

FEATURE

## Waiting for the General

By Elizabeth Drew

The mystery at the center of the contest for the Democratic Party's presidential nomination is whether a late-entering candidate with no direct experience in domestic politics can win it. The entry of retired General Wesley Clark in mid-September dramatically changed the dynamics of the race: he has been at or near the top of polls of registered Democrats ever since and has a strong and enthusiastic following that began to organize months before he entered the race. Some polls show him defeating President Bush. Clark is trying to do what no other serious candidate for the presidency has done before.

Until Clark's announcement, the presumed front-runners were Howard Dean and John Kerry. Dick Gephardt, Joe Lieberman, and perhaps John Edwards were also considered serious candidates. But none appeared to be a runaway winner. This lack of enthusiasm on the part of voters was one of the reasons why Clark decided to run. The mystery is whether such a belated and, to many, unlikely effort can succeed.

Never before has someone so in-experienced in national politics—at least one whose candidacy has to be taken seriously—entered the presidential campaign so late and under such difficult circumstances. Though, like virtually everyone who runs for president, Clark is immodest, he doesn't think of himself as comparable to Eisenhower. When Eisenhower decided to run as a Republican in 1952, both parties had been seeking him out, and he was handed the nomination by Republican Party leaders.

Howard Dean can be said to be leading a genuine movement; he has attracted a strong following through his opposition to the war in Iraq and his ability to express the anger that many Democrats feel toward Bush; he has strong organizations in Iowa and New Hampshire. But his irritability often spills over at inopportune times. On ABC's *This Week with George Stephanopoulos* he responded testily to a question about his having strongly supported NAFTA and denied that he had ever done so, even though he had signed a letter saying that he had. On the other hand, a speech I saw Dean deliver recently at a meeting of the Democratic National Committee was strong and assured. He was able to arouse the Democrats' anger, though to a degree that seemed to me almost disturbing.

John Kerry's is a perplexing campaign. He can be very effective or can seem wooden and perfunctory. I saw him addressing a women's lunch where he seemed steady and well-informed on a wide range of issues, including health care and the disastrous reconstruction of Iraq. He was also loose and funny. In his speech to the DNC he attacked Howard Dean and the other candidates—most of the others refrained from criticizing their competition—and spent considerable time calling attention to his own accomplishments, often using the first person singular. During his campaign, he has, I think, talked too much of his service in Vietnam and has displayed a certain degree of indecisiveness. He hurt himself badly (not for the only time) by his labored explanation of why he had voted in the Senate for the resolution authorizing the use of force in Iraq. (He often takes his motorcycle to campaign stops, as if trying to demonstrate that he is one of the guys.) His campaign has a superabundance of high-powered advisers.

Wesley Clark, for all his fame, is the least known of the major candidates. He is a complex man, intense and often tightly wound. He can also be relaxed and humorous. He is a talented mimic who can mock his own performance in the debates. He is capable of apologizing for the slightest discourtesy without being prompted, a rarity

among politicians and part of his considerable charm. He is known to be exceptionally intelligent—he was first in his class at West Point and a Rhodes Scholar—but he is clearly aware that he has a lot to learn in his campaign. He’s shown that he can change his mind. For example, he at first resisted turning back his fees for already booked speeches at three universities after he launched his campaign and after *The Washington Post* said they might be illegal under the campaign finance law. His campaign lawyer had advised him that the fees were legal, and his inclination was to seek a ruling from the Federal Election Commission. But when he was told that the FEC is dominated by Republicans, and that the administration might unleash the Justice Department to tie up his campaign, as it did John Edwards’s over an allegedly questionable contribution, he reversed himself and put out a statement saying that he would return the funds and cancel all the other paid speaking arrangements that had been booked before the campaign.

Clark can be brash, he can be flip. He is also a highly ambitious man—otherwise he wouldn’t have become a four-star general. Out of a military force of about 1.5 million, and an officer corps of about 230,000, there are, by statutory limit, only thirty-five four-star generals. Republican Senator Chuck Hagel, like Clark a veteran of Vietnam, told me, “To become a four-star general you have to get through a very tight screen.”

