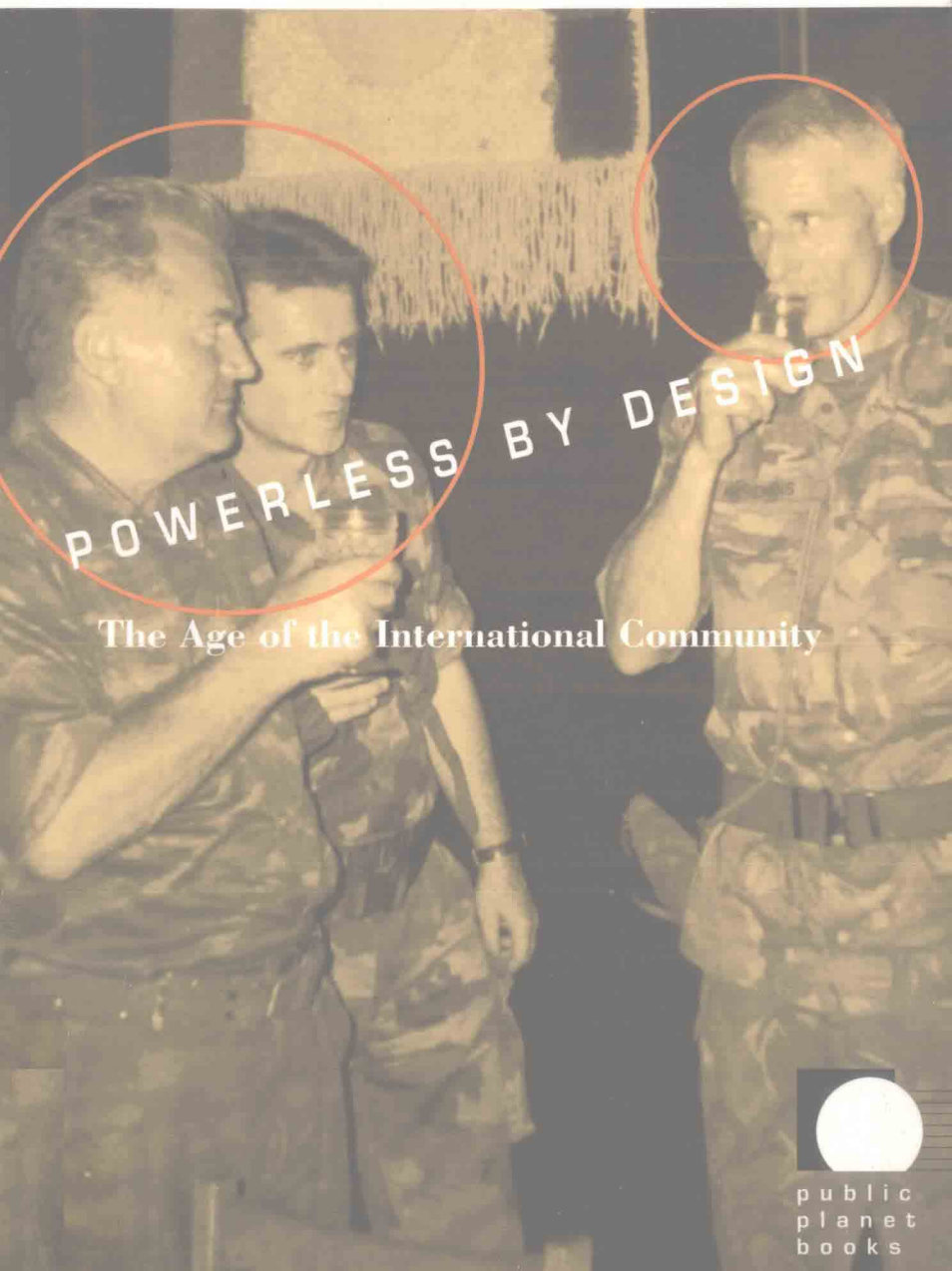


Michel Feher



POWERLESS BY DESIGN

The Age of the International Community



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# **Powerless by Design**

The Age of the International Community

**Michel Feher**

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## Preface

Sometime in the early 1990s, Western officials began portraying themselves as the leading members of the international community. In that capacity, they devised a doctrine that was not only at odds with the rhetoric of the cold war but also a far cry from the “new world order” promoted by George Bush and Margaret Thatcher at the outset of the decade. Whereas their predecessors had invested almost every regional conflict with a political and ideological stake—whether it was the struggle between the “Free World” and totalitarianism or the defense of international law against rogue states—the representatives of the new international community claimed that the crises they were confronted with called neither for military intervention nor even partisan involvement on their part. Exemplary of this new approach was the Western response to the ethnic cleansing campaigns in the former Yugoslavia and the genocide of the Rwandan Tutsis. Arguing that these crimes needed to be traced to ancient tribal enmities, rather than the ideology of the regimes that had planned them, U.S. and European leaders professed that the role of the international community should be limited to a humanitarian, impartial, and conciliatory engagement with all the warring parties. Hence the tone of powerless righ-

teousness—or was it righteous powerlessness?—that characterized Western diplomacy between the end of the Gulf War and the launching of the air campaign against Serbia in March 1999.

Faced with this new doctrine, both the liberal and radical wings of the Western Left found themselves in an uneasy position. Liberals, while lured by the vocabulary of their leaders—the latter’s mottoes were indeed dialogue, the rule of law, and reconciliation—could not help feeling disturbed by the dismal results of the policies carried out in the name of the international community. Conversely, anti-imperialist militants were quick to mock the hypocrisy of their governments’ helpless indignation, yet certainly not prepared to demand that Western powers resort to more forceful measures, whether in the Balkans or central Africa. Thus, if the representatives of the international community were rarely praised for their reactions to ethnic cleansing and genocide, even the traditionally critical segments of their public opinions did not present them with a particularly vigorous challenge.

