

In the runup to the Iowa Democratic caucuses

The “Stop Dean” campaign and the divisions in the American political establishment

David Walsh
14 January 2004

The Democratic Party candidates for the presidential nomination held their final debate in Iowa Sunday night. Eight of the nine candidates participated in the debate. Former army general Wesley Clark, who is not contesting the Iowa caucuses, did not attend.

The Iowa caucuses on January 19 are a series of meetings held in every precinct in that state (1,993) that select delegates—pledged to particular candidates—and send them to county Democratic Party conventions next month. While Iowa is not a populous or economically critical state, the event is the first gauge of public sentiment in the nearly year-long presidential electoral process, and since 1972 has been the center of a great deal of media attention.

The Iowa contest will be followed by the first primary (an election in which Democratic Party members and independents who choose a Democratic ballot will vote directly for a candidate) in New Hampshire on January 27. On “Mini Tuesday,” February 3, Democratic primaries will be held in South Carolina, Missouri, Arizona and Oklahoma. California, New York, Ohio and seven other states hold primaries on “Super Tuesday,” March 2. The party’s nomination, gained by winning a majority of delegates to the national convention, slated for Boston in late July, is expected to be more or less wrapped up by this point.

The Democratic Party contest has revealed deep divisions within the US ruling elite, expressed in particularly sharp form in the orchestrated campaign against frontrunner Howard Dean, the former governor of Vermont.

In the January 11 debate in Des Moines, sponsored by cable network MSNBC and known as the “Brown and Black Presidential Forum” for its supposed emphasis on issues critical to Hispanics and blacks, the Reverend Al Sharpton launched the fiercest attacks on Dean. In a demagogic outburst that appeared to take Dean by surprise, Sharpton accused the former of having “discovered blacks and browns during this campaign.” He demanded to know why Dean, governor of a state that is 96.8 percent white, did not have a single senior “black or brown” member of his six-person cabinet.

Sharpton, a charlatan and former FBI informer, whom the media inevitably describes as a “civil rights activist,” proceeded to lecture Dean: “And I think that, while I respect the fact you brought race into this campaign, you ought to talk freely and openly about whether you went out of the box to try to do something about race in your home state and have experience with working with blacks and browns at peer level, not as just friends you might have had in college.”

Directly or indirectly, Sharpton was clearly operating Sunday night in the service of that faction in the Democratic Party establishment that is desperate to stop Dean. Neither the media questioners nor any of his fellow candidates were impolite enough to question Sharpton about a January 10 *New York Times* article reporting that “his [Sharpton’s]

campaign has paid thousands of dollars for him to stay in luxury hotels and to travel around the country with his own personal filmmaker” and that “a review of the candidate’s most recent campaign report, filed in September, shows it is marked by oversights, errors and potential violations.”

The Sharpton outburst is only one in a series of largely contrived issues that have been raised to discredit Dean—his failure to disclose all his records as governor of Vermont, his criticism four years ago of the Iowa caucuses process, his position on the Bush tax cuts, etc. The Democratic candidates have difficulty getting beyond mudslinging and petty squabbles pitched at an extremely low political level. Most of the attacks on Dean represent a reactionary diversion.

The anti-Dean campaign is even more remarkable considering the former Vermont governor’s own record and political views. A self-described “fiscal conservative” and a product of a wealthy New York family, Dean represents no threat to vested economic interests in America. The *Wall Street Journal*, which should know, commented recently that Dean “remains a child of Wall Street—with closer ties there than any top Democratic contender since John and Robert Kennedy.”

While Dean has risen in the polls because of his criticisms of the decision to go to war in Iraq, he supports the continued illegal occupation of that country, the ongoing conflict in Afghanistan and the so-called “war on terror,” a code phrase for the US imperialist drive for global domination. He went out of his way during Sunday’s debate, when questioned by Ohio congressman Dennis Kucinich, to pledge that he would not cut defense spending, which now represents half of the US government’s discretionary budget. In recent weeks, the “outsider” Dean has received the endorsement of former vice president Al Gore, former New Jersey senator Bill Bradley (Gore’s chief opponent for the Democratic presidential nomination in 2000) and Iowa’s senator Tom Harkin.

