirect allusions as another Holocaust, the imperative of stopping a genocide would lend support to some kind of American intervention in Kosovo. If the crisis were viewed as another Vietnam or as a civil war in which the United States had no clear national interest, unpleasant memories of the Vietnam conflict would likely produce countervailing pressures against intervention. The study of historical metaphors and analogies used in the Kosovo debate, therefore, is not merely an examination of language but rather an investigation into the conduct of politics through language.

This much was noted by media commentators at the time of the debate.¹¹ But the use of historical comparisons was considerably more complex than many pundits suggested, not least because the metaphor war was waged on two distinct levels simultaneously. Participants in the debate not only argued about the relevance of particular historical metaphors to the situation in Kosovo (which I call the “first level” of the metaphor war); they also fought over the meaning of the metaphors themselves (the “second level”). This second level of disagreement reflected the fact that certain historical references have clearer connotations than others—their meanings are more settled and less contested. Munich is an example of a relatively settled metaphor, because it almost always signifies the folly of attempting to appease an aggressive dictator;¹² the meaning of references to Vietnam are less obvious, probably because Americans con-

⁹ Mary E. Stuckley and Frederick J. Antczak, “The Battle of Issues and Images: Establishing Interpretive Dominance” in Kathleen E. Kendall, ed., *Presidential Campaign Discourse: Strategic Communication Problems* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 117–134. For a related argument, see William H. Riker, *The Art of Political Manipulation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986).

¹⁰ M. J. Peterson, “The Use of Analogies in Developing Outer Space Law,” *International Organization* 51 (Spring 1997): 249.

¹¹ For example, Daniel Schorr, “The Dread ‘Appeasement,’” *Christian Science Monitor*, 4 June 1999.

¹² David Chuter, “Munich, or the Blood of Others” in Cyril Buffet and Beatrice Heuser, eds., *Haunted By History: Myths in International Relations* (Providence: Berghahn, 1998), 66–67.

tinue to disagree about why the Vietnam War turned out so badly for the United States. Some participants in the Kosovo debate used the Vietnam metaphor to imply that the United States had not devoted sufficient political and military resources to defeat Serbian forces in Kosovo (drawing on the view that the United States failed in Vietnam because American forces fought with one hand tied behind their back). Others invoked Vietnam to suggest that the Kosovo campaign was being waged too vigorously (by drawing parallels between Serbian civilian deaths from NATO bombing and the killing of civilians during the Vietnam War). Both versions of the Vietnam metaphor were used to argue against American intervention in Kosovo, but they were based on very different interpretations of what “went wrong” in Vietnam. The Kosovo debate, then, was simultaneously a battle to define or fix the meaning of both the present and the past.

More generally, there are compelling incentives for political actors to fight over the usage of historical metaphors. In addition to shaping interpretations of particular events, both past and present, metaphors can also influence the manner in which political communities define their collective goals. Although this article conceives of the Kosovo metaphor war in relatively narrow terms—as a political battle to define the significance of specific historical events—it should be noted that the larger world of politics is, among other things, a never-ending metaphor war over the meaning and purpose of social life.¹³ In the words of Lynn Boyd Hinds and Theodore Otto Windt: “Political language and arguments—in sum, political rhetoric—create political consciousness, define political settings, create national identity, stimulate people to act, and give sense and purpose to these actions.”¹⁴ The debate over Kosovo was one element (albeit, a very small element) of this larger interpretive struggle.

The article is divided into five parts. In the first part, I review the scholarship on historical metaphors as instruments of political communication. In the second part, I describe the methodology that was used in gathering data for this study. In the third part, I examine the usage of historical metaphors by President Clinton and senior U.S. officials in public speeches and statements on Kosovo, focusing primarily on the roughly four-month period from the start of the Serbian offensive on 20 March 1999 until the termination of NATO’s bombing campaign on 10 June 1999. In the fourth part, I analyze the congressional debate on Kosovo during the same period. Finally, I explore a number of implications of the Kosovo metaphor war for our understanding of foreign policy debates within the United States.

¹³ William E. Connolly, *The Terms of Political Discourse*, 3rd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), chap. 1.

¹⁴ Lynn Boyd Hinds and Theodore Otto Windt, Jr., *The Cold War As Rhetoric: The Beginnings, 1945–1950* (New York: Praeger, 1991), 7.

HISTORICAL METAPHORS AND U.S. FOREIGN POLICY DEBATES

Within the scholarly field of political communication, there is a voluminous literature on the use of metaphors in political speech.¹⁵ One branch of this literature concentrates on the rhetoric of U.S. foreign policy and focuses especially on the language used by presidents during moments of “crisis,” such as wars.¹⁶ Whether these works explore the language of foreign policy or of some other arena of politics, most contributors to this literature start from the proposition that metaphors are not merely rhetorical flourishes or ornamentation; rather, metaphors can shape the way in which people apprehend and respond to a particular issue or event. In adopting this perspective, students of political communication build upon the insights of ancient political commentators—including Aristotle, who noted more than two millennia ago that the skillful use of metaphors by political actors can induce listeners to “see things” that they might not otherwise perceive¹⁷—as well as the findings of modern cognitive psychologists who have long recognized that the way in which people interpret and respond to new information will depend in part on how this new information is presented or “framed.”¹⁸ Because metaphors, by definition, draw attention to similarities across different domains,¹⁹ they invite listeners to conceive of one issue or phenomenon in the light of another issue or phenomenon. Thus they offer, in the words of David Allbritton, “a framework for understanding a new domain or for restructuring the understanding of a familiar domain.”²⁰ Another

¹⁵ For overviews, see Mary E. Stuckey, ed., *The Theory and Practice of Political Communication Research* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996); David L. Swanson and Dan Nimmo, eds., *New Directions in Political Communication: A Resource Book* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1990); and David L. Paletz, ed., *Political Communication Research: Approaches, Studies, Assessments* (Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 1987).

¹⁶ Foundational works include Robert L. Ivie, “Presidential Motives for War,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 60 (October 1974): 337–345; and Philip Wander, “The Rhetoric of American Foreign Policy,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 70 (November 1984): 339–361. For an overview of more recent work, see Denise M. Bostdorff, *The Presidency and the Rhetoric of Foreign Crisis* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1994).

¹⁷ Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, trans. by W. Rhys Roberts (New York: Modern Library, 1954), book 3:11 and 1:1–2. See also William J. Jordan, “Aristotle’s Concept of Metaphor in Rhetoric” in Keith V. Erickson, ed., *Aristotle: The Classical Heritage of Rhetoric* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1974), 244–246.

¹⁸ Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman, “The Framing of Decisions and the Psychology of Choice,” *Science* 211 (30 January 1981): 453–458; Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, “Choices, Values, and Frames,” *American Psychologist* 9 (April 1984): 341–350; and Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974). See also Zeev Maoz, “Framing the National Interest: The Manipulation of Foreign Policy Decisions in Group Settings,” *World Politics* 43 (October 1990): 88; Francis A. Beer, Alice F. Healy, Grant P. Sinclair, and Lyle E. Bourne, Jr., “War Cues and Foreign Policy Acts,” *American Political Science Review* 81 (September 1987): 701–715; and Lance Bennett, “Constructing Publics and Their Opinions,” *Political Communication* 10 (April–June 1993): 101–120.

¹⁹ The word “metaphor” derives from the Greek *metapherein*, which means “to transfer” or “to carry” from one thing to another.

²⁰ David W. Allbritton, “When Metaphors Function as Schemas: Some Cognitive Effects of Conceptual Metaphors,” *Metaphor and Symbolic Activity* 10 (1995): 36.

scholar of political communication, George Lakoff, puts it this way: metaphors “limit what we notice, highlight what we do see, and provide part of the inferential structure that we reason with.”²¹

There are two further characteristics of metaphors that make them potent instruments of political persuasion. First, they not only suggest similarities across different domains, but they can also “activate conscious and subconscious, rational and emotional responses” in their listeners.²² To suggest that a foreign leader is behaving “like Hitler,” for example, is apt to produce a more emotional response among listeners than the suggestion that the foreign leader is behaving “like the head of an oppressive, authoritarian regime,” because strong emotions are associated with the evocation of Hitler’s name. As Murray Edelman argues, it is this aspect of metaphors—namely, their ability to evoke rational as well as irrational or emotional associations—that permits political actors to use metaphors in order to “threaten or reassure people so as to encourage them to be supportive or quiescent.”²³ Second, metaphors are powerful rhetorical tools because they can often be summoned subtly with trigger phrases or oblique references that evoke the metaphor without necessarily making it explicit. Indirectness can serve several purposes: in cases where it might be impolitic to make a particular claim or comparison, metaphorical allusions allow speakers to suggest these connections and to deny having done so. Peter Fysh and Jim Wolfreys, for example, point out that the leaders of France’s Front National regularly employ euphemisms for immigrants and blacks that convey the party’s racist, anti-immigrant agenda, while preserving a veneer of respectability.²⁴ More generally, by selecting their metaphors carefully, political actors can calibrate messages to the sensitivities, prejudices, and emotional associations of particular audiences.

