

CLARK WAS NOT CLINTON'S GENERAL.

## Falsely Accused

by Spencer Ackerman

There may be no worse epithet in military circles than “Clinton’s general.” So it came as little surprise that, as soon as retired General Wesley Clark threw his stars into the race for the Democratic presidential nomination—and hired a Clintonite all-star team to staff his campaign—conservatives rushed to tarnish him by association with their most loathed president. Oklahoma Senator James Inhofe reminded *The Wall Street Journal*’s John Fund that the former supreme allied commander “was known as ‘Clinton’s general’” for the way he “constantly ran decisions about the Kosovo war directly by the White House.” By way of elaboration, *National Review*’s David Frum called Clark the embodiment of all the “illusions and errors of the 1990s,” arguing that his NATO leadership was “based on an unending series of errors, above all his claim that his air campaigns could destroy Serbian military capabilities.” In a column this week, Robert Novak implied that Clark would not have been promoted without the intervention of senior Clinton officials.

The onslaught is bewildering for two reasons. First, none of it is true: It was the White House that demanded the tactical-level briefings during the Kosovo campaign; Clark (along with über-hawk John McCain) was a relentless proponent of using ground troops against Slobodan Milosevic; and Clark’s mid-’90s promotions were at the behest of Joint Chiefs Chairman John Shalikashvili. In fact, when the Pentagon rewarded Clark for winning the Kosovo war by callously dismissing him, many conservatives were justifiably outraged. In 1999, Thomas Donnelly of the American Enterprise Institute described Clark in the same breath as several of history’s most legendary warriors, writing that “he has suffered a similar fate to that of Epaminondas, Sherman, and Patton—cast aside by his political masters.”

More important, portraying Clark’s military career as Clintonian entirely ignores the heated defense policy battles of the ’90s. As this week’s *Newsweek* cover profile makes clear, Clark often clashed with his uniformed and civilian superiors when their strategic judgment conflicted with his. But it was Clark’s bureaucratic adversaries—in particular, Secretary of Defense William Cohen; Shalikashvili’s successor, Hugh Shelton; and most of the armed service chiefs—who better resembled the president they served. Like President Clinton, they were risk-averse, half-heartedly committed to the mission, and reluctant to make important decisions. Clark, by contrast, refused time and again to shrink from the Balkan slaughter, to wage a traditional military campaign, or to promise an antiseptic war. In fact, Clark’s foreign policy instincts could hardly be more un-Clintonian.

Unlike most officers who served in Vietnam, Clark came home from the jungles convinced of the importance of defending U.S. values with force. As he writes in his memoir, *Waging Modern War*, “One of life’s greatest gifts, I’ve found, is the opportunity to fight for what’s right.” He adds, “There is so much more to be done.” Throughout the ’90s, he bridled at U.S. inaction, particularly in Rwanda, where rampaging Hutu militiamen murdered 800,000 Tutsi in 100 days. The response from Washington was worse than nothing: Secretary of State Warren Christopher urged a “full, orderly withdrawal” of U.N. peacekeepers, lest the United States be called upon to relieve the rump force, a prospect the Pentagon adamantly opposed. Clark, then Shalikashvili’s policy director, was ashamed. He later observed to author Samantha Power, “The Pentagon is always going to be the last to want to intervene.” In *Waging Modern War*, Clark implies that the military dishonored itself “when we stood by as nearly a million Africans were hacked to death.”

A year later, Clark risked his career to confront the unformed reluctance to use force in defense of human rights. As Shalikhvili's envoy in the Balkans, he directly crossed Admiral Leighton Smith, the four-star commander of Mediterranean NATO forces. NATO began bombing Bosnian Serb positions in late August 1995 in order to force an end to a genocidal campaign controlled by Serbian dictator Milosevic. Although NATO demanded a full Serb withdrawal from the besieged city of Sarajevo, Smith urged that a brief bombing pause in early September be extended indefinitely, since, as he explained to Ambassador Richard Holbrooke, he thought the United States had no business intervening. But Clark, then still a three-star, insisted in a heated telephone call that the bombing should continue as planned. As Holbrooke writes in *To End A War*, "I could tell from the noises emanating from Clark's cell phone that he was being scolded by a very angry, very senior American naval commander." Smith—who quickly alerted his superiors to Clark's insolence—had the inclinations of NATO policymakers on his side; after all, heads of state had neglected Bosnia as long as was politically tolerable. But Clark was right, and he won: The bombing resumed and caused the Bosnian Serbs to withdraw from Sarajevo within two weeks of Clark's clash with Smith. That November, the warring parties met at Dayton to negotiate a peace accord. Shalikhvili soon afterward awarded Clark his fourth star—despite ferocious resistance from the Army, which would have preferred his retirement.

