

# Ramsey Clark, Former Attorney General of the United States and Principled Critic of the U.S. Warfare State, Dies at 93

By [Frank Dorrel](#)

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On April 9<sup>th</sup>, **Ramsey Clark** passed away at his home surrounded by his family.

Clark was Attorney General of the United States from 1967-1969 under Lyndon Johnson, during which time he [led the way on voting rights for African-Americans, and school desegregation](#) and [drafted the landmark Civil Rights Act of 1968](#), better known as the Fair Housing Act, which addressed housing discrimination.

As the most progressive Attorney General in U.S. history, Clark also ordered a [moratorium on federal executions and prison construction; banned wiretaps in criminal cases; and refused to enforce a law that was intended to countermand the Supreme Court’s restrictions on the questioning of criminal suspects under the so-called Miranda](#).

Clark was critical of the Vietnam War, though in 1967, he told President Johnson that antiwar demonstrators had been infiltrated by communists, and the same year in Boston, he [prosecuted famed pediatrician Dr. Benjamin Spock, Yale Chaplain William Sloane Coffin](#) and three other antiwar activists for conspiring to undermine selective service laws.



Left to right: Dr. Benjamin Spock, Rev. William Sloane Coffin, Mitchell Goodman, Michael Ferber. Clark felt guilty about prosecuting them for conspiring to undermine selective service laws and later defended antiwar activists. [Source: [woodstockwhisperer.info](http://woodstockwhisperer.info)]

Clark's guilt for these actions inspired his later antiwar activism.

In 1970, [he defended the Harrisburg Seven](#), antiwar activists led by the Rev. Philip Berrigan, the radical Roman Catholic priest, who were [charged with 23 counts of conspiracy, including plotting to kidnap Henry A. Kissinger](#), and in 1972, [traveled to Hanoi](#) to meet with North Vietnamese officials and [publicly criticized U.S. war conduct](#).

In subsequent years, Clark publicly denounced U.S. support for the Shah of Iran, the bombing of Libya (in 1986 and 2011), [Grenada](#), Bosnia, Kosovo, Panama, Afghanistan and Iraq, among other countries, and criticized [U.S. support for the Tutsis in Rwanda whom he believed started the war there and killed more than the Hutu](#).<sup>[1]</sup> (see [CAM exclusive on this](#))

In 1991, Clark [filed a complaint](#) with the International War Crimes Tribunal accusing President George H.W. Bush of war crimes after spending two weeks visiting Iraq and documenting the effects of the war on its people.

Clark found that U.S. "smart" bombs hit more than military targets, decimating homes, destroying vital infrastructure, and killing thousands of innocent civilians, and that U.S. sanctions compounded the human misery.

In his 1992 book *The Fire This Time: U.S. War Crimes in Iraq*, Clark wrote that "a whole nation [Iraq] lay helpless beneath an alien military that could attack and destroy with impunity...U.S. planes [in the assault on Iraq] had flown more than 109,000 sorties, raining 88,000 tons of bombs, the equivalent of seven Hiroshimas, and killing indiscriminately across the country."<sup>[2]</sup>

Clark helped found the New York-based [International Action Center](#) in the 1990s which, among other activities, organized street protests in 1999 condemning the U.S.-led NATO bombing of Yugoslavia.

In 2018, Clark said that he considered U.S. foreign policy to be “[the greatest crime since WWII](#). American aggression had already created incalculable levels of misery for the world. The poor of the planet are made poorer, dominated and exploited by the foreign policies of the U.S. and its rich allies. [The U.S. invasion of Iraq was a war of aggression, an offense called ‘the supreme international crime’ in the Nuremberg Judgment.](#)”

Clark continued:

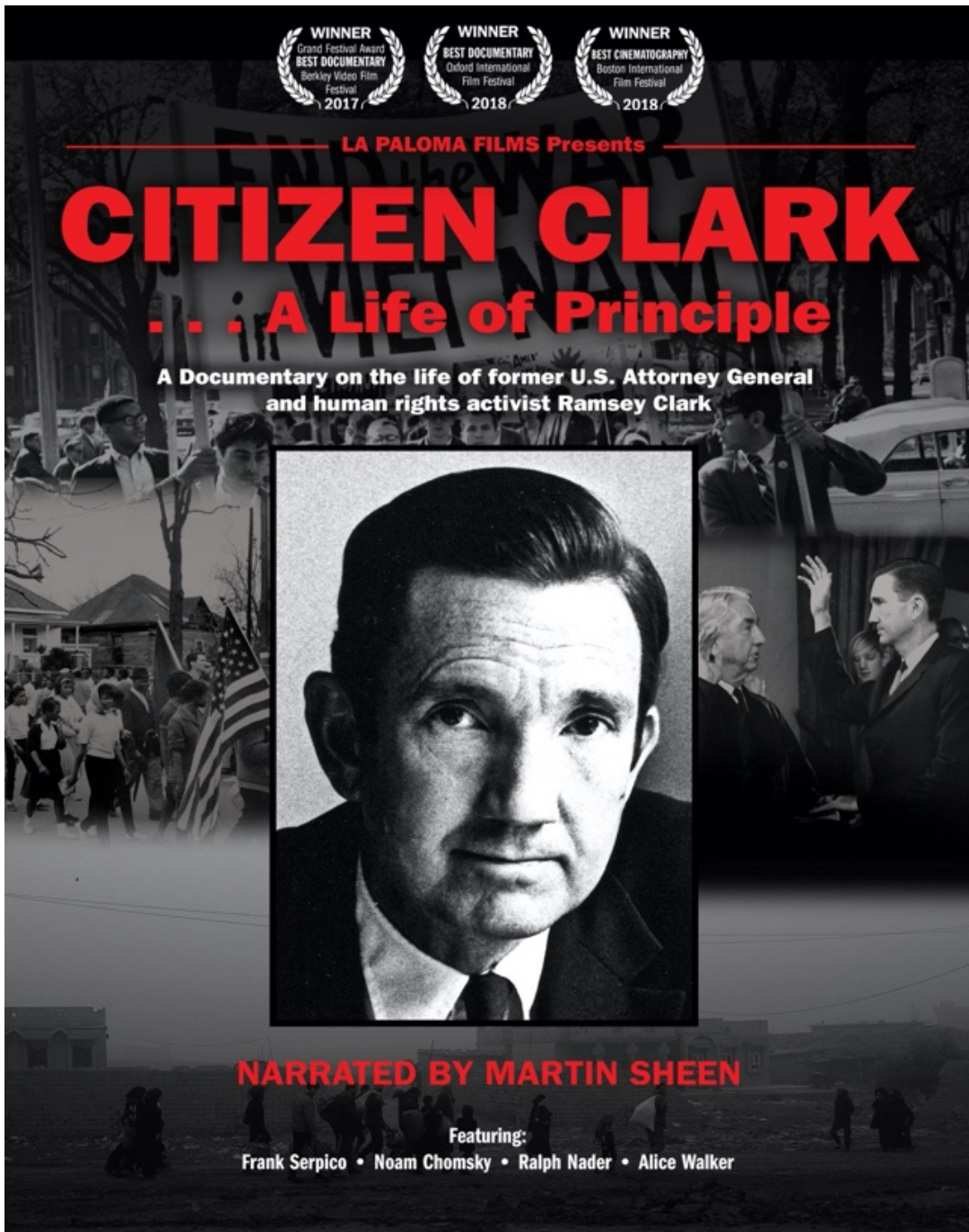
[“Our overriding purpose, from the beginning right through to the present day, has been world domination—that is, to build and maintain the capacity to coerce everybody else on the planet: nonviolently, if possible; and violently, if necessary.](#) But the purpose of our foreign policy of domination is not just to make the rest of the world jump through hoops; the purpose is to facilitate our exploitation of resources. And insofar as any people or states get in the way of our domination, they must be eliminated or, at the very least, shown the error of their ways.”

