

The general and his ground troops

Howard Dean is not the only Democratic candidate who has inspired an army

By Michelle Goldberg

Since she found Gen. Wesley Clark, Beatrice Moritz, a Manhattan photographer, has stopped hating George Bush. She's taking down the full-page MoveOn.org ad she'd taped to her wall, with its scowling picture of the president labeled "Misleader." Before becoming a Clark volunteer, she'd spent months seething, becoming obsessed with photographing those who were "speaking back" to Bush with their signs at protest marches, incredulous about the nation's acquiescence to an administration that seemed to her so self-evidently awful. Then Clark turned it all around.

"Now I feel like I have an alternative because Wesley Clark, he's going to win," she says. "It makes me feel that I'm not going to waste my energy thinking about all the bad things Bush has done. I don't hate Bush as a person. I went through a period of that, but I'm more focused now on the very positive experience of supporting a candidate who's a real president, and I know it's not just me. I feel it."

It's not just her. After a month in the Democratic primary race, Clark's professional campaign, based in Little Rock, Ark., is just starting to coalesce, but his grass-roots movement, tens of thousands of ardent supporters and volunteers nationwide, is already large and expanding rapidly. Numerically, Clark's ground troops are not yet any match for Dean's, but if his momentum continues, they may be soon. In May, there were only a few hundred people registered to attend Clark events through the Internet organizing site MeetUp.com. Now he's second only to Howard Dean on the site, with 40,100 people registered. (Dean, who pioneered the use of MeetUp as a campaign tool, has 124,800 people signed up.) And even if his followers are fewer than Dean's, they're just as fanatical. Clark is igniting a desperate hope in supporters, something they describe in the language of love and religion. He can save us, they say. Over and over, they use the same phrase: "He's the one."

Many of Clark's followers say that while Dean speaks to their rage, Clark, four-star general, intellectual, humanitarian and war hero, speaks to their longing for something higher. "He's obviously the best man at this time in history," says Alexandra Richards, a New Jersey stay-at-home mother with a 2-year-old child and an unemployed husband. Figuring that their economic prospects are unlikely to improve as long as Bush is in office, Richards and her husband are considering selling their house and moving to Clark's home base in Little Rock to volunteer for the campaign full-time. "Dean makes me angry about the present," Richards writes in an e-mail. "Clark, on the other hand, gives me HOPE for the future. Hope feels better than anger."

Richards, like several other Clark supporters, was a Deanie until the general entered the race. There's no statistical evidence showing that Dean's supporters are peeling off in favor of Clark, but anecdotes abound. "Dean has a whole year on this guy, but I can tell you this, the Dean supporters I know, I've suggested that they watch Clark," says Christopher Dale, a 34-year-old San Diego public relations executive. "When they have checked him out, he's won all of them over."

Dale, an independent who says he's never been involved politically, recently gave Clark \$100 and plans to volunteer for his campaign. "There's something about this guy," he says. "I just think he's the perfect antidote to what's going on in this country."

For Clark, it will still be an arduous process to translate this passion into an effective campaign organization. Recent American history is littered with candidates who won over devoted legions of citizens, whose races turned into causes, and who then lost to better-funded if less-inspired rivals. Donnie Fowler, who recently quit as Clark's campaign director, says he's seen the kind of energy Clark has generated before, in the

Jesse Jackson campaigns in 1984 and 1988, and in John McCain's race in 2000. It was there "with Robert F. Kennedy in 1968, and we saw it with Eugene McCarthy in the '70s. It's not unique to Wesley Clark, but it's unusual and it is refreshing," he says.

Then he adds, "Did I list a bunch of people who didn't become president? I did."

Clark is hindered by a late start, forcing him to give up even trying to compete in the Democratic Iowa caucuses in January, where winning requires an intricate ground-level organization and lots of face time with the state's citizenry. The political press was unimpressed by his first few weeks on the trail, where he blundered while trying to answer simple policy questions. Even more negative coverage followed Fowler's departure on Oct. 7, which suggested that Clark's Little Rock operation was not yet working smoothly. Fowler was said to be angry that the professional political operatives on the Clark team were freezing out the Draft Clark activists who laid the campaign's groundwork, though there was also speculation that he left because he was about to be demoted.

