

## The TPM Interview with Wesley Clark

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*(Retired General Wesley Clark recently entered the race for the Democratic presidential nomination. Clark served for 34 years in the United States Army. From 1997 to 2000, he was NATO Supreme Allied Commander and Commander in Chief of the United States European Command.)*

TPM sat down with Clark en route from Dulles airport to Washington on September 30<sup>th</sup>

TPM: Well let's start with--there's obviously a tradition in the officer corps of generals -- all officers -- having an apolitical stance when they're in the service. But people who vote in primary elections are very political people. Obviously you were in the Army for 34 years and you said that you were non-partisan during that time and then you came out and started thinking about your views and so forth. I think, again, for people who vote in primaries, that's a little hard to understand: You know, how can you be a man in your fifties and have put aside politics in that way? So how do you explain that? Again, for people who have really lived politics for most of their life and think about it a lot.

CLARK: I think it's a wonderful thing that people have dedicated their lives to politics because without that we wouldn't have a democracy. In our country, political parties perform an essential function. But for people in the military it's very hard to participate in party politics because you're always on the move and you don't have the time, the energy, the opportunities -- deployments and night maneuvers and so forth would screw up anybody. Sometimes some of the wives have been involved. But generally the men couldn't be. And there's also the Hatch Act, which says that you can't participate in uniform. So you can give money to a party or to a candidate, if you want, as an officer, but you can't do anything that indicates an official endorsement by people in uniform for someone in a political race.

It's a good thing. Because we don't want our military involved in partisan politics. Our military should be loyal to the commander-in-chief no matter who he is, no matter what party. Their job is to raise the professional military issues, and the big policy decisions ultimately have to be made by the people's elected representatives or their appointed representatives. That's civilian control of the military. It's the essence of democracy.

The old military tradition was that people in the armed forces didn't vote at all. Guys like George C. Marshall, they made a passion of not voting. The reason is, they said, "It's really

up to the people, the electorate, to choose the president. I'll work for whoever, I don't want to get involved in trying to pick sides. Whoever the president is, I support him."

In the 1950s it became acceptable and expected -- well I shouldn't say expected because no one ever knew -- but acceptable to vote. And there were efforts made to make sure that soldiers got to vote through absentee ballots. We know after Florida that a lot of these ballots probably were never counted. There's no telling whether they were ever counted, and in most races they probably weren't. For me, I had served under a Republican president as a White House fellow. I was in the Office of Management and Budget--

TPM: This was President Ford?

CLARK: Ford. And I knew Dick Cheney and Rumsfeld -- I didn't know them personally or well; I was 30 years old and they were very important people. I was just a sort of special assistant to the director of OMB. But I knew him, and Paul O'Neill and other people, and respected them. Then I worked around with the Clinton administration when I was the J5 on the Joint Staff. I knew people there, high level officials, and respected them. And when I got out, I went into business and obviously I voted.

I voted for Al Gore in the election of 2000. I had voted for Bill Clinton previously. For me, the issue was: make sure before you pick a party -- you don't have to pick a party in Arkansas to vote, you just vote, and I voted in the Democratic primary, but that didn't mean becoming a member of the Democratic party. Before you pick a party, make sure you know why you're picking a party. Make sure you understand what the partisan political process is in America. What does it commit you to? What does it mean? How does it affect the rest of your life? What is it all about? And so I thought I'd take a look at both parties.

I was fortunate. I was well-enough known that both parties invited me to consider them. The Republican party invited me to participate in a fundraiser and run for Congress. The Democratic party invited me to be their nominee for governor of the state of Arkansas. I was tremendously honored by that. And it was clear as I looked at the parties, looked at the culture, watched the dialogue, it wasn't just that I had voted for Al Gore, I really believed in what the Democratic party stood for. And so when it came time to choose a political party, I chose the Democratic party.

TPM: Obviously, President Bush has been in office for more than two years, and a lot of Democrats, at least, think he's governed in a very ideological, very conservative way. A lot of the divisions among Democrats have been pushed aside because there's unity created by being in the opposition--sort of a beleaguered opposition, some would say. But those differences are still there in the Democratic party, and they would certainly come to the fore with another Democratic president. You have -- just the most obvious one -- in the '90s, Clinton who had a more New Democrat, pro-free trade, fiscal discipline message; the people in congress were more traditional Democrats, more leaning to the left. So, especially since your experience is more on the foreign policy side, which advisors are you listening to? Who are you gravitating towards in the context of the Democratic party?