See this remarkable speech by Ramsey Clark criticizing U.S. foreign policy as a representation of plutocratic interests and its unjust war against the Third World. This dedicated video segment featuring Clark had its own YouTube post but was inexplicably taken down just after Clark’s death. CAM has reposted it in our [Covert TV YouTube channel](#) thanks to Frank Dorrel’s excellent film entitled “[What I’ve Learned About U.S. Foreign Policy: The War Against The Third World,](#)” which features the clip. [Source: [youtube.com](#)]

In 2008, [the United Nations General Assembly awarded Clark its prize, which it gives every five years to human rights defenders.](#)

Clark told *The Washington Post* that his work had always been motivated by the attempt to [“prevent war and strengthen international institutions and protect human rights and create social and economic justice.”](#)

He confessed in another interview that he was often overwhelmed by [“the enormity of human misery on the planet; the enormity of poverty and suffering; the contrast between raw power and the vaster poverty of the impotent,”](#) and hoped to at least make a small difference.



2018 documentary about Clark's life extolling his human rights work. [Source: [amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com/Citizen-Clark-A-Life-Principle/dp/B079888888)]

After news broke of Clark's passing, tributes poured in including from Cuba's President Miguel Díaz-Canel, who wrote on twitter that ["Clark was an honest and supportive man that stood by our side during crucial battles and denounced the great injustices committed by his country worldwide. #Cuba pays him grateful tribute."](#)

Mary Anne Grady Flores of the Ithaca Catholic Workers in another tribute wrote that Clark was "a friend of the Catholic Workers [peace group], a great defender of Plowshares anti-nuclear activists, a defender of Palestine, Cuba and Nicaragua, (to name a few) and defender of all issues concerning justice throughout the world."

Sara Flounders, who worked with Clark at the International Action Center, further noted that Clark "took big personal risks in challenging criminal U.S. policies, [and was] brilliant in

sifting through material to pull out the relevant facts in writing wrenching reports. He always tried to work with and listen to activists on the local level and encourage people to work together. His view, as he'd say at almost every rally, speaking engagement, press, conference, or forum was: 'the power is in the people.'

### **Controversial Clients**

Clark garnered controversy by defending U.S. adversaries such as Slobodan Milosovic—[whom Clark praised for “standing tall \[in the face of U.S. aggression\] and for his “heroic individual resistance”](#)—Saddam Hussein, and Sheikh Omar Abdel Rahman, who was convicted in the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center.<sup>[3]</sup>

Clark said: [“if you believe in the rule of law, you’re never afraid to represent anyone.”](#)

His particular interest in representing Saddam Hussein began when media reports started coming in of Mr. Hussein’s arrest in a spider-hole hideout in the desert. Clark said he was [“shocked”](#) by the images he saw and [“the savage presentation of \[Mr. Hussein\], disheveled, with his mouth open, people probing in his mouth, the dehumanization.”](#)



Clark was appalled by the image of Saddam Hussein pried out of a spider-hole by U.S. soldiers and chose afterwards to defend him. [Source: [wikipedia.org](#)]

“I represented Indian peoples for many years, and I can’t tell you how many Indians I’ve worked with called after they saw the picture and said, ‘That’s exactly the way they treated us.’ And this is hardly the road to peace if you want respect for human dignity.”

Clark added that he hoped to help ensure a fair trial of Hussein, which “would be difficult to ensure—and was critically important to the future of democracy in Iraq” and “in terms of reconciliation of peoples, and in terms of belief in truth and justice as a priority over force

and violence. [It's about addressing the concept of victor's justice, which is only the exercise of power. If you really want peace, you have to satisfy people about the honor of your purpose.](#)"