With the intervention of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in Kosovo, however, Western leaders unexpectedly departed from what was now their time-honored doctrine. To justify their decision to confront Slobodan Milosevic without a mandate from the United Nations Security Council, the sponsors of operation “Allied Force” declared that they were acting not as the representatives of the international community but as the guardians of democracies’ duty to prevent massive human rights violations. Among other consequences—especially for the Albanian Kosovars and later the people of East Timor—this sudden doctrinal shift enabled both liberal and radical activists to finally find their post-cold war marks: the former welcomed the newfound resolve of their governments as the belated fulfillment of the promises

raised by the end of the cold war, while the latter condemned it as the return of the imperialist new world order.

A year later, the war against Serbia continued to be a defining issue for the Western Left. Anti-imperialist militants were still working on a revisionist account of the Kosovo crisis that would vindicate their opposition to NATO's intervention, whereas liberals desperately hung onto the notion that their governments were now committed to oppose massive human rights violations, even at the expense of state sovereignty. Yet, at the same time, U.S. and European responses to the destruction of Chechnya by Russian troops seemed to indicate that the spring of 1999 had been less a turning point than an exceptional moment in the ongoing age of the international community. Therefore, while the following pages are almost exclusively about the 1990s, the discursive strategy that they attempt to expose may well remain with us for quite some time.

xiii

This book not only owes its existence to the generous encouragements and insightful critiques of some wonderful people but also to their insightful encouragements and generous critiques. I wish to express my deepest gratitude to Amanda Bay, Judith Butler, Andrea Dooley, Eric Fassin, Hal Foster, Carla Hesse, Thomas Keenan, Thomas Laqueur, Ramona Naddaff, Robert Post, Peter Sahlin, and Michael Warner. If, as I fear, my efforts have not met what their intelligence and kindness deserve, it only shows that I am a better judge of character than they are. I also want to thank my successive editors at Duke University Press: Richard Morrison, Leigh Anne Couch, and Ken Wissoker. Finally, I am very grateful to Laszlo Feher for losing hardly any sleep over this project.

