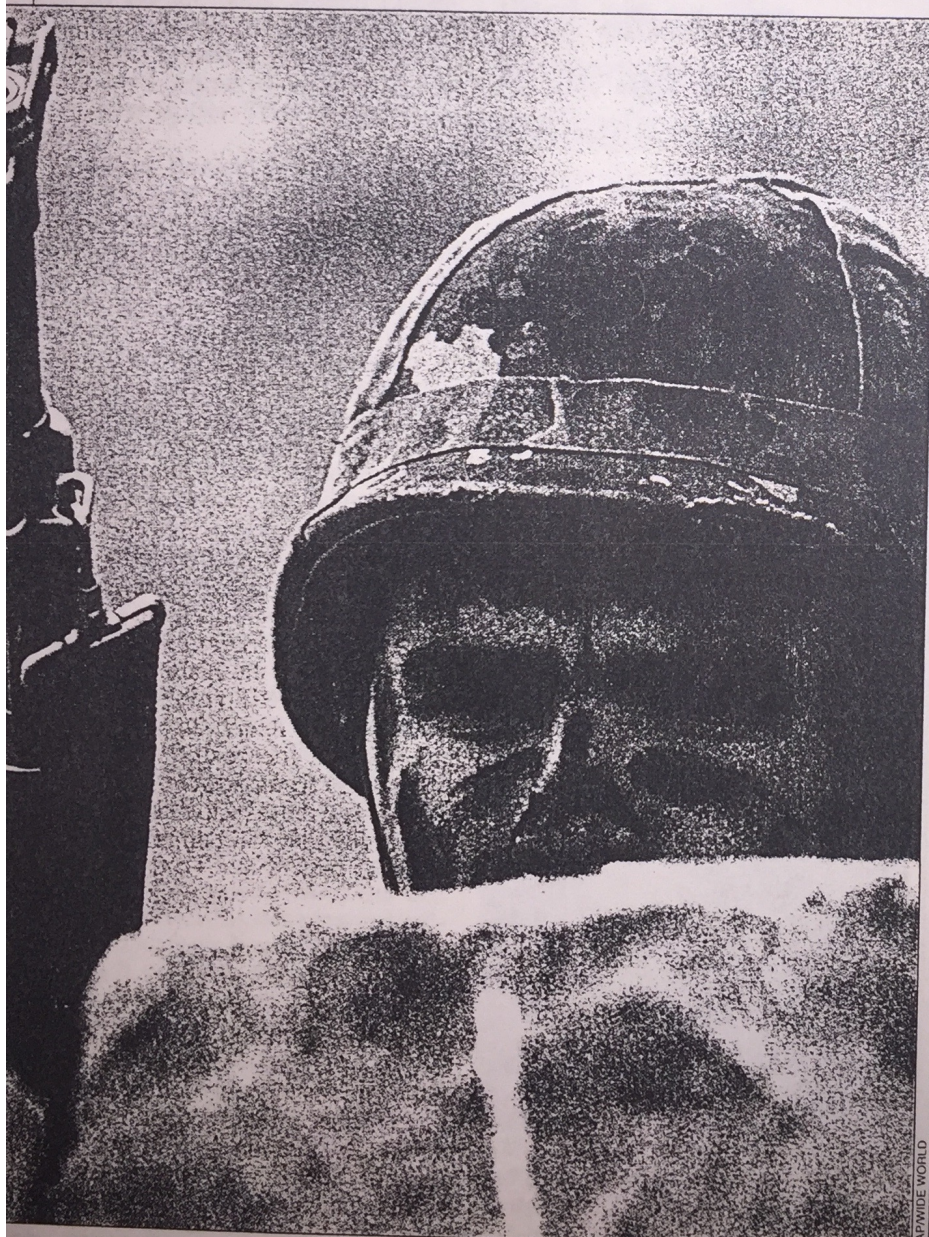


Flirting With KLA Terrorists

By J. Michael Waller

Support is building to arm the KLA to fight against the Serbs in Kosovo, though evidence suggests it is a drug-smuggling, leftist terrorist group with plans of conquest.



Sanctions failed. Diplomacy failed. Even massive air attacks by nuclear-capable strategic bombers failed. As the Clinton administration's drive to force Yugoslavia to grant autonomy to Kosovar Albanians crumbled amid the bombed-out hulks of government buildings, bridges and factories, Washington seemed primed to try yet another weapon: waging a ground war by arming what a former U.S. special envoy to Kosovo called a "terrorist group." It's an option that, if implemented, will further complicate Operation Allied Force, will risk throwing a monkey wrench into U.S. counterterrorism and counternarcotics policy and could further complicate relations with NATO allies.

