

Feature Story: Meet Mister Massacre

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by Mark Ames and Matt Taibbi

Years from now, when the war in Serbia is over and the dust has settled, historians will point to January 15, 1999 as the day the American Death Star became fully operational. That was the date on which an American diplomat named **William Walker** brought his OSCE war crimes verification team to a tiny Kosovar village called Racak to investigate an alleged Serb massacre of ethnic Albanian peasants. After a brief review of the town's 40-odd bullet-ridden corpses, Walker searched out the nearest television camera and essentially fired the starting gun for the war.

"From what I saw, I do not hesitate to describe the crime as a massacre, a crime against humanity," he said. "Nor do I hesitate to accuse the government security forces of responsibility." We all know how Washington responded to Walker's verdict; it quickly set its military machine in motion, and started sending out menacing invitations to its NATO friends to join the upcoming war party.

How Russia responded is less well-known. One would assume that it began preparations for a diplomatic strategy in the event of war, which it probably realized was inevitable. But in Russia's defense and intelligence communities, the sight of William Walker uncovering Serb atrocities on television almost certainly provoked a different, and more dramatic, reaction. It probably sent a chill up the community's collective spine, and pushed its generals into rapid preparations for a new cold war with the United States. As connoisseurs in the art of propaganda and the use of provocateurs, they recognized a good job when they saw one. And, more importantly, they knew who William Walker was.

Since the outbreak of war in the Balkans, most people in the West have already read news reports raising the possibility that Russia may commit troops, weapons, or even its nuclear arsenal to aid Yugoslavia in its war against NATO. But few people overseas are aware yet of why Russia is talking about going to war with us. We've been told that it's a race thing, that Russians are only upset about U.S. policies in Serbia because their fellow Slavs are being bombed. We've also heard that this is just another chapter in the sore-loser syndrome, that Russians are bitter about the NATO bombing because it has forced them to face the stinging reality of their impotence to defend even their former satellite states.

If these reports are to be believed, Russia's military leaders are considering war with superpower America because their feelings have been hurt. These stories overlook the fact that Russia has, or at least thinks it has, a real reason to be considering military resistance to

NATO, even in its severely weakened state. And that reason is that much of the military and political leadership in this country believes sincerely that the Yugoslavia bombing is just the first chapter in an ambitious American campaign for world domination. Even the soberest of Russian generals is now inclined to consider military intervention on behalf of Serbia on the purely pragmatic grounds that it would be cheaper and easier to try to stop the U.S. now rather than later, when it might be too late. "The people in the Russian military believe sincerely that they need to try to stop the U.S. now, before it goes on a real rampage around the world," said military/defense analyst Pavel Felgenhauer. "That the U.S. is striving for world domination, no one has any doubt."

Most Americans laugh off the idea of themselves as burgeoning world dictators, and would dismiss Russian fears as paranoia. But what most Americans don't realize is that the United States, through its prosecution of the NATO bombing and in its foreign policy in general, has given foreigners plenty of reasons to see conspiracy and military ambition behind everything we do. One good example is the role of the mysterious William Walker in starting the war. As it turns out, even the most cursory review of the background of our chief "verifier" would inspire almost any foreign government to regard the entire Yugoslavia campaign as a cynical, unabashed act of imperialist aggression. For if William Walker is not a CIA agent, he's done a very bad job of not looking like one. Judge for yourself:

Walker's Background

According to various newspaper reports, Walker began his diplomatic career in 1961 in Peru. He then reportedly spent most of his long career in the foreign service in Central and South America, including a highly controversial posting as Deputy Chief of Mission in Honduras in the early 1980s, exactly the time and place where the Contra rebel force was formed. The Contra force was the cornerstone of then-CIA Director William Casey's hardline anti-Communist directive, and Honduras was considered, along with El Salvador, the front line in the war with the Soviet Union. From there, Walker was promoted, in 1985, to the post of Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Central America. This promotion made him a special assistant to Assistant Secretary of State Elliot Abrams, a figure whose name would soon be making its way into the headlines on a daily basis in connection with a new scandal the press was calling the "Iran-Contra" affair. Walker would soon briefly join his boss under the public microscope. According to information contained in Independent Counsel Lawrence Walsh's lengthy indictment of Abrams and Oliver North, Walker was responsible for setting up a phony humanitarian operation at an airbase in Ilopango, El Salvador. This shell organization was used to funnel guns, ammunition and supplies to the Contra rebels in Nicaragua.

Despite having been named in Walsh's indictment (although he was never charged himself) and outed in the international press as a gunrunner, Walker's diplomatic career did not, as one might have expected, take a turn for the worse. Oddly enough, it kept on advancing. In 1988, he was named ambassador to El Salvador, a state which at the time was

still in the grip of U.S.-sponsored state terror. Walker's record as Ambassador to El Salvador is startling upon review today, in light of his recent re-emergence into the world spotlight as an outraged documenter of racist hate-crimes. His current posture of moral disgust toward Serbian ethnic cleansing may seem convincing today, but it is hard to square with the almost comically callous indifference he consistently exhibited toward exactly the same kinds of hate crimes while serving in El Salvador.

In late 1989, when Salvadoran soldiers executed six Jesuit priests, their housekeeper, and her 15 year-old daughter, blowing their heads off with shotguns, Walker scarcely batted an eyelid. When asked at a press conference about evidence linking the killings to the Salvadoran High Command, he went out of his way to apologize for chief of staff Rene Emilio Ponce, dismissing the murders as a sort of forgiveable corporate glitch, like running out of Xerox toner. "Management control problems can exist in these kinds of these kinds of situations," he said. In discussing the wider problem of state violence and repression--which in El Salvador then was at least no less widespread than in the Serbia he monitored from October of last year until March of this year--Walker was remarkably circumspect. "I'm not condoning it, but in times like this of great emotion and great anger, things like this happen," he said, apparently having not yet decided to audition for the OSCE job.