Meanwhile, a few Clark volunteers have publicly blasted the more conventional direction the campaign has taken. Stirling Newberry, an intense Massachusetts computer programmer who runs the Web site DraftClark.com, remains devoted to Clark and discourses fervently on his virtues, but felt betrayed as the campaign haltingly transformed itself from an insurgency into a more traditional political operation. The day Fowler left, Newberry published an open letter to the Clark campaign saying, "By the time you read these words, the bell will be tolling for Wesley Clark's candidacy. It will be clear across the country that the campaign of Wesley Clark is nothing more than the Gore campaign with a better candidate—this will mean that activists, the people who can create a field organization that can win Iowa and New Hampshire, will know that this campaign is nothing more than a media creation."

Even now, the campaign doesn't have much of a presence in New Hampshire, an important early primary state. "They haven't announced any leaders for the campaign here in New Hampshire," says Michael Dennehy, who ran Sen. John McCain's 2000 presidential campaign in New Hampshire and New England. "That's campaign 101. If you come up here and make an announcement but cannot follow that up with some endorsement announcements, that is very strange to me. Either they're not running the campaign they should be, or they're struggling to find these people to support him, or a combination of the two."

According to Fowler, the problem is organization, not enthusiasm. "Wesley Clark hasn't had two years of recruiting foot soldiers," he says. "He has to rely on this committed band of partisans in an irregular army."

Yet those partisans' commitment is uncommonly fierce, and in a crowded field, that matters. "A movement is a very important ingredient in this cycle because these candidates are not well known," says Donna Brazile, Al Gore's former campaign manager. Brazile, a loyal Democrat who has decided to sit out the primary fight, says, "The establishment has not blessed any one person. Therefore, because the race is wide open, having a movement will be an asset. Right now, the only two campaigns that exhibit that are the Dean campaign and the Clark campaign. Dean created a movement, Clark was started by one."

Indeed, as is well known by now, before Clark entered the race, groups of grass-roots volunteers spent months building a Draft Clark movement, securing pledges of donations if the general ran and creating a rough campaign infrastructure.

Before Clark announced his candidacy on Sept. 17, there were reports that former President Bill Clinton was encouraging him, suggesting to many that Clark was being imposed on the party from above. When he bungled his first day on the trail, one insider quoted by ABC's political weblog "The Note" blamed the party's leadership, saying, "Why did my party's best operatives think it would be a good idea to subject their neophyte candidate to the country's savviest reporters for over an hour? Why have my party's elders rallied around a candidate who is so shockingly uninformed about core

issues and his own positions?”

Yet to Clark’s grass-roots supporters, all this is Beltway ephemera. On Oct. 14, there was a Clark fundraiser for young professionals at Coda, a plush midtown Manhattan nightclub full of red velvet and gold chandeliers. The minimum ticket price was \$50. MTV’s Gideon Yago was there doing interviews, and there was an anticipatory frisson in the crowd more reminiscent of rock concerts than political rallies. Clark was ill, but he took the stage anyway, hoarse and beaming, as the crowd cheered, “Wesley! Wesley!”

Right away, he alluded to the kinks in his Little Rock operation, saying “We’re building this ship as we sail out from the harbor.” He urged his followers not to pay too much attention to stories about campaign mechanics. “That’s just process,” he said. “What matters is message.”

That message is getting through, at least to Clark’s growing corps of true believers. The Clark camp has its own grand narrative of the campaign, in which its candidate transcends the triviality of contemporary politics. Jaded Washington journalists often judge candidates by their ability to navigate the semiotic minefield of the press’s own obsessive scrutiny. In her 1988 essay “Insider Baseball,” Joan Didion described the default attitude of most campaign chroniclers: “They speak of a candidate’s ‘performance,’ by which they usually mean his skill at circumventing questions, not as citizens but as professional insiders, attuned to signals pitched beyond the range of normal hearing.”