With dashed hopes for the Yugoslavian regime's quick surrender, the administration and Congress are considering an initiative to build up a small guerrilla force, the Kosovo Liberation Army, or KLA, into an effective fighting machine. As Secretary of State Madeleine Albright openly flirts with the KLA, other officials say the United States wants closer relations with the group. Some Capitol Hill staff following Kosovo are asking if, despite NATO's open nonsupport, the United States already may be providing covert assistance to the KLA.

Bipartisan initiatives in the House and Senate, meanwhile, openly would fund the arming and training of the KLA into a full-scale irregular army. Arming the KLA is attracting an unlikely coalition of Democratic and Republican lawmakers with ethnic Albanian constituencies; politicians squeamish about using U.S. and NATO ground forces but wanting some sort of on-the-ground military presence against Yugoslavian forces in Kosovo; a smattering of conservative armchair insurgency "experts" who invoke the Reagan Doctrine of supporting anti-communist resistance movements; and Marxist radicals who find the KLA's ideology compatible with their own.

Among the most prominent politicians favoring this scheme are polar opposites, Republican presidential candidate Steve Forbes and House Minority Whip David Bonior of Michigan. While Forbes was hastening the collapse of the Soviet empire in the 1980s as head of the board supervising Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty in the effort to undermine communist rule, critics say Bonior was so friendly to the comrades that he became a cheerleader for

The KLA rivals the Sandinistas in the pantheon of left-wing causes.

the Marxist-Leninist Sandinista regime in Nicaragua and a leading foe of democratic resistance there.

On April 14, six congressmen led by Rep. Eliot Engel, a New York Democrat, introduced the Kosova Self-Defense Act to allocate \$25 million to train and arm the KLA. (The name of the Yugoslavian province itself is in dispute. Kosovo is the Serbian-language name, while Albanians use the term Kosova.) "The KLA is on the ground in Kosova now and, with proper weapons, could defend innocent Kosovars against Serb predation," the hawkish Engel reasons. "When Serb forces do leave, the KLA can serve as a peacekeeping and police force until a government is organized. This would mean fewer NATO troops, including U.S. forces, would be needed in the area." Sponsors include Republican Mark Sanford of South Carolina and William Goodling of Pennsylvania, as well as Bonior. Sens. Joseph Lieberman, a Connecticut Democrat, and Mitch McConnell, a Kentucky Republican, have prepared similar legislation, now under State Department review.

Veteran Reagan Doctrine proponents who have studied the KLA think the proposal is a dangerous idea. "Some politicians have apparently confused the KLA with the Nicaraguan Contras or the Afghan mujahideen of the 1980s," says Michael Radu of the Foreign Policy Research Institute in Philadelphia. In a memo circulating on Capitol Hill, Radu argues that arming the KLA "would display both American ignorance of the true nature of the KLA and despair at the failure of the NATO air strikes against Yugoslavia."

Not only does the KLA stake territorial claims on other countries, including NATO ally Greece, but *Insight's* sources say it has roots in the Sigurimi secret police of Albania's late Stalinist dictator Enver Hoxha, who had designs on a Greater Albania carved from Greece and countries that made up Yugoslavia. "Some of its founders and leading cadres were associated with the Yugoslavian Communist secret police or even . . . Sigurimi," according to Radu. Even more disturbing are reports that the KLA has received military support from Iran and from fugitive Saudi terrorist financier Osama bin Laden, who is wanted for a spate of mass killings, including the 1998 bombings of the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. President Clinton ordered cruise-missile attacks on alleged bin Laden targets in Sudan and Afghanistan.

Last month, the *Times of London*

reported that the KLA is involved in the heroin trade and that Germany, Sweden and Switzerland, in conjunction with the European police authority Europol, are probing "growing evidence that drug money is funding the KLA's leap from obscurity to power." Italian and Czech authorities also report KLA connections to weapons and narcotics trafficking. If proved, allegations of terrorism and drug smuggling would blow up in the face of Washington as it armed and equipped the KLA and would drive a stake through U.S. antiterrorism and anti-narcotics policy.

As it is, say *Insight* sources who specialize in this region, Washington has undermined its own goal of supporting democracy there. U.S. diplomacy has subverted more moderate, Western-oriented Kosovar Albanian groups. The U.S. government "has

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In Montenegro: Reps. Sue Kelly, left, and Engel were turned back at the border for alleged grandstanding.

seemingly undermined the anti-Marxist faction" in Kosovo, says Daniel McAdams, a Budapest-based human-rights worker and Phillips Foundation Balkan analyst who has visited Albania 15 times and is writing a study of the Albanian secret police. "The KLA has politically ascended at the expense of the democratically elected [Kosovar Albanian leader Ibrahim] Rugova and with the full support of the U.S.," McAdams tells *Insight*. "This shift in the power axis is most significant when considering events which were to take place subsequently, as the KLA had shown no hesitation to dispose of those Kosovar Albanians politically opposed to its hybrid ideology of Maoism, Swiss banks, Chinese guns and heroin."

