

# The Political Forum

*A review of social and political trends and events  
impacting the world's financial markets*

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## THEY SAID IT

“I have read the accounts of the Clark interviews and my reaction is despair and anger. Why did my party’s best operatives think it would be a good idea to subject their neophyte candidate to the country’s savviest reporters for over an hour? Why have my party’s elders rallied around a candidate who is so shockingly uninformed about core issues and his own positions? I am not a Dean supporter — but I am angry that our party’s leaders have anointed an alternative to him who seems even more ignorant and unprepared — and that this supposed ‘anti-war’ candidate turns out to have been in favor of both the war resolution and Richard Nixon!! And let’s not even talk about the Clintons. Today I am embarrassed to be a Democrat.”

-- An unnamed “Democrat with national experience,” as quoted in the September 19 issue of ABC News’ popular daily web report on politics, called “The Note.”

**MEMBERS ONLY.** I watched with considerable interest recently when General Wesley Clark announced that he was going to run for president. It was, however, pretty much of an academic exercise for me, in that I had already made up my mind that this guy didn’t have a chance either to be the Democratic nominee for president or the President of the United States. In fact, for a variety of reasons, I think he’ll fold like a cheap umbrella in a hurricane sometime between Iowa and New Hampshire, if not before.

In one of our daily brainstorming sessions, I told Steve that I was going to write about why I don’t think Clark will be successful. He agreed with my position, but said that he was more interested in the Clark/Clinton connection and what that says about the Democratic Party. So we decided that I would write about Clark’s viability and he would write about Clark’s murky connections with Bill and Hill. So here goes.

Now let me say even before I begin my task that predicting what Democrats will do is not my forte. I can’t understand how anyone could be a Democrat to begin with, so it never surprises me if I find that I am wrong about what they are capable of doing as a group. But I believe that Clark will have trouble raising enough money to make a credible run. I further believe that he

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will have trouble connecting with the wacky, far left of his newly adopted party, which he must do if he is to win in the early primaries. And I believe that he will commit enough gaffs early on to effectively take himself out of the running.

POLITICIAN JOKE

This guy is selling captives to a tribe of cannibals. The first one he presents is a missionary. The cannibals agree that the missionary looks very fat and healthy, and they offer to pay five goats for him.

The second captive is a nature photographer. He too is fat and healthy, and the cannibals once again offer to pay five goats.

The third captive is a highly successful Washington politician. The cannibals say they wouldn't have him at any price. The salesman says, "I don't understand. He's just as fat and healthy as the other two. Why don't you want him?"

To which the head cannibal replies, "Have you ever tried to clean one of those things?"

Now I am aware that these are not original thoughts; that many pundits have said as much, and that many people more knowledgeable than I have said just the opposite. So I will discuss another hurdle faced by Clark, which no one, to my knowledge at least, has mentioned, and which could be the most important factor of all in his quest for the White House; that being that he is an outsider in a game that is run by and for insiders.

When sitting pertly together on a stage answering politely asked questions from a friendly moderator, the Democratic candidates may look as though they are engaged in a respectable occupation that anyone with a reasonable knowledge of domestic and world affairs could pursue.

But the fact is, whether they look and act like it or not, the ones that have a chance, the ones that are leading the pack, are highly skilled professional politicians who have had years of

practice operating in the arcane world of backroom, big money, national politics. It is not a place for amateurs. Like a brothel that advertises itself as a "fun place to go," behind the scenes this is actually a sleazy, tight knit little club with a very high initiation fee.

The dirty little secret about this club is that all day, every day, the successful members unblushingly sell promises and principles for cash. If they were racecars, they would long ago have run out of surface space on which to place the sticker of another "sponsor." Their principles have been altered, refurbished, and sold more times than Heidi Fleiss's "escorts."

And while they pride themselves in "telling it like it is," the answers they give to virtually every question have been extensively tailored by skilled pollsters and a score of political hacks to appeal to that particular politician's "target" audience, while being kept in line with the needs and demands of big contributors. Needless to say, this is a difficult task, to say the least.

It is true that on paper this profession demands many of the same skills that were necessary for Wesley Clark to become a four star general. But the battlefield and the rules of engagement are vastly different. A lion has big teeth and big muscles, but he couldn't survive very long in a sewer full of rats with little teeth and little muscles.

The many problems that an amateur faces in the world of big money politics at the presidential level are not obvious to most people for two reasons. The first is that they are used to seeing

successful newcomers at the local and state level and fail to understand that regional politics is to a presidential race what sand lot ball is to the All-Star game.

The second reason has to do with the widely held belief that a vast majority of Americans yearn for a non-politician to ride into Washington on a white horse and rid the town of the influence of the evil “special interest groups.” But as a practical matter, nothing could be further from the truth, which is why people always tend to vastly overestimate the appeal that a newcomer, such as Ross Perot or Steve Forbes, is likely to have.