Finally, in what may be the most amazing statement of all, given his current occupation, Walker questioned the ability of any person or organization to assign blame in hate crime cases. Shrugging off news of eyewitness reports that the Jesuit murders had been committed by men in Salvadoran army uniforms, Walker told Massachusetts congressman Joe Moakley that "anyone can get uniforms. The fact that they were dressed in military uniforms was not proof that they were military." Later, Walker would recommend to Secretary of State James Baker that the United States "not jeopardize" its relationship with El Salvador by investigating "past deaths, however heinous." This is certainly an ironic comment, coming from a man who would later recommend that the United States go to war over...heinous deaths.

One final intriguing biographical note: Walker in 1996 hosted a ceremony in Washington held in honor of 5,000 American soldiers who fought secretly in El Salvador. While Walker was Ambassador of El Salvador, the U.S. government's official story was that there were only 50 military advisors in the country (Washington Post, May 6, 1996).

A Spooky Choice

With a background like this, it seems implausible that Walker would be chosen by the United States to head the Kosovar verification team on the basis of any established commitment to the cause of human rights. What seems more likely, given Walker's background, is that he was chosen because of his proven willingness to say whatever his government wants him to

say, and to keep quiet when he is told to keep quiet-- about things like a gunrunning operation, or the presence of 4,950 undercover mercenaries (whose existence he regularly denied with a straight face) in the banana republic where you are Ambassador.

The Iran-Contra incident isn't the only thing in Walker's background which gives reason for pause. Another is his curious ability to remain in Central and South America throughout virtually his entire diplomatic career. Not since before the fall of China has the State Department allowed its career people to remain in one place for any significant length of time. After the Chinese Revolution, the State Department enacted what has come to be known as the Wriston reform, which dictated that Department employees be rotated out of their posts every few years. With this reform, the government was hoping to put an end to a problem which they termed "quiet-itis"--the development of "excessive" sympathies towards the culture of one's host countries.

With the Wriston act, the U.S. government eventually got exactly what it wanted--a State Department characterized by fortress-like embassy compounds, in or around which Americans live amongst themselves in monolingual, isolationist bliss, counting the hours until they're rotated out to their next job in Liberia, or Peru, or wherever. As a result, most State employees see three or four different posts in different corners of the world every ten years. It is well-known among career foreign service people, though, that one of the few exceptions to this rule are the CIA agents in the embassies. Our intelligence people take longer to develop their contacts, and in order to preserve these "personal relationships" (bribe-takers don't like to change bagmen), they tend to hang around longer.

Walker was in Latin America virtually throughout his entire career, until he arrived in Kosovo. He had no experience in the region which qualified him to head the verification team in Yugoslavia. Furthermore, he spent the entire 1980s occupying high-level State positions in Central America, under the Reagan and Bush White Houses, when the region was the source of more East-West tension than in any other place in the world, and Central American embassies were the most notoriously CIA-penetrated embassies we had. You can draw your own conclusions. Nonetheless, one need not prove that Walker is a CIA agent to make the case that the United States made a serious error in judgement in appointing him.

Whether or not he was sent to Kosovo to guarantee that evidence of ethnic cleansing would be "discovered", and whether there even exists a covert plan, of which Walker might be part, to install a semi-permanent U.S. military force in the Balkans, it is bad enough that other countries might identify Walker according to their own criteria and assume the worst. And assume they will, according to political analysts familiar with the story. "Ambassador Walker's record in El Salvador does not a priori invalidate his testimony on the massacres in Kosovo, but it certainly does compromise his reliability as an objective witness," said James Morrell, research director for the Washington-based Center for International Policy. "No question about it, they should have chosen someone else," said Felgenhauer. "If this guy was working for Ollie North, then that's all anyone in Russia is going to need to know,

anyway."

There is a widespread belief not only in Russia, but in other countries, that Walker's role in Racak was to assist the KLA in fabricating a Serb massacre that could be used as an excuse for military action. Already, two major mainstream French newspapers--Le Monde and Le Figaro--as well as French national television have run exposes on the Racak incident. These stories cited a number of inconsistencies in Walker's version of events, including an absence of shell casings and blood in the trench where the bodies were found, and the absence of eyewitnesses despite the presence of journalists and observers in the town during the KLA-Serb fighting. Eventually, even the Los Angeles Times joined in, running a story entitled "Racak Massacre Questions: Were Atrocities Faked?" The theory behind all these exposes was that the KLA had gathered their own dead after the battle, removed their uniforms, put them in civilian clothes, and then called in the observers. Walker, significantly, did not see the bodies until 12 hours after Serb police had left the town. As Walker knows, not only can "anybody have uniforms", but anyone can have them taken off, too.

The story of William Walker's involvement in the war is just one of a rapidly-growing family of tales cataloguing the incompetence and arrogance of the United States and its allies throughout the Kosovo conflict. Even if it isn't proof of some as-yet-unreleased sinister plan to secure a permanent military presence in the Balkans, the fact that the United States didn't even care to avoid the appearance of impropriety in its search for Serb atrocities says a lot about our approach to international relations. It says, "Go ahead and think the worst about us. We don't care. We've got more bombs than you do." If that's the sum of our entire policy, it's only a matter of time before a place like Russia decides to strike first. They won't wait for us to send the next Walker.
