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Rumor Analysis: NATO, Radiation Weapons, and Gornja Omarska

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Abstract. This article identifies factors contributing to the credibility of a rumor transmitted by and among some Bosnian Serbs that the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) employed radiation weapons in its 1995 bombing campaign leading up to the Dayton peace accords.

The New York Times recently has reported that some Bosnian Serbs in Gornja Omarska believe that NATO employed weapons that released low levels of radiation during its 1995 military campaign against Serbian military installations and gun emplacements within Bosnia. In addition, the Times reported that news media from Pale, the political power-center of former Bosnian Serb president Radovan Karadzic, reported that the release of radiation was intended to induce illness within the Bosnia Serb population and destroy Bosnian Serb crops.

There are many benefits for a political leadership to initiating and reinforcing information--in the midst of a crisis--that suggests an adversary or some other agent has released low-level radiation. And this is so regardless of what the adversary or other agent actually did. (1) Suggesting malign behavior on the part of some other political entity usually increases domestic--and often enough international--support for the political leadership doing the suggesting. (2) In so far as the leadership has political vulnerabilities for mismanaging the crisis--or indeed starting it--creating an alternate target for the slings and arrows of the people's wrath often protects and even increases the leadership's political power. (3) Choosing an alleged perpetrator who already has engaged in dastardly behavior--e.g., initiating a bombing campaign intended to impede one's righteous and nationalistic political and military machinations--increases the probability that (1) and (2) will occur. (4) Suggesting malign behavior through the judicious misapplication of true information--e.g., the reality of the 1995 bombing campaign or the use of Tomahawk missiles that can carry nuclear warheads--and false information (assuming the radiation attack did not occur) also increases the probability that (1) and (2) will occur. (5) Purveying the allegation of a weapon with low-level radiation renders counters to and discounting of this allegation quite difficult. After all, such radiation cannot be seen with the naked eye and may be difficult to detect even with more advanced sensory apparatus. Moreover, political and other realities may make it quite difficult for advanced apparatus to be brought in and correctly employed to detect radiation. But what if advanced sensory apparatus are brought in and employed by outside investigators? Given the low level of sophistication among most people about low-level radiation, the political leadership initiating or reinforcing the rumor can easily counter or discount negative findings of radiation by alleging that the adversary, viz., NATO, had the sophistication to devise a low level radiation weapon that leaves no trace after it causes harm. (6) The allegation that an adversary has employed a low-level radiation weapon will have credibility among some people solely because it that adversary advocates or has advocated use of nuclear weapons. (Throughout most of the Cold War, NATO advocated first use of nuclear weapons in certain military contingencies. Throughout its history NATO has had a de facto leader, the United States (US), that has previously employed nuclear weapons in warfare, viz., against Japan, and even applied radiation to its own unwitting citizens for scientific and security purposes. (7) The allegation also may have credibility solely because of alleged consequences--inducing illness and destroying crops. Obviously, there is a base rate of illness and of crop failure regardless of military attack. And, in addition, increases in the base rates that might be more accurately attributed to economic sanctions, Bosnian

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Serb economic mismanagement, or Bosnian Serb corruption instead may be associated with the allegation.

Advances in biomedical technology--real and misperceived--have been and continue to be opportunities for political propaganda and rumor--accurate, inaccurate, and yet to be determined. Some of the more common examples include allegations of Iraqi use of chemical and biological warfare agents against the US-led allies in Operation DESERT STORM, Soviet targeting of nonionizing electromagnetic radiation against US embassy staff in Moscow, and US dispersal of an insect population intended to destroy Cuban crops. Part of the susceptibility of those who readily believe such stories--regardless of accuracy--may stem from a fear and distrust not just of an adversary or a maligned other, but of science and technology in an era of globalization. (See Hedges, C. (September 1, 1997.) Many Bosnian Serbs fear and mistrust NATO. The New York Times, <http://www.nytimes.com>; Igra, L. (1997.) Myth or delusion? An exploration of open and closed states of mind. *International Forum of Psychoanalysis*, 6, 25-31; Slim, R.M., & Saunders, H.H. (1996.) Managing conflict in divided societies: Lessons from Tajikistan. *Negotiation Journal*, 12, 31-46.) (Keywords: Information Warfare, Propaganda, Rumor, NATO, Bosnia, Serbia, Radiation Weapons.)