

The Puzzle of Wesley Clark

by Tony Papert

Winning Modern Wars

by Gen. Wesley K. Clark
New York: Public Affairs Press, 2003
200 pages, hard cover, \$39.00

Waging Modern War

by Gen. Wesley K. Clark
New York: Public Affairs Press, 2001
461 pages, hard cover, \$44.95

General Clark's first book, *Waging Modern War*, was written when he was fresh from military service and still free from the distraction of contemplating an election campaign. It reveals much more of his thinking than his more recent *Winning Modern Wars*. Some aspects of Peter J. Boyer's *New Yorker* profile of Nov. 17, 2003, cohere with Clark's report of his own ideas, as is noted below. What other written sources I have found, have little to add.

It has been said that, "We went to Vietnam, but we never came back." It's true. At least for us Americans, the Vietnam War never actually ended: the issues were never resolved; all those disagreements still continue to fester—so that now Vice President Cheney and his "neo-conservative" helpers have forced us into new Vietnams in Afghanistan, and the "Vietnam in the desert" that is Iraq. In somewhat the same way, the Peloponnesian War of ancient Classical Greece was another one which never really ended. Although some imagine it ended when Thucydides' death forced him to put down his pen, and others give later dates; yet in fact, that war still continued unabated for decades under various names, until all the parties were too weakened to fight any further, by which time Classical Greece had already entered the twilight from which it never returned.

For myself (let me note here that I was born in 1945), I fought for many years to end the Vietnam War. My still greater concern was to determine just where our nation had gone so far off its track, as to be able to launch such an ill-conceived war, and then to continue it as long as we did.

Many of the brave young American officers there made a

promise, each to himself, that this would never happen again if he were in any position to prevent it. Retired Generals Colin Powell of the Army, and Anthony Zinni of the Marines, are among the best known, and their commitments the best documented, but hundreds of others made the same vow, and have remained just as true to it. Never again would the U.S. go to war based on "lies of state"; nor, without an "exit strategy"—the latter a poor substitute for the deeper strategic conceptions of a Douglas MacArthur and his predecessors, but still entirely positive in today's context.

For their part, the senior officers like Gen. Creighton Abrams who commanded the Powells, Zinnis, and Clarks at that time, later constructed a new system of military manpower which prevented the United States from ever fighting a war without drawing heavily on reserves from the civilian population. This was intended as the institutional guarantee for another promise they shared with the younger group: Never again would America go to war without the support of the American people.

Now, of course, each of these disasters—lies, no exit strategy, no real popular support—has been repeated with a vengeance in Iraq. But not through any fault of these officers, serving or retired. When the full story can be told, it will be seen that they were no less brave in their recent fight for war-avoidance, against Cheney's draft-dodging "chicken-hawks," than earlier in Asian jungles.

'Escalation,' 1970 and 1999

Gen. Wesley Clark also served with distinction as a young officer in Vietnam, and Vietnam has clearly left a great mark on him, but of totally another nature. General Clark has taken one aspect of Vietnam, and reified that into what he calls "modern war." Clark's "modern war," is war, first of all, fought despite the absence of a threat to the existence of our Republic; it is, thus, a "war of choice," even though Clark does not use that term. Even at this, his starting point, Clark completely parts company from the other critics of Vietnam alluded to above. Powell, Zinni, my co-thinkers: All of us saw in Vietnam *precisely* a threat to the existence of our Republic.

For General Clark: Since the war does not involve any peril to the existence of the nation-state, it is further defined as "coercive diplomacy," or the use of graduated applications of deadly force, when necessary to further the work of diplomacy in persuading foreign governments to alter their behavior. It is also, typically, coalition war, where battlefields reflect the balancing of shifting views among allies, just as much as shifting relations of force among adversaries. What Clark thinks is "modern war," is in reality nothing but "cabinet warfare," a medieval pestilence only finally overcome after a long process launched originally by Joan of Arc in the 15th Century.

Clark's so-called "modern war" can be still more narrowly defined, and he does so throughout many passages of his first book. Except for a possible final phase of ground-

warfare, “modern war” consists of aerial bombardment of enemy targets, or “assets.” Success is achieved by destroying such “assets” faster than the enemy can replace them. But still more fundamental to success, is the credible threat to “escalate.” (Remember that word from Vietnam?) “Escalation” means the launching of more destructive bombardments; and even, after a certain point, invasion on the ground, or “ground warfare.” The final straw which led to Clark’s firing, was just that issue, “ground warfare.”