## **Contents**

Preface xi

A Puzzling Chiasma 1

A New Doctrine 31

A Radical Critique 51

An Ambiguous Evolution 111

An Unsettling Message 117

An Emerging Polarization 125

Notes 137

## A Puzzling Chiasma

**O**n June 10, 1999, as Serbian troops were starting to leave Kosovo, Bill Clinton justified NATO's operation Allied Force in the following way. "We should remember," the president said in his address to the nation, "that the violence we responded to in Kosovo was the culmination of a ten-year campaign by Slobodan Milosevic, the leader of Serbia, to exploit ethnic and religious differences in order to impose his will on the lands of the former Yugoslavia. That's what he tried to do in Croatia and in Bosnia, and now in Kosovo." Throughout the century, Clinton added, "millions of innocent people died . . . because democracies reacted too late to evil and aggression." Thanks to NATO's resolve, however, this unfortunate tendency to "appease" bloody dictators by turning a blind eye to the plight of their victims was finally interrupted. The president of the United States could thus proudly conclude that "the twentieth century is ending not with helpless indignation but with a hopeful affirmation of human dignity and human rights for the twenty-first century."

This was not the first time that Clinton blamed the war in the former Yugoslavia on the "renegade regime of Slobodan Milosevic." He had already used that same expression in July 1992 as the Democratic candidate for the presiden-



tial election.<sup>1</sup> Soon after, on August 3, 1992, when *Newsday* correspondent Roy Gutman revealed the existence of concentration camps set up by the Serbs in northwestern Bosnia, the former governor of Arkansas was among the few Western politicians who called for an immediate military intervention. More important, the future president already defended his position as he would seven years later, namely, by stressing the necessity of confronting “ethnicist” regimes early on in order to prevent them from realizing their genocidal projects. “If the horror of the Holocaust taught us anything,” Clinton declared, “it is the high cost of remaining silent and paralyzed in the face of genocide.” Roger Cohen reports that just one day later, the Democratic candidate confirmed his statement by saying, “We cannot afford to ignore what appears to be a deliberate and systematic extermination of human beings based on their ethnic origin. I would begin with air power against the Serbs, to try to restore the basic conditions of humanity.”<sup>2</sup>

Yet, starting in early 1993, the Clinton administration portrayed the Bosnian conflict in quite a different manner. Almost as soon as they took office, the new president and his secretary of state, Warren Christopher, ceased to point to the “renegade regime of Slobodan Milosevic” as the root cause of the war. Instead, they resorted to the “ancient enmity” explanation that the Bush administration had used to justify its neutrality and that was still the official line of the secretary general of the United Nations (UN) as well as the French and British governments. According to that view, what had successively set Croatia and Bosnia aflame was not the implementation of a specific political project—that is, the constitution of an ethnically cleansed Greater Serbia—but the resurgence of a traditional cultural feature of the Balkans—namely, age-old “ethnic violence” between Serbs, Croats, and Bosnian Muslims. Drawing from this “historical” perspective, George Bush’s secretary of state, Lawrence Eagleburger,

had famously concluded that “until the Bosnians, Serbs, and Croats decide to stop killing each other, there is nothing the outside world can do about it.”<sup>3</sup>

Similarly, in the spring of 1993, Clinton declared that “the hatred between all three groups is almost unbelievable. It’s almost terrifying, and it’s centuries old. That really is a problem from hell.”<sup>4</sup> Though some mild efforts were made to decrease the discrepancy between the positions of candidate and President Clinton—such as conceding that “the Serbs” were responsible for more atrocities than the other “warring factions,” while Muslim civilians were the principal victims of the conflict—for two and a half years, the Clinton administration maintained that an extraordinarily long history of mutual resentment was the main obstacle to establishing peace in Bosnia. “Their enmities go back five hundred years, some would say almost a thousand years,” said Clinton in June 1995, just a few weeks before Bosnian Serb General Ratko Mladic and his henchmen were to commit the worst genocidal act of the Bosnian War—the mass execution of over 7,000 people in the eastern enclave of Srebrenica.<sup>5</sup>

