

New Criticism

Wesley Clark's gutsy new tack: Blame Bush for not preventing 9/11.

by Michael Tomasky

Wesley Clark, speaking on Tuesday to a liberal foreign-policy conference sponsored by the *Prospect*, the Center for American Progress (John Podesta's new outfit) and The Century Foundation, could have gone in any of several directions in attacking the Bush administration's foreign policy. The \$87 billion, so unpopular with voters, would have been the obvious target. The lack of a postwar plan, a close second. The intentionally failed diplomacy in the run-up to hostility, a pretty clear bronze medalist.

He didn't ignore those issues entirely, but the heart of his attack came in the form of "a blistering review" (*The New York Times*' words) of the administration's actions prior to September 11. Clark, assaying pre-9/11 intelligence failures, said that responsibility for those failures can't be fobbed off on "lower-level intelligence officers," and he came within a few inches of saying outright that the Bush administration was responsible for the attacks having happened.

"Shocking" might be putting it too strongly, but certainly it was surprising that Clark chose to reopen that temporarily sealed can of worms. Politicians don't often say something you don't expect to hear, and when they do, you wonder why. Clark either took a major risk here to breathe some life into a campaign that nearly every Washington insider thinks is melting (which probably means it's just fine, thanks) or he knows something the rest of us don't. But first, some background.

The question of Bush administration responsibility for 9/11, you may recall, was explored by some in the media in May 2002. *Newsweek* offered the most notable entry, with a 3,300-word cover package headlined "What Went Wrong?" In it, some of the magazine's lead writers on intelligence and foreign policy (Michael Isikoff, Mark Hosenball, Christopher Dickey) delved into various aspects of the story and came up with several tantalizing angles that had the potential to do real political damage to the White House. Bill Clinton's national security adviser, Sandy Berger, briefed successor Condi Rice on al-Qaeda—and she yawned. John Ashcroft nixed an FBI request for "hundreds more counter-intelligence agents," as the magazine put it, and reduced Justice Department funding for anti-terrorism activity. Donald Rumsfeld chose not to renew the Predator Drone, which tracked terrorist cells, and emphasized Star Wars Redux.

It was tough stuff. Other outlets piled on, and for two weeks the administration was playing defense. The problem was that no one—the Democrats, say—was playing offense. The charges dissolved into a fog of unprovables; the story lost its momentum; George W. Bush seized the security issue during the midterm elections. And that was the end of that.

Fast-forward now to the independent 9/11 commission, chaired by former New Jersey Gov. Thomas Kean. In an amazing interview with Philip Shenon of *The New York Times* published this past Sunday, Kean tore into the administration for withholding information from his commission. "I will not stand for" stonewalling, Kean said. "That means we will use every tool at our command to get hold of every document."

With a Republican talking like that, the administration—and remember, it resisted the creation of this commission to begin with—is going to face tremendous pressure to produce the relevant information. And the relevant information brings us back to Clark.

It is exceedingly difficult for a candidate running a presidential campaign against an incumbent to establish a favorable story line and make it stick. And, of all possible story lines, Clark has landed on one of the most difficult: He will apparently seek in the coming weeks and months to convince Americans that a failure of presidential

leadership before 9/11 may have been partly responsible for the disaster's occurrence in the first place.

On the surface, it seems the odds against his succeeding here might be long ones. But the surface is the surface. It could be that Clark—who surely has his own sources in the U.S. intelligence world, after all—has drawn a bead on certain pieces of information that are bound to come out one way or another.

And, more important, it is also the case, as the old dialecticians used to say, that the historical circumstances have changed. In May 2002, when *Newsweek* did its cover story, neither the major media nor the Democrats nor, arguably, the average American citizen was quite ready to hear the most candid unpleasantries about whether this administration had acted seriously on any pre-9/11 warnings it may have received. But that was then. The Democrats have since learned how to flex their biceps (at least some of them, some of the time; hey, it's a start), and the average citizen is now roughly as likely to be dubious of this president as not.

The Dems are doing their part. Will the media do its? Two months before the *Newsweek* cover package ran, *Washington Post* Executive Editor Len Downie took part in a panel discussion at the Kennedy School's Shorenstein Center on the future of investigative reporting. The conversation zigged and zagged about the then-current Washington climate, until finally Downie weighed in with this: "So if you do tough investigative reporting about Democrats or about issues that are important to the left, you'll get a strong backlash from the left. Similarly, if you do tough investigative reporting of the Republicans or people on the right, you'll get a strong backlash from them. And I think this is also having an impact on the media. It's scaring people." (Click here and scroll to page 17.)

I scarcely need to comment on the idea that the man sitting in Ben Bradlee's old chair is afraid that doing tough reporting is too scary. Rather, in a spirit of positive thinking and uplift, I will merely hope that his attitude may have changed. As Clark and Kean advance their story line, we may behold our answer.