Historical metaphors are implicit or explicit comparisons between the present and the past. Scholars such as Ernest May and Yuen Foong Khong have demonstrated that American policy makers tend to apprehend and respond to foreign events through the filter of historical analogies and their own personal experiences.²⁵ It is also true, however, that policy makers use historical meta-

²¹ George Lakoff, “Metaphor and War: The Metaphor System Used to Justify War in the Gulf” in Martin Pütz, ed., *Thirty Years of Linguistic Evolution* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1992), 481.

²² Francis A. Beer and Christ’l de Landtsheer, “Metaphorical Meaning and Political Power” in Francis A. Beer and Christ’l de Landtsheer, eds., *Metaphorical World Politics* (forthcoming).

²³ Murray J. Edelman, *Constructing the Political Spectacle* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 103–4.

²⁴ Peter Fysh and Jim Wolfreys, *The Politics of Racism in France* (London: Macmillan, 1998).

²⁵ Ernest R. May, *“Lessons” of the Past: The Use and Misuse of History in American Foreign Policy* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1973); Richard E. Neustadt and Ernest R. May, *Thinking In Time: The Use of History for Decisionmakers* (New York: Free Press, 1986); Yuen Foong Khong, *Analogies At War: Korea, Munich, Dein Bien Phu, and the Vietnam Decisions of 1965* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992). See also Alex Roberto Hybel, *How Leaders Reason: U.S. Intervention in the Caribbean Basin and Latin America* (Oxford, UK: Basil Blackwell, 1990); Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976); and Christopher Jon Lamb, *Belief Systems and Decision Making in the Mayaguez Crisis* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1989).

phors as tools of political persuasion in their public rhetoric by drawing parallels between contemporary phenomena and past events, and thereby encouraging listeners to conceive of the present in the light of the past. Because historical references frequently evoke the perceived lessons of the past experience, political actors can use historical metaphors to legitimize certain policy options and to delegitimize others. More generally, as Phillip Wander points out, historical and other metaphors allow political leaders “to inspire their partisans, attract other groups with whom coalitions might be formed, and recruit from that vast, unorganized aggregate known as the ‘mass audience.’”²⁶ However, not all historical metaphors will resonate equally with audiences. All other things being equal, listeners are more likely to embrace comparisons that offer a credible description of events,²⁷ refer to past experiences that the listeners themselves recollect,²⁸ and evoke what Robert Ivie calls the society’s “vocabularies of motive” or the justifications that members of the society are generally willing to accept for governmental policy or action.²⁹ By examining the use of historical metaphors in political debates, therefore, we can gain insight into the choice of metaphors that the participants in the debates themselves believed would resonate with their listeners. And by distilling the implied lessons of these metaphors for contemporary policy, we can gain a better understanding of what the participants were actually communicating when their rhetoric drifted into the realm of historical allusion.

As Riikka Kuusisto points out, when political leaders describe foreign crises or events, they often engage in “story telling” that evokes widely-remembered experiences from the past in order to make sense of the present.³⁰ Foreign policy “stories,” writes Kuusisto, transform “originally ambiguous circumstances into something relevant to us; in the discourses treating far-away events and actors, necessary duties . . . as well as obstacles to action are formed out of formerly insignificant elements.”³¹ Students of political communication have studied the foreign policy “stories” conveyed by American political leaders during many different moments of recent history: for example, the outset of the

²⁶ Wander, “The Rhetoric of American Foreign Policy,” 341.

²⁷ Thomas A. Hollihan, “The Public Controversy Over the Panama Canal Treaties: An Analysis of American Foreign Policy Rhetoric,” *Western Journal of Speech Communication* 50 (1986): 379.

²⁸ At a society-wide level, the most recognizable historical references are those that tap into the “public memory” or the stories that societies tell themselves about their collective past. On the notion of public memory, see Stephen Browne, “Reading, Rhetoric, and the Texture of Public Memory,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 81 (May 1995): 237–265; Erna Paris, *Long Shadows: Truth, Lies, and History* (New York: Bloomsbury, USA, 2001); Maurice Halbwachs, *La Mémoire Collective* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1950); and David Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

²⁹ Ivie, “Presidential Motives for War.”

³⁰ Riikka Kuusisto, “Framing the Wars in the Gulf and in Bosnia: The Rhetorical Definitions of the Western Power Leaders in Action,” *Journal of Peace Research* 35 (September 1998): 603–620.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 607.

cold war,³² the 1962 Cuban missile crisis,³³ the 1964 Gulf of Tonkin incident,³⁴ the 1983 U.S. intervention in Grenada,³⁵ the 1991 Persian Gulf war,³⁶ and the Bosnian war of 1992–1995.³⁷ As well, other scholars have examined the foreign policy rhetoric of Presidents Eisenhower, Kennedy,³⁸ Reagan,³⁹ Clinton,⁴⁰ and, more generally, leaders in the post-cold war era.⁴¹ Many of their works are superb at identifying the metaphors that punctuated the political speech of American political leaders—especially presidents—in the area of foreign policy. But this literature has paid less attention to the relationship between historical metaphors and domestic disagreements or debates about foreign policy. As a result, one learns a great deal from this literature about the metaphorical content of official American foreign policy rhetoric, but relatively little about the politics surrounding the use of competing historical metaphors in domestic foreign policy debates. Furthermore, many of these works (along with those in the May-Khong school cited above) portray historical metaphors as having relatively settled connotations, rather than considering that these metaphors might be the focus of ongoing battles over the interpretation and meaning of past events.

The domestic debate over U.S. policy toward Kosovo suggests that the use of historical metaphors is considerably more complex and controversial—in short, more politically fraught—than the literature on political communication and U.S. foreign policy has suggested. While political leaders were arguing over the American response to Kosovo, they were also engaged in what I call a meta-

³² Robert L. Ivie, “Fire, Flood, and Red Fever: Motivating Metaphors of Global Emergency in the Truman Doctrine Speech,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 29 (September 1999): 570–591; Hinds and Windt, *The Cold War As Rhetoric*.

³³ Jutta Weldes and Diana Saco, “Making State Action Possible: The United States and the Discursive Construction of ‘The Cuban Problem,’ 1960–1994,” *Millennium* 25 (Summer 1996): 361–395; Bostdorff, *The Presidency and the Rhetoric of Foreign Crisis*, chap. 2.

³⁴ Richard Cherwitz, “Lyndon Johnson and the ‘Crisis’ of Tonkin Gulf: A President’s Justification of War,” *Western Journal of Speech Communication* 42 (Spring 1978): 93–105; Bostdorff, *The Presidency and the Rhetoric of Foreign Crisis*, chap. 3.

³⁵ David E. Procter, “The Rescue Mission: Assigning Guilt to a Chaotic Scene,” *Western Journal of Speech Communication* 51 (Summer 1987): 245–255.

³⁶ Francis A. Beer and Barry J. Balleck, “Body, Mind, and Soul in the Gulf War Debate” in Stuckey, ed., *The Theory and Practice of Political Communication Research*, 159–176; Mary E. Stuckey, “Remembering the Future: Rhetorical Echoes of World War II and Vietnam in George Bush’s Public Speech on the Gulf War,” *Communication Studies* 43 (Winter 1992): 246–256; Lakoff, “Metaphor and War.”

³⁷ David Campbell, *National Deconstruction: Violence, Identity, and Justice in Bosnia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998); Kuusisto, “Framing the Wars in the Gulf and in Bosnia.”

³⁸ Wander, “The Rhetoric of American Foreign Policy.”

³⁹ Bonnie Dow, “The Function of Epideictic and Deliberative Strategies in Presidential Crisis Rhetoric,” *Western Journal of Speech Communication* 53 (Summer 1989): 294–310.

⁴⁰ Siobhan McEvoy, *American Exceptionalism and U.S. Foreign Policy: Public Diplomacy at the End of the Cold War* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2001).

⁴¹ Mary E. Stuckey, “Competing Foreign Policy Visions: Rhetorical Hybrids After the Cold War,” *Western Journal of Communication* 59 (Summer 1995): 214–227.

phor war, which took place on two distinct but interconnected levels. The first level of the metaphor war was a series of disagreements over the relevance of particular historical metaphors to the situation in Kosovo, or a struggle to define the present in the light of the past. The second level of the metaphor war centered around the connotations of the historical metaphors themselves, including the lessons to be drawn from particular past events. Both levels of the metaphor war became intertwined in complex and interesting ways as speakers engaged in simultaneous battles for interpretive dominance over both the present and the past. This article seeks not only to determine which historical metaphors appeared in the Kosovo debate and to explain what they signified, but also to examine the politics surrounding the use of the historical metaphors themselves.