Clark’s followers feel attuned to something far more epic. In the story they see unfolding, America is at a low point in its history, threatened from without and plundered from within, led by a smug and reckless mediocrity who blithely aids the nation’s implosion. Patriotic moderates hear themselves denounced as traitors and despair that the country has entered a period of inexorable decline.

And then, just when it seems that American greatness has spent itself, into the breach comes a war hero, brilliant and brave, with a Silver Star and a Purple Heart. Joe Hlinko, a founder of the Draft Clark movement who’s since joined Clark’s campaign staff, says, “He’s the president we were promised as children,” a phrase much quoted among Clark’s fans.

Ironically, Clark’s appeal is due in large part to the same thing that propped up President Bush’s staggering presidency: 9/11. Four years ago, a retired general might not have seemed such a dream candidate, but right now, says Samuel Popkin, professor of political science at the University of California at San Diego and a former Clinton advisor, people feel “a real threat in the world.”

“**Y**ou look for different things in a president when there are different things in the air,” Popkin says. “When all you wanted was a president who could spend your money, a lot more people were eligible for the office than when you want a president who can protect your life. You would never have been able to get a Bill Clinton during the Cold War. The feeling is that you need a war president, someone who is comfortable managing and handling force and aggression.”

Clark fills that bill—which comes as a pleasant, even euphoric surprise to Democrats accustomed to being pushed around like 97-pound weaklings by chest-pounding GOP musclemen. Popkin points out that historically, the perception of Democrats as weak on national security is a new phenomenon: It started with George McGovern and was exacerbated by the Iran hostage crisis during the Carter administration. “It used to be, we had Roosevelt and Kennedy,” says Popkin. “The missile gap was wimpy Republicans getting pushed around by fast-on-their-feet Russians. Once upon a time, most policemen were Democrats. During World War II, it was Roosevelt who wanted to make it easier for the military to vote.”

And while there may be nothing historically analogous between Clark and Kennedy, much less Franklin Roosevelt, he still seems like a link to a time of muscular Democratic greatness. The general—first in his class at West Point, Rhodes scholar, four-star gen-

eral, commander of the NATO forces in Europe—stands for excellence, says Newberry. “Bush,” he says, “is the antithesis of excellence.”

Indeed, Clark’s followers circulate stories of his exploits—and the fact that Clark himself hesitates to tell them only stokes their devotion. Tom Junod’s awed August Esquire profile has become an ur-text of the campaign. Junod writes of how, in August 1995, Clark was on his way to Sarajevo with Ambassador Richard Holbrooke when an armored personnel carrier in their convoy plunged off a mountain road.

“In his book, the general describes what happened this way: ‘At the end of the first week we had a tragic accident on Mount Igman, near Sarajevo. [Three members of the team] were killed when the French armored personnel carrier in which they were riding broke through the shoulder of the road and tumbled several hundred meters down a steep hillside,’” Junod writes.

“It is not until one reads Holbrooke’s book, ‘To End a War,’ that one finds out that after the APC went off the road, Clark grabbed a rope, anchored it to a tree stump, and rappelled down the mountainside after it,” Junod continues, “despite the gunfire that the explosion of the APC set off, despite the warnings that the mountainside was heavily mined, despite the rain and the mud, and despite Holbrooke yelling that he couldn’t go.”

Whether or not Clark’s modesty is conscious, it’s an essential part of his persona. At the Oct. 14 fundraiser, he spoke of the draft movement and the support for his emerging campaign, saying, “I know it’s not personal. It’s about changing American leadership.”

He quoted a “friend”—a former Arkansas governor—who told him, “Politics is a blood sport. If you can live without it and sleep at night, don’t do it.” Then Clark said, “But I can’t live without it and sleep at night looking at where this country is going.”

Clark’s campaign slogan, “A New American Patriotism,” may seem like a cheap bit of electoral banality, but it resonates with followers who embrace the white-knight story his campaign has generated about itself. To the general’s devotees, Clark summons up images of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, reviving an exhausted, dispirited nation during the Depression. “We like calling General Clark the ‘Real Deal,’” says Alexandra Richards. “FDR was the New Deal, Truman was the Fair Deal, and Bush is the raw deal.”