Clark can also be remarkably, almost unnervingly, candid, saying (off the record, of course) all sorts of things that a politician doesn’t usually talk about outside his close circle of advisers. He is well aware of his own missteps since he announced his candidacy—particularly his apparent inconsistency about how he would have voted on the resolution authorizing Bush to go to war in Iraq—and he knows that neither the press nor many Democrats will be generous if he makes any further mistakes.

Unlike the other major candidates, Clark had no political team to bring with him into the campaign, and scarcely knew several of the people who agreed to work for him. And though a number of young people have joined Clark’s staff, some of the most influential people around Clark once worked for Bill Clinton. This, and statements praising him by Bill and Hillary Clinton, have led to some erroneous (and mischievous) suggestions that Clark is a tool of the Clintons, who are said to have a devious plan to use Clark’s candidacy to somehow benefit Hillary Clinton’s ambitions. But Clark is an exceptionally independent man and it is, in my view, inconceivable that he would willingly be used in that way by the Clintons. One problem that he might have with Clinton’s former aides is that most of them have gone on to lucrative careers and are not as intensely involved in the current campaign as they were in those of the past. One top adviser, the Washington lawyer Ron Klain, a former adviser to Al Gore, decided not to leave his firm and his wife and young children in Washington to move to Little Rock, Clark’s hometown, where his campaign is based.

Clark is paying a price for his late entry. His campaign headquarters seemed at first chaotic, and his staff slow to give him the advice he needed. During the week of October 6, however, Clark imposed a new structure on his campaign, making it more clear who was in charge of what. The difficulty of his position is that he is trying to organize a campaign and prepare statements of his positions while flying about the country to win support and raise money. He raised a quite respectable \$3.5 million in the first three weeks of his campaign, but he is of course still behind the other candidates. At the rate he’s now raising money, however, he should end up with sufficient campaign funds.

Clark spent the early weeks of his campaign traveling throughout the country to establish himself as a plausible national candidate and—critical to the Democratic Party’s chances next November—as a strong candidate in the South. Then he planned to concentrate on New Hampshire and South Carolina, which votes just after New Hampshire. His campaign has announced that he won’t try to contest Iowa’s more than 2,000 precinct caucuses because of his late entry into the race. But it can’t be ruled out that Clark would consider reviewing the situation if strong grassroots pressure emerged. (If

his campaign hadn't let it be known that he wouldn't contest the caucuses he would have been expected to spend several million dollars and twenty to thirty days in Iowa.)

In early October one of his top campaign workers, Donnie Fowler, who had been the field coordinator for the Gore campaign, resigned, saying publicly that he felt that the older Washington members of the campaign weren't giving enough emphasis to the spontaneous movement on the Internet that had urged Clark's candidacy. While there had been some tension over that matter—Clark has since named one of his Internet organizers to a top position—there may well have been other reasons for Fowler's resignation. Clark had made Eli Segal, a longtime Clinton associate, the CEO of the campaign, with authority over Fowler, which he may have resented. More recently, Clark has hired several talented people from the now-defunct campaign of Bob Graham, including experienced organizers for New Hampshire and South Carolina, and he recently hired a former member of the Kerry campaign, Chris Lehane, to handle communications.

Clark didn't enter the race until mid-September largely because his wife, Gert, to whom he is extremely close, didn't want him to run. He held back until she said that the decision was his to make. It had been clear for months that Clark was greatly drawn to running but was also waiting to see if any of the already declared candidates had achieved a strong consensus within the party. Many well-informed people had told him that, because of his personal appeal and his military credentials, he was the Democrat most likely to defeat George W. Bush. Gert Clark, an outspoken woman to whom Clark has been married for thirty-six years, was being protective of her husband; she feared that the Democratic base would not accept a military man. She also had strong memories of the time in 2000 when Clark was fired as Supreme Allied Commander for Europe (SACEUR) six weeks after he had led the NATO allies to victory in the war over Kosovo.