"This month the KLA decided on its own government, overthrowing Rugova after boycotting last year's election" that made Rugova the first-ever democratically elected Kosovar Albanian leader, according to McAdams. After Belgrade's crackdown, Rugova appointed an exile government in Germany. But the KLA clamored for a more "broad-based" government on KLA-controlled territory inside Kosovo.

The \$25 million in the House legislation to back irregular forces, according to a news release from Engel, "would be made available only for grants to the interim government of Kosova and be used for training and support for established self-defense forces — the KLA." That would effectively bar funds from going to any non-Marxist Kosovar resistance forces. Right now, no such force exists; the KLA has made sure it would have no competition.

"When the Kosovo Democratic League of Ibrahim Rugova," according to Radu, "tried to establish its own armed branch, the armed forces of the Kosovo Republic, with bases in Albania, the KLA promptly killed its leader." The KLA also murdered other moderate Kosovar Albanian leaders allied with Rugova. The goal, Radu says, is "to eliminate competitors from power."

The KLA alleges that Rugova is a sellout to Belgrade. That line is consistent with what other extremist movements, from the Palestine Liberation Organization and the Irish Republican Army to the Sandinistas, have done to discredit rival leaders who don't share their ideology or brand of violent revolution. Human-rights worker McAdams believes that Rugova, a key to any peaceful settlement, initially fled to Belgrade to hide from KLA assassins. No one outside the region knows for sure; Rugova is not free to leave Yugoslavian custody or commu-

nicate freely with the outside world.

For the moment, Clinton administration officials only speak openly of training KLA leaders to help them transition from an insurgency to a political entity or standing constabulary force. "We want to develop a good relationship as they transform themselves into a politically oriented organization," says State Department spokesman James Foley. "We want to develop closer and better ties with this organization." The models, in the administration's view, are the Provisional Irish Republican Army and the Palestine Liberation Organization, or PLO. That line may be bending. On April 16, NATO spokesman Jamie Shea acknowledged that NATO air attacks were making the KLA "more effective" and seemed to hold out the possibility of coordination in the future.

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The views of Gelbard, who is one of the government's top experts on terrorism and international organized crime, should have carried a lot of weight. Later, however, Gelbard retreated in Clintonian fashion, telling a House panel that the KLA was not "classified legally by the U.S. government as a terrorist organization."

Support for the KLA has become a political issue in states which have sizable Albanian-American constituencies, including New York, Connecticut and Massachusetts, and that might account for the parsing of terrorist definitions in Washington. Engel, who sponsored the bill to aid the KLA, is a seasoned veteran of ethnic politics. He boasts on his Website that he is a leader of the Congressional Ad Hoc Commit-

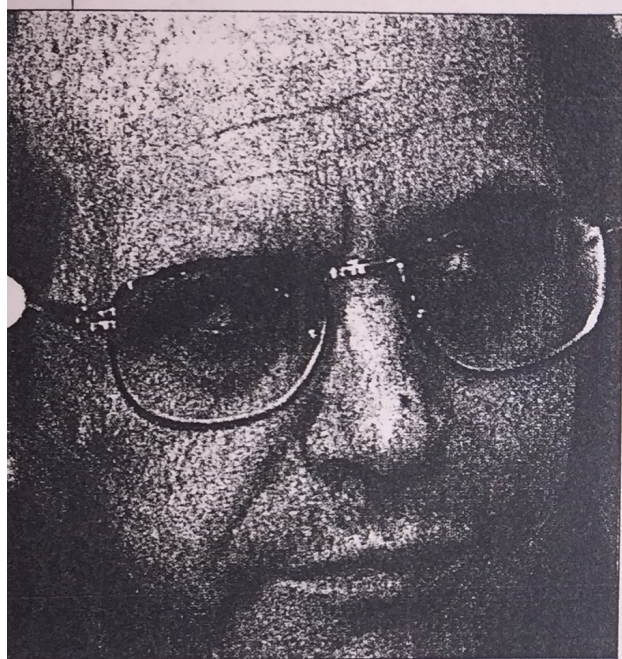
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Other politicians also are likely to milk the KLA issue for electoral gain. First lady Hillary Rodham Clinton, for instance, has just discovered Kosovo as she mulls a run for the Senate from New York. Though she has not yet declared support for the KLA, she already champions Yasser Arafat's PLO and Palestinian statehood. On a visit to New York on April 18, she declared her intention to visit Kosovo as early as possible. "I've expressed my very strong interest in going," she told refugee-relief groups, "and as soon as I'm given the green light to go, I intend to go."