Even after the Dayton Peace Agreement was signed, in November 1995, the Clinton administration continued to attribute the difficulties in consolidating peace and fostering reconciliation between the three Bosnian communities to the intractability of their ancient hatreds. Similarly, in 1998, when an increasing number of Albanian Kosovars realized that they could not hope to shake the apartheid rule imposed on them by Milosevic without resorting to armed struggle, U.S. officials not only stuck to their usual “evenhandedness,” apportioning blame equally between Albanian “terrorism” and Serbian “brutal repression”; true to form, they also traced these regrettable outbursts of violence to ancient enmity, this time between Serbs and Albanian Kosovars.<sup>6</sup> Yet once Milosevic bluntly refused to sign the Rambouillet agree-

ments, in the winter of 1999, thereby forcing the United States and its European allies either to take military action or fatally compromise NATO's credibility, the ancient enmity explanation was suddenly dropped. In its stead, the Clinton administration revived the diagnosis of the Yugoslav wars that had been proffered by candidate Clinton in the summer of 1992. Within a few days of March 24, 1999—that is, as soon as it became clear that Milosevic would try to outlast NATO's resolve—the violence that had successively engulfed Croatia, Bosnia, and now Kosovo was no longer linked to 500 or even 1,000 years of ethnic hatred but to a decade-old renegade regime whose representatives had relentlessly endeavored to rid what they saw as Serbian land of its non-Serbian population.

Though he proved remarkably swift in substituting Milosevic's ten-year campaign for the thousand-year enmity rationale, Clinton was hardly the only one to modify his perspective on the Yugoslav wars once NATO planes started bombing Serbia. Just as striking as the president's was the symmetrical but opposite shift that took place in some leftist circles. For reasons that will be discussed at the end of this book, it is true that neither ethnic cleansing in the former Yugoslavia nor even genocide in Rwanda ever became prominent motives of outrage among what used to be called the anti-imperialist Left—in the United States as well as Europe.<sup>7</sup> Nonetheless, a venerable platform for U.S. progressives such as the *Nation* took a largely negative view of the West's response to the Bosnian War.

The “peacekeeping” mission known as the United Nations Protection Force (UNPROFOR), which embodied the humanitarian and impartial approach chosen by Western governments, came under especially harsh criticism in the leftist weekly in the wake of Srebrenica's fall. Columnist Christopher Hitchens, who was then representative of the *Nation's*

position, rejected the claim made by UN and Western officials that they had been “powerless” to prevent Mladic’s troops from seizing Srebrenica—officially a “safe haven” under UNPROFOR protection—and slaughtering the town’s male population. According to Hitchens, the fact that U.S. and European diplomats even dared to make that assertion only exposed the hypocrisy of their alleged commitments to the defense of human rights and advancement of international justice. Because the territorial integrity of a multiethnic Bosnia presented no economic or strategic interest for the United States and its allies, Hitchens argued that Western powers were simply seeking to present the partition of the country, and thus the victory of the ethnic cleansers, as a regrettable *fait accompli*: “The decision to let Srebrenica ‘go’ was a cold one,” he wrote, “designed to shrink the territory claimed by the Sarajevo government and thus to create ‘on the ground’ the preconditions for partition. It is therefore not true to say that the shame of the West lies in watching helplessly as a population was put to the sword. The shame lies in the complicity and the collusion.”<sup>8</sup>

In spring 1999, the *Nation* was still intent on exposing the hypocrisy of U.S. and European leaders. This time, however, Western governments were not faulted for claiming to be powerless in the face of systematic mass murder and deportation but for pretending that the purpose of NATO’s intervention in Kosovo was to oppose such crimes. With the exceptions of UN correspondent Ian Williams and Hitchens—whose column now truly deserved to be called “Minority Report”—the *Nation*’s editors and contributors made it their mission to reject the notion that the air campaign against Serbia was an “ethical war,” as British Prime Minister Tony Blair had called it, waged for humanitarian motives.<sup>9</sup> In about twenty editorials and articles devoted to the operation, they argued that Allied Force was not about protecting the Albanian Ko-

sovars since the main cause of their suffering was “the blood-lust roused by NATO’s bombing.”<sup>10</sup> Rather, it was primarily about finding a new *raison d’être* for the North Atlantic alliance, undermining the authority of the UN, and allowing the Pentagon to show that it could wage a war without U.S. casualties.<sup>11</sup>

