Retired General Wesley Clarke doesn't live in Gettysburg as former President Dwight Eisenhower once did, but neither Clarke nor his supporters is going to object strenuously if you confuse him with Eisenhower in other ways. As the only professional military officer to run for the Presidency since Ike, Clarke likes the comparisons.

And well he should. Successful warrior candidates, such as Eisenhower, have a special prominence in presidential electoral politics stretching back to George Washington, Andrew Jackson, and Zachary Taylor, through a bevy of Civil War officers, including Ulysses Grant and Rutherford Hayes, to modern times.

Throughout its history, America has had an affinity for its warriors, electing them to high office, sometimes regardless of their political and civilian experience or ability. Military candidates don't always win, but they win often enough that their candidacy is always significant—and always taken seriously. Their credentials in combination with their standing as non-politicians make them seem ideal candidates to many.

So when Wesley Clarke announced his candidacy, he immediately became a member of the gang of ten seeking the Democratic nomination. However, much more importantly, he also became a category of one—alone in the field as a member of the professional warrior class.

And the reaction to him as a candidate is very similar to the reaction earlier warriors have generated. Much, for example, has been made about his political inexperience, his issue inconsistency, his unfamiliarity with domestic issues, and his general lack of experience outside the military. His rivals are even challenging his credentials as a real Democrat, since among other acts of heresy, he's acknowledged casting votes for Republicans Nixon, Reagan, and Bush the elder.

This is all familiar territory to historians of the presidency. Some of the same criticism was leveled at earlier professional soldiers who sought the presidency. Grant and Eisenhower, for example, did not always vote. Worse, when they did, their lack of interest in political matters was apparent. Grant, the Republican candidate in 1868, in fact, had only voted in one previous presidential election and then he voted for Democrat James Buchanan in 1856.

For both Eisenhower and Grant, so little was known of their political views that each was courted as a presidential candidate by both major parties. For these "Warriors in Frock Coats", it was less important what they said or what they understood than what they did and who they were. They were elected for their military service or because heroic military acts, not because they had civilian experience or command of domestic politics.

Timing is critical for warriors running for the presidency. Their success or failure has been very influenced by the period in which they live. In post-Revolutionary War times, oddly enough, not one major military figure followed Washington into the presidency. Not until Andrew Jackson, was elected in 1828 did another former
general reach the White House—and his reputation was built on the War of 1812 rather than the Revolutionary War.

Nevertheless, there have been other periods in our history in which military credentials were the political gold standard. Virtually no northern candidate after the Civil War could seek the presidency office and not have a war resume. From Lincoln to Taft—nine of the men elected to the presidency—served in the union cause in one military fashion or another.

Since Eisenhower in the 1950’s, however, military credentials have seemed less important. Presidents from Kennedy to the first Bush each had some military experience on their resumes, but all as civilian soldiers. Moreover, Clinton had no military experience at all, while the incumbent President Bush was a reservist.

This political zeitgeist is very influenced by the last major war and public attitudes toward it. Most recently, America has passed through a post Vietnam 30-year period of deep ambivalence towards the military. During this period, probably no professional soldier could have run for president with any prospect of being elected.

September 11, 2001, which changed so many things in America, may also have changed that. With the war on terrorism also came two other wars—Afghanistan and Iraq—and with them national security concerns that again raise the prospect that the nation will turn for national leadership to one of its professional soldiers.

How will Clarke do as a candidate, and what kind of president would he be? Neither question yields a definitive answer at this time.

Among the Democratic field, consensus seems to be that he hurts John Kerry the most because he trumps Kerry’s own military credentials, but he also undercuts some of Howard Dean’s support. The truth is none of the other Democratic candidates wants to see him in to the race. And why would they? Clarke is the quintessential political wild card. For the same reason, Republicans can’t be happy to see him become a candidate, especially if the post Iraq War recovery and the war on terror are going badly. With military candidates, many of the conventions of politics no longer apply.

On the other hand, Clarke is by no means a sure winner of either the Democratic nomination or the presidency itself. In fact, the historical odds are long against him. Many have used their military credentials to win high office, but few have premised an entire presidential campaign on a single credential—that of a professional soldier. Exactly three men in American history have been successful with that approach—Taylor, Grant, and Eisenhower.

Moreover, the Democrats, in particular, have not been successful with warrior candidates. Their most recent nominee Winfield Scott Hancock, the last Pennsylvanian to be nominated by a major party, lost to James Garfield in 1880. The only previous Democratic warrior nominated by the Democrats was George McClellan who lost to Lincoln in 1864.

And what kind of President would he make? Historians generally have denigrated the performance of warrior presidents. Some like Thomas Bailey view their elections as evidence of the political immaturity of the nation itself. Other historians have dissected the governmental leadership of military heroes and found it generally wanting.
Yet, some of these judgments seem harsh. Certainly, some warrior presidents have been far from successful. In addition, Grant stands out as the best single example of a failure. Naive and completely unprepared for the burdens of office, he was a chronic poor judge of character and cynically manipulated by a succession of sleazy wheeler-dealers.

Eisenhower is typical, and Ike's place in history is very different from Grant's. He had extensive experience in dealing with civil and administrative officials during and after World War 11, and was adroit enough to lead the nation through a decade of peace and prosperity. In fact, we are just beginning to understand how well and fully Eisenhower mastered the presidency--while beguiling the nation into thinking of him an amiable, avuncular figure more interested in playing golf than being president.

Nevertheless, all comparisons with past warrior presidents are wildly premature. Clarke has just become a candidate, and we do not yet know enough about him to predict what kind of president he might make. For most voters, he's a blank slate. That's his greatest strength at this point, and his greatest liability.

Meanwhile, there are nine other candidates in the Democratic field--and one in the Republican Party--fervently committed to keeping Wesley Clarke retired. How he handles them is going to determine his future--and maybe ours.

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