But it was as NATO commander that Clark took his biggest gamble—against practically the entire Pentagon—and triumphed. By early 1999, Milosevic's army was murdering Albanian civilians in the Serbian province of Kosovo, despite a U.N. Security Council resolution and NATO threats to bomb. Negotiations at Rambouillet, France, had failed. With NATO's credibility on the line and Kosovar lives in jeopardy, Clark prepared to transform diplomacy backed by the threat of force into diplomacy backed by its use. But Clark's plans were vastly different from those favored by his Pentagon colleagues, who advocated the Powell Doctrine's dictate of overwhelming force in pursuit of a specific goal. Instead, Clark merged military and diplomatic action into a hybrid—as the bombing intensified, so did NATO's demands, moving from a return to negotiations to halting the ensuing ethnic cleansing to a final settlement of Kosovo's political status. It was an incremental war with incremental objectives, brazenly flouting the Powell Doctrine.

Clark's Pentagon superiors were appalled. During both the buildup and the campaign itself, the military—and, subsequently, the White House—hobbled the NATO commander. In December 1998, Clark requested that the U.S. Army prepare for an impending war. Chief of Staff Dennis Reimer, who had fought nearly all of Clark's high-profile promotions, bluntly responded, "But we don't want to fight there." The next month, the service chiefs met and decided to undercut the war effort by emphasizing the possibility of bloody conflict—a prospect they knew would frighten Clinton. As a senior military official explained to *The Washington Post*, "I don't think anybody felt like there had been a compelling argument made that all of this was in our national interest." Although the chiefs argued that sanctions alone might bring Milosevic to heel, they would not even credibly *threaten* the use of force needed for their success: In March, on the eve of the war, the Pentagon ordered the U.S.S. *Theodore Roosevelt* out of the Adriatic, sending a message of vacillation during Clark's preparations.

But, if the Pentagon acted to stall the campaign, at least its position on the war was clear. The same could not be said of the Clinton White House. In March, NATO opened its offensive against Milosevic. But the night the bombing began, Clinton issued a critical statement: "I do not intend to put our troops in Kosovo to fight a war." This position reflected the advice of Defense Secretary Cohen and Joint Chiefs Chairman Shelton, but it confounded Clark. The war was predicated on NATO's ability to gradually increase the pressure on Milosevic, but, without at least the plausible threat of an invasion, NATO leverage was crippled. Clark confided to British Prime Minister Tony Blair, "I can't guarantee [victory] with air power alone." Behind the scenes, he began to lobby for a

175,000-troop invasion of Kosovo, and, as the bombing dragged on through April, the White House realized that ruling out ground troops had hamstrung the campaign. Yet Clark could not even get the White House to decide *when to decide* if an invasion would go forward. In mid-May, national security adviser Sandy Berger asked him, “How long can we defer a decision, Wes?” When Clark responded that operational planning had to begin on June 1, Berger asked, “Can you push that date back a couple of weeks, to, let’s say, 15 June?” By that time—thanks to intensified bombing, increased NATO and Russian diplomacy, and word of a prospective invasion—Milosevic had capitulated.

But not even victory stopped the Clinton administration’s intransigence. After Milosevic began to withdraw from Kosovo in early June, Russian troops began moving from their Bosnian positions toward the strategically important Pristina airfield. Clark worried that the Russians would occupy a portion of Kosovo independently of NATO and allow Serb atrocities to continue, as they had in Bosnia. He arranged with Washington to quickly take the airfield under the pretext of coordinating communication and information flow with the arriving Russians. But, after Moscow assured Washington that its troops would not enter Kosovo on their own, Shelton told Clark to stand down. Hours later, however, Russian soldiers began to land in Pristina in violation of their pledge. Clark felt his hand had been forced and ordered three-star British General Michael Jackson to have his troops block Pristina’s runways. But Jackson thought the move might spark a firefight with the Russians and refused, famously telling the NATO commander, “Sir, I’m not starting World War III for you.” Instead, Jackson suggested taking the roads near the field. Clark’s command to seize the airfield has been recently cited as evidence of his overaggressiveness (hardly a Clintonian trait). But, although Jackson’s quote was memorable, in essence the British general’s plan differed with Clark’s by only a few stretches of road. And it worked. In the end, NATO took the roads, and there was no confrontation. Of course, had the Clinton administration followed Clark’s advice to take the airfields in the first place, the incident might well have been avoided altogether.

Clark’s tactical and strategic wisdom went unappreciated inside the Beltway. He was rewarded for his win in Kosovo by a terse call from Shelton the following month informing him that his NATO assignment would end early. (According to *Waging Modern War*, Shelton would not even show Clark the courtesy of extending the phone call a few minutes to work out a face-saving exit.) Clinton privately told Clark, “I had nothing to do with it.” Indeed, Clinton had very little to do with practically everything about Clark—including Clark’s victory—while generals who shared the president’s disinterest in the mission stymied a successful commander. Yet Clark has never disparaged Clinton’s efforts to take full credit for winning the war—most recently, during the former president’s triumphant trip to Kosovo last week. How un-Clintonian.