You see, every American is a dedicated member of scores of “special interest groups.” Most are not aware of this when they rail against “special interests” and talk about how they would like to see a “truly independent thinker” take over for the politicians. Yet, if they have a special interest in education, abortion, gun control, the environment, taxes, fat content in food, pornography, the war against terrorism, agricultural subsidies, the role of religion in government, Israel, affirmative action, the war in Iraq, tariffs, relations with Cuba, trade with China, or any one of a thousand other issues, then they are, in fact, a member of a “special interest group.” And if they care deeply about any of these or other issues, they are, when it comes down to voting, unlikely to be willing to take a flyer on a novice politician, whose convictions on the issue in question might not be trustworthy.

This means that Clark has less than four months between now and the Iowa caucuses not only to develop positions on a massive number of issues, but to be able to convincingly argue that he has believed these various positions for a very long time; that they are indeed a part of his very being. And he can't just buy the party line on the package because if there were such a line, there wouldn't be nine candidates in the race already.

My guess is that given the time constraints, Clark will make the same mistake Ross Perot made, which is to announce that his campaign is about the big issues of the day, and that the little issues will have to wait. I said the following about such a strategy some years ago when Perot was raising expectations among some observers, in a piece dated May 20, 1992 and entitled, “Right/Left Differences Fade, Leaving Hot-Button Issues To Decide Future Elections.”

Some people may think it's cute when Perot says cavalierly that he hasn't really considered certain issues; that he will make up his mind after he's elected. But it isn't cute to the voter who cares deeply about one or maybe two very specific issues, say Israel, or abortion, or hiring quotas. Not only does that voter want to know where Perot stands, but he or she would probably feel even better if Perot certified his support by accepting a campaign donation from the “special interest” group representing him or her on the issue . . . From the special interest standpoint, there is a lot of truth in the old saw that an honest politician is one who when bought, stays bought, and the corollary that a politician who can't be [or hasn't yet been] bought can't be trusted.

To make Clark's task over the next four months even more difficult, he must firm up his positions on scores of issues while selling promises in exchange for campaign funds, which can be tricky when the promises and the positions clash. On trade and labor issues alone, Clark has his work cut out for him. He not only must understand what these many issues are all about, but, if he wants to lead the Democrats, he will have to find a way to take nonsensical positions on

each of them while sounding sane, a feat that even Dick Gephardt can't pull off, and he's been tight with organized labor for decades.

On other fronts, Clark must convince voters that he is both a dedicated advocate of abortion rights and a good Catholic. He must convince them that he is against the war in Iraq, even though he was in charge of the effort to bomb the hell out of bunch of people in Bosnia in a cause that was arguably much further removed from American interests than Iraq is today. He must convince them that he is an ardent environmentalist, even though he was a mega big shot in what is surely one of America's largest polluters, the U.S. Army. And he must similarly convince them that he has always been in favor of gays in military, even though he seemed skeptical about it when he himself was in uniform.

If he can't do these and other similar things, he can't be president. And if he can, a lot of people are going to decide that he shouldn't be.

**THE ARKANSAS CONNECTION: BILL, HILL, AND THE GENERAL.** For several weeks now, both before his official announcement last week and since, the mainstream media and the usual crowd of political pundits have been discussing the relationship between Wesley Clark, his fellow Arkansan, Bill Clinton, and Bill's lovely wife, Bruno.

It is, much to the General's chagrin I'm sure, widely accepted that he is merely the Rodham Clintons' pawn in a game designed to thwart Howard Dean's efforts to make himself titular head of the Democratic Party, where they themselves are precariously perched on the loftiest of roosts. Polls over the weekend showed that Clark appears to have a legitimate chance to knock Dean out of the frontrunner's spot in the now 10-deep Democratic primary contest. Nevertheless, most observers still seem to think that this is somehow more about Bill and Hillary than it is about Wesley Clark.

As the editors of *The Wall Street Journal* put it last week, "All of this occurs amid speculation about Hillary's own Presidential ambitions. Her role in backing the general suggests that she and her husband fear that Dr. Dean's insurgency could upset her own well-laid plans for 2008."

The more cynical among this group, such as *Washington Times* editor-in-chief Wesley Pruden, who, as a native Arkansan, is particularly sensitive to this debate, have suggested that the Clintons don't mean for Clark to be a serious candidate at all, but want him simply to prove his mettle enough to qualify as Hillary's running mate – not in '08, but next fall. As Pruden put it last Friday:

"Mr. Clark is a novice in politics and hasn't yet learned the difference between the machinations of professionals and the flattery of amateurs. He was impressed by the number of "hits" on several Draft-Clark Internet sites, not understanding that these were mostly from computer geeks and nerds with more time on their hands than smarts in the belfry. This flattery made him susceptible to the cunning of the Clintons, who need cover for Hillary to overcome the public's remembrance of the Clinton loathing of the military. With Clark covering her ample flanks, Hillary could concentrate on massaging the pent-up Democratic anger in the blue states.

