

WESLEY K. CLARK: Being relieved of NATO duty was a turning point in general's career.



By Ralph Vartabedian
Times Staff Writer

When the call came on that summer night in 1999, Gen. Wesley K. Clark was dining with Lithuanian President Valdas Adamkus at the leader's elegant estate in Vilnius. A fine cut of roast beef was on his plate, French wine filled his glass and Clark was in excellent spirits.

A military aide whispered in Clark's ear: The Pentagon was on the line. "Excuse me, Mr. President," Clark said. "I'll have to take this call."

On the phone was Gen. Hugh Shelton, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, with news that would change the life of Clark, then supreme allied commander in Europe and one of the brightest stars in the U.S. military.

Should he find a secure phone, Clark asked Shelton. Don't bother, was Shelton's reply. Then, curtly, Shelton informed Clark that Defense Secretary William S. Cohen was relieving him of command early, cutting short Clark's meteoric military career.

When Clark returned to the dinner table, he quietly informed Adamkus. "I couldn't believe this was happening," Adamkus recalled recently. "I asked Gen. Clark if he had expected this, and he said he had to admit it was a surprise."

The full effect took awhile to sink in. When Margaret Sullivan, one of Clark's aides, saw him later, she remembered, "Wes looked like he had been hit by a car. He felt he had been publicly humiliated."

While Clark knew his relations with Cohen and Shelton were strained, he had not anticipated the move, which came in the glow of his crowning achievement: the successful intervention by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization to stop ethnic bloodshed in Kosovo, the small, mountainous province of Serbia.

But it was a turning point in the career of this ambitious American general. And it would lead, four years and two months later, to Clark's decision last fall to enter a crowded field of candidates seeking the Democratic nomination for president of the United States.

"Here he had spent his entire career serving his country, led a near perfect operation in Kosovo and was now being summarily dismissed," said Sullivan, his Pentagon aide. "I have often wondered ... would he be running for president if his military career had ended on a different note?"

Clark's 33-month tenure as NATO chief is cited by his supporters as evidence of his brilliant, skillful leadership in an international crisis. But his detractors, including former colleagues in the military, say it's an example of Clark's overriding ambition and thirst for the limelight.

No one disputes, though, that Clark was at the nexus of a bruising fight within the Clinton administration over the Western role in the Balkans. At issue was whether the United States should try to stop Yugoslav strongman Slobodan Milosevic from carrying out murderous attacks against Kosovo's 1 million ethnic Albanians, who are mostly Muslim.

Pentagon leaders then were opposed to intervention, arguing that it would serve no important national security or economic purpose. But the State Department and White House countered that the United States could not afford to ignore another large-scale humanitarian disaster.

Clark aligned himself with the White House, giving it the key military support it needed to win the argument. In the Pentagon, though, Clark's position was seen as an act of betrayal that bordered on insubordination.

In the end, NATO succeeded in stopping Milosevic with a 78-day bombing campaign. Milosevic now is on trial in The Hague for war crimes. But Clark's efforts, particularly his use of the news media to advance his views, earned him enemies among the military's senior officer corps. As one foe put it, Clark had become "a political courtier who had lost the ethos of a warrior."

The path taken by this 59-year-old Arkansas native to the Democratic campaign trail this month began with a career launched in glory at West Point, where he was quickly identified as a future leader. First in his class at West Point in 1966, he spent a year studying social sciences and economics at Oxford University as a Rhodes scholar, earning a reputation as one of the Army's "intellectual" leaders.

He went to Vietnam and was shot Feb. 19, 1970, in the shoulder, hand and hip when the company of infantry soldiers he was leading was ambushed. For continuing to command his troops while wounded, he was awarded the Silver Star.

After Vietnam, though, West Point graduates like Clark fell out of favor. The unsuccessful war in Southeast Asia was blamed by some on a cadre of Pentagon intellectuals, led by Defense Secretary Robert S. McNamara and his "whiz kids" analysts. Clark returned to West Point in 1971 to teach in the social sciences department with "The Lincoln Brigade," a corps of Army intellectuals named for a World War II general who championed the soldier-scholar-statesman model for officers.

Through the 1970s and 1980s, Clark was more or less indistinguishable from other accomplished bureaucrats in the Army. He earned a reputation as a smart, hard-driving and highly competent Vietnam veteran who could efficiently carry out orders and train soldiers. He was promoted quickly, though he spent many of those years at Army bases far from the military center of power.