METHODOLOGY AND SYNOPSIS

Figure 1 presents the four historical metaphors that appeared most often in the debate⁴² and also identifies the principal “trigger phrases” that speakers commonly used to evoke these metaphors. These findings are based on an examination of the public speeches and statements of two groups of U.S. political leaders: first, the Clinton administration, which consisted of President Bill Clinton and his senior foreign policy officials, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, Secretary of Defense William Cohen, and National Security Adviser Samuel Berger; and, second, the U.S. Congress, or elected members of the United States Senate and House of Representatives. The source for statements by the President and his officials was the Lexis-Nexis Academic Universe database, news-transcripts section,⁴³ which contains a complete record of official declarations and on-the-record comments to the press by administration officials. The principal source for statements by elected members of Congress was the *Congressional Record*, as reproduced in the Lexis-Nexis Congressional Universe database.⁴⁴ Both databases were searched for all references to Kosovo during the period from the start of the Serbian offensive on 20 March 1999 until the termination of NATO’s bombing campaign on 10 June 1999. Each mention of Kosovo was examined for explicit comparisons between an historical event and the Kosovo crisis. The most commonly cited comparisons were the four historical events in the figure. Each comparison between Kosovo and these four events was then examined for adjectival words and phrases or synonyms that speakers associated with the historical events. The most frequently recurring words and phrases are those labeled “trigger phrases” in Figure 1. Finally, the databases were searched once again, this time for all occurrences of the trigger

⁴² Bosnia was also mentioned frequently, but given that events in Bosnia were still unfolding at the time of the Kosovo debate, I did not consider it to be an historical reference.

⁴³ http://web.lexis-nexis.com/universe/form/academic/s_transcript.html, accessed on 1 March 2000.

⁴⁴ http://web.lexis-nexis.com/congcomp/form/cong/s_congress.html, accessed on 1 March 2000.

FIGURE 1
Historical Metaphors in the Kosovo Debate and Associated Trigger Phrases

<p>U.S. War in Vietnam</p> <p>"Vietnam," "quagmire"</p>	<p>Attempted Genocide of the Jews by the Nazis</p> <p>"Holocaust," "genocide," "never again," "concentration camps," "loading innocent people onto trains," "Hitler"*</p>
<p>Lead-Up to WWII/ Munich Conference</p> <p>"appeasement," "Munich," "stand up to Nazi aggression," "Hitler"*</p>	<p>Balkans' Role in the Outbreak of WWI</p> <p>"Balkan powderkeg," "Balkan tinderbox"</p>

* References to "Hitler" were associated with both the Munich metaphor and the Holocaust metaphor.

phrases.⁴⁵ The citations found in this search were added to the list of explicit historical comparisons (eliminating duplicates) that had already been gathered. The result was a complete compilation of allusions to the four historical events in Figure 1.

⁴⁵ The time period for this search extended from one year before the beginning of the March 1998 Serbian offensive until the end of NATO bombing in June 1999. In addition, because the *Congressional Record* does not include public statements made by elected members of Congress outside the Congress, the Lexis-Nexis database of "major U.S. newspapers" (http://web.lexis-nexis.com/universe/form/academic/s_gennews.html) was also searched for instances in which members used trigger phrases in connection with the Kosovo crisis.

Before proceeding with the analysis, one further note of clarification is in order: we cannot know whether members of Congress or the Clinton administration invoked historical metaphors for purely instrumental purposes (that is, to shape others' interpretations of the Kosovo crisis) or whether they genuinely believed that the crisis resembled these historical precedents. We simply lack the necessary evidence, such as the private and unguarded communications of these political leaders, to answer this question at present. However, we can assume that officials who promoted particular interpretations of the Kosovo crisis were, among other things, seeking to convince others of the value of these interpretations. Why else would these officials have bothered to speak publicly on this matter, if not to express a position that would be taken seriously by others? In this article, therefore, I examine the use of historical metaphors in the Kosovo debate as a form of political persuasion, and I leave to others the knottier question of whether participants in the debate who used these metaphors were truly speaking from the heart. I do not claim that metaphors serve solely as instruments of persuasion in political or social life, but rather, that this is one of the functions that metaphors perform in policy debates.

THE CLINTON ADMINISTRATION

During late spring 1998, the United States and other members of the Contact Group—France, Germany, Italy, Russia, and Britain—announced that they would impose sanctions on Yugoslavia unless President Slobodan Milosevic withdrew his security police from Kosovo and opened talks with representatives of Kosovo's Albanian community on the future of the province. The Contact Group had called for peaceful dialogue on the status of Kosovo for several years,⁴⁶ but Milosevic had shown little interest in political negotiation with the Kosovars. Even after the Contact Group issued threats of sanctions against Yugoslavia, Milosevic remained defiant. On 10 June 1998, the United States froze all Yugoslav-owned assets in the United States and prohibited Americans from making investments in Yugoslavia.⁴⁷ The executive order authorizing sanctions against Yugoslavia articulated a theme that Clinton would later develop in his speeches and statements: namely, the danger that violence in Kosovo could spread to nearby states. According to the text of the order, the situation in Kosovo constituted “an unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security and foreign policy of the United States,” because the Yugoslav policies, by promoting ethnic conflict and human suffering in Kosovo, threatened “to destabilize countries in the region,” including Bosnia.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ For example, “Statement on Kosovo of the Contact Group of Foreign Ministers,” New York, 24 November 1997, reproduced on the internet website of the Office of the High Representative, <http://www.ohr.int/docu/d970924a.htm>, accessed on 6 March 2000.

⁴⁷ Executive Order 13088, 10 June 1998.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

By October 1998, Serb forces had driven the KLA and thousands of Albanian civilians into the mountains of Kosovo, prompting Clinton to make extended public comments on the Kosovo situation.⁴⁹ His main concern, as before, was that instability in the province threatened peace and security in the entire Balkans region. In making this argument, the President introduced a new metaphor: He described Kosovo as the “powderkeg” of the Balkans—a term that along with “tinderbox” would be used repeatedly over the subsequent months in the debate over American policy towards Kosovo. Clinton stated: “We all agree that Kosovo is a powderkeg in the Balkans. If the violence continues, it could spill over and threaten the peace and stability of Bosnia, of Albania, of Macedonia and other countries in the region. What is already a humanitarian disaster could turn into a catastrophe.”⁵⁰

At this early stage in the Kosovo crisis, Clinton’s language was still somewhat coded and suggestive; in the months to come, he would spell out the implications of his historical allusions with much greater clarity. Nevertheless, the phrase “powderkeg in the Balkans” would have carried historical significance for listeners who possessed even a casual knowledge of European history. Since the early part of the twentieth century, when instability in the Balkans drew in the great powers and provided the spark that ignited World War I, the region has been widely known as a powderkeg. In 1947, for instance, members of the International Court of Justice noted that the Balkans had been “*so often described* as the ‘powder-keg’ of Europe.”⁵¹ Today, the term continues to be attached to the region’s politics, conjuring up memories of the origins of World War I.⁵²

The meaning of the powderkeg metaphor is straightforward: the Balkans can explode at any time, and the resulting conflagration can spread to the rest of Europe; preventing such an explosion is vital to the continent’s, and perhaps even to American, security. When Clinton described Kosovo as a powderkeg, he warned that the Kosovo conflict might spill over not only to surrounding

⁴⁹ Before October 1998, Clinton made only sporadic and passing references to the “alarming tensions” and “turmoil” in Kosovo in his public statements. See, for example, “Remarks by President Clinton at Reception for Lee Fisher,” Federal News Service, 3 June 1998; “Remarks by President Clinton to the 141 1998 Presidential High School Scholars,” Federal News Service, 15 June 1998; “Remarks by President Clinton: Announcement of Cabinet-Level Appointments,” Federal News Service, 18 June 1998; “Remarks by President Clinton to the American Federation of Teachers 75th Convention,” Federal News Service, 20 July 1998; and “Remarks by President Clinton to Members-Elect of the Northern Ireland Assembly,” Federal News Service, 3 September 1998.

⁵⁰ “Remarks by the President to Opening Ceremony of the 1998 International Monetary Fund/World Bank Annual Meeting,” Federal News Service, 6 October 1998.