CLARK: I read books and I listen to a lot of different people who talk to me. Laura Tyson's been a friend. She's helped me. On the policy team with me now are guys like Ron Klain. These are people who've got a lot of experience, they've seen a lot of issues go by. Gene Sperling, Bob Rubin have participated. Some of the former speechwriters have helped me.

But when you run it all through, it's really me. It's my views that have been shaped by a lifetime of public service, traveling across this country, putting a child through school, worried about how much--or how little--money I made, how to survive on very middle [income] wages while moving every two or three years. The wife would come in and say, "Ah, the towels don't match the bathroom and you've got to buy new bathroom mats. And now what are we going to do for curtains? The curtain rods don't fit in this kind of the house." You know, all these expenses of moving on top of not making very much money. It's just a question of who you are.

I have strong views. I have strong feelings about what's right and what's wrong in the way of policy. I taught economics at West Point, I taught political philosophy. I worked in the South Bronx in 1966 for three or four weeks in the neighborhood youth corps as part of the Johnson administration's anti-poverty program. So I had seen urban poverty. I worked as a counselor at the Little Rock Boys' Club back in the late '50s, early '60s, ended my last staff member position at the Little Rock Boys' Club in 1965, meeting kids from not the most affluent backgrounds. You get a certain feeling for America. And that's the feeling for the America I know. That's the America I want to--you know, I want to give everyone in America equal opportunity, including those people that are like I grew up with.

TPM: There are all sorts of critiques about the present administration's domestic policies. What's the central one? What's the central problem, the central flaw in this administration's domestic policy?

CLARK: There's an underlying ideological drive that overrides pragmatism. The American people want government to fix the things they can't fix themselves. The American people are basically individualists. They like each other; they're very charitable and generous; they're bound together in a hundred different ways -- they're not a big-government country. They're not socialists. But they recognize there are things they can't fix, like healthcare, or education-public education.

And this administration comes in with an ideology that blocks its ability to see, articulate, and resolve those problems. It's an ideology that's a sharpened sort of right-wing Republican party ideology. It has no real intellectual base to it. It's just the ideology of a party. By intellectual base, I'm talking first, trickle-down economics. No reputable economist stands up and says, "Trickle down economics *really* works." Because we know the marginal propensity to consume of people who are making \$100,000 a year and less is much higher than the marginal propensity to consume of people who are making \$350,000 a year and more.

So therefore when you say you're going to give money to the rich so they'll make jobs for the poor -- that's not a very efficient way of producing jobs in the American economy. We know that, all things being equal, that the lower the tax rate at the margin, the greater the incentive to earn the extra dollar. But we also know -- it's just human nature to figure that out -- that in

a society where you've got a lot of people that are struggling to pay the electricity bill and the telephone bill and you've got a few people who don't care what the electricity and telephone bill is, that the few people who don't care about these things ought to pay a higher proportion of their income to help the rest of the country than the people who are struggling with the necessities in life.

I mean this is just sort of basic principles. I think most Americans understand and appreciate it. For some reason, this administration can't. This administration has crafted an ideology that basically is designed to roll back the institutions that have helped this country. They promote the ideology through sloganeering, through labeling, name-calling, talk radio. But when you really get down and scratch it, there's not much there.

For example, take the idea of competition in schools. OK now, what is competition in schools? What does it really mean? Well, competition in business means you have somebody who's in a business that has a profit motive in it. It's measured every quarter. If the business doesn't keep up, the business is going to lose revenue, therefore it has an incentive to restructure, reorganize, re-plan, re-compete and stay in business.

Schools aren't businesses. Schools are institutions of public service. Their job--their product--is not measured in terms of revenues gained. It's measured in terms of young lives whose potential can be realized. And you don't measure that either in terms of popularity of the school, or in terms of the standardized test scores in the school. You measure it child-by-child, in the interaction of the child with the teacher, the parent with the teacher, and the child in a larger environment later on in life.

So when people say that competition is--this is sort of sloganeering, "Hey, you know, schools need this competition." No. I've challenged people: Tell me why it is that competition would improve a school. Most of them can't explain it. It's just like, "Well, competition improves everything so therefore it must improve schools."

