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Wesley & Me: A real-life docudrama

Here's the real-life plot: A famous documentary filmmaker puts out a letter to a retired four-star general urging him to run for president. The essay quickly zooms through cyberspace and causes a big stir.

For Michael Moore, the reaction is gratifying. Three days later, he thanks readers "for the astounding response to the Wesley Clark letter" and "for your kind comments to me." But some of the reactions are more apoplectic than kind.

Quite a few progressive activists are stunned, even infuriated, perhaps most of all by four words in Moore's open letter to Gen. Clark: "And you oppose war."

The next sentence tries to back up the assertion: "You have said that war should always be the 'last resort' and that it is military men such as yourself who are the most for peace because it is YOU and your soldiers who have to do the dying."

But for some people who've greatly appreciated the insightful director of "Bowling for Columbine," the claim is a real jaw-dropper. It could easily be refuted by mentioning a long list of names such as Colin Powell, Alexander Haig and William Westmoreland, along with John McCain and other militarists who won high elective office after ballyhooed service in the armed forces.

Other flashbacks make Moore's statement seem not only simplistic but also gullible: After all, many presidents have touted war as a "last resort" — even while the Pentagon killed people in Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Panama, Afghanistan, Iraq ... and, oh yes, Yugoslavia.

Moore's Sept. 12 open letter doesn't mention the 1999 war on Yugoslavia — which included more than two months of relentless bombing under the supervision of Wesley Clark, the Supreme Allied Commander in Europe at the time.

A second letter, dated Sept. 23, does refer to that bloodshed. Moore recalls his own opposition to the war while summarizing news reports that Clark wanted to utilize ground troops, a move that might have reduced the number of civilian deaths. But the followup letter doesn't mention the huge quantities of depleted uranium used in Yugoslavia under Clark's authority. Or the large number of cluster bombs that were

dropped under his command.

When each 1,000-pound "combined effects munition" exploded, a couple of hundred "bomblets" shot out in all directions. Little parachutes aided in dispersal of the bomblets to hit what the manufacturer called "soft targets." Beforehand, though, each bomblet broke into about 300 pieces of jagged steel shrapnel.

Midway through the war, five springs ago, BBC correspondent John Simpson reported from Belgrade in the Sunday Telegraph: "In Novi Sad and Nis, and several other places across Serbia and Kosovo where there are no foreign journalists, heavier bombing has brought more accidents." He noted that cluster bombs "explode in the air and hurl shards of shrapnel over a wide radius." And he added: "Used against human beings, cluster bombs are some of the most savage weapons of modern warfare."

I agree with much of what Moore wrote in his Sept. 23 essay. Certainly, "we need to unite with each other to keep our eyes on the prize: Bush Removal in '04." But with our eyes on the prize, we should not stumble into the classic trap of candidate flackery while applying political cosmetics. Clark has yet to repudiate his own actions in 1999. And this year, his espoused positions about the war on Iraq have blended criticism with ambivalence, equivocation and even triumphalism.

Many news outlets don't seem very interested in contradictory details. So, the Sept. 29 edition of Time magazine says in big type: "Wes Clark has launched a presidential bid that has a four-star luster. But is the antiwar general prepared for this kind of battle?"

But if Wesley Clark is "antiwar," then antiwar is a pliable term that doesn't mean much as it morphs into a codeword for tactical objections rather than principled opposition.

"Nothing is more American, nothing is more patriotic than speaking out, questioning authority and holding your leaders accountable," Gen. Clark said in a Sept. 24 speech. That's a key point — and it must always apply to how we deal with all politicians, including Wesley Clark.

Overall, a strong case can be made that Clark would amount to a major improvement over the current president. But those who recognize the importance of ousting the Bush team from the White House should resist the temptation to pretty up any Democratic challenger. ■

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