Clark has been open about the fact that he was hurt when his command was cut short. He offered clues about why he was treated so badly in his first book, *Waging Modern War: Bosnia, Kosovo, and the Future of Combat*, published in 2001, and recollections of highly placed civilians in the Clinton administration confirm what he wrote. Clark displeased the defense secretary, Bill Cohen, and General Hugh Shelton, then chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, by arguing strenuously that—contrary to Clinton's decision—the option of using ground troops in Kosovo should remain open. But the problem seems to have gone further back. Some top military leaders objected to the idea of the U.S. military fighting a war for humanitarian reasons. (Clark had also favored military action against the genocide in Rwanda.)

Clark's view on Kosovo, shared by Tony Blair and other European leaders, was that Clinton, by stating that ground troops would not be used there—a position Clinton took for domestic political reasons—gave the Serbs a military advantage. Similarly, Clark wasn't allowed to use helicopter gunships for fear that they might be shot down, despite the fact that the helicopters didn't need to fly over Kosovo itself and the helicopters' missiles could have been more precise in hitting targets than bombers flying at 15,000 feet. The argument over whether there should be even contingency planning for the use of NATO ground troops in Kosovo (at the time, it appeared that they would have to fight their way in) caused a serious clash between Clinton and Blair, particularly when they met in April 1999 at the White House residence on the eve of a NATO summit. Clinton's national security adviser, Samuel Berger, argued strongly against contingency planning for ground troops. It would, he said, be controversial domestically and might imply that the air war wasn't working. It was clear that Clinton, who remained largely silent, fully agreed with Berger. A close Clinton associate has told me that “to this day” Clinton regrets that he removed the option of ground troops.

According to three former Clinton aides, when Clinton approved the list of appointments submitted to him by Cohen, including the selection of General Joseph W. Ralston

as the new commander of the NATO forces, it wasn't made clear to the President that this would cut Clark's term as the supreme commander by nearly three months. (Of this, Clinton later said at a press conference in Europe, "I had nothing to do with it.") Despite having been treated badly, Clark continued to serve for the following nine months. Clinton was reportedly furious when he realized the mistake that had been made, but he didn't want to go back on it lest he look indecisive, or further alienate military officials, with whom he had been on bad terms since the beginning of his presidency.

To make sure that Clark's dismissal was a *fait accompli*, the Pentagon immediately leaked the news that he had been fired, thus denying him the dignity of being allowed to announce his own retirement. Several members of the Clinton administration believe that Clark was treated in an extremely unfair, even cruel, manner. This treatment continues. Cohen, who had originally declined to comment, said on CNN on October 15 that "there was friction between General Clark and myself. And, frankly, I think it would be inappropriate for me to comment on his political aspirations. I made a judgment during the time that he was serving as head of NATO, SACEUR. And I felt that the ax, as such, when it fell, spoke for itself."

Since he announced his candidacy, it has been clear that Clark is also disliked by several high military officers. At least one of them, retired General Hugh Shelton, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff at the time of the Kosovo war, has publicly smeared him. When asked in September his opinion of Clark, Shelton said, "I will tell you the reason he came out of Europe early had to do with integrity and character issues." Shelton has several times declined to explain his remarks. Others who served in the Pentagon have said negative things about Clark so the word has spread nationally that "the generals hate him." This is taken to mean that he is disliked by "the people who know him best"—a claim that is often repeated without scrutiny by the press.

John McCain, who thinks well of Clark, says that Shelton, having made such a derogatory statement, should explain what he means. Charles Rangel, a strong supporter of Clark, has called Shelton's comment "character assassination." One of the Pentagon's chief complaints at the time was that Clark was on television too often during the Kosovo war. Shelton told Clark, "Get your fucking face off the tv. No more briefings, period." So, most unusually, for six weeks the commander of a war wasn't allowed to brief the press in public. His Pentagon bosses also wouldn't allow Clark to brief the President directly (as Generals Norman Schwarzkopf and Tommy Franks had briefed the presidents they were serving). Shelton tried to keep Clark from attending the NATO summit while Clark was conducting a NATO war. Pentagon officials also spread the word that Clark went around them to lobby Clinton for support for his positions, but there is no evidence that he did so.