⁵¹ “Separate Opinion by Judges Basdevant, Alvarez, Winiarski, Zoricic, de Visscher, Badawi Pasha and Krylov,” *American Journal of International Law* 42 (July 1948): 707. (Emphasis added.) See also John D. Treadway, “Of Shatter Belts and Powder Kegs: A Brief Survey of Yugoslav History” in Constantine Danopoulos and Kostas G. Messas, eds., *Crisis in the Balkans: Views From the Participants* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1997).

⁵² For example, Treadway, “Of Shatter Belts and Powder Kegs, 19–45.

Balkan states, but to Europe as a whole; and he insinuated that the United States could be compelled to fight in such a pan-European conflict, just as it did in World Wars I and II. “As we approach the next century,” he stated on 12 October, during a discussion of the Kosovo situation, “we must never forget one of the most indelible lessons of this one we’re about to leave—that America has a direct stake in keeping the peace in Europe before isolated acts of violence turn into large-scale wars.”⁵³ Translation: if you want to make sure American boys will not have to fight another world war, then support me in my efforts to extinguish the smoldering fire in the Balkan powderkeg, before it is too late.

Internationally sponsored peace talks on Kosovo opened in Rambouillet, France, in early February 1999. Shortly thereafter, another historical metaphor entered the Clinton administration’s public statements on Yugoslavia—the “lessons of Munich,” or the imperative to deal firmly with dictators who are bent on aggression.⁵⁴ Although the President and his aides continued to use the powderkeg/tinderbox metaphor, Secretary of State Albright, for instance, told a congressional committee that Kosovo “is a tinderbox.”⁵⁵ American officials now also began to evoke memories of the failure to stop Hitler before World War II. Albright likened the Kosovo crisis to “what happened before the Second World War in Munich.”⁵⁶ The President argued that history had proved that the failure to “deter aggression” would lead “to even greater violence we will have to oppose later at greater cost.”⁵⁷

The Clinton administration’s most extensive use of historical metaphors to describe the situation in Kosovo, however, came during the period of the crisis itself, after Serbian forces began the March 1999 offensive that elicited the NATO bombing campaign. On 23 March, three days into the Serbian offensive and one day before NATO started dropping bombs, the President delivered a speech on the Kosovo situation in which he evoked both the powderkeg and Munich metaphors: “What if someone had listened to Winston Churchill and *stood up to Adolf Hitler* earlier? How many peoples’ lives might have been saved, and how many American lives might have been saved? What if someone had been working on the *powderkeg* that exploded World War I, which claimed more lives than World War II for most European countries, what would have happened?”

⁵³ “Statement by the President at the New York Hilton and Towers,” Federal News Service, 12 October 1998. See also Clinton’s warning of “a wider war in Europe” in “Remarks by the President at HMO Announcement,” Federal News Service, 8 October 1998.

⁵⁴ On the enduring quality of the Munich metaphor, see Kenneth M. Jensen and David Wurmser, eds., *The Meaning of Munich Fifty Years Later* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 1990); and Chuter, “Munich, or the Blood of Others.”

⁵⁵ “Hearing of the House International Relations Committee,” Federal News Service, 25 February 1999; see also “Foreign Policy Address by President Clinton,” Federal News Service, 26 February 1999.

⁵⁶ “Hearing of the House International Relations Committee,” Federal News Service, 25 February 1999.

⁵⁷ “Radio Address by the President to the Nation,” Federal News Service, 13 February 1999.

He further reinforced this message by making the historical lessons more explicit than in his earlier speeches, and by using trigger phrases such as “concentration camps” and “genocide” that introduced yet another metaphor into his description of the Kosovo situation—that of the Holocaust. “Let me remind you,” he told his audience, “this is not the first time we’ve faced this kind of choice [over whether to take military action]. When President Milosevic started the war in Bosnia seven years ago, the world did not act quickly enough to stop him. Let’s not forget what happened. Innocent people were herded into *concentration camps*. . . . A quarter of a million people in a country with only six million population were killed, and a couple of million refugees were created. Not because of anything they had done, but because of who they were, and because of the thirst of Mr. Milosevic and his allies to dominate, indeed, to crush people who were of different ethnic and religious affiliation. Now, this was *genocide* in the heart of Europe. It did not happen in 1945. It was going on in 1995.”⁵⁸ Clinton was in effect offering Americans a conceptual model for interpreting the complex circumstances of the Kosovo crisis. It invited his listeners to draw upon widely shared understandings of key historical events and to view the Kosovo conflict in the light of these historical events.

On the following evening, 24 March, the president reiterated these themes in a televised address announcing NATO air strikes on Serbian forces. “We act to prevent a wider war,” he explained, “to defuse a *powderkeg* at the heart of Europe that has exploded twice before in this century with catastrophic results.” Without asserting that a genocide was actually taking place in Kosovo, he evoked memories of the Holocaust twice in his speech, along with several other historical metaphors: “Sarajevo, the capital of neighboring Bosnia, is *where World War I began. World War II and the Holocaust engulfed this region*. In both wars, Europe was slow to recognize the dangers, and the United States waited even longer to enter the conflicts. Just imagine if leaders back then had acted wisely and *early enough*, how many lives could have been saved, how many Americans would not have had to die. We learned some of the same lessons in Bosnia just a few years ago. The world did not act *early enough* to stop that war either. And let’s not forget what happened . . . *genocide* in the heart of Europe. . . . Not in some grainy newsreel from our parents’ and grandparents’ time, but in our own time, testing our humanity and resolve.” The President then returned to the powderkeg/tinderbox metaphor: “Let a fire burn here in this area and the *flames will spread*. Eventually, key U.S. allies could be drawn into a *wider conflict*, a war we would be forced to confront later—only at far greater risk and greater cost. . . . [Let us act now] so that future generations of Americans do not have to cross the Atlantic to fight *another terrible war*.”⁵⁹

⁵⁸ “Remarks by President Bill Clinton to AFSCME (American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees) Conference,” Federal News Service, 23 March 1999. (Emphasis added.)

⁵⁹ “Statement by the President to the Nation,” Federal News Service, 24 March 1999. (Emphasis added.)

In this speech, which was apparently meant to rally public support behind the NATO bombing campaign, Clinton assembled all of the historical metaphors that he had used to describe Kosovo over the previous months and combined them into a single, concentrated barrage of emotionally charged images from the distant and recent past. The President's earlier metaphorical allusions had been almost oblique in comparison to the blunt manner in which he now invoked the powderkeg, Munich, and Holocaust metaphors to explain events in Kosovo.

Although neither Clinton nor any of his cabinet officers explicitly called Milosevic a new Hitler, or stated that the Serb treatment of Albanian civilians in Kosovo actually represented a new Holocaust, American officials continued to stir up memories of World War II, Hitler, and the Holocaust in the weeks that followed the president's televised address. Madeleine Albright's speech at a Brookings Institution panel on the future of NATO was a case in point. In the first minute of her presentation, she portrayed NATO as a response to the lessons of Munich and the Holocaust, which helped to situate her subsequent discussion of Kosovo against the backdrop of this history: "The North Atlantic Treaty Organization was forged in the aftermath of the *Holocaust* and war by the survivors of war to prevent war. It reflected our predecessors' determination to defend hard-won freedoms and their understanding that while *weakness invites aggression*, strength is a parent to peace." She then went on to fit the Kosovo crisis into this institutional history of NATO: "[B]y acting on behalf of justice and peace in Kosovo, we are reaffirming NATO's core purpose as a defender of democracy, stability and basic human decency on European soil. . . . Kosovo is part of an area, the southeast corner of Europe, *where World War I began*, [and] major battles of *World War II* were fought. The worst fighting in Europe since *Hitler's* surrender, occurred in this decade. . . . It is because of [Milosevic's] cruelty that NATO actions became the only option as he prepared to unleash *yet another rampage of terror*. . . . We are resolute because it is in our interest and it is right to stop the ethnic cleansing, war crimes, crimes against humanity and other indicators of *genocide* that we see."⁶⁰ Without explicitly comparing Milosevic to Hitler, or explicitly asserting that the Kosovo crisis was analogous to Munich or the Holocaust, Albright seemed to be inviting her listeners to make these connections for themselves.

The president and his advisers also linked Kosovo to the Holocaust by repeating certain trigger phrases in their public remarks, such as "never again" (an expression that is associated with the pledge never to allow another Holocaust to occur) or references to innocent people being loaded into train cars for deportation (which recalls the transportation of Jews to Nazi concentration camps during World War II). For instance, during a public forum at the White House with Holocaust-survivor Elie Wiesel in April 1999—a forum entitled

⁶⁰ "Remarks by Secretary of State Madeleine Albright at Brookings Institution Forum," Federal News Service, 6 April 1999. (Emphasis added.)