All such arguments may, of course, contain a kernel of truth. Hillary may indeed want Clark to serve as the sacrificial lamb in '04 so that she can save the party in '08. Or she may want to make him her VP. That said, there is, I think, something else going on here. It think she and Bill want to keep Dean from winning the nomination not solely because they fear he could win the general election, but because they fear the power that the nomination would bring him within the Democratic Party establishment at their expense.

A large part of the reason that Bill and Hillary remain immeasurably important to the Party, nearly three years after Bill left the White House, is their ability to raise money. Indeed, over the last twenty years or so, no one in the Party has been able to raise money like them, and lately, no one has been able to do so without them. Nobody, until Dean, that is.

Howard Dean has been propelled into the lead in most polls in part because he has managed to tap into the anger that boils in many of the party's activists. But more importantly, his success rests on the fact that he is the only candidate thus far to raise serious money. And not only has he raised cash hand-over-fist, but he's done so without the help of either the Clintons or the traditional party machine. And thus, he has made himself a serious threat not just to Joe Lieberman and John Kerry but to Bill and Hillary's future plans as well.

Nothing bears out this contention as well as the low-profile but extremely important squabbling between Dean and the party's official leadership. Dean has made little secret of the fact that he wants Terry McAuliffe, the Clintons' longtime friend, perennial bagman, and extraordinary mortgage banker, out as the head of the Democratic National Committee, which he could certainly do as the Party's nominee.

This would mean that not only are the Clintons no longer the party's sole successful fundraisers, but that they no longer pull the levers at the Party headquarters.

It is possible, of course, that they would regain control of the party following Dean's loss to Bush. But they could not be certain of that, and more importantly, they need to worry about the damage that Dean would do to the Party in the meantime.

The Clintons, after all, spent the greater part of the last decade remaking the Party to suit their politics. The "New Democrat" model that Bill embraced didn't do a whole lot for down-ticket Democrats, but it did make him the most electorally successful Democratic president since FDR. And his "centrism" was certainly more successful on the national level than was the yuppie-liberalism embraced by folks like McGovern and Dukakis. And now Dean threatens to turn back the clock to the bad old days, erasing the presumed gains of the Clinton decade.

Whereas Bill appealed to a broad swath of the old Democratic coalition, politicians like Dukakis and Dean appeal to a very narrow group of activists, the young, generally urban, upper middle-class **bourgeois-bohemians**, or, as they're commonly called, "bo-bos." And while most of the bo-bo crowd undoubtedly remember the pre-Clinton era fondly (control of both houses of Congress and all that), there is no question that the party before Bill and Hillary entered the scene had become laughably uncompetitive on the national stage.

Conservatives on TV and radio spend countless hours every week moaning about Bill's refusal simply to go away and behave like a decent ex-president, playing golf and keeping his mouth shut. But Bill can't do that. In his estimation, it is still his party, and so long as McAuliffe is Chairman, he is right about this. And should Lieberman, Kerry, Graham, or even Gephardt win the nomination next spring, the Clinton's would most likely still run it when one of them lost to Bush. But Dean presents a problem. He represents a much different Democratic party, and therefore challenges both Bill's relevance and what he sees a good portion of his legacy.

And so Bill and Hillary have decided that they must stop Howard Dean from winning the nomination. And while it would be nice if they could do so while maintaining Hillary's viability for '08, they will, I'm convinced, do whatever it takes to stop Dean. And to stop him, they do not need for Clark actually to win the nomination. They simply need him to "muddy the waters" enough to ensure that anyone but Dean gets the nod next July in Boston.

If Clark is up to the task, fine. If he is not, then I think there is a good chance that Hillary will decide to do the job herself, regardless of any promises she or Bill may have made to the General, the people of New York, or anyone else about keeping her out of the race.

Conventional wisdom holds that Hillary will wait until '08, because then she will not have to face an incumbent George W. Bush. Though Bush is eminently beatable, and appears more so every day, Hillary looks at poll numbers and can see as well as anyone that even if she is by far the most popular potential Democratic candidate, she still gets beaten badly by Bush in the hypothetical general election match-up. Thus, there is no question that her best shot is to wait until '08.

Unfortunately for her, she may not be able to wait. From the Clintons' perspective, the meteoric rise of Howard Dean and the threat he poses to their exceptional place in the Democratic Party may force her to ride to the rescue.

In the meantime, General Wesley Clark will serve just fine as Hillary's surrogate in this battle. Should he manage to dislodge Dean, he will not only have held off the "bo-bo" insurgency, but will have preserved the integrity of Bill and Hillary's strategy as well. We'll see.

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