



KOSOVO

COMPROMISE 2007

Your daily-updated analyses, charts and solution plug-ins for the Kosovo crisis.

July 4, 2008

Wes Clark's sniping at McCain backfires

By Elizabeth Sullivan, The Cleveland Plain Dealer

http://blog.cleveland.com/pdopinion/2008/07/wes_clarks_sniping_at_mccain_b.html

Kosovo war commander and decorated Vietnam vet Wesley Clark was never shot down during war. Maybe that's why the retired general, ex-NATO war leader and former presidential candidate chose this aspect of John McCain's war record to carp about last Sunday, when he said, "I don't think riding in a fighter plane and getting shot down is a qualification to be president."

Yet McCain wasn't just shot down.

He also was brutalized and tortured during five years of North Vietnamese captivity, a period during which McCain gallantly refused the early release his captors offered because he was an admiral's son.

Those are leadership qualities that Clark's maladroit comments reveal he does not share.

This is not the first time that Clark's ego and ambition have gotten in the way of political and military realities -- but they show what a slow learner he is.

Instead of burnishing his credentials, he managed to eliminate himself from vice presidential contention, while also revealing how little interest he has in Barack Obama's own qualifications to be president.

Obama quickly distanced himself from Clark's remarks. But if Clark, who only recently came to the Obama campaign after supporting Hillary Clinton, really was acting as an Obama "surrogate" on CBS's "Face the Nation" -- which he denies -- he would never have talked about military service, since Obama has not served.

Clark had in mind not the blank on Obama's r sum , but his own illustrious one.

And it's true: Clark was a brilliant military student. He was first in his 1966 West Point class, a Rhodes scholar, and later Supreme Allied Commander of NATO forces in Europe during the alliance's first and only aggressive war, over Kosovo in 1999.

Yet that career ended in tatters, with Clark ignominiously dumped from the top NATO military job for repeatedly going behind the backs of his Pentagon superiors, as they saw it.



KOSOVO

COMPROMISE 2007

Your daily-updated analyses, charts and solution plug-ins for the Kosovo crisis.

How acrimonious those feelings were was made clear five years ago, when Clark was running for president.

During an appearance at tiny Foothill College in California, Gen. Hugh Shelton, the former chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, was asked about his erstwhile subordinate.

"The reason he came out of Europe early had to do with integrity and character issues," Shelton bluntly said of Clark, as quoted in the Los Altos (Calif.) Town Crier.

"Wes won't get my vote," Shelton added.

Where Clark really teed off his military superiors was in how persistently he tried to end-run them, and possibly at times, President Clinton, on the issue of ground troops in the war.

Clinton had publicly and privately nixed the idea of ground forces. That didn't keep Clark from pushing the idea in war plans he sent back to Washington and, none too subtly, in press conferences and while briefing other NATO leaders.

The New Yorker magazine reported five years ago that Clark, during a meeting in Brussels with Tony Blair a month after war started, helped persuade the British prime minister to press the idea with Clinton, causing a temporary rift between the two leaders.

His micromanagement of aspects of the Kosovo war alienated not just his Pentagon superiors but also allies, contributing to NATO divisions -- and to Pentagon suspicions about how well NATO can function during wartime -- that persist to this day.

In the interest of alliance unity, Clark supported a limited, politically dictated set of bombing targets instead of the big initial attacks the U.S. Air Force advocated against Slobodan Milosevic's command and control centers, including in Belgrade.

Yet this created a strategy of incremental warfare where every tiny target set could be debated, and often was -- and where an increasing number of the targets were chosen for political, rather than military, reasons. These included the building housing Milosevic's wife's political party, a downtown hotel and the main Serbian television station when only lowly technicians, most of them political opponents of the Milosevic regime, were at work. That Clark and other NATO leaders weren't indicted for war crimes for the civilians predictably killed in some of the bombings may have been solely due to the fact that the U.N. war-crimes tribunal charged with such prosecutions owed its existence, its rules and its funding largely to Washington.