Several people who are well informed about military politics or who worked with Clark during the Kosovo war believe that his enemies were largely motivated by professional jealousy of a U.S. general who rose so quickly and also got international attention for a war unpopular with many of his colleagues. Some also say that Clark was too cerebral, too much of an intellectual for some of his fellow military officers. Besides, there is an inherent tension in wartime between the commanders on the ground and their superiors in Washington. In 1943 during the fighting in North Africa, Dwight Eisenhower thought he'd be fired. Colin Powell and Schwarzkopf yelled at each other during the Gulf War; and there have been serious strains between Donald Rumsfeld and the field officers in Iraq. Technically, Shelton wasn't directly superior to Clark in the chain of command, but Cohen used him as a go-between, having Clark report to Shelton, and so most of Cohen's information about Clark came from Shelton. Politics at the top of the military can be vicious; there are numerous stories of three-star officers not receiving a fourth star or of high-ranking officers taking early retirement because of personal feuds.

Clark's conduct of the Kosovo war, and his earlier participation as the U.S. military negotiator in the meetings in Dayton following the war in Bosnia, earned him the admiration of several of the civilians he had worked with. Strobe Talbott, then the deputy secretary of state, reminded me recently that Clark is, after all, the only Supreme Allied Commander of NATO who actually had to fight a war, "and it ended in victory." Talbott told me that he found Clark to be "extraordinarily determined and able, and open to working with diplomats and civilians, U.S. and foreign." Talbott pointed out that Clark, in commanding the Kosovo war, had had to deal daily with nineteen nations.

Berger, who has not endorsed any of the presidential candidates, also speaks highly of Clark. Richard Holbrooke, under whom Clark served at the Dayton negotiations, is a friend of Clark's and supports his candidacy. Michael Gordon, the *Times's* able military reporter, who covered the Kosovo war, wrote of Clark in early October that "while NATO's military campaign was not perfect by any means . . . the general's judgment of . . . critical issues seems pretty solid when viewed in perspective; a humanitarian wrong was righted and NATO won its first and only war." Gordon also defended Clark's desire to try to prevent the Russians, who rushed a small troop unit to the Pristina airport after hostilities had supposedly ended, from establishing their own sector in Kosovo, completely independent of NATO. (In the end, the Russians backed down and accepted an arrangement that put them indirectly under NATO command.)

Much has been made of a single sentence in a long argument that Clark had with General Sir Michael Jackson, the British officer in command on the scene at Pristina airport, who said, "I'm not going to start World War III for you." Clark devoted an entire chapter to the airport incident in his first book, and his account has been confirmed by others. He explains that at first he had the support of the Clinton White House and the Joint Chiefs of Staff, as well as the secretary-general of NATO, Javier Solana. But when the British refused to support him, largely in response to Jackson's objections, Washington backed down. Clark himself reported Jackson's now-famous hyperbolic line to Shelton as an example of what he saw as an emotional overreaction. Berger says, "To say that Wes was reckless is to misunderstand the context; it's an absurd notion."

I spoke recently with retired General Walter Kross, a former four-star Air Force general under whom Clark served on the staff of the Joint Chiefs in the mid-1990s. For two years Kross worked with Clark from 6:00 in the morning until 9:00 at night six days a week, and sometimes on Sundays. He disagrees strongly with Shelton and Cohen about Clark's abilities and character. When I asked him why Clark was disliked by some military officers, Kross replied,

He's not the army general officer from central casting. He's the extra-ordinary senior officer who can do extra-ordinary work on the entire range of challenges senior officers have to face—including Kosovo and the Dayton Accords, on which he worked himself into exhaustion. No army officer from central casting can do that work, but Wes did.

He added, "Some senior officers misinterpret drive, energy, and enthusiasm for over-ambition . . . he is outside the mold and that makes some other officers uncomfortable."