If you want to improve schools, you've got to go inside the processes that make a school great. You've got to look at the teachers, their qualifications, their motivation, what it is that gives a teacher satisfaction, what it is a teacher wants to do in a classroom. We've got to empower teachers. Give them an opportunity to lead in the classroom. Teachers are the most important leaders in America. All that is lost in the sloganeering of this party. And the American people know it's lost. So you asked me to give you one thing about this party that's in power -- it's the sort of doctrinaire ideology that doesn't really understand the country that we're living in.

TPM: In the primary process, one of the things that you bring to the table is your foreign policy resume. You spent a career working with national security issues -- obviously being a general and so forth. It seems in many ways, though, that the threats that this country faces in the medium-term or maybe even the long-term are more asymmetric threats rather than the conventional military threats that we thought of in the Cold War period. How does your background suit you to guiding a country and a world where those are the threats.

CLARK: Because in foreign policy and foreign affairs you have to work with allies. It doesn't matter what the threat is. And in the world that I learned to work in, international law trumps diplomacy. And, except under the most extreme circumstances, diplomacy trumps force. Force is the ultimate action, but improperly applied, force only kills people and breaks things. It gets you into something. It doesn't give you your success. I've had the experience of putting together the complete packages.

TPM: Let me just touch on a couple of issues. Iraq is the major issue now, but there are a few others sitting there that could rise to the surface at any point. On the Korean Peninsula, is there a line that we have to say they cannot cross? And if there is, where is it?

CLARK: Well there was a line, we already set it, but this administration let it go by. This administration thought it was better for the country to permit North Korea to go ahead with the nuclear development program rather than to talk to it. In other words, this administration was more worried about embarrassing itself in front of its right-wing base by talking to the North than it was in preventing the emergence of another nuclear-armed power that could proliferate nuclear weapons. It was a tragic--it will be, it's possible that it could be, a tragic miscalculation. And like much I see in this administration, it's an administration that's put politics over sound policy. People on both sides of the aisle understood that the way to resolve the North Korean problem was to talk to North Korea--honestly talk to them.

TPM: Which is what the previous administration was in the process of doing.

CLARK: It's what the Clinton administration had done. Is North Korea wily, tough, paranoid, nasty? Sure, it's all those things. Has to be. It's a twenty-three- twenty-four-million population impoverished country in Asia--in the land of super-giants. Its survival as a separate state is an historical anomaly and nobody knows it better than the North Koreans. And that's why they're hyper and paranoid. That's why they built up an arsenal of weapons and forces that defies all rational explanation but is ultimately highly rational from their perspective. And so why can't we talk to that regime? We talked to them in the past.

TPM: Given that we let them--we sort of gave them--a tacit green-light, and now they're clearly moving ahead with the plutonium process, the uranium process is probably not quite so far along, but they probably have--we at least assume that they have--some nuclear weapons, but how do we deal with it now?

CLARK: It's not too late to talk to them.

TPM: How about Iran?

CLARK: Iran needs to be worked through the international community. But it's difficult to work Iran through the international community when you have alienated much of the international community by your policy in Iraq. Iran was always a greater threat than Iraq.

TPM: Why is that?

CLARK: There was an odd--Iran is larger. Had more power, more wealth, more independence, more maneuver room. It was not under UN sanctions, was not under an imposed inspection regime. Been a much tougher problem. And, my friends in the Israeli Defense Forces would have been the first to acknowledge it.

But, in the odd kind of geopolitical chess board game this administration seemed to want to play, they seemed to assume that you could get your forces into Iraq, and, like a game of checkers, you could skip across the Middle East--plop, plop, plop--as though in some metaphysical sense, it was easier to come ashore up through the Euphrates and Tigris valleys into the heart of the Middle East and southwest Asia, and then cross into the mountains of Iraq--excuse me, of Iran--or pivot and go towards Syria. It was analytically, geometrically satisfying, even though those of us who understood the situation at the time said it made little sense. It was old-think. It was 19th century geostrategy--

TPM: So, the Great Game? A sort of a new version of the Great Game?