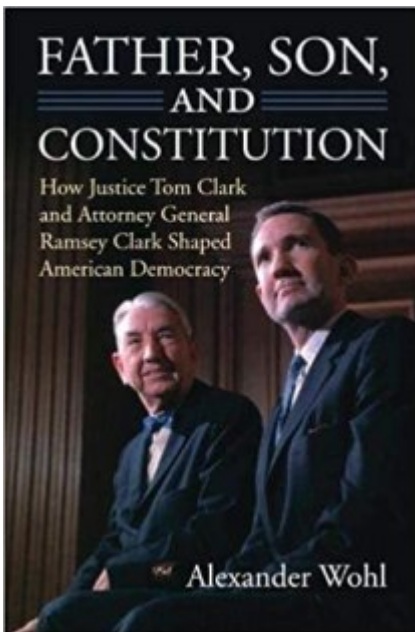
### **Influence of His Father**

Born in Dallas in 1927, Clark grew up in a family steeped in Texas culture and politics. His father, **Tom Clark**—who was appointed by Harry S. Truman as Attorney General in 1945, and became a Supreme Court Justice in 1949—taught him the ways of the outdoorsman and the values of the rugged individualist. On weekends they camped, fished, and hunted. Tom's involvement in local politics had Ramsey attending rallies and speeches, hanging posters, and handing out flyers. Tom Clark's work as one of the few local attorneys willing to represent African-Americans had a profound impact on his son.

Ramsey witnessed his father's guilt and despair when one client, a black teenager accused of raping a white woman, was found guilty and sentenced to death.

Neither Tom's legal arguments nor his certainty of the young man's innocence had been enough to save his life. Another client, Charlie Ellis, hired Tom to save his family's home, slated by the city for demolition to build a parking lot. They won the case, and the Ellises paid in kind by doing the Clarks' laundry.

Every week Ramsey and his mother drove 30 minutes to pick up and drop off their clothes. From his seat in the car, he watched the Ellis children in their dirt yard, laughing and playing, just like he and his cousins did. He sensed something was wrong, though he was too young to understand what it was.



Ramsey's early career followed expectations. He joined the Marines in 1944 and served as a courier in post-War Europe, [where he saw terrible scenes of destruction that shaped his life-long aversion to war](#). Afterwards, Clark earned three degrees—a bachelor's, a master's, and a law degree—in four years. He married his college sweetheart Georgia Welch, fathered two children, and returned to Dallas to become a partner at his uncle's law firm. On behalf of Safeway Stores, he argued his first case before the U.S. Supreme Court. Tom Clark, appointed to the Court in 1949, recused himself to avoid any appearance of a conflict of

interest.

A political outsider in a state that leaned more and more conservative, Ramsey stayed away from Texas politics. At the same time, he became bored with corporate law. “I got tired of fighting over other people’s money,” he explained.

Then came an opportunity, in the form of John F. Kennedy—the chance to make a difference. In 1961, Clark became the Department of Justice’s Assistant Attorney General for Lands. Moving his way up the government ladder, he was appointed Lyndon Johnson’s Attorney General in 1966. His years in public service would change the course of his life.

Early in his tenure, Clark focused on managing government lands and spent much of his time procuring property, either through purchase or by force, for the construction of missile sites, space stations, reservoirs, and other public facilities.

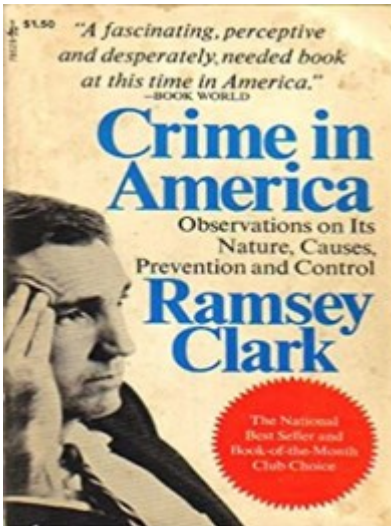
His attempts to bring fairness to the process—and in particular his efforts to equitably settle lawsuits brought by Native Americans seeking restitution for property seized from their ancestors—caught Attorney General Bobby Kennedy’s attention. As the administration’s focus shifted toward Civil Rights, Bobby Kennedy called on Clark to assist.

Hoping that his Southern accent and Texas roots would open doors closed to a New Englander, Kennedy sent Clark to Georgia, South Carolina, and Louisiana to enforce federal integration orders. Ramsey served with a cadre of federal agents who walked the campus of Ole Miss with James Meredith to protect him from violence.

In early March of 1965, Clark drove along U.S. Route 80 between Montgomery and Selma, setting up camps for marchers and trying to ensure that armed racists didn’t break the thin blue line protecting civil rights activists. “Imagine,” he later reflected, “in this country, in 1965, having to march five days for the right to vote.”