6 In 1995, the *Nation* had pointed to the lack of Western interests in the former Yugoslavia to explain why NATO planes did not prevent Milosevic’s subcontractors from entering Srebrenica; in 1999, however, the same publication pointed to the imperialistic aims of the West to explain why NATO members used air power to pressure Milosevic into removing his troops from Kosovo. In the summer of 1995, the *Nation* had accused Western governments of hiding behind a deliberately counterproductive UN diplomacy in order to evade their own responsibilities in the victory of the ethnic cleansers; conversely, in the spring of 1999, *Nation* editorials proclaimed that Western leaders were waging a blatantly illegal war because NATO’s air campaign against Serbia had been launched without the approval of the UN Security Council. In short, Western leaders, who had been blamed in 1995 for doing what they finally ceased to do four years later, were criticized in 1999 for not reverting back to their earlier policies.<sup>12</sup>

A remarkable feature of these two sudden and symmetrical shifts in perspective is that neither the Clinton administration nor the *Nation* felt the need to acknowledge them. Usually, for the sake of preserving some credibility among their target audiences—who as voters or readers, exercise some influence over their fate—both the U.S. government and an established voice of leftist opposition are expected to submit what they say about any particular issue to a basic set of constraints. At the very least, the stories they tell must pay homage to the values that they are supposed to stand for, convey a measure of

continuity with their previous statements about the same or even related issues, and address the facts that other sources of information have made available to the public. Though public stances are subject to occasional revisions, these changes in outlook tend to be publicly acknowledged and properly framed, if only to ward off embarrassing questions. Thus, the appearance of a new rationale can either be justified by a transformation in the situation itself—such as when Ronald Reagan officially declared that Mikhail Gorbachev's Soviet Union no longer was the “evil empire”—or staged as carefully calibrated apologies—such as when Clinton recognized that the international community, including the United States, had failed to stop the Rwandan genocide.

7

Yet, in the spring of 1999, neither the representatives of the U.S. government nor the editors of the *Nation* tried to explain why they were modifying their views on the Yugoslav wars, whether by calling forth the good reasons or confessing the bad ones behind the incompatibility between their successive positions. The Clinton administration, far from dramatizing the replacement of the thousand-year-old-enmity explanation with the newfound indictment of Milosevic's ten-year-old renegade regime, endeavored to stress the constancy of U.S. policies. On the one hand, to prevent their current resolve from underscoring their past inaction, government officials argued that operation Allied Force belonged to the same forceful approach, albeit on a larger scale, as operation “Deliberate Force”—the bombing of Bosnian Serb positions, in the late summer of 1995, that paved the way for the Dayton Peace Agreement. But on the other hand, to avert domestic as well as international fears of a militaristic turn in U.S. foreign policy, the Clinton administration kept calling the 1999 air campaign a “humanitarian intervention,” thereby suggesting some continuity between the decision to remove Serbian troops from Kosovo by force and that of sending “humani-

tarian aid” to Bosnia—prior to 1995—instead of military assistance.

As for the *Nation*, opposing the war against Serbia enabled the leftist weekly to return to the anti-imperialist rhetoric devised for the Gulf War: conflicts should be resolved through negotiations rather than war; public money should be spent to help people live better rather than to kill them; Western powers, especially the United States, do not have the moral right, given their own record, to impose their will on others. However, little effort was made to reconcile this familiar mix of pacifism and disgust for Western arrogance with the critique of Western hypocrisy and indifference to the victims of post-cold war conflicts that had increasingly informed the *Nation*’s view of Western diplomacy during the period ranging from the end of operation “Desert Storm” to the launching of Allied Force.