Both Clark and Bush appeal to something nostalgic in their supporters, says Newberry, who studies Clark like a rabbi obsessing over the Talmud. “Five hundred years ago Machiavelli said, ‘No republic will long endure unless it refreshes itself at the wellspring of its creation.’ Eisenhower said, ‘We look forward with nostalgia.’ But just as there is always a forward-looking kind of love of tradition, there’s always going to be jingoism, reactionary sentiment and reactionary fervor.” To Newberry, of course, Clark represents the former, Bush the latter.

Clark stirs something even in people who usually don’t fall for mawkish campaign rhetoric. On Oct. 14, Harold Bloom, the venerable Yale humanities professor, cultural conservative and defender of the Western canon, published a remarkable encomium to Clark in the Wall Street Journal’s ordinarily right-wing editorial page with the portentous title “Cometh the Hour.” In it, he references Edward Gibbon’s “The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire,” and writes, “It is not at all clear whether we are already in decline: bread is still available for most and circuses for all. Still, there are troubling omens, economic and diplomatic, and a hint or two from Gibbon may be of considerable use ... We need, at just this time, a military personage as president, one who is more in the mode of Dwight Eisenhower than of Ulysses Grant. In Wesley Clark, we have a four-star general and former NATO commander who is a diplomatic unifier, an authentic hero, wise and compassionate. That Gen. Clark saved tens of thousands of Muslim lives in Bosnia and Kosovo is irrefutable, despite current deprecations by worried supporters of the president. They are accurate only in their anxieties.”

Most of Clark’s supporters aren’t so articulate, but all seem to be tapping into a similar spirit. “It’s sentimental and hokey, but it’s real,” says Mia Tran of the optimism

Clark arouses. Tran, a 28-year-old graphic designer from Brooklyn, N.Y., who'd never donated money to a political candidate before, had paid to attend Clark's Manhattan fundraiser. The day before, she'd attended a Wes Clark MeetUp in a Brooklyn bar with around 50 others.

Before Clark joined the race, Tran looked at Dean, but he didn't inspire her. "He can't maintain his cool," she said. "The Dean thing, a lot of it is about negative sentiment and anger."

Indeed, while it's often said that Dean might alienate independents and moderate Republicans with his rage, according to Clark's supporters, he turns off some liberal Democrats, too. "I'm all for getting people riled up, but I don't want an angry president," says Allyn Brooks-LaSure, a 25-year-old Clark volunteer from Washington, D.C. "I want a president who is presidential. I want a president who can get mad and can harness that energy into forward-thinking policies for all Americans."

Many Clark supporters are grateful for Dean's steadfast bravery in challenging the president on Iraq when few others were willing, and they appreciate his pugnacity, but they find him exhausting and can't imagine him charming those who disagree with him. "The thing about Dean, a lot of people could find him unreasonable and a bit shrill," says Moritz. "He reminds me a lot of the guys I marched with during the antiwar marches. You want to listen to what they're saying, it's invigorating, but you also know they are turning off a lot of people by their intensity."

Dean promises to fight back against the right's vicious partisanship. Clark's supporters see their man as someone who can transcend it. "Dean's rhetoric is not appealing to people who want a healing of the government, a healing of the American people from all this partisan warfare," says Richards. "I give a lot of credit to Dean for raising the alarm about Iraq, but in order to be elected president, you have to have some sort of credibility with all Americans, not just angry white liberals."

According to Ruy Teixeira, co-author of "The Emerging Democratic Majority," Clark's followers are right to suppose that their man's appeal is demographically broader than Dean's. In a post on the Emerging Democratic Majority blog, he analyzes an October Gallup poll to discern "The Demographics of Clarkism":

"While Clark receives more support than Dean among both men and women, his margin over Dean among women is just 3 points (16 percent to 13 percent), but an impressive 12 points among men (29 percent to 17 percent)," Teixeira points out. "He also beats Dean in every region of the country, but especially in the South (25 percent to 8 percent). Also intriguing is how well he does among low income voters (less than \$20,000), clobbering Dean by 26 percent to 5 percent. In fact, Clark bests Dean in every income group up to \$75,000. Above \$75,000, Dean edges Clark, 26 percent to 25 percent."