“The Perils of Indifference: Lessons Learned From a Violent Century”—the president’s wife, Hillary Rodham Clinton, stated: “I never could have imagined that when the time finally came for him [Wiesel] to stand in this spot and to reflect on the past century and the future to come, that we would be seeing children in Kosovo *crowded into trains*, separated from families, separated from their homes, robbed of their childhoods, their memories, their humanity. It is something that causes all of us to pause and to reflect . . . how could all this be happening *once again* at the end of this century?”⁶¹

When Wiesel pointed out that he did not believe the Kosovo crisis was a new Holocaust, President Clinton, who was also present at the forum, immediately agreed but was apparently reluctant to abandon the historical parallel: “When we see people forced from their homes at gunpoint, *loaded onto train cars*, their identity papers confiscated, their very presence blotted from the historical record, it is only natural that we would think of the events which Elie has chronicled tonight in his own life.” In other words, the Kosovo situation may not be a new Holocaust, but it bore an uncanny resemblance to the Holocaust, which the President highlighted again and again in his public comments and choice of imagery.

In the weeks following that evening, the President and his aides continued to include indirect references to the Holocaust in their statements on Kosovo. “This is Holocaust Remembrance Day,” Clinton declared on 13 April 1999, drawing a connection between the Holocaust and Kosovo, “*On this day*, let us resolve not to let this ethnic cleansing and killing by Mr. Milosevic go unanswered.”⁶² Secretary of State Albright similarly described “images of families uprooted and *put on trains*.”⁶³ President Clinton, speaking to Kosovar refugees on 26 May, recalled their ordeal: “People rounded up in the middle of the night, *forced to board trains for unknown destinations*, separated from your families. . . . On the eve of a new century, we refuse to be intimidated by a *dictator* who is trying to *revive the worst memories of the century we are leaving*.”⁶⁴ While Clinton’s condemnation of Serbian atrocities was certainly warranted, it seemed to be the President himself, not Milosevic, who was reviving memories of the Holocaust in the minds of his listeners, along with several other historical metaphors.

THE CONGRESSIONAL DEBATE

The U.S. Congress was a central battlefield in the metaphor war. As in the Clinton administration’s public statements, references in Congress to the Balkan

⁶¹ “Remarks at Millennium Evening, The Perils of Indifference: Lessons Learned From a Violent Century,” Federal News Service, 12 April 1999. (Emphasis added.)

⁶² “Statement by the President [in the Rose Garden],” Federal News Service, 13 April 1999. (Emphasis added.)

⁶³ “Madeleine Albright Testifies Before the House International Relations Committee,” Federal Document Clearing House, FDCH Political Transcripts, 21 April 1999. (Emphasis added.)

⁶⁴ “William J. Clinton Delivers Remarks to the Kosovar People,” Federal Document Clearing House, FDCH Political Transcripts, 26 May 1999. (Emphasis added.)

powderkeg, Munich, and the Holocaust were common, although the most hotly disputed metaphor was Vietnam. Congressional debate also involved a second level of contest in the metaphor war—the meaning and implications of the historical events themselves.

Powderkeg (and Falling Dominoes)

In comparison to the Holocaust and Vietnam metaphors, which came up frequently in Congress during the Kosovo crisis, references to the Balkan powderkeg were relatively rare, although when such references did appear they generally echoed the President's warnings of a wider European war. Representative Lincoln Diaz-Balart (R-FL), for example, argued that, "Historically it is well known that the Balkans have been a *tinderbox* for regional wars, and we must not forget that World War I began in that part of the world."⁶⁵

Some critics of Clinton administration policy devised an interesting response to assertions that the United States should use its armed forces to prevent the Balkan powderkeg from exploding. They sought to redefine the powderkeg argument in terms of another metaphor—falling dominoes. The domino theory gained prominence in 1954, when President Dwight Eisenhower explained American concerns about the dangers of Vietnamese communists gaining control over the former French colony of Indochina, including the possibility that surrounding countries would subsequently fall under communist domination: "You have a row of dominoes set up, you knock over the first one, and what will happen to the last one is the certainty that it will go over very quickly. So you could have a beginning of a disintegration that would have the most profound influences."⁶⁶ Although the notion of falling dominoes shaped American strategic thinking from the very beginning of the cold war,⁶⁷ it played an especially important role in the private decision making and public justifications that surrounded the intervention of United States forces in the Vietnam War, and is still closely associated with America's Vietnam policy.⁶⁸ The historical association between the domino metaphor and the Vietnam War may provide an explanation for the behavior of congressional critics of the Clinton ad-

⁶⁵ 145 *Cong. Rec.* H 1181, 11 March 1999. See similar comments by Senator Joseph Biden (D-DE) in 145 *Cong. Rec.* S 3094-3013, 23 March 1999; and Senator Joseph Lieberman (R-CT) in 145 *Cong. Rec.* S 3110, 23 March 1999.

⁶⁶ "The President's News Conference of April 7, 1954," in *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Dwight D. Eisenhower, 1954* (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1960), 383.

⁶⁷ Robert Jervis, "Domino Beliefs and Strategic Behavior" in Robert Jervis and Jack Snyder, eds., *Dominoes and Bandwagons: Strategic Beliefs and Great Power Competition in the Eurasian Rimland* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 20-50; and Frank Ninkovich, *Modernity and Power: A History of the Domino Theory in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

⁶⁸ Ole R. Holsti and James N. Rosenau, "Vietnam, Consensus, and the Belief Systems of American Leaders," *World Politics* 32 (October 1979): 1-56; and Jervis, "Domino Beliefs and Strategic Behavior."

ministration's policies towards Kosovo, who responded to arguments about the danger of the "Balkan tinderbox" by recasting these arguments as new versions of the Vietnam-era domino theory, thus portraying the Kosovo conflict in the negative light of the Vietnam War. In the words of Representative Mark Sanford (R-SC): "the domino theory has long been disproven. Clark Clifford was sent by President Johnson down to Vietnam for the very reason that is being described as one of the reasons we need to go to Kosovo, and, that was, if we do not do something, this could escalate, this could really grow. That was disproven there."⁶⁹

Rather than seeking to replace one metaphor (the Balkans powderkeg) with another (falling dominoes), other critics of the NATO bombing campaign accepted the Clinton administration's powderkeg image, but then used this metaphor to argue *against* American involvement in the Balkans on the grounds that it would be reckless and wrong to deploy U.S. troops to a location that was about to explode into a wider conflict. In the words of Representative William Goodling (R-PA): "We must consider the powderkeg we are getting ourselves into. Let us not enter the twenty-first century in the same way we began the twentieth century by getting ourselves involved in a centuries-old Balkan conflict which we cannot and will not resolve . . . now by the introduction of U.S. ground troops."⁷⁰ The implication of this argument is that the deployment of American troops to Europe during World War I was a mistake and that the United States does not have a vital interest in using American forces, if necessary, to maintain peace in Europe. Unlike many of his colleagues, in other words, Goodling did not deny that the Kosovo crisis might spread; his argument for not involving the United States forces in Kosovo was the very real danger, from his perspective, that the crisis could spark a larger conflict. In this sense, while Goodling's colleagues were fighting over the applicability of the powderkeg metaphor to Kosovo, Goodling himself chose to challenge the policy implications of the metaphor.

Munich and the Holocaust

Those who favored NATO's firm response to the Serbian military campaign frequently conjured up memories of World War II and the Nazis. One member of Congress baldly asserted, for instance, that Slobodan Milosevic was "a modern day Hitler,"⁷¹ while others suggested that Milosevic's behavior or character merely bore a resemblance to that of Hitler.⁷² Some comparisons between the

⁶⁹ 145 *Cong. Rec.* H 1243-1244, 11 March 1999. See also Senator John Kerry's (D-MA) remarks in 145 *Cong. Rec.* S 3116, 23 March 1999.

⁷⁰ 145 *Cong. Rec.* E 609, 12 April 1999. Representative Randy Cunningham (R-CA) similarly argued: "it is a powderkeg. . . . Let us not send our men and women to Kosovo." (145 *Cong. Rec.* H 1197, 11 March 1999).

⁷¹ Representative Chet Edwards (D-TX) in 145 *Cong. Rec.* H 2447, 28 April 1999.

⁷² For example, Representative Major Owens (D-NY) in 145 *Cong. Rec.* E 621, 13 April 1999; and Representative Ron Packard (R-CA) in 145 *Cong. Rec.* E 1742, 4 August 1999.