But in April 1994, he arrived back at the Pentagon as a freshly minted three-star general with the key job of running strategic planning and policy for the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Not long after walking in the door, Clark got his first big assignment: to develop a plan for a U.S. intervention in Rwanda in east-central Africa, where the slaughter of the Tutsi minority by the Hutu majority was beginning.

But the White House wasn't interested, and Clark's assignment turned out to be a pointless exercise.

"There was no serious military planning undertaken, because there was no go-ahead," Clark recalls. "Then it was too late."

Too Late for 800,000

When the ethnic violence ended in Rwanda, 800,000 Tutsis had been killed. Only later, when Clark read the detailed journalistic descriptions of the brutality, did he realize the implications of the failure to act.

Why, "if we could prevent these things, wouldn't we?" Clark asked recently.

Samantha Power, a Harvard University lecturer and author of a book on genocide, says that attitude is what set him apart. "General Clark was one of the few in the military that allowed human considerations ... to affect him, not cripple him, but affect his judgment of what should be done," she said.

As his tour in the Pentagon drew to a close in 1996, Clark faced a crossroads. Under the Army's rules, he needed to either get promoted to a four-star general job or retire. Only one four-star job was open — commander of U.S. forces in South and Central America.

Gen. Marc Cisneros, credited with capturing Panamanian strongman Manuel A. Noriega, thought he had that job in the bag. But, while visiting the Pentagon during job interviews, he heard a rumor that Clark was angling for it.

Cisneros recalls thinking, "Well, I know Wes Clark. I'll just ask him if it's true." When he did, Clark denied he was seeking the job.

"He outright lied to me," said Cisneros, now chief executive of a charitable foundation in Texas.

Clark denies that he ever campaigned for the job and says he genuinely thought his Army career was over when he talked to Cisneros.

In fact, the two men represented very different armies. Cisneros said Clark's support came from a circle of "elitist West Pointers." Added Cisneros: "It is not good to have an elitist group have all the power." Clark notes that neither Cisneros nor any of his other critics attended West Point. "Whether there was a bias or not, I don't know," he said. "Maybe there was."

But Clark had important allies: Gen. John M. Shalikashvili, then chairman of the Joint Chiefs, and Defense Secretary William J. Perry. It was Shalikashvili who had selected Clark as director of strategic planning. And, as would later become clear, Shalikashvili shared Clark's belief in the use of military power for humanitarian causes.

Clark spent 13 months as South Command chief before being tapped, with Shalikashvili's support, as supreme allied commander of NATO in July 1997. It would be Clark's last assignment.

When Clark arrived at NATO headquarters in Belgium, tensions were rising in the Balkans. The Dayton accords had settled matters in Bosnia, but conditions were deteriorating inside the Serbian province of Kosovo.

President Clinton, Secretary of State Madeleine K. Albright and White House national security advisor Samuel R. "Sandy" Berger, wanted to intervene. After sitting idly by during the conflicts in Bosnia and Rwanda, Clinton wanted a different outcome.

But the Pentagon was cautious, partly because of the embarrassment of its failed peacekeeping mission in Somalia. To the generals, peacekeeping was a potential quagmire that served no vital U.S. security interest and, in fact, hampered the military's readiness to face higher-priority threats, should they arise.

Clark already had had two difficult experiences in the Balkans.

Three years earlier, in 1994, Clark had gone to talk with Bosnian and Serb forces. During the meeting with Bosnian Serb Gen. Ratko Mladic, who would later be indicted for war crimes, Clark and Mladic exchanged hats and posed for photographs. Those photos incensed members of Congress and left Clark looking like a lightweight easily manipulated by a crafty international outlaw. Clark later admitted it was a mistake, but he learned how important it was to use a tough hand when dealing with the Serbian leadership.

Then, a year later, in 1995, Clark and a team of senior U.S. officials traveled to the Balkans to help carry out the Dayton peace accord. Clark had a special friendship with one member of the delegation, Joe Kruzel, an assistant secretary of defense.

In fact, soon after arriving in the region, Kruzel and Clark, on a dare, climbed to a third-story window of their seaside hotel, dove into the Adriatic Sea and swam across a harbor. It was, Kruzel's

wife would say later, "a life-affirming event, a crazy thing to do. That was my husband. I guess it was Wes too."