CLARK: It was the Great Game with modern equipment, and hypermodern risks. And, in reality, the problems with Osama bin Laden were not problems of states. They were problems of a supranational organization which alighted in states, used states, manipulated elements of states, but wasn't going to be contained and destroyed by attacking and replacing governments.

TPM: I noticed that Doug Feith, who's obviously the Undersecretary of Defense for Policy, had a statement a while back saying that the connection between terrorist organizations and state sponsors was, I think he said, the principal strategic thought behind the administration's policy.

CLARK: It's the principal strategic mistake behind the administration's policy. If you look at all the states that were named as the principal adversaries, they're on the periphery of international terrorism today. Syria -- OK, supporting Hezbollah and Hamas -- yeah, they're terrorist organizations. They're focused on Israel. They're getting support from Iran. It's wrong. Shouldn't be there. But they're there. What about Saudi Arabia? There's a source of the funding, the source of the ideology, the source of the recruits. What about Pakistan? With thousands of madrassas churning out ideologically-driven foot soldiers for the war on terror. Neither of those are at the front of the military operations.

TPM: Well, those are our allies, our supposed--

CLARK: Mentioning those two countries upsets the kind of nineteenth century geostrategy and the idea--this administration is not only playing that game, but they're more or less settling scores against the Soviet surrogates in the Cold War in the Middle East.

TPM: That being Syria, Lebanon

CLARK: The proxy states, Syria, Lebanon, whatever. These states are not -- they need to transform. But, why is it impossible to take an authoritarian regime in the Middle East and see it gradually transform into something democratic, as opposed to going in, knocking it off,

ending up with hundreds of billions of dollars of expenses. And killing people. And in the meantime, leaving this real source of the problems -- the states that were our putative allies during the Cold War -- leaving them there. Egypt. Saudi Arabia. Pakistan.

TPM: Obviously, the big, really *the* foreign policy issue right now is Iraq. And, there was all the debate that went on before last March and April, which is sort of moot now. But the question is, what do we do now? We're in there, we have almost 150,000 troops -- that's an expense in itself -- let alone the reconstruction stuff. What do we do now?

CLARK: Well, I support our troops, and I want to see this be successful in Iraq, and that's a national imperative, that we be successful. What we've got to do is realistically look at the situation, put the right number of troops on the ground, hopefully, they'll be Iraqi troops. Secondly, there'd be international troops. Last resort, we may need more American troops, but that's not clear yet, to me.

I haven't been invited over there to take a look. I'd like to, but they haven't invited me to do that. Then the second problem is going after al Qaida. You must go after al Qaida. You know, let's not give them a free ride, re-forming in Pakistan, and penetrating into Afghanistan, and sending its messages around the world. Number three: if you're going to be successful in Iraq, you're probably going to have to change the dynamic in the Middle East. Right now, we've given Iran and Syria the strongest possible incentives to work against our purposes in Iraq, because we've let them know that they're next. So, from their perspective, they don't want to get invaded. They don't want to get knocked off because they're against the United States. It's only natural that they'd be working to make sure there's enough resistance in Iraq.

TPM: To keep us pinned down there?

CLARK: Exactly, exactly.

TPM: What is victory in Iraq?

CLARK: Well, I think that's an important question that we'd like to see the administration define. The elements of it might be the following: What kind of government? A unitary Iraq? Maybe a federalized Iraq? A common language, common currency, common -- no customs problems inside Iraq. Common schools, common flag, all the symbols of nationhood. So, you want to hold Iraq together. And, a country that doesn't threaten its neighbors, and a government that has enough security wherewithal to be able to protect itself and not become a recruiting base for al Qaida. And an Iraq that's able to be integrated into the modern world. So if you lay out those five criteria in some way, you probably could come up with a definition of success.

TPM: As we mentioned before, in different capacities you worked for a number of different administrations. Whether it was Ford, working directly in the White House, or for the last 15, 20 years in various capacities at a fairly senior level. You've seen these different presidents conduct foreign policy. What are your opinions of the different ones?

CLARK: Well, you know, nobody gets to be president of the United States without conspicuous strengths. But the ability to conduct foreign policy draws not only on the president himself but on the leadership of the administration. If you were to start here and work backwards, you'd say this administration was doctrinaire. You'd say that it didn't have a real vision in foreign policy. It was reactive. Hobbled by its right-wing constituency from using the full tools that are available -- the full kit-bag of tools that's available to help Americans be in there and protect their interests in the world.

