A militarist as “peace” candidate: Retired general Wesley Clark enters Democratic presidential race

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Retired US general Wesley Clark, who commanded NATO forces during the 1999 bombing of Yugoslavia, entered the contest for the Democratic presidential nomination on September 18. Clark became the tenth Democrat to announce his candidacy for the November 2004 election, and the first new entry since early this year.

Although Clark centered his initial statements on criticism of President Bush’s policies in Iraq, his campaign in no way represents a repudiation of militarism. His candidacy is rather bound up with the calculations of an important section of the Democratic Party establishment, which is dissatisfied with the present state of the contest for the party’s presidential nomination.

Since last March, the retired general has been widely reported to be preparing a presidential bid, while conducting a well-publicized effort to make up his own mind and sound out possible support within the Democratic leadership. The *New York Times* reported that former president Bill Clinton was drumming up support for Clark among Democratic Party regulars and donors “earlier this summer.”

The timing of Clark’s declaration reflects interrelated concerns of sections of the Democratic Party establishment over the growing support for former Vermont governor Howard Dean, whose repeated attacks on Bush, initially over Iraq and then over a wider range of policies, propelled him to the lead both in nationwide polls and in the first key primary states, New Hampshire and Iowa.

Those party leaders encouraging Clark—including Bill and Hillary Clinton, former vice president Al Gore and many of their closest aides—are not concerned about what Dean himself would do in office. He had a record in Vermont as a conservative Clintonite “New Democrat” who insisted on strictly balanced budgets, took pro-business positions on environmental and regulatory issues, and favored the death penalty.

Rather, they are afraid of the expectations that a successful Dean campaign might foster among his supporters, particularly as Dean has made increasingly strident appeals to antiwar sentiment. As the British magazine the *Economist* wrote on June 26, “For good or ill, Mr. Dean has decided to climb on the back of the leftist tiger. He cannot climb off without being eaten alive. The sight of Mr. Dean on the tiger’s back is striking terror into the party establishment... The problem for the Democrats is not just the man from Vermont but the rank-and-file rage that he embodies.”

The *New York Times* wrote on September 17 that Clark’s campaign “is being designed as an establishment counterweight to Dr. Dean’s effort.” When asked about this, Clark confirmed that he views himself as an attempt to appeal to an antiwar constituency while carrying them to the right politically. He said: “I’ve heard that view [that I am the “Stop Dean” candidate] expressed. But I’ve heard a lot of people say: ‘You cut across party lines. You are drawing independents. You draw Republicans.’ They want to know more than just the war was wrong.”

The upper levels of Clark’s campaign staff are in large part drawn from the right-wing Democratic Leadership Council (DLC) and the Clinton-Gore entourage. His current campaign staff includes businessman and 1992 Clinton campaign chief of staff Eli Segal, Clinton White House counselor Bruce Lindsey, Clinton Presidential Foundation president Skip Rutherford, Gore chief of staff Ron Klain, former Clinton/Gore communications aide Mark Fabiani, and Donald Fowler, a former chairman of the Democratic National Committee under Clinton. According to Will Marshall, co-founder of the DLC, referring to Clark, “Rich Democrats are wowed by him.”

Press coverage of Democratic candidates has largely focused on Clark since the last few days before he declared his candidacy, and other Democratic candidates, including Dean, are scheduling their media events around Clark’s so as to receive some press coverage. The result of the media barrage—including dueling cover stories on Clark in *Time* and *Newsweek*—was quickly reflected in opinion polls, which showed that the former general, almost completely unknown either to the general population or to rank-and-file Democratic voters, now led George W. Bush in the polls.

A Sept. 22 CNN/USA Today/Gallup poll showed Bush’s approval rating falling to 50 percent, with a disapproval rating of 47 percent, and trailing two Democratic candidates in head-to-head match-ups. According to the poll, 49 percent would vote for Clark versus 46 percent for Bush in a Clark-Bush election and 48 percent would vote for Senator John Kerry versus 47 percent for Bush in a Kerry-Bush election. Despite his relative lack of either political history or name recognition (more than 42 percent of Democratic voters had not heard of him on Sept. 1), Clark was the favorite candidate among Democratic voters: 22 percent said they would vote for him, versus 13 percent for the second-place candidate, Dean.

Clark is neither a well-known public figure nor a popular hero for his military exploits, the most successful of which was the brutal 79-day campaign to bomb Yugoslavia into submission, a “war” so one-sided that the US military did not suffer a single death in combat. His rocketing to the top of the polls demonstrates, first, that the polls themselves are driven largely by media coverage. This is especially the case for a Democratic nomination contest that has failed to arouse any great popular support. None of the Democratic presidential hopefuls—including Dean—has any genuine mass base.

