

The rise and fall of Howard Dean

An object lesson in Democratic Party politics

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Former Vermont governor Howard Dean's announcement Wednesday that he is quitting his bid for the Democratic presidential nomination marks the end of a brief and meteoric campaign. He delivered his concession speech in Burlington, Vermont after placing a distant third place with 18 percent of the vote in Wisconsin—a state he had previously declared a must-win.

Dean's astonishingly rapid rise and fall contain vital lessons about the nature of the American two-party political system. The method used to select bourgeois political candidates in America has long been a rather brutal process in which people are picked up and in some cases just as quickly discarded. Even by these tough standards, however, Dean's case is exceptional.

Barely six weeks ago, Dean was touted as the undisputed front-runner, having emerged from the relative obscurity of 11 years in the Vermont governorship to challenge the Democratic Party establishment.

When he began his campaign last year, he had undeniable qualities that separated him from the other potential contenders for the Democratic nomination. Dean sensed that the media portrayal of Bush, largely accepted by the Democratic Party, as an unchallengeable political colossus had no basis in reality. He recognized that the Bush administration was vulnerable to an aggressive attack; and his campaign tapped into widespread frustration and anger not only with the policies of the Bush administration, but with the cowardly performance of the Democratic Party itself in moving ever further to the right and adapting itself to the Republicans.

As a candidate, Dean worked off of instinct and hunches, rather than any broader, more developed perspective on the political situation in America. A physician before going into politics, his program resembled nothing so much as the contents of a country doctor's medical bag, containing everything from antibiotics to aspirin and snake oil. It represented an eclectic combination of positions left, right and center. He sharply criticized the war in Iraq, while denouncing Bush for neglecting the "war on terror." He demanded universal health care, while vowing that "fiscal responsibility" would be the "hallmark of a Dean presidency."

Nonetheless, his campaign picked up momentum by appealing to something that had been ignored by the leadership of both parties and the media: the growing rage of millions of people over the theft of the 2000 election, the illegal war in Iraq and the impact of economic policies crafted for the sole purpose of further enriching America's financial oligarchy.

He claimed to have signed up over 600,000 supporters over his website and collected some \$41 million in contributions—a record for a Democratic primary candidate. How much he himself understood about the depth of the political disaffection that fueled his campaign is not clear. What is undisputed, however, is that until the end of 2003, he had the field virtually to himself.

This made all the more extraordinary the sudden implosion of the Dean campaign. By the end of January, his standing in the polls had plummeted, and from the first primary in New Hampshire to Tuesday's vote in Wisconsin he failed to place first in any primary and finished third or worse in most of the contests.

How is this reversal of political fortune to be explained? Much was made in the media of Dean's ill-considered speech after finishing a distant third in Iowa—the famous "scream" that was endlessly rebroadcast and made the butt of countless late-night talk-show jokes.

Clearly this incident was deliberately distorted and blown far out of proportion by the media. In and of itself, it hardly provides a satisfactory explanation for Dean's political demise. Nonetheless, it was not accidental nor without political significance.

As Dean's insurgency within the Democratic Party gathered momentum, confusion mounted over where it was going and the inconsistency of the former Vermont governor's own policies. Once the campaign encountered serious difficulties, Dean had little to offer in the way of a political answer besides empty bravado.

To some degree, the Dean campaign proved victim of its own early successes. It was also undone as a result of political shifts within the American political establishment.

As long as Bush was considered politically unassailable, a viewpoint that was bolstered by a media mesmerized by its own propaganda, there was little concern within the ruling elite over who would be chosen as the Democratic Party nominee.

The Dean campaign was one indicator of the broad and intense popular disaffection with the Bush presidency, something that has only been underscored by the Democratic primaries, in which exit polls show significant numbers of voters describing their attitude toward the president as one of "anger" or "hatred."

This popular unrest has intersected with and intensified disquiet within US corporate and financial circles over the viability of the Bush administration. Concerns within these circles over the fiasco of the administration's policies in Iraq and fears that its policies on debts and deficits could be creating conditions for severe economic crisis have become increasingly widespread, as evidenced by

former Treasury Secretary Paul O'Neill's recent book recounting his own dismay over the direction of policy.

As the year began, preparing a possible Democratic alternative to Bush emerged as a serious concern for the American ruling class, and the focus of the Democratic primaries became ever more clearly the vetting of a candidate who could be trusted and accepted by the financial oligarchy that ultimately controls both major parties.

There existed palpable unease within these circles over the Dean candidacy. It was not so much that his political program was beyond the pale—much of it consists of boilerplate policies that are shared by politicians in both parties. Rather, Dean—whose experience consisted of serving as governor in a state with a population of just over 600,000 people—was seen as a man with no real political history, unproved and untested. To the extent that he appealed to popular anger and attracted the support of a section of students, he was further regarded as suspect.

As a result, Dean became the object of relentless and often humiliating attacks in the media. The attempt to manipulate public opinion had its effect, in part because of the tremendous hostility to the Bush administration that his campaign had tapped into. Primary voters became increasingly concerned with picking the candidate with the best chance of forcing Bush out of the White House. On an instinctual level, many voters recognized that “electability” meant a candidate acceptable to the existing political establishment.

The last weeks of the Dean campaign and the former Vermont governor's reaction to this concerted drive to undermine his candidacy have grown increasingly pathetic on both a political and personal level. All the weaknesses and inconsistencies of his own politics have emerged ever more forcefully.

While he began his quest for the nomination by denouncing the war in Iraq, he now resorted ever more frequently to denouncing the new front-runner, Massachusetts Senator John Kerry, for failing to support the first Persian Gulf War launched by Bush's father in 1991. This line of attack only served to underscore the fact that Dean's own opposition to US militarism and imperialist aggression was episodic at best, lacking any depth based on either theoretical understanding or political conviction.

In the end, his campaign was that of an entirely conventional bourgeois politician, while his principal rivals—Kerry and North Carolina Senator John Edwards—appropriated his antiwar rhetoric, downplaying their own role in voting to authorize the war.

In his concession speech in Vermont yesterday, Dean told his supporters that they should “continue the effort to transform the Democratic Party and to change our country.”

He continued: “Let me be clear, I will not run as an independent or third-party candidate and I urge my supporters not to be tempted to support any effort by another candidate. The bottom line is that we must beat George W. Bush in November, whatever it takes.”

Yet the fundamental lesson of Dean's political rise and fall is precisely the opposite. The essential question confronting American working people in the fight against the policies of the Bush administration is the need for a political alternative outside of and in opposition to the bourgeois two-party system.

Dean's initial success was a symptom of growing mass

opposition to the existing political setup in the United States. To the extent that he garnered genuine popular support, it was because he appeared to be a fresh face, an angry man capable of articulating the immense resentment that exists toward a political system—backed by both