The U.S. team intended to travel to Sarajevo, the Bosnian capital, by air, but Milosevic refused to guarantee their safety at the airport. So the team drove in a convoy over a hazardous mountain road. A shoulder of the rain-soaked road gave way, and the vehicle carrying Kruzal and two other Americans plunged more than 1,000 feet.

Clark disregarded warnings that the area was mined and clawed his way to the burning vehicle. Two men died at the scene; Kruzal died several hours later.

"I loved Joe Kruzal," Clark said recently. "Joe's death was a huge blow to me."

The deaths, though, were one reason Clark was so committed to using force against Milosevic in 1997. It was "very personal for Clark," a senior defense official recalled. "Clark had a great animosity toward Milosevic, rather than the cool detachment you would expect from a senior military officer."

When the question of whether to intervene to protect Kosovo arose, Clark already had a personal stake.

Cohen, the Defense secretary, and Shelton, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs, opposed the Kosovo campaign. Clark, Albright and Berger were behind it. For Clark, the decision to put himself at odds with his military superiors wasn't taken lightly. Not only were innocent lives at stake, but NATO and Europe's stability were on the line.

"There was not any way of tilting toward what they wanted, because what they wanted in the spring of '98 was to say nothing about what was happening," Clark said.

"The Pentagon was not interested," Albright agreed. She added, in a recent interview, that Clark was "not out of sync with the administration." Added Berger: "Clark was forward-leaning on Kosovo. It would have been quite unfortunate if the final act of the 20th century had been the ethnic cleansing of a million people in Europe."

Weeks after NATO ended bombing in June 1999, the United Nations estimated that 800,000 refugees who had fled their homes in Kosovo were returning. An estimated 10,000 had died during the violence, according to Human Rights Watch. No U.S. soldier was killed in the NATO military operation.

Cohen and Shelton declined to comment for this article.

But their dispute with Clark was exacerbated by the way he conducted himself, Clark's critics say. Cohen and Shelton are said by friends to feel that Clark went around them in promoting the Kosovo campaign, using contacts in the White House and taking his case to the public through the media.

Clark has denied circumventing his superiors and he never spoke directly with Clinton during the Kosovo war, according to Berger.

However, Clark did employ all of his considerable communications skills — honed on the West Point debate team — in articulating his views to the public. Clark was being quoted more in major newspaper and news broadcasts than any other military officer between 1998 and 2000. He was mentioned in more than 300 stories in the New York Times alone. By comparison, Shelton received 24 mentions.

'Get Your Face Off TV'

At one point, Cohen grew so angry that he sent Shelton with a message to Clark: "Get your ... face off the TV. No more briefings, period," according to Clark's account in his book, "Waging Modern War." The demand was punctuated by an obscenity.

After Clark entered the presidential race, Shelton publicly attacked Clark's "integrity and character." Shelton has since refused to explain his choice of words, but his opinion has been endorsed by

several retired generals. Clark defenders, including Albright and retired Army Gen. Don Kerrick, say Shelton's attack is "ridiculous" and untrue.

Clark "stood for personal integrity," said Chris Hernandez, a retired Army warrant officer who led Clark's security detail at NATO. "There were generals out there who really abused the system. If a general left his gloves some place, he would send a helicopter crew to get them. That wasn't Clark."

"I have known him almost his entire adult life," said retired Army Gen. Barry McCaffrey, a former head of the Drug Enforcement Agency. "And he is one of the most extraordinarily talented persons I have ever known. He is a man of enormous integrity and good judgment."

The tension between the Pentagon and Clark was partly due to the nature of Clark's job in Europe. He did command U.S. forces. But the other hat he wore was leading the 19-nation NATO alliance, and many of its members were tepid about the Kosovo intervention. Also, by its very nature, the post of NATO commander has a greater visibility than almost any other U.S. military officer.

"You can not overstate his role in holding together the NATO alliance," said Stephanie Hoehne, a retired colonel who ran NATO's news media office.

Nonetheless, military officers have criticized Clark for some of his detailed decisions during Kosovo: for strongly advocating the use of ground troops; miscalculating how quickly Milosevic would capitulate to bombing; introducing Army helicopters into the area; and the ineffectiveness of the early weeks of the bombing campaign.