Notwithstanding his essentially conservative politics, Dean has been the subject of a quite ferocious campaign in the media and the Democratic Party. Senators Joseph Lieberman of Connecticut and John Kerry of Massachusetts have led the assault by the other candidates for the Democratic presidential nomination. Dean’s comment that Americans were “no safer” after the capture of Saddam Hussein, an entirely legitimate observation that has been borne out by events in Iraq, opened him up to a torrent of abuse. Lieberman, a right-wing supporter of the Bush policy in Iraq and Israeli oppression of the Palestinians, charged that Dean had “climbed into his own spider hole of denial.”

The general attitude of the media has been to treat Dean like an extremist, perhaps with one or two screws loose. *Time* magazine ran a major piece headlined “Inside the Mind of Howard Dean,” as though the former governor’s bizarre thought processes were particularly difficult to

penetrate or follow. *Newsweek* matched this with a cover story: “Doubts about Dean—Behind the Democrats’ Battle to Stop Him.” The *New York Times* waded in with its January 9 article, “Tide of Second Thoughts Rises Among Democrats” about Dean.

One of the most extraordinary pieces was penned by *Washington Post* columnist David Broder, “Dean: Dominator or Detonator?” The normally ultra-colorless, “moderate” Broder became nearly apoplectic on the Dean question, writing that “grass-roots [Democratic] party activists” disgusted by the performance of Democrats in Congress had been “wide open to being recruited by a dogmatic, even demagogic critic of President Bush and the Washington establishment.”

The notion that Dean is “demagogically” and “dogmatically” hostile to Bush, while hardly true, is revealing. Lieberman has denounced this same supposed quality. “We’re not going to defeat the extremism of the Bush administration with extreme anger of our own,” the Connecticut senator claimed in the January 5 Iowa debate. To oppose Bush is tantamount to political “hate speech” in the eyes of the Republican Party and considerable sections of the Democrats.

What is behind the unease that Dean’s surge in the polls has provoked within the media and political establishment? It has less to do with the personality and perspective of the former Vermont governor than with the apparently unknown and unexpected element his campaign has injected into the electoral process.

In the aftermath of the hijacking of the 2000 election—and the Gore camp’s capitulation—and in particular the September 11 terrorist attacks, seized upon for entirely reactionary purposes by the Bush administration, the right wing believed it had things firmly in hand in America. The Democratic nominating process, in the eyes of Lieberman, Kerry, Missouri congressman Richard Gephardt and others, was supposed to have proceeded along the same general rightward trajectory, selecting a candidate who would be approximately one degree to the left of Bush. All signs of the mass opposition to Bush and the war reflected in the huge anti-war demonstrations last February were to be kept out of the political arena.

Dean, while no threat to American capitalism, nonetheless represents a somewhat troubling phenomenon to sections of the political elite. Support for his campaign has been widespread among college students, much of it won through the Internet. Hardly a charismatic or electrifying figure, Dean has gained popularity solely on the basis of his reputation as an “anti-war” candidate. Howard Fineman in *Newsweek* acknowledges, “Dean’s blunt, combative persona—and his opposition to George W. Bush’s war in Iraq—allowed him to rocket to the top via the Internet.” This alone frightens the media and political elites.

After all, having voted to authorize Bush to launch an invasion of Iraq, Kerry, Lieberman, Senator John Edwards of North Carolina, Gephardt and the Democrats in Congress are implicated in an illegal war and occupation in Iraq; they are accomplices to a war crime. This is no small matter. Moreover, they are implicated in passing the massive Bush tax cuts for the wealthy, the sinister Patriot Act and the Homeland Security bill (Lieberman boasts about his role on this), and in failing to halt the “reform” (i.e., the undermining) of Medicare.