Serb leadership and the Nazis conveyed the lessons of both the Munich and Holocaust metaphors simultaneously—that is, the importance of countering an aggressive dictator with force and the commitment to “never again” allow genocide to occur. Representative Sam Gejdenson (D-CT), for example, alluded to both of these lessons when he argued against a motion for the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Kosovo: “If we pass this proposal, Mr. Milosevic will see a bright green light to continue the work of his role models, Hitler and Stalin.”⁷³ Other participants in the congressional debate over Kosovo also likened Serbs to Nazis, but in a less direct and explicit manner, such as Senator Joseph Biden’s (D-DE) description of the manner in which Albanian Kosovars were killed by Serb forces: “These bullet wounds were in the back of their heads. They [the Albanians] were executed, just like they [the Serbs] did in Bosnia, *just like Hitler did in World War II.*”⁷⁴ In making this comparison, Biden implied that Serbian forces in Kosovo had behaved like Nazis.

References to the Holocaust appeared regularly in the pages of the *Congressional Record* during the period of the crisis. Few speakers directly asserted that events in Kosovo were equivalent to the Holocaust, but many used language that invited listeners to make this connection for themselves. Representative David Obey (D-WI), for example, declared: “I think we need to have meant it when we said about Europe after Hitler in World War II ‘Never Again!’ And I think when the President walked into this problem and we saw what was happening in Yugoslavia, that we had an obligation to try to stop it.”⁷⁵

Obey never described the precise nature of the “problem” in Yugoslavia, but it did not require much imagination to divine his meaning. Senator Christopher Dodd (D-CT) similarly juxtaposed the Holocaust and the Kosovo crisis without directly comparing them: “[S]ixty years ago, as Europe moved increasingly close to war, a number of philanthropic organizations came to the aid of those desperately trying to escape the Holocaust. Today, many of those same organizations have turned their attention to helping the latest victims of genocide. . . . As in World War II, these organizations recognize that they cannot stop the genocide without support from the world community. In the case of Kosovo, that means that NATO has had to bring its military might to bear on Slobodan Milosevic.”⁷⁶ Dodd’s apparent justification for juxtaposing the Holocaust and the Kosovo crisis was not the characteristics of the respective genocides themselves, but the activities of philanthropic organizations. Neverthe-

⁷³ 145 *Cong. Rec.* H 2425, 28 April 1999. Similarly, Delegate Robert Underwood (D-GUAM): “Too many lives in past conflicts have been lost because of inaction. Imagine how different the world might have been had the world stood up sooner to an Adolf Hitler or a Heideiki Tojo. We are once again at one of those historical crossroads,” in 144 *Cong. Rec.* H 1668, 24 March 1999; see also the comments of Representative Ciro Rodriguez (D-TX) in 145 *Cong. Rec.* H 2398, 28 April 1999.

⁷⁴ 145 *Cong. Rec.* S 3048, 22 March 1999. (Emphasis added.)

⁷⁵ 145 *Cong. Rec.* H 2880, 6 May 1999.

⁷⁶ 145 *Cong. Rec.* S 4472, 29 April 1999.

less, simply by juxtaposing these two events, Dodd's comments had the effect of inviting listeners to view the Kosovo situation as analogous to the Holocaust.

Another speaker who achieved a similar effect was Senator Richard Durbin (D-IL): We [Americans] get engaged in wars for values. That is what it was all about in World War II; to make sure that Hitler and his genocide would come to an end once and for all, to make certain in the cold war that we stopped the spread of communism in Europe. Now, today, in this mission in Kosovo, we say we are standing again for values that are important, not only in the United States, but in Europe and around the world."⁷⁷ Like Dodd, Durbin implicitly compared the Holocaust and Kosovo by mentioning them both in the same breath, although he did not argue that they were equivalent; his only explicit claim was that American "values" were at stake in both cases. The implication was that Americans would be justified in using armed force to protect the victims of Serb aggression and that the United States had a moral commitment to do so.

In response to these comments, many opponents of the Kosovo operation rejected the portrayal of Milosevic as Hitler, or Serb behavior as Nazi-like. In the words of Representative Goodling: "[P]eople like to somehow or other say this has something to do with Hitler and Nazi Germany. That is nonsense. It has nothing to do with that at all. There is no correlation at all."⁷⁸ Others critics provided reasoned arguments for differentiating between Kosovo and the Holocaust, such as the claim that in Kosovo atrocities were being committed by "both sides"—the Serb forces and the KLA—and not just by one group against another, as in the Holocaust. Therefore, the United States did not have a responsibility to intervene in the Balkan crisis.⁷⁹

By contrast, Representative Jim Leach (R-IA) acknowledged that "Holocaustal analogies" did apply to Kosovo, but he warned against taking these comparisons too far: "if we exclusively make Hitlerite analogies, we have no choice whatsoever than to follow a kind of strategy that could lead in and of itself to greater losses of life to innocents than a negotiated settlement . . . [and] renders it impossible for the US to consider anything less than unconditional victory."⁸⁰ Leach's comment exposed what seemed to be the core of the debate over the use of World War II metaphors: If the U.S. administration, other members of Congress, opinion leaders, and the public could be convinced that the complex situation in the Balkans was in at least a few important ways analogous to the Holocaust or to Nazi aggression (if these constituencies could just be persuaded to think about the Kosovo crisis in the light of World War II) then it would be difficult to oppose U.S. military intervention in the crisis. This observation may help to explain why some supporters of U.S. intervention, when they were confronted with arguments emphasizing the lack of equivalence be-

⁷⁷ 145 *Cong. Rec.* S 4143, 22 April 1999.

⁷⁸ 145 *Cong. Rec.* H 1899, 13 April 1999.

⁷⁹ Representative Scott McInnis (R-CO) in 145 *Cong. Rec.* H 2796, 5 May 1999.

⁸⁰ 145 *Cong. Rec.* H 2421–2422, 28 April 1999.

tween the Kosovo crisis and World War II, acknowledged that the two events were not directly analogous. But they continued to argue that there were enough similarities to merit a forceful international response to the Serbs. As Senator Mary Landrieu (D-LA) put it:

Some of my colleagues here in the Senate are consistently remind[ing] us that Kosovo is not the Holocaust. I agree. What has occurred in the last few months, does not yet compare to the crimes the Nazis perpetrated. But this is a senseless justification for inaction. Should we wait for another Holocaust to occur before we act decisively? What, then, is the point of action? How many children must be traumatized? How many homes need to be destroyed? How many women need to be victims of brutality before we can act? I say the words “never again” mean that we should not wait and we will be decisive in our action. That is why I support using whatever means is necessary to accomplish the goal set out by NATO.⁸¹

In this statement, Landrieu used a rhetorical method that President Clinton had employed in his public conversation with Elie Weisel. Both Clinton and Landrieu first acknowledged that the comparison between Kosovo and the Holocaust did not stand up to scrutiny, but then proceeded to evoke memories and images of the Holocaust in an apparent effort to justify and enjoin U.S. military intervention in Kosovo.

Vietnam

While most invocations of Vietnam during the congressional debate were made by speakers opposed to American intervention in Kosovo, close examination reveals a wide variation in the precise implications that these speakers attributed to the Vietnam metaphor. Lawmakers' interpretations of Vietnam's lessons were considerably more varied than their reading of the Holocaust's lessons. Because of the relatively unsettled status of the Vietnam metaphor, members of Congress disagreed not only on the question of whether the Vietnam example was relevant to the Kosovo crisis but also over the connotations of the Vietnam metaphor itself. The battle over the significance of the Vietnam War, perhaps more than any other historical metaphor in the congressional debate, took place simultaneously at these two levels.

Several members of Congress, for example, used Vietnam references to highlight the internecine, ancient, and complex aspects of the conflict between Albanians and Serbs in Kosovo and to suggest that these were the features of the Vietnam War that led to the American defeat. As Representative Jerry

⁸¹ 145 *Cong. Rec.* S 4141, 22 April 1999. Representative Eliot Engel (D-NY) echoed this argument: “The isolationist attitude that I hear amongst some of my colleagues is indeed troubling and puzzling. We have heard these arguments time and time and time again. We heard these arguments during the Second World War when 6 million people plus were ethnically cleansed and the Holocaust was there. I am not saying that this is on the same level, but when innocent people are killed because of their race, or ethnicity, we have a right and a duty, I think, to respond.” (145 *Congressional Record* H 1220, 11 March 1999).

