

Remarks Announcing Airstrikes Against Serbian Targets in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (Serbia and Montenegro)

March 24, 1999

Good afternoon. United States forces, acting with our NATO Allies, have commenced airstrikes against Serbian military targets in the former Yugoslavia. I will address the Nation more fully tonight on why this action is necessary, but I wanted to say a few words now.

We and our NATO Allies have taken this action only after extensive and repeated efforts to obtain a peaceful solution to the crisis in Kosovo. But President Milosevic, who over the past decade started the terrible wars against Croatia and Bosnia, has again chosen aggression over peace. He has violated the commitments he, himself, made last fall to stop the brutal repression in Kosovo. He has rejected the balanced and fair peace accords that our allies and partners, including Russia, proposed last month, a peace agreement that Kosovo's ethnic Albanians courageously accepted.

Instead, his forces have intensified their attacks, burning down Kosovar Albanian villages and murdering civilians. As I speak, more Serb forces are moving into Kosovo, and more people are fleeing their homes—60,000 in just the last 5 weeks, a quarter of a million altogether. Many have headed toward neighboring countries.

Kosovo's crisis now is full-blown, and if we do not act, clearly, it will get even worse. Only firmness now can prevent greater catastrophe later.

Our strikes have three objectives: First, to demonstrate the seriousness of NATO's opposition to aggression and its support for peace; second, to deter President Milosevic from continuing and escalating his attacks on helpless civilians by imposing a price for those attacks; and third, if necessary, to damage Serbia's capacity to wage war against Kosovo in the future by seriously diminishing its military capabilities.

As I have repeatedly said to the American people, this action is not risk-free. It carries

risks. And I ask for the prayers of all Americans for our men and women in uniform in the area. However, I have concluded that the dangers of acting now are clearly outweighed by the risks of failing to act, the risks that many more innocent people will die or be driven from their homes by the tens of thousands, the risks that the conflict will involve and destabilize neighboring nations. It will clearly be much more costly and dangerous to stop later than this effort to prevent it from going further now.

At the end of the 20th century, after two World Wars and a cold war, we and our allies have a chance to leave our children a Europe that is free, peaceful, and stable. But we must—we must—act now to do that, because if the Balkans once again become a place of brutal killing and massive refugee flights, it will be impossible to achieve.

With our allies, we used diplomacy and force to end the war in Bosnia. Now trouble next door in Kosovo puts the region's people at risk again. Our NATO Allies unanimously support this action. The United States must stand with them and stand against ethnic violence and atrocity.

Our alliance is united. And I am particularly grateful for the support we have received from Members of Congress from both parties. As we go forward, I will remain in close contact with Congress—I have spoken with all the leaders today—and in contact with our friends and allies around the world. And I will have more to say about all of this tonight.

Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 2:15 p.m. in the Briefing Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to President Slobodan Milosevic of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (Serbia and Montenegro).