The fact that the Clinton administration obscured its own decision to publicly blame the bloody decomposition of the former Yugoslavia on a political project rather than a cultural trait suggests that this decision was not premeditated. Indeed, we have already mentioned that at the outset of the crisis leading to operation Allied Force, U.S. officials still framed the troubles in Kosovo as the resurgence of an old and intractable dispute fueled by extremists on both sides. On February 23, 1998, for instance, Assistant Secretary of State Robert Gelbard denounced the then-surging Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) as a “terrorist group,” thereby equating the proponents of Albanian armed resistance with overt advocates of Albanian deportation such as Vojislav Seselj and his Serbian Radical Party. To counter these “extremist” forces as well as to devise a compromise combining Serbian sovereignty over Kosovo and the end of the apartheid rule in there, Washington called on “moderates” such as Ibrahim Rugova, the pacifist president of the Democratic League of Kosovo,

but also the supposedly “pragmatic” head of the Yugoslav state, Milosevic himself.<sup>13</sup>

Though the persistent defiance of the Serbian leader gradually made such evenhandedness untenable, until the end of March 1999, the U.S. government and its European allies continued to believe that Milosevic would not want to sacrifice his status as a tough-yet-indispensable partner for peace—a status that the Clinton administration had granted him during the Bosnian peace negotiations in 1995.<sup>14</sup> While U.S. officials realized that the Yugoslav president would test their resolve, and thus that they should be prepared to actually resort to force, they nonetheless envisioned this eventuality as a new version of operation Deliberate Force, the three-week air campaign against Mladic’s forces that purported to lower the territorial ambitions of the Bosnian Serbs but also enabled Milosevic to negotiate in their name. In other words, before it was launched, operation Allied Force was not meant to be a response to a ten-year reign of terror: its initial purpose consisted of leveling the field between the Albanian and Serbian parties in order to pressure the latter into removing its troops, reinstating Kosovo’s autonomy, and allowing NATO troops to monitor the peace. Among Western diplomats, the consensus was that Milosevic planned to use the threat of a NATO air campaign, or even endure a few days of largely symbolic bombing, to persuade the Serbian people that for the sake of their safety, he had no other choice than to comply with the terms of the Rambouillet agreement that he had previously refused to sign. Accordingly, not only did NATO governments fail to prepare for a protracted war but they went as far as announcing publicly that they had no intention of deploying ground troops in Kosovo prior to the departure of the Serbian special forces.

Once the bombing of Serbia began, however, U.S. and European officials realized that they had considerably overesti-



mated Milosevic's fear of becoming an international pariah. (They may have thought that he would not want to expose his country to the lot of Iraq after the Gulf War, whereas the main lesson Milosevic had drawn from Desert Storm was that, nine years later, Saddam Hussein was still in power.) Betting both on the fragility of NATO's unity and Russian support for the Serbian cause, the Yugoslav leader challenged Western governments to sustain a long campaign. Moreover, taking advantage of their refusal to commit ground troops, he ordered his army to empty Kosovo of its Albanian population—thereby fulfilling the covert promise on which he had built his power in the late 1980s. Thus, it was only when the Clinton administration understood that the war, though still undeclared, was going to last longer, kill more civilians—the infamous “collateral damages”—and raise more anti-American sentiments than initially expected, that its representatives sought to secure the support of the U.S. public by providing a new definition of the violence that successively ravaged a third of Croatia, the whole of Bosnia, and now Kosovo.

Portraying the difference between the various Yugoslav “warring parties” in purely quantitative terms—that is, one of them had more weapons at its disposal and was guilty of more crimes than its rivals—had proved a good enough formula as long as U.S. officials merely needed to justify the threat or even limited use of force as a proper way to pressure the dominant and more brutal party into negotiating with its weaker foes. But when NATO was suddenly faced with the prospect of a prolonged and hazardous confrontation with Serbia, the Clinton administration could no longer defend its involvement without proclaiming that the difference between Milosevic and his enemies, past and present, was a qualitative one—namely, the Serbian leader had relentlessly endeavored to “exploit ethnic and religious differences in order to impose his will on the lands of the former Yugoslavia.”