Clinton administration: broad minded, visionary, lots of engagement. Did a lot of work. Had difficulty with two houses in congress that [it] didn't control. And in an odd replay of the Carter administration, found itself chained to the Iraqi policy -- promoted by the Project for a New American Century -- much the same way that in the Carter administration some of the same people formed the Committee on the Present Danger which cut out from the Carter administration the ability to move forward on SALT II.

TPM: This being the same neo-conservatives that people hear about in the press today?

CLARK: Right, some of the same people. And then, you know, if you go back to the Bush administration, they were there when the Berlin Wall fell. I think there was some artful maneuvering -- which the Clinton administration followed through on -- to extract Russian forces from the rest of Eastern Europe. That began in '89-'90, it was carried on, actually didn't finish until I think '94 when the last Russian forces pulled out of Latvia.

So both administrations get credit for that. I think the Bush administration as they worked the problem of [the] post-Cold War had difficulty understanding the significance of NATO and the role that Europe could play. They opened -- they were part of the fissure that emerged -- the Europeans, especially the French, were also part of that. But there's that famous quote from former Secretary [of State] Jim Baker about the problem in Yugoslavia saying, "We don't have a dog in that fight" or something. And I think that if you critique it from the standpoint of 15 years post, the first Bush administration's beginning, you say it was a time of revolutionary transformation and what we had to do at a time of transformation like that is hold even closer to our friends and our allies around the world.

Lord Palmerston in the 1830s, I think, in the UK, later quoted by Count Gorchakov, the Russian foreign minister in the 1880s, later quoted by Prime Minister Primakov in 1998, it was, at the original saying, "Britain has no permanent friends, only permanent interests." It became transformed into Russia. But it's the sentiment that we want to avoid in a modern world. What we wanted to have done, what we should have done in the late '80s was said, "Look, even though now we've eliminated the Soviet threat, we have permanent friends. You in Europe, you're our permanent friends. We will make our interests converge so that we strengthen our friendship. The friendship is more important than the interests, if you work this right over time, you can work to smooth off the sharp edges of conflicting interests. And I think that's still a recipe for moving forward.

As for Ronald Reagan, there were some things done well, some things done poorly, but one of the biggest things was it was the administration in which inflation came under control as the result of a lot of tough policies, some of them begun by Reagan's predecessor to attack the

expectations that had built up in this country as a result of trying to do guns and butter during Vietnam. And it took years to drive these expectations out of the business community, out of the financial community. But as they disappeared and people began to accept core inflation rates of less than two and three percent and they didn't build cost escalators into everything, you established a much firmer sense of purpose and success in America. That's a bipartisan effort. I loved Reagan's speech at Pointe du Hoc. I was at the Pentagon, I was at the Pentagon as a colonel when he gave it on D-Day.

TPM: This is the forty-fifth anniversary I guess?

CLARK: Fortieth anniversary. Communications is really important for a president. We've had a few presidents in the twentieth century who were great communicators. Most aren't. But in terms of foreign policy, we went through a lot of shocks in the 1980s with our European allies. But ultimately it was Russia itself that broke. The Soviet Union fell apart. A combination of circumstances and pressures dating back to Franklin Roosevelt's and Harry Truman's early visions of how to win this competition, finally came to fruition.

TPM: We just crossed the Potomac River a few minutes ago. So that both means that my time is running short but also we're coming into Washington -- we've just come into Washington, DC. And obviously for the last two or three days there's been one story in this town. And that's about this beginning investigation. We don't know what the facts are, but it seems at least -- there's evidence out there -- that some high level officials in the administration, seemingly just for political reasons, exposed the cover of a CIA agent, a covert operative in the CIA, whose husband obviously, Joseph Wilson -- people know the background story. Obviously having been a four-star general, retired now, you've dealt with all sorts of classified and top-secret information. Just how does that strike you? That that could have happened? What was your reaction to that?

CLARK: Well, I'm mystified as to how it could have happened. I don't understand how people in the White House -- if that's where it came from -- in the political operation, would have had any knowledge about the qualifications, or the activities, of a retired ambassador's wife. They just wouldn't have -- how would they know that? That's why I've called for an impartial commission of inquiry, not associated with the executive branch, to go back into this, because there are enough charges and counter-charges out in this issue, in this very political administration. You have to take the intelligence community, especially the protection of censored sources, out of the political process. And that means you need an independent commission, which is not part of this administration, to look into the full circumstances and issues surrounding this case.