Dean’s criticisms of “Washington Democrats” run the risk of focusing attention on the complicity of the Democrats with the conspiracy of the Bush administration against the Iraqis, Afghans and the American people. This cannot be tolerated.

Moreover, the support Dean has gathered threatens to destroy two of the great myths of contemporary American politics: the popularity of the war in Iraq and the popularity of George W. Bush.

The media finds itself in an impossible bind. Dean is the frontrunner with Democratic voters in every part of the country. How is this to be explained, when “everyone” knows the war is immensely popular? Broder argues that Dean, facing eight rivals, only has “to turn out the true

believers” to win. The conventional wisdom in the media is that Dean represents the “activist” base of the Democratic Party, some hard-core liberal, if not leftist, social layer, and he hasn’t a prayer of making a wider appeal.

What will prevent Dean from galvanizing the population is not his “extremist” position on the war or any other issue. On the contrary, his generally conservative views, his defense of the existing social order, must inevitably cut him off from making a direct and honest appeal to those wide layers of the population suffering from unemployment or under-employment, low wages, poverty and homelessness, and those tens of millions more who barely scrape by while the wealthy elite greedily monopolizes the country’s resources.

Dean’s campaign also belies the notion that to attack Bush is political suicide. When the former Vermont governor claims, with some basis in fact, that he was the only one of the major Democratic candidates to “stand up to Bush,” this wins him instant respect, financial backing and popular support.

The media establishment’s existence at present, on the other hand, is predicated on the idea that Bush is a towering figure, nearly invincible. Accompanying their feature on Dean, for example, *Newsweek*’s editors absurdly ran a low-angle photo of a solitary, grim-faced Bush, silhouetted against a threatening sky, over the caption: “Looming large: Bolstered by Saddam’s capture and good economic news, Bush presents as formidable a target as ever.”

The *New York Times* piece mentioned above includes this gem: “And in an electoral environment where animosity toward President Bush is matched only by the sense that he cannot be defeated, many Democrats expressed concern that the warfare among the candidates was making a hopeless cause all the more hopeless.”

On one level, the controversy surrounding Dean’s candidacy boils down to whether the Democratic Party will entirely cease to compete with the Republicans. Lieberman in particular speaks for that faction of Democrats opposed to any attempt to remove Bush, Cheney, Rumsfeld and the criminal gang in power.

Dean and those who have endorsed him—like Gore, Bradley and Harkin—represent a somewhat more far-sighted section of the ruling elite, genuinely disturbed by the thrust of the Bush administration’s policies. They have been made increasingly anxious by the collapse of the hopes for an easy victory in Iraq and the implications of an ongoing conflict in that region; the reckless character of Bush’s doctrine of “preemptive war,” the likelihood of further costly wars and the possibility of a genuine military disaster; the shredding of the postwar imperialist alliances, with Europe in particular, and the generally belligerent attitude adopted by the Bush administration toward virtually every regime on earth; and the danger that the administration’s domestic policies may ignite a popular radicalization, under conditions in which the Democratic Party has so discredited itself that it can no longer function as a means of channeling discontent.

All of these concerns are now being exacerbated by increasing unease about the economy, with job growth at a standstill in December, record budget deficits piling up in Washington and the dollar slumping to record lows against the euro. There is real concern that the US is sailing in extremely hazardous economic waters. Last week, former treasury secretary Robert Rubin co-authored a paper warning that the huge budget and trade deficits currently run by the US threatened an Argentina-like catastrophe.

It is not Howard Dean’s intention, of course, to provoke or fundamentally challenge the political establishment, to which at heart he belongs. His aim, backed by figures like Gore in particular, is to refurbish the Democratic Party before it’s too late. That Dean is perceived as a threat, however, provides some indication of the utterly alienated, insular and sclerotic character of the American political setup, its inflexibility and

shortsightedness, its almost complete unpreparedness for genuine opposition.



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