Clark witnessed how these activists pushed government policy by forcing representatives to take stronger action. He noted their patience and commitment and admired their methods of civil disobedience. After leaving office in 1969, he was determined to join their ranks, and in 1969, at the age of 41, after his tenure as Attorney General ended, began the second stage of his career.

He first wrote *Crime in America*, a book excoriating the correctional system he’d just overseen. In the work he referred to American prisons as “manufacturers of crime,” and proposed a systemic overhaul that favored rehabilitation over punishment.



Clark subsequently took a job with a progressive New York law firm where he focused his energy on pro bono cases. Over the years, he represented the American Indian activist Leonard Peltier, the Plowshares 8 (antiwar activists who tried to sabotage nuclear weapons facilities), the Attica prison rioters, the families of [air force officers “disappeared” by the U.S.-backed Pinochet government in Chile](#), a [woman convicted of aiding Marxist guerrillas in Peru](#), Libyans killed in U.S. bombing in 1986, and death row inmates. He joined the board of Amnesty International. He worked with Coretta Scott King to establish a national holiday in honor of her slain husband. He ran for U.S. Senate on a platform of [cutting the defense budget by 50 percent](#) and lost.

Clark’s activism took him overseas to the world’s hot spots, including Grenada, Iran, Libya, Panama, North Korea, Sudan and Iraq, where he became a [“one-man opposition to the State Department”](#) and hoped to hold the U.S. accountable to the laws and spirit of the Geneva Accords and the U.S. Constitution.



Peace activist John Parker (with microphone) and unidentified man with Clark during a mission to Sudan in September 1998 to uncover the truth about the U.S. bombing of the Al-shifa pharmaceutical plant, which supplied vital medicine for Sudan and all of Africa. The Clinton administration had claimed that this plant manufactured nerve gas which proved to be false. [Source: Photo courtesy of John Parker]



Frequently, Clark would host mock war crimes tribunals. In 2011, he served as an expert witness in defense of the Creech 14 who attempted to impede illegal drone killings carried out from a military base in Las Vegas. He was also a leading [spokesman against the imposition of economic sanctions](#), which have borne terrible human costs.



Ramsey Clark outside courthouse where he testified on behalf of the Creech 14. [Photo courtesy of Colonel Ann Wright]

Throughout his career, Clark's willingness to provide legal advice and representation to those on the outskirts of society and dubbed enemies of the United States brought him both admiration and disdain. To some, he was a voice of truth in a system defined by hypocrisy. Others saw him as anti-American, or a "[piece of lint from the 1960s](#)," to quote conservative columnist George F. Will.

A man of strong ideals and few words, Clark would provide a simple response. "Democracy is not a spectator sport," he was fond of saying. He believed that for a country to truly be democratic, the people must participate. They must hold their government accountable for its actions. And he spent his life trying to do that.

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**Frank Dorrel** is a member of the Los Angeles chapter of Veterans for Peace and publisher of the popular antiwar book, [Addicted to War](#). He also put together a two-hour film titled [What I've Learned About U.S. Foreign Policy: The War Against The Third World](#), which has been seen by as many as 2 million people since 2000. It includes [a segment on Ramsey Clark](#). He can be reached at: [frank.dorrel@gmail.com](mailto:frank.dorrel@gmail.com).

## Notes

1. Clark had defended Hutu clergyman Elizaphan Ntakirutimana who was charged with genocide. Clark believed him to be innocent.

2. Ramsey Clark, *The Fire This Time: U.S. War Crimes in the Gulf* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1992), xvi. Clark continued: "What was visible was a nation with thousands of civilian dead, without water, hospitals, or health care, with no electricity, communications or public transportation; without gasoline, road and bridge repair capacity...and a growing food crisis. The bombing, as could be seen from the ground, was hardly surgical, but was clearly designed to break a whole country and its population for a long time to come."

3. Clark had other controversial clients, including ex-Nazis accused of war crimes and Lyndon LaRouche, head of a political cult-like group who was convicted in 1988 of conspiracy to commit mail fraud.

*Featured image: Ramsey Clark speaking at Riverside Church in New York in 2013. [Source: [iacenter.org](http://iacenter.org)]*

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