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The same must be said of Bush, whose supposedly unchallengeable public standing has crumbled amid the barrage of reports of rising resistance in Iraq to the US occupation. The latest poll follows logically from previous surveys that showed Bush defeating all named Democratic presidential candidates but losing when pitted against an unnamed Democrat or when voters were asked whether Bush deserved a second term, without specifying who would replace him. Clark, behind a wave of media publicity, fills the part of the "generic Democrat," with his banal, telegenic and misleading campaign.

Clark has sought to exploit the Iraq crisis by mildly criticizing Bush's invasion of the country and appealing for international assistance. He has claimed that the case for war with Iraq has been made "under false pretenses" and called for Bush to "be held accountable." He has also stated that the Iraq war should not be the centerpiece of an anti-terrorist campaign.

Faced with the need to appeal to voters radicalized by the Bush presidency, Clark has attempted to put a thin populist, or at least anti-Bush, gloss on his candidacy. In addition to his limited criticisms of the war, Clark chose to make his first campaign speech in Florida. In a muted protest of Bush's theft of the 2000 elections in Florida, Mark Fabiani said this was because "the general wanted to send a message that he will fight for every vote and the right of every person to have their vote counted."

However, the growing political gulf between the ruling elites and popular hostility to Bush's militarism has made it difficult for Clark to maintain this stance. During his Florida speech, Clark rhetorically asked why the US had invaded Iraq. He was greeted with spontaneous cries of "oil" and "Halliburton" (the oil construction firm that used to employ current vice-president Dick Cheney and that has benefited handsomely from US government contracts to rebuild Iraqi oil wells). Anxious not to overstate his opposition to the war and publicly raise the issue of the Bush administration's criminality, Clark lied, lamely responding: "We don't know. And that's the truth. We have to ask that question."

Clark has issued contradictory statements on the war that indicate his antiwar stance is largely an act he plays to win support among radicalized Democratic voters. On Sept. 18, in a clear continuation of his previous limited criticisms of the Iraq war, Clark said: "I don't know if I would have or not [voted for the congressional resolution authorizing Bush to invade Iraq]. I've said it both ways, because when you get into this, what happens is you have to put yourself in a position. On balance, I probably would have voted for it."

When it became clear that this would allow political opponents or rivals such as Dean to expose the bogus character of his "antiwar" stance, Clark beat a hasty retreat. The next day he reversed himself, telling the Associated Press: "Let's make one thing real clear: I would never have voted for this war."

Clark's perspective is to use European and international support to bolster a US occupation of Iraq. On Sept. 8, he told National Public Radio's Dick Gordon: "We should use the UN for what it is good for. It offers credibility... We can use the UN in Iraq to help spread the blame around—let them hate some French and others, instead of hating just us."

On domestic policy, Clark has made few policy statements except for taking liberal positions on certain social questions such as abortion and advocating a partial repeal of Bush's tax cuts for those earning more than $200,000 a year. There are significant questions as to his allegiance to the Democratic Party. According to *Newsweek,* Clark was furious in the aftermath of Sept. 11, 2001, when Bush political advisor Karl Rove turned him down for an official position in the administration's "war on terrorism." This January, Clark told two prominent Republicans—Colorado governor Bill Owens and University of Denver president Marc Holtzman—that "I would have been a Republican if Karl Rove had returned my phone calls." *Newsweek* added: "Soon thereafter, in fact, Clark quit his day job and began seriously planning to enter the presidential race—as a Democrat."

The Democratic Party establishment is more than willing to overlook Clark's late-comer status, not only to employ him for the immediate purpose of stalling the Dean campaign, but because his status as a career military officer who commanded a victorious war supposedly makes him more "electable" (i.e., less vulnerable to a right-wing media barrage equating criticism of Bush with treason).

Attempts to present Clark as a candidate somehow opposed to militarism, or even as a candidate whose brand of militarism will reduce international tensions, fall apart upon any investigation into Clark's past. As NATO commander in the late 1990s, he was a fervent supporter of a more powerful intervention, seeking to supplement the deadly mass bombings of Serbia and Kosovo with a ground invasion. While pressing for permission to bomb more civilian targets, Clark expressed his frustration at "the only air campaign in history in which lovers strolled down riverbanks in the gathering twilight and ate at outdoor cafes to watch the fireworks."

Clark also ordered British general Michael Jackson to storm Pristina airport in order to prevent Russian troops from taking positions there. Jackson refused, saying: "I'm not going to start World War III for you." According to *Newsweek*, "Both Jackson and Clark appealed to their political leadership back home for support. Jackson got all the help he needed; Clark didn't. Effectively, his orders as Supreme Commander were overruled." Clark was dismissed shortly thereafter. He parlayed his military experience into a number of advisory positions, most notably at the Stephens investment-banking firm of Little Rock, Ark., and as a CNN commentator during the Iraq war.

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