Clark is aware that many voters want to hear his positions on domestic issues such as budget policy and health care. His supporters claim that Clark has been conversant with those issues for a long time, although he hasn't dealt with them to the extent that, say, senators do. But he has kept up with some issues over the years and has had to deal every day with such matters as the schooling, housing, and health of the thousands of military families under his command. He signed an amicus curiae brief to the Supreme Court defending the University of Michigan's affirmative action program. Ron Klain, Clark's senior policy adviser, says that as a result of Clark's military experience, "he's

more like a governor than a senator. He has run bases: they have school systems, health care issues, race issues.” Klain said that in briefing Clark, “it’s much more a conversation you’d have with Clinton than with Gore.”

Clark is preparing detailed programs on several domestic issues, advised by, among others, former Clinton economic officials including Laura Tyson and Robert Rubin. In fact, sixteen-point proposals for policy are less useful to voters than their getting a sense of the character of the candidates, as well as of the general direction of their policies and how they plan to pay for them. A presidential candidate challenging an incumbent doesn’t have an Office of Management and Budget or a Treasury Department or other cabinet officers to help draft his proposals; he doesn’t know the makeup of the next Congress. Between the primaries and the inauguration, moreover, facts can radically change. A major part of Bill Clinton’s 1992 campaign platform was a middle-class tax cut of \$500 per family. The week after the election he was told for the first time in a briefing that the prospects of a dangerously high government deficit were far worse than he had been led to expect. He dropped the middle-class tax cut and made raising taxes one of his primary goals. The tax increase is seen by most economists as critical in producing the boom of the Clinton years.

Clark neither distinguished nor injured himself in the first two debates, but it’s nearly impossible to stand out on such a crowded stage. In their current form debates, in any case, are a poor way to find out much about candidates. Lincoln and Douglas wouldn’t recognize them. The answers to questions from reporters have to be short and snappy; candidates are mostly judged by their ability to deliver sharp one-liners. Press coverage of the debates is mainly concerned with who attacked whom.

The abilities called for in a debate have little to do with governing, while the current round of debates, with nine or ten candidates on the stage, is perhaps the most ineffectual in American history, with marginal candidates cluttering the stage and wasting the viewers’ time. Al Sharpton, whose quick wit has enlivened them, is shadowed by past controversies (such as the one over Tawana Brawley), as is Carol Moseley Braun (who has been accused of misusing campaign funds). Dennis Kucinich is amusing and makes some salient points. When Howard Dean bragged about having enacted health care for all the citizens of Vermont while also balancing the state’s budget, for instance, Kucinich pointed out that Vermont doesn’t have a military. Voters should hear from candidates who have a chance of winning the nomination. Sharpton, Moseley Braun, and Kucinich have none, but at this point it’s impossible to get them off the stage.

When I asked Clark about the speeches he was planning on key issues, he told me that he sees the campaign as a form of dialogue. “You present your programs to people and you look for resonance and as you listen to people you sharpen your proposals over time if necessary.” He made a dig at Bush when he commented to me, “A president has to have, like any chief executive, an ability to focus on the decisive issues in some degree of detail—he can’t just preside and chair meetings while his aides grapple with all the details.”

In September, in Clark’s first speech on domestic issues, he said he planned to create jobs by providing tax incentives for employers, at an estimated cost of \$20 billion. The government would pay for this by repealing the Bush tax cuts that benefit people making over \$200,000, thus generating an estimated \$200 billion over two years. He said he would use other proceeds from the cuts for homeland security, for slowing the rise in the cost of college tuition, easing Medicaid shortages, and helping the states address other needs. He would, he said, improve and expand the No Child Left Behind education law that was passed by Bush in his first year but remains underfunded. He would work to make the Social Security Trust Fund, which will run out of its surplus in 2018, solvent. (As of now the trust fund’s surplus is being drawn upon to help offset the huge budget deficit.)

I asked Clark how he would pay for these programs when there is already a budget deficit of \$450 billion. He would, he said, not only repeal the tax cuts for the well-to-do, but also reform the tax code by eliminating loopholes that amount to tax subsidies for corporations. These reforms, Clark and his economic experts estimate, would yield another \$300 billion. He would set up a bipartisan commission to recommend such changes, as is now done for base closings. None of the Democratic candidates, including Clark, has flatly ruled out tax increases. In a speech in New Hampshire on October 22, he announced a plan to save more than \$2 trillion over the next decade by cutting the deficit each year.