Costello (D-IL) argued: “[S]ince Vietnam ended, [we have paid] a terrible price for our mistake and we are still reaping the bitter fruit of those decisions. The war in Southeast Asia is very similar to the Balkans, a civil war . . . [that] has to be settled by those who are most affected—those who live there . . . and it will be impossible for us militarily from the outside to impose a successful solution on the problems faced by the people of this area.”⁸²

Many speakers repeated a similar set of facts. The Balkan conflict, like the Vietnam War, had been going on “for hundreds of years”; it was “a 610-year-old ethnic war, civil war, religious war” in a region that “has been inflamed for centuries.”⁸³ The United States was getting involved in a conflict “with less justification than there was in Vietnam in the midst of a cold war, getting into it to involve ourselves in a civil war that for all practical purposes has already gone on for 600 years.”⁸⁴ Kosovo is a “quagmire of ethnic and religious rivalries that we cannot solve alone. Let us remember Dien Bien Phu, when many of his key advisers pressured President Eisenhower to send our armed forces to help bail out the French. He was a wise president; he turned them down.”⁸⁵ Representative Lindsey Graham (R-SC) may have expressed these concerns most clearly: “How many more young men and women are going to [be sent] in faraway places to get in the middle of civil wars where there is a dubious reason to be there to start with and no way home?”⁸⁶ This version of the Vietnam metaphor implied that the United States was courting disaster if it intervened in distant, deep-rooted conflicts that it did not understand and in which it had no vital national interest.

Another version of the metaphor emphasized the incompetent manner in which the American government waged the Vietnam War. By invoking this interpretation of Vietnam, speakers apparently sought to impugn the Clinton administration’s handling of the Kosovo crisis. “More than 30 years ago in Vietnam,” stated one such speaker, Senator Max Cleland (D-GA): “we also lacked clear and specific objectives. . . . The result was a conflict where the politicians failed to provide clear political objectives, but intruded in determining military strategy, and where our policy was never fully understood or fully supported by the American people. . . . I cannot in good conscience sit here and *watch it all appear to be happening again*.”⁸⁷

Several lawmakers pointed, in particular, to the lack of a clearly defined “exit strategy” as a planning failure in Vietnam and a weakness in America’s Kosovo policy; while others, recalling the collapse of public support in the

⁸² 145 *Cong. Rec.* H 2394, 28 April 1999.

⁸³ Representative Scott McInnis (R-CO) in 145 *Cong. Rec.* H 2796, 5 May 1999; Representative Joe Scarborough (R-FL) in 145 *Cong. Rec.* H 2445, 28 April 1999; and Senator Robert Smith (I-NH) in 145 *Cong. Rec.* S 6035, 26 May 1999.

⁸⁴ Senator Slade Gorton (R-WA) in 145 *Cong. Rec.* S 3097, 23 March 1999.

⁸⁵ Representative Stephen Horn (R-CA) in 145 *Cong. Rec.* H 2436, 28 April 1999.

⁸⁶ 145 *Cong. Rec.* H 1203, 11 March 1999.

⁸⁷ 145 *Cong. Rec.* S 5668, 20 May 1999. (Emphasis added.)

United States for the Vietnam War, criticized the Clinton administration for failing to explain its policy clearly to the American people.⁸⁸ Although this interpretation of the Vietnam metaphor was not incompatible with the first version (the argument that domestic conditions in Vietnam were not conducive to a U.S. military victory), it did have different implications for the Kosovo crisis. If America's failure in Southeast Asia was primarily due to American mismanagement of the war, rather than to the circumstances of the Vietnamese conflict itself, then the key to successful U.S. intervention in Kosovo would depend on the competent organization and execution of such an operation.

A third reading of the Vietnam metaphor emphasized the alleged lack of resolve or steadfastness in America's Vietnam War effort and suggested that the Kosovo mission would not succeed unless the United States used "full force" to achieve its goals.⁸⁹ Representative Kevin Brady (R-TX) used this type of argument to criticize administration policy: "Like Vietnam, [in Kosovo] we wage a war we are not committed to win, by the seat of the pants, war by committee, war by posters, war by the politically correct. It is having fatal results. Worst of all, we forgot the most important lesson of Vietnam. *It is fatal to enter a war without the will to win it.*"⁹⁰ Senator Robert Smith (I-NH) agreed: "to do anything less than to go in with absolute purpose and absolute decisiveness . . . is another Vietnam."⁹¹ This version of the Vietnam metaphor was also used to condemn the "incrementalist" manner in which the United States was engaging in the Balkan conflict, recalling the ill-fated "escalation" of American involvement in Vietnam, or what is sometimes called "mission creep."⁹²

In making this argument, several speakers lectured the administration in the fundamentals of warfare. For instance, one senator argued that the "Vietnam-style" of the NATO bombing campaign had sacrificed the "two principle elements of war: surprise and overwhelming force."⁹³ Another lawmaker was similarly blunt: "we have no business getting into wars that we are not determined to win . . . this is what brought us the agony of Vietnam."⁹⁴ More generally, this third version of the Vietnam metaphor, like the first and second versions, cast a negative light on U.S. involvement in the Balkan crisis, but it also

⁸⁸ For example, Representative Doug Bereuter (R-NE) in 145 *Cong. Rec.* H 1195, 11 March 1999; Representative Jack Kingston (R-GA) in 145 *Cong. Rec.* H 1246, 11 March 1999; Senator Arlen Specter (R-PA) in 145 *Cong. Rec.* S 2919, 18 March 1999; Representative Tillie Fowler (R-FL) in 145 *Cong. Rec.* H 2402, 28 April 1999; and Representative Doug Ose (R-CA) in 145 *Cong. Rec.* H 2836, 6 May 1999.

⁸⁹ Senator Kay Bailey Hutchison (R-TX) in 145 *Cong. Rec.* S 4523, 3 May 1999.

⁹⁰ 145 *Cong. Rec.* H 2445, 28 April 1999. (Emphasis added.)

⁹¹ 145 *Cong. Rec.* S 6034, 26 May 1999.

⁹² For example, Representative John Kasich (R-OH) in 145 *Cong. Rec.* H 2339, 27 April 1999; Representative Dave Camp (R-MI) in 145 *Cong. Rec.* H 2413, 28 April 1999; Senator James Inhofe (R-OK) in 145 *Cong. Rec.* S 4540, 3 May 1999; and Senator Kay Bailey Hutchison (R-TX) in 145 *Cong. Rec.* S 4523, 3 May 1999.

⁹³ Senator John Ashcroft (R-MO) in 145 *Cong. Rec.* S 4564, 3 May 1999.

⁹⁴ Representative Benjamin Gilman (R-NY) in 145 *Cong. Rec.* H 2427, 28 April 1999.

revealed another reading of the lessons of Vietnam: the American failure in Southeast Asia was not primarily due to the domestic conditions in Vietnam (the first version of the metaphor), nor simply to the poor management of the U.S. government (the second version), but to a lack of willingness to employ all necessary means—overwhelming force—to the goal of defeating the enemy. In the words of Senator Kay Bailey Hutchison (R-TX), “when you go [to war], by God, you go to win.”⁹⁵

Other legislators, however, rejected any likening of the Kosovo crisis to the Vietnam War. According to Senator Biden, such comparisons were “heartfelt and searching” but “totally out of proportion” because there was “nothing analogous” between the two situations.⁹⁶ Biden pointed to a number of differences: “It is a different continent, it is a different population, it is a different rationale.”⁹⁷ Senator John Kerry (D-MA) echoed these points, and added that American strategy in Kosovo was shrewder than in Vietnam.⁹⁸ Senator Patrick Leahy (D-VT) argued that it was premature to talk about becoming “bogged down” in Kosovo at such an early moment in the campaign: “we and our NATO allies have been at war in Kosovo for a total of three weeks,” whereas the U.S. government enjoyed at least four years of strong congressional support at the beginning of the Vietnam War.⁹⁹

The lines of division between those who endorsed or rejected the Vietnam metaphor, however, became quite hazy because there was a concurrent debate over the meaning of the metaphor itself. Perhaps the best illustration of this dynamic was the controversy surrounding the so-called McCain-Biden resolution in the Senate, which would have authorized the president to use “all necessary force” in Kosovo, including the deployment of ground troops. President Clinton did not support the resolution, arguing that he already had sufficient authority to conduct an aerial bombing campaign through NATO, and that he had no immediate plans to deploy ground troops to Kosovo. The impetus behind the resolution, rather, came from a coalition of Democratic and Republican senators who were dissatisfied with the way in which the Kosovo operation was being conducted.

Some of these senators, like Biden, one of the cosponsors of the resolution, explained their motivation in terms of the perceived imperative to stop the “genocidal aggression” of Slobodan Milosevic’s forces, and to preserve stability in the region and Europe. Other supporters of the resolution, such as John McCain (R-AZ), the other cosponsor, did not acknowledge the relevance of the Holocaust and powderkeg metaphors to the Kosovo crisis, and had initially disapproved of the Clinton administration’s decision to involve U.S. forces in

⁹⁵ 145 *Cong. Rec.* S 4523, 3 May 1999.