Support for the KLA by mainstream politicians is only weeks old, say staffers on the Hill, and follows on the heels of hard-core sandal-wearing groupies of Central American Marxists whose heroes petered out with the Cold War. "Not since the Nicaraguan Sandinistas embodied anti-American Marxist chic have the 'Sandalistas' of North America had such excitement for a guerrilla group as the KLA," says professor Mark Almond of Oxford University. A revolutionary-warfare expert, Almond last year chronicled KLA agitprop from San Francisco to Switzerland and reported on an Internet-based solidarity network that includes Fidel Castro-backed Latin American guerrilla movements. That network has disappeared from Internet as the KLA has gone more mainstream.

Almond tells *Insight*, "It is odd how links and sites which existed in 1997 have been purged." He says, "Already similar myths are being created to explain their struggle as the ones which made the Viet Cong so cozy in the 1960s to readers of the *New York Review of Books* and draft dodgers distant from the action," according to Almond. "Anyone who points out the KLA's shadowy past and links to Marxist-Leninist groups is usually told (via Internet abuse) that the KLA is based on local clan structures among the Albanian peasantry." KLA supporters in the United States aren't too anxious to shatter the images.

While acknowledging that the KLA has its share of unsavory figures, Joseph O'Brien of Engel's district office in the Bronx shrugs, "It's a work in progress." Asked about reports of heroin smuggling, ties to the communist secret police and connections with Middle Eastern terrorists, O'Brien can only say, "It's tough to tell where it's all coming from."



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Kosovar leader: *Rugova became a KLA target for assassination as they sought to consolidate their power.*

KLA supporters brush off the terrorist label as Serbian propaganda. But before its military action against Belgrade's forces, the Clinton administration used the same language, citing the KLA's strategy of murdering people to provoke a Serbian crackdown that the KLA would use as a pretext to wage more violence. In early 1998, State Department officials belittled the KLA's name, known in Albanian as the UCK, and repeatedly condemned what they called "terrorist action by the so-called Kosovar Liberation Army." Ambassador Robert Gelbard, then a top policymaker on the Balkans and the administration's special envoy to Kosovo, told reporters in February 1998 that the State Department deplored violence "by terrorist groups in Kosovo and particularly the UCK — the Kosovar Liberation Army. This is, with-

tee on Irish Affairs, was "the prime sponsor of the [nonbinding] congressional resolution recognizing Jerusalem as the undivided capital of Israel" and was author of "the bill designating October as Italian-American Cultural and Heritage Month." As author of the KLA-support bill, Engel is wearing his hat as a leader of the Congressional Albanian Issues Task Force.

Is arming the KLA just another throwaway campaign issue? Engel, whose district in the Bronx is one of the most ethnically diverse in the country, was a member of the House International Relations Committee and warned early of an impending Yugoslavian crackdown on Kosovar Albanians. However, the *Almanac of American Politics* observed in 1996 that he used his committee seat not to further the nation's interest but instead "signed on to

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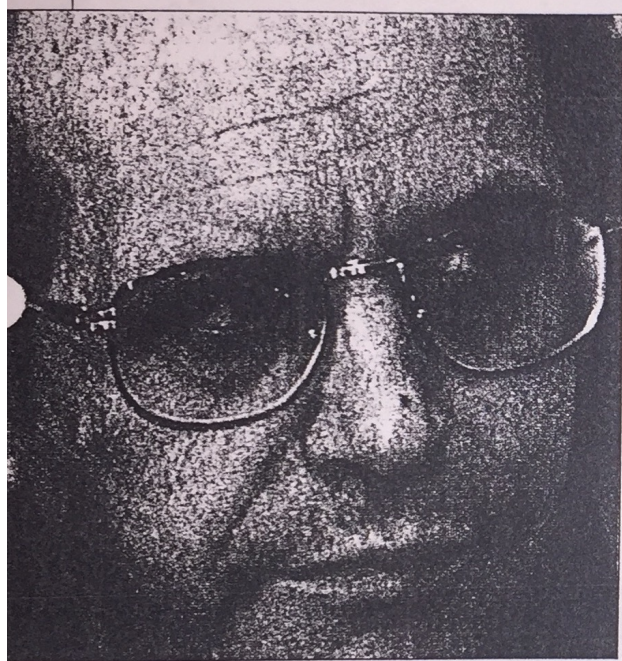
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