TPM: Now, obviously this particular case of whether this CIA employee's cover was blown, and so forth, gets back into this other issue of the uranium claims and forged documents, and you can sort of trace that back into the whole larger debate about intelligence--the quality of intelligence, the political uses of intelligence. Obviously, you've talked a lot on CNN and stuff like that -- what is, looking back, what are the key mistakes? Not on the formal, not on the operational plan of the war, key mistakes getting in? What weren't they thinking? What didn't they prepare for?

CLARK: Well, we don't know why they chose to go to Iraq in the first place. There's a lot of circumstantial evidence, but even Paul Wolfowitz admitted that the weapons of mass destruction issue was just the one issue that they could get most consensus on. Meaning, I suppose, that Colin Powell would have had more difficulty arguing against it then, let's say, a visionary scheme to transform the Middle East by playing hopscotch with military forces from country to country. So, that's the first question, is, why did they do it? And secondly is, why then? Why, when? Why, at that point in time, did they have to do that?

We don't know. And then you ask, well, when they took it to the United Nations, and when they got UN Security Council Resolution 1441 passed, why, at that point, didn't George Bush ask Karl Rove and say, "Karl. I've won the elections. I've done everything we wanted to do. [Inaudible] I'm a great wartime leader. Tell me again, why do we have to invade Iraq? What's in it for us, as America? Why can't we find another alternative? Why don't we just string this thing out? Let the international community fumble with it --we've got them going. We could, you know, knock out the critics and say, 'Look, I did go to the United Nations.'" You undercut the old whole unilateralist approach [argument], you argue that you're only using force as a last resort, let the half time play out. Why the rush? Don't know why.

TPM: You must have some sense.

CLARK: I think that it's really hard to understand it, but it goes back to the sort of doctrinaire, rigid, ideological approach that the administration's following. When you're looking at the facts in a pragmatic way, it was hard to construct the argument as to why you had to go in right away. It was so hard that we couldn't persuade our allies to come in with us. We couldn't even persuade the American people. Until it came time that the troops were actually there, and people said, "Well, you know, you've got the troops there, how long are you going to hold them there, this is getting embarrassing. Just go ahead and do it." At that point the polls started to raise--

TPM: So, sort of creating a situation [which] forced our hand on that.

CLARK: Exactly. I mean, the President went around, apparently, speaking around the country in February and March. I didn't hear him, but the quotes I've seen from then suggest that he went around saying, "If we're forced to go to war." Well, the only people that forced him to go to war was his own advisors. They forced the situation and the timing of it. It defies a good explanation. It needs to be -- it warrants an explanation. Even an investigation.

TPM: We're about to come up to Capitol Hill right now, and obviously I'm sure that -- you just flew in to Dulles. I'm sure that you've got a schedule of meetings with various [people]--how are you enjoying campaigning?

CLARK: I love it.

TPM: Yeah? How is it compared to being SACEUR [Supreme Allied Commander in Europe]?

CLARK: It's a lot more fun.

TPM: A lot more fun?

CLARK: Yeah. Because as SACEUR, I had life and death issues at risk. If we were to be successful in this campaign, those responsibilities will settle in again, even heavier. But right now, it's about reaching out. It's about communicating. It's about helping other people capture a vision, share, grow, experience, learn. It's an incredibly exciting thing to go around America and talk to people and have them tell you what they're thinking.

I was in New Hampshire on Saturday morning. I went to the YMCA. It was seven o'clock in the morning. There were already two ladies at work there, checking admissions passes. One of them told me that she works eighty hours a week. She works seven days a week. She works in the police station doing traffic tickets or something like this--you know, collating is her normal job, and then she works at the Y as an additional job. She works from eight o'clock in the morning to ten o'clock at night, six days a week. I was in awe of her. She has two children. She's a single mom. She puts those two children through school. Amazing. People share those kind of stories; we can get a real feel for what this country's about. And, a real determination. We can do more and be more and help more.

TPM: Thank you very much. I appreciate your time.

CLARK: Thank you, Josh.