Furthermore, unlike Dean, Clark seems to have significant support from black voters. He's been treated gently by Al Sharpton and endorsed by Rep. Charlie Rangel, D-N.Y. "When Charlie Rangel speaks up for somebody like General Clark, it speaks volumes in the black community," says Brazile.

Brooks-LaSure, an African-American who plans to work on communicating Clark's message to black communities nationwide, points out that when Dean spoke at a black church in South Carolina, the audience was primarily white. Clark, he insists, will appeal to black voters. "The general's experience growing up in Little Rock, and then in the military, where they boast of having more African-Americans in positions of management and leadership than any other organization in the world, you can tell [working with black people] is not something new for him," Brooks-LaSure says.

Finally, Clark has support among a constituency that doesn't relate to Dean at all—those who think that Bush is a basically decent man who's doing a bad job as president.

At Coda, there was a large contingent of besuited Wall Street types, the kind of people for whom "frat boy" isn't a damning epithet. What make them so different

from Deanies wasn't their clothes, though—Dean's movement is certainly not lacking in yuppies. It was their near-total absence of Bush hatred, an absence unusual anywhere in Manhattan and almost unheard of at Democratic events.

A 34-year-old who works for a hedge fund says, "Bush could be doing a better job, but he could be doing a worse job." One 25-year-old investment banker in a blue suit and gray tie says his support for Bush "ebbs and flows," and though he thinks the administration's unilateralism has harmed America's prestige, he believes the president was acting in good faith. Strident attacks on Bush's legitimacy, the kind that thrill the Democrat's activist base, don't excite him. "I don't want to vote for a candidate because I loathe the opposition," he says.

Standing off to the side of the room, Nicomodos Sy Herrera, a 31-year-old Republican lawyer in a well-tailored suit, seemed almost surprised to find himself at a Democratic event. A pro-life hawk who'd been "a big Bush supporter" in 2000, he'd grown alarmed by Bush's inability to "balance the hard and soft power of the U.S." Now, he was considering changing his party affiliation in order to vote for Clark in the primary. "Bush was seduced too much by the hard right's insistence that it had to go alone," he says. "He made that bed, he has to sleep in it." Still, while he says he doesn't think Bush could win him back, he also says Clark is the only Democrat he would support.

"Those are exactly the kind of people you want," Teixeira says of these Clark fans. "The people who hate Bush 24/7, those voters are not the Democrats' problem. The Democrats' problem are the people who say, 'Goddamn it, he did a pretty good job after 9/11, but he's really doing a lousy job now.' That's the sweet spot. Those are the voters you're going to need to get in droves."

Clark's ability to appeal to these voters is, in turn, attracting pragmatic Democrats who are looking for a winner, not a hero. "The kind of people I tend to talk to by and large tend to have been skeptical of the Dean candidacy while respecting its energy," says Teixeira. "They're worried to death about whether Dean can actually beat Bush. These people are very interested in Clark. We need the guy who's best able to beat Bush. I think he's probably the guy."

Yet part of the reason Teixeira thinks Clark can beat Bush is precisely because he has such zealous supporters. "You don't need to have a movement to get elected president, but you need a movement to get elected president if you're a Democrat in this situation," he says.

Besides, some of those first attracted to Clark for reasons of realpolitik find themselves becoming converts to the movement. Moritz says one of the reasons she initially liked Clark is because she thought he could win over people like her Republican father, himself an Army veteran.

Now, she says, "It feels like we're on a rocket that's taking on more and more passengers and people are really energized. Everybody finds him so exciting. We're not doing this just because we want to get somebody else in the White House. Every single person I know who is involved in helping General Clark really, really believes in him."

Fowler is a little bit wry about the adoration his former boss is generating. "The beginning of a love affair is always the most exciting part," he says. "Sometimes the love affair lives up to its promise. Sometimes it doesn't."

For now, though, Clark's followers are smitten, and after three years of hate, they say, it feels good to be in love.