⁹⁶ Senator Joseph Biden (D-DE) in 145 *Cong. Rec.* S 3097, 23 March 1999, and 145 *Cong. Rec.* S 4552, 3 May 1999.

⁹⁷ Senator Joseph Biden (D-DE) in 145 *Cong. Rec.* S 4552, 3 May 1999.

⁹⁸ Senator John Kerry (D-MA) in 145 *Cong. Rec.* S 4549-50, 3 May 1999.

⁹⁹ Senator Patrick Leahy (D-VT) in 145 *Cong. Rec.* S 3668, 14 April 1999.

the crisis. But once the United States had committed its armed forces to combat, they believed that there should be no hesitation to devote the full power of the American military to achieve victory. In explaining his position, McCain referred explicitly to the lessons of Vietnam, which in his view clearly demanded the use of overwhelming force in U.S. military operations, rather than making partial or incremental commitments of American forces. Senator Kerry, expressing a similar point, warned against turning Kosovo into “a Vietnam” through a “lack of resolve and pursuit” in the prosecution of the Balkan campaign.¹⁰⁰

Meanwhile, opponents of McCain-Biden continued to argue that the lessons of Vietnam argued against the deployment of ground forces to Kosovo: for example, some of these opponents equated McCain-Biden with the 1964 Gulf of Tonkin resolution, which, they argued, had given the U.S. president a “blank check” to wage the Vietnam War.¹⁰¹ The Senate eventually voted to table the resolution, but the debate surrounding the motion illustrated the dual character of the metaphor war in the Congress: not only was there competition to define Kosovo in the light of different historical metaphors, but there was a concurrent struggle to establish the implications of particular past events, including the Vietnam War.

CONCLUSION: HISTORICAL METAPHORS IN THE KOSOVO DEBATE

In the debate over Kosovo, historical metaphors seemed to serve as a kind of shorthand representing competing understandings of the Balkan crisis, each of which suggested different strategies for responding to the crisis. This observation, which is derived from the speeches and statements both of Clinton administration officials and members of Congress, lends support to the proposition that political metaphors are not merely rhetorical flourishes, but rather, as Max Black puts it, “every metaphor is the tip of a submerged model.”¹⁰² By casting the Kosovo situation against the backdrop of the Holocaust or Munich, for instance, participants in the debate invoked a set of well known and emotionally charged representations of past events, which provided an apparent rationale for American intervention in the crisis. The Vietnam metaphor, by contrast, invited listeners to interpret Kosovo in a very different light—one that was much less encouraging about the prospects of a successful American intervention in Kosovo. References to the Balkan powderkeg were less obvious in their implications for U.S. policy, because they could be used to warn against the United States becoming entangled in an explosive local conflict, or on the other

¹⁰⁰ Senator John Kerry (D-MA) in 145 *Cong. Rec.* S 4549, 3 May 1999.

¹⁰¹ For example, Senator Paul Wellstone (D-MN) in 145 *Cong. Rec.* S 4517, 3 May 1999; Senator Russ Feingold (D-WI) 145 *Cong. Rec.* S 4527, 3 May 1999; and Senator Arlen Specter (R-PA) in 145 *Cong. Rec.* S 4484, 30 April 1999.

¹⁰² Max Black, “More About Metaphor” in Andrew Ortony, ed., *Metaphor and Thought* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 31.

hand, to highlight the danger of failing to prevent such a conflict from spreading to neighboring states, and possibly to other parts of Europe.

Indeed, some metaphors appeared to have more settled connotations than other metaphors. There was little disagreement, for example, about the meaning of references to Munich and the Holocaust. When Munich appeared in speeches and statements, it always referred to the failure of the Western democracies to stand up to Hitler in 1938 and, more generally, to the dangers of appeasing dictators. Perhaps because the connotations of the Munich metaphor are so well-established, opponents of American intervention in Kosovo did not attempt to challenge or redefine the metaphor itself, but rather argued that Kosovo was not analogous with Munich, that Milosevic was not Hitler, that the Serbs were not Nazis, and the like. In other words, they questioned the applicability, not the connotations, of the Munich metaphor. Similarly, references to the Holocaust in the Kosovo debate appeared to convey a single interpretation of what the Holocaust signified and of the appropriate foreign policy response to any new Holocaust: the metaphor referred to a genocide in which innocent civilians were targeted for extermination because of their ancestry; and the United States should “never again” allow another Holocaust to occur. Opponents of U.S. intervention in Kosovo did not communicate alternative interpretations of the Holocaust metaphor or seek to redefine the metaphor; disagreement centered instead on the question of whether the Kosovo crisis could, or should, be characterized as a new Holocaust.

This type of disagreement, which focused on the perceived applicability of particular historical metaphors to the situation in Kosovo, is what I have called the first level of the metaphor war in the public debate over U.S. policy toward Kosovo. These arguments were often heated and vitriolic, suggesting that the speakers themselves perceived that a great deal was at stake in the struggle to characterize the Kosovo crisis. But these conflicts were also relatively straightforward, at least in the following sense: one could either agree or disagree that the Munich or Holocaust metaphors applied to the Kosovo situation.

Allusions to Vietnam and to the Balkan powderkeg metaphors, by contrast, fueled more complex disagreements. While speakers argued about the applicability of these metaphors to the Kosovo crisis, just as they did in the case of Munich and the Holocaust, they also quarreled about the actual meaning and the perceived lessons of the Vietnam and Balkans powderkeg metaphors. This was especially true of references to Vietnam. At various moments in the debate, Vietnam appeared to signify, among other things, the ignominious military defeat of American forces in a civil war “quagmire”; the killing and harming of innocent civilians by American forces in an apparently senseless war; the incompetent leadership and conduct of the war by the U.S. government; the danger of gradual escalation of American military involvement in a foreign conflict, or what is known as “mission creep”; and the lack of political and material commitment to defeating North Vietnam, or the notion that U.S. forces were forced to fight with one hand tied behind their back. Most of the speakers

who saw a connection between Kosovo and the Vietnam War strongly opposed American intervention in the Balkans and used the Vietnam metaphor to argue against such an intervention. But different speakers used the metaphor in different ways, which appeared to reflect ongoing disagreements about the nature and lessons of America's experience in Vietnam. Some speakers, for example, drew parallels between Serbian civilian deaths from NATO bombing and the killing of civilians during the Vietnam War, in order to argue that the campaign against Serbia was being waged too vigorously and that more extensive U.S. intervention in Kosovo would only cause more senseless deaths. Others—most notably, those who traced the American failure in Vietnam to a lack of political and material commitment to the war—were initially wary of U.S. involvement in Kosovo, but supported increased intervention, including the deployment of American ground forces to fight the Serbian military, once the decision to start the NATO bombing campaign was taken. Thus, the connotations of the Vietnam metaphor, rather than merely the applicability of the metaphor to the Kosovo crisis, were a focus of contestation in the debate over Kosovo.

To a lesser extent, participants in the debate also disagreed about the implications of the Balkans powderkeg metaphor. Some speakers insisted that the region's history of political instability and the lessons of World War I supported rapid American action to stem the Kosovo crisis before it ignited a larger conflict, while others argued that the very same danger of a larger conflagration argued against U.S. intervention, and yet others sought to recast the metaphor as a type of domino theory, apparently in the hopes of discrediting it.

Disagreement over the meaning and implications of particular historical allusions (as distinct from disagreement over the applicability of these metaphors to the situation in Kosovo) comprises the second level of the metaphor war, which was in effect the residue of earlier interpretive struggles that had never been fully resolved. What made the Kosovo metaphor war so complex—and, in my view, interesting—was the fact that it was waged on both the first and second levels simultaneously: it was a battle over the meaning of both the present and the past, and their relationship to one another. Fredrick Jackson Turner once remarked that “Each age tries to form its own conception of the past.”¹⁰³ The Kosovo debate suggests that each age also tries to form its own conception of the present in the light of its own contested interpretations of the past.

Studying the metaphors of political debate not only offers to shed light on a society's struggle to understand its own experiences and the surrounding world. There is a more prosaic—and perhaps more important, from the viewpoint of some political scientists—reason to decipher such metaphors: namely, to gain a better understanding of what political actors are actually saying when they engage in public debate; and perhaps ultimately to figure out why political leaders speak in certain ways and not in others. Much of the Kosovo debate took

¹⁰³ Cited in Avery Craven, “The ‘Turner Theories’ and the South,” *Journal of Southern History* 5 (August 1939): 291.

place in a type of code, comprised in part of direct and indirect references to previous historical experiences. This article has attempted to make sense of that code—that is, to clarify what American political leaders were actually saying when they discussed the Kosovo crisis while at the same time offer a broader explanation of the role that metaphors play in the U.S. foreign policy debates.*

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