

Wes Clark and Family Values

by Swanee Hunt, Scripps Howard News Service, January 28, 2004

A couple of days before the New Hampshire primary, I watched presidential contender Wes Clark bring an overflowing crowd to its feet as he talked about the real meaning of family values. I know personally his commitment.

Back in September 1997, my husband Charles Ansbacher and I flew to Brussels for a quiet dinner with Wes and Gert Clark. The two husbands, both White House Fellows, became friends when Wes was stationed in Colorado Springs, where Charles was the symphony conductor. Many years later, as ambassador to Austria, I'd been intimately involved in negotiations to end the horrific war in Bosnia. As Supreme Allied Commander for Europe, the military head of NATO, Wes was intent on keeping US troops in Bosnia until the country was secure. Pulling in the opposite direction was Senator Kay Bailey Hutchison (R-TX), who had introduced resolutions calling for the troops' withdrawal.

Wes asked if I might bring together about a dozen Bosnian women from opposing sides of the conflict to meet with the senator when she visited Europe a couple of weeks later. I did, and after the group had met for two days on the army base, designing a Bosnian version of the League of Women Voters, General Clark arrived with Senator Hutchison. The women introduced themselves, giving their professional identities as journalists, political leaders, educators, and so on. Then, using flip charts, they presented their plans for the League. The senator nodded her approval, but then switched topics to insist that U.S. troops come home right away.

"But our country is in its infancy," one of the women said. "Please, keep the troops here until we can walk." The women from across conflict lines agreed, but the senator did not. She offered no support for apprehending war criminals that were preventing hundreds of thousands from returning home. Instead, she urged the women to "concentrate on the future and forget the past." "Then you're asking me to accept the ethnic cleansing," replied Beba Hadzic from Srebrenica, where, after a brutal three-year siege Bosnian Serb soldiers massacred 8,000 unarmed men and teenaged boys, piling them into mass graves.

"You just have to invite your former enemies into your kitchens for a cup of coffee," the senator said, apparently poorly briefed. "With all due respect, Senator, I'm from Srebrenica," Beba responded. "I was

a math teacher and the high school principal. My husband managed a warehouse. We had a car, a TV, a VCR...a home in town and a place in the mountains. Now, only because of my last name, I am a refugee. And, Senator, I don't have a kitchen."

The senator didn't seem particularly impressed by the women. I thought they were magnificent.

The progress of the Bosnian women was overshadowed by Slobodan Milosevic's new campaign against ethnic Albanians in nearby Kosovo. Some 250,000 Balkan people had already died, so after diplomatic efforts failed, General Clark called for and led a military intervention to stop the carnage. He alienated Pentagon leaders not willing to "fight for the right," as he said. Although he won the war, in 2000, Clark was relieved three months early to free up his post for another general—at least that was the official Pentagon statement. In fact, the forced retirement was years premature, based on historical tenures. A "Washington Post" editorial on July 29, 1999 lauded Clark's performance in the Kosovo campaign and questioned the timing of the abrupt announcement of his retirement from the Army, concluding that: "Clark wanted to use his authority to actually accomplish something." In the final analysis, the real battle Clark lost was against the Pentagon.

On May 3, 2000, Charles and I once again flew to Belgium, for the change of command ceremony and Wes's farewell from NATO. Those who had engineered his leaving sat politely on the front row as he stepped up to the podium to deliver his parting words, thanking his troops. "Vision, courage, determination," he said, "these qualities give comfort to all those who seek simply to live in peace and freedom, and make a better world for their children."

It was time for him to leave. Charles and I waited in the back of the line to bid him farewell. He embraced us both, then said: "We must get the women of Srebrenica back into their homes." Then he turned and walked away from his command. That's what I call "family values."