On October 14 Clark gave a speech to a young audience at Hunter College in New York about voluntary national service as part of what he calls “A New Patriotism,” his campaign theme. He put forward a somewhat complex proposal to establish a “Civilian Reserve,” for which every American over eighteen could volunteer, serving either in the United States or overseas, helping other nations with, among other things, economic, political, and legal development. The volunteers could be called up to respond to terrorist attacks and natural disasters. In return they would receive “health care, a stipend . . . and the right to return to their jobs when the service is done.” Just how Clark’s Civilian Reserve would work remains vague, but his plan reflects the convictions of a man who has spent his life in public service. And clearly the “New Patriotism” has been conceived as an alternative to the Bush administration’s intolerance of dissent.

As an example of his idea of a New Patriotism, Clark said at Hunter, “There’s nothing more American—nothing more patriotic—than speaking out, questioning authority, and holding your leaders accountable.” Of the 1,200-page Patriot Act, which passed Congress shortly after September 11 without serious scrutiny, Clark says:

Law enforcement agencies should have every appropriate tool to fight terrorism, but I believe that the Patriot Act, which was designed and passed in haste, should be improved to more clearly protect civil liberties. It’s an outrage that the Bush/Ashcroft Justice Department has refused to submit to legislative oversight such a sensitive and important measure. That’s why as president I would call for a real review and for changes in the law. For now, we should immediately suspend the provisions that allow searches and seizure without judicial oversight—there’s no reason why the FISA [Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act] court couldn’t issue subpoenas and search warrants. And until we have more information about abuses of the act, I would limit the Justice Department’s use of its powers strictly to the actual prevention and prosecution of terrorism and protect the privacy of American citizens.

If one looks over his statements, one is struck by how often Clark refers to the damage caused by Bush both to civil liberties and to the American tradition of dissent. In his first major speech after he announced his candidacy, given at the Citadel in South Carolina, he said,

The administration has done many wrong-headed things. One of the worst has been to try to define patriotism as agreement with the current administration. . . . No president has the right to define patriotism. No president has the right to drape himself in the flag of patriotism and then demean those who would speak out against him.

Last March, while he was still appearing on CNN as a military analyst, he was interviewed on CNN's *Newsnight with Aaron Brown*, just after Michael Moore had delivered one of his tirades against the Bush administration, in particular its policy in Iraq. When asked by Brown how he would respond, Clark replied, "People in the military not only respect dissent, they expect dissent. . . . That's democratic, let's have it out." Dissent over Iraq, he said, "should be directed at the policies of the government, not the troops fighting the war." The fact that parts of the antiwar movement during the Vietnam War not only opposed government policy but attacked the soldiers as well was, he told me, a factor in his voting Republican at the time. He also felt then that the Republicans would do more to build up U.S. national security forces than the Democrats would.

Clark showed his inexperience with the political press and its propensity to pounce on any seeming contradiction when, on a plane on the second night of his campaign, he engaged in the type of unguarded, freewheeling policy discussion that he was accustomed to having with military reporters, and speculated that he might have voted for the war resolution. But Clark always was in favor of diplomacy and using the threat of war as a last resort. In a conversation with me, Michael Gordon, the *New York Times* military reporter, said that he talked to Clark in the months leading up to the war and that "he was consistently skeptical that Iraq presented an urgent threat." And when Clark was working as a nonpartisan CNN analyst, he made it clear privately that he thought the U.S. attack was mistaken. He now calls the administration's deceptive promotion of the war an "outrage." In his recent book, *Winning Modern Wars: Iraq, Terrorism, and the American Empire*, he strongly criticizes the administration's failure to plan for the postwar violence and disorder. He has argued that the U.S. should try to transfer both military and civil authority in Iraq to the United Nations.

It is far too early to tell whether Clark can make the most of his advantages: his military record and his appeal as an intelligent, independent outsider. As I write near the end of October, the greatest challenge facing him seems the wider and wider circulation of unexamined charges by some people who have opposed him in the past.