Given Clark’s simplifying assumptions, Washington’s “credible threat to escalate,” which now becomes the deciding factor in war, is the same thing as our “will” to escalate. So-called “modern war” becomes a pure test of *wills*, in the sense of Schopenhauer or Nietzsche. This is where the factors of “collateral damage,” U.S. public opinion, and “information warfare” come into play. “Collateral damage,” killing of civilians, if it is felt to be excessive, can influence public opinion to weaken the will for that continued escalation which is necessary for victory. Or more generally, media reportage can influence public opinion in this way. Clark’s diagnosis of Vietnam, was that that war was lost in the U.S. mass media, which weakened American public opinion’s will for continued escalation. We were defeated by the mass media, not by the Vietnamese or by our own stupidity.

So one knows right away how Clark spent the first night, March 24, 1999, of the Kosovo War, in which he was U.S. Commander in Chief, European Command, and also commanded NATO forces as SACEUR. He spent it watching television, as he must have spent many other nights of that war. If his forces were to suffer any losses on the electronic battlefield of “information warfare,” General Clark would catch them at the source and reverse them. For example, that first night, NBC newscaster Tom Brokaw reported “American-led air strikes.” Clark’s public affairs officer was on the phone with NBC in a moment, and the network immediately changed the way it identified the strikes to “NATO air strikes.”

Ground War in Kosovo

Quite of a piece with this view of war, and of life generally, is an obsession with “sending the right message”: As, to say that, or to do this, would “send the wrong message.” There may be sense to this notion at times, as when St. Paul cautions Christians against eating meat from pagan sacrifices, lest it weaken the faith of their fellow-Christians. But if you let such “signal-sending” notions run rampant, you risk ignoring the real effects of your acts in the real world, in favor of purely symbolic, or even fanciful interpretations.

As *EIR* knows first hand from the corridors of NATO’s 50th Anniversary Conference, April 24, 1999, the immediate issue of Clark’s firing was his insistence on planning a ground war against Serbia in Kosovo, contravening his orders from Clinton’s Defense Secretary William Cohen. Cohen didn’t want Clark to come to that conference at all, but he came nevertheless, to push such invasion planning. With support

from Britain’s Tony Blair and others, Clark claimed that such planning was necessary immediately, to “send a signal” to Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic, that NATO had the will to “escalate” if necessary, from aerial bombardment into a ground invasion.

Boyer’s negative *New Yorker* profile draws largely on named and unnamed detractors of Clark from the uniformed military and civilian Pentagon leaders. I am not in a position to evaluate most of what Boyer writes, nor to positively confirm Boyer’s account of how Clark brought the United States into war in the Balkans in 1999; but that account is totally coherent with the general’s own beliefs, seen in his 2001 book, and with *EIR*’s first-hand knowledge.

Boyer writes that Clark insisted that he knew the mind of Serbian President Milosevic as no U.S. commander has ever known the mind of his adversary, from Clark’s experience in assisting Richard Holbrooke at the Dayton negotiations of 1995. Clark insisted from this knowledge, that merely threatening to bomb would coerce Milosevic to make demanded changes regarding the ethnic-Albanian majority in Serbia’s province of Kosovo. Acting as though preparing to bomb would “send the right signal.”

But Milosevic essentially ignored the threat. What do we do now? “We have to bomb. Don’t worry—I know him as no other American commander has ever known the mind of his adversary. When we start bombing, he’ll negotiate in earnest, and meet our demands.” Again, Milosevic failed to respond. What now? “We plan a ground invasion. Don’t worry. I know his mind. When he sees we’re serious about a ground war, he’ll come around.”

“No dice!”

“Well, I’m doing it anyway!”

“You’re fired!”

Just as credible is the following exchange reported by Boyer, on Clark’s ground-invasion plan.

Clark outlined the plan to the Joint Chiefs in a video-conference, and they were starkly unresponsive. Dennis Reimer, the Army Chief of Staff, made it clear he considered Clark’s plan ludicrous. General Shelton refused to go forward with any real planning for the invasion. A Clinton Defense official recalls, “Any of those elements of his most expansive plan would have, in our view and in the view of a number of thinking people, derailed what was a fairly fragile situation. And, in the judgment of many, many military professionals, it wouldn’t have worked anyway. It called into question the real military judgment being put behind it.”

Clark’s friend Dan Christman acknowledges that the ground plan may have seemed impractical. “But the question of its feasibility was totally beside the point. It was as much psychological as it was military. He wanted to convince Milosevic that we were prepared to go in.”