Dennis Reimer, retired Army chief of staff, said Clark had spent more time with Milosevic before the Kosovo campaign than any other U.S. military official and had concluded he would cave in to NATO demands with the threat of force or with several days of bombing. After weeks of bombing, though, Milosevic hadn't budged.

"I don't necessarily fault Clark for that," Reimer said. "He sincerely felt Milosevic would cave in."

Clark says his support for intervening in Kosovo is consistent with his position today on the Iraq war. He didn't oppose unseating Saddam Hussein, he says, but the Bush administration should have secured an international consensus and used NATO forces.

The phone call in Vilnius ended Clark's military career. The NATO job is nominally a three-year appointment, but most NATO commanders routinely receive one- or two-year extensions. Cohen set Clark's retirement date in May 2000, three months shy of the basic two-year tour of duty.

After the dinner that night, Clark placed a call in hopes of talking directly with Cohen. But he was told the Defense secretary was unavailable. By then, the Pentagon already had leaked word of Clark's fate.

The official reason given for the decision was that Cohen wanted to retain Air Force Gen. Joe Ralston, who would have had to retire if a four-star job was not found for him.

But to Clark, that explanation "didn't wash." Ralston served three full years as NATO commander and now works for Cohen's lobbying firm in Washington.

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Chain of command is really not an issue.
By Jai

For one thing, as a principle cabinet member, what chain of command is there to go around? Any one of them reports directly to the President, granting they may go thru the VP on National Security Council functions, and other issues depending how the President uses his VP.

Now, the fact is that Clark is a man of strong convictions, who has a tendency to say what he thinks

and to fight for what he believes in. He is not a "yes man"... but he is a team player, and recognizes the need to support the guy he works for and the people he works with. For example, he never went public (until much later) with what he saw as a failure in the Defense Dept refusal to commit ground forces to Kosovo, or to even plan for it, but he did continue to push for that option even after he was told no. But Albright saw the need, and so did Solana in NATO, so it may well have seemed that Clark was working with both or either against his military superiors.

But in actuality, Clark did not work around his chain of command as a four-star. Part of the problem was, he had more than one chain, since as SACEUR he was directly answerable to NATO Secretary General Solana, as the senior US commander in NATO he was responsible to the head of the US delegation to NATO, which brought Albright and the State Dept into the equation, and as Cinc European Command he worked for the Secretary of Defense. The NATO relationships are unique to Europe, of course, but ALL regional CinCs work with State Dept reps in their regions, usually thru the embassies, but sometimes thru special envoys and other appointees. The SecDef and Joint Chiefs understand that--the supposed problem with Clark was merely another battle in the campaign to limit any US involvement in Kosovo, which in turn was really part of the war to discredit Clinton. Clark was one of many, altho probably the most visible, caught in the middle.

So the main problem with Clark was that he worked for a Republican SecDef at odds with the President's policy that Clark was obligated to carry out. There were no doubt personality conflicts at work, but fundamentally Cohen undercut Clark purposely to further anti-Clinton politics--his first loyalty was to his former colleagues in Congress and their sponsors (who fwiw have put him in a rather cushy job since his SecDef tenure). And those people, you may remember, were dead set against US involvement in Bosnia and Kosovo. Again, wholly for political reasons, to undermine Clinton's authority and will.

When Clark was successful anyway, making Clinton look good, Cohen stabbed him in the back.

The thing is, by law, Clark as regional CinC worked for "the national command authority," which is further defined as the President AND the Secretary of Defense. The law doesn't anticipate that there should ever be a division in the intent of these two. But the assumption for most would be, I think, that first loyalty goes to the President as the US Commander-in-Chief. The SecDef is NOT a "deputy" in that capacity, for all that he is considered to be within the chain of command. Under normal circumstances, this ambiguity is no big deal, but of course nothing about Clinton's second term was "normal" and having a SecDef from the other party during a war that was not unreservedly supported by both parties was a huge mistake on his part.

In any case, it was Cohen who "fired" Clark, without Clinton's knowledge, and with the official reason that it was merely a fairly routine rotation of general officers. Then Cohen purposely leaked the information to the media before Clinton found out, so that it would have looked bad, and caused Clinton further controversy at a time he didn't need it, to countermand the order. Clinton has since gone on record as saying it was a mistake not to intervene anyway, but at the time, I'm not sure he had much choice.

The mistake was in appointing Cohen in the first place--so much for the spirit of bi-partisanship. Think about that, those who would have McCain in a Kerry administration.