

Michael Moore enlists with General Clark: the pathetic—and predictable—logic of protest politics

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The decision by American independent filmmaker and radical gadfly Michael Moore to endorse former army general Wesley Clark for the Democratic Party presidential nomination, while deplorable, is hardly astonishing. On the contrary, the move possesses a certain inevitability. It expresses the political and intellectual limitations, indeed bankruptcy, of an entire trend of current liberal-left thinking in America.

Moore is only one of many in that milieu who are presently weighing in on the respective alleged virtues of Clark, former Vermont governor Howard Dean, Representative Dennis Kucinich of Ohio or Senator John Kerry of Massachusetts.

The filmmaker's arguments, advanced in his statement, "I'll Be Voting For Wesley Clark/Good-Bye, Mr. Bush," are pragmatic and fairly puerile. Moore explains that he has met Clark "on a number of occasions" and "I have to tell you that he is the real deal...an honest, decent, honorable man who would be a breath of fresh air in the White House."

The clinching argument is this: "Clark has the best chance of beating Bush.... I am convinced that the surest slam dunk to remove Bush is with a four-star-general- top-of-his-class-at-West-Point- Rhodes-Scholar- Medal-of-Freedom-winning- gun-owner-from-the-South—who also, by chance, happens to be pro-choice, pro-environment, and anti-war. You don't get handed a gift like this very often. I hope the liberal/left is wise enough to accept it.... It is Clark who stands the best chance—maybe the only chance—to win those Southern and Midwestern states that we MUST win in order to accomplish Bush Removal. And if what I have just said is true, then we have no choice but to get behind the one who can make this happen."

Moore goes on to make rather sweeping claims about Clark's meager program, suggesting that the former general will be "socking it to the rich" by increasing the tax rate 5 percent on incomes over \$1 million, that he is "100 percent opposed to the draft," that he "is anti-war," that he will "gut and overhaul the Patriot Act and restore our constitutional rights to privacy and free speech," etc.

Moore, like many others in America's middle class protest circles, bases his political judgments largely on impressions. Insofar as his impressions coincide with or include a sympathy for the working class or genuine feeling for its suffering, he can produce valuable work. Both *Roger & Me* and *Bowling for*

Columbine, despite their limitations, contain some genuinely worthwhile moments and insights.

His denunciation of Bush's stealing of the 2000 elections at last year's Academy Awards ceremony was undoubtedly courageous, but individual heroics are no substitute for a penetrating analysis of modern American society, its dynamics or its place in history. Moore has no time for such an enterprise; he pours scorn on such a concern. He would apparently agree with Henry Ford that "history is more or less bunk."

Everything is reduced to immediate and practical concerns. In this manner, the essential framework of American bourgeois politics is accepted uncritically. Thus, Moore remains entirely imprisoned within the current political setup, obliged to choose between this or that section of the establishment. His choice of a former general who commanded the brutal 79-day bombing campaign against the former Yugoslavia in 1998, a "war" so lopsided that the US military did not suffer a single casualty, is particularly telling.

Moore motivates his support of Clark by a near-hysterical fear of George W. Bush. This approach ironically elevates the current occupant of the White House to a stature that he hardly deserves. The Bush presidency is a symptom of the thoroughly diseased state of American capitalism. Bush is the mouthpiece for the most predatory, ruthless sections of American big business. His regime, no doubt the most reactionary in modern US history, has not, however, fallen out of the sky. It is the sharpest expression of the rightward lurch by both the Republicans and Democrats in response to the crisis of the profit system. No one who seriously examines American society could conclude that Bush is the source or at the center of its problems. In the end, Moore's magnification of Bush is a reflection of his own prostration before the American political establishment.

The demonizing of Bush becomes the justification for opportunist politics. Nothing matters, according to this line of reasoning, except the defeat of Bush at the polls. "Why expend energy on the past [i.e., Clark's record] when we have such grave danger facing us in the present and in the near future?" writes Moore. A whole host of liberal-left groups and individuals in the US will attempt to use arguments like this over the next nine months as a bludgeon against socialist opponents of the two-party system.

Moore's statement excludes any consideration of Clark's role in the war against the former Yugoslavia, or as an enthusiastic supporter of the invasion of Iraq last spring. After all, the former general penned an op-ed piece in the *Times* (London) on April 10, 2003, headlined "What must be done to complete a great victory," which began, "Can anything be more moving than the joyous throngs swarming the streets of Baghdad? Memories of the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the defeat of Milosevic in Belgrade flood back. Statues and images of Saddam are smashed and defiled. Liberation is at hand. Liberation—the powerful balm that justifies painful sacrifice, erases lingering doubt and reinforces bold actions. Already the scent of victory is in the air."

Clark's piece went on to suggest that certain difficulties remained, but added, "Still, the immediate tasks at hand in Iraq cannot obscure the significance of the moment. The regime seems to have collapsed—the primary military objective and with that accomplished, the defence ministers and generals, soldiers and airmen should take pride.... As for the political leaders themselves, President Bush and Tony Blair should be proud of their resolve in the face of so much doubt." This is Moore's "anti-war" candidate. There is a farcical element to all this.

It should be noted that Moore, unlike many liberals in the US and elsewhere, did not support the US-NATO intervention in the Balkans, which Clark helped lead and today vociferously defends. When Moore was interviewed by the *International Workers Bulletin* (one of the predecessors of the WSWS) in September 1995, in connection with his film *Canadian Bacon*, he was asked about the "two-year campaign to portray the Serbs as the monsters" and the "selective reporting of atrocities" in the Balkans.

Moore replied that "once again the liberals [are] supporting this sort of thing. I find that very interesting. People don't see what's really going on here. I think the media in this country is one lie repeated over and over again.... What's the old cliché, give a lie a 24-hour headstart and the truth will never catch up to it. Once you start saying the Serbs X, and it's out there... If you want to present a different opinion about that, you got a long way to go to try to catch up to the lie."

Nor does Moore feel the need to explain or justify his own political history. In 2000, he supported the presidential candidate of the Greens, Ralph Nader, and made quite strident denunciations of Democratic candidate, then-vice president Al Gore. In his book *Stupid White Men*, he suggests, at one point, that the Democrats and Republicans should simply fuse and have done with it, while at another, he calls on "real" Democrats to find their "roots."

Moore regularly denounced the Clinton administration for its right-wing foreign and domestic policies, quite rightly, but simply ignores the glaring reality that Clark is widely considered to be a stalking-horse for the former president's camp in the Democratic Party. As recently as October 2003, he labeled the Democrats a "miserable, pathetic excuse for a party." Inconsistency and eclecticism are the hallmarks of this political milieu.

Moore declares in his endorsement of Clark, "There are times to vote to make a statement, there are times to vote for the underdog and there are times to vote to save the country from catastrophe." And he further asserts that the "liberal/left" must "reach out to the

vast majority who have been snookered by these right-wingers," and that "we have a better chance of winning in November with one of their own leading them to the promised land."

This kind of thinking, a particularly crass expression of the argument in favor of supporting the "lesser of two evils," is precisely one of the factors that have made the dominance of the extreme right in US political life possible. Moore cannot conceive of an honest and direct appeal to American working people—who he assumes to be under the influence of the right wing—on an anti-capitalist program.

He has his own strategy for "snookering" the American people, encouraging them to place themselves under the political leadership of a former (or not so former) right-winger, Wesley Clark (who acknowledges voting for Ronald Reagan), so as to arrive at the "promised land." Such clever, desperately opportunist plans never succeed. They only further reinforce the grip of bourgeois politics and illusions on wide layers of the population.

Why has the left failed to construct a mass movement in the US? The strength of American capitalism no doubt played a significant role. But this failure has persisted despite the obvious and growing crisis of the system. The absence of a coherent, consciously considered and worked out ideology, indeed the contempt for theory that Moore and others exhibit, has played a huge role. The right wing in America has no intrinsic power or popular appeal, its relative dominance is a function in part of the intellectual bankruptcy of this sort of "left" pragmatism, thoroughly incapable of orienting itself to the historic needs of the working class and the construction of a principled mass movement.

Moore doesn't have time for thinking; frankly, he only has time for foolish, thoughtless decisions. If former general Clark were to be elected, how would America be different? Instead of the reckless, unilateralist policy of the Bush administration, we would experience the more calculated, perhaps better managed exploitation of broad masses carried out in cooperation with the European and other ruling elites. In short, the return of a Clinton. This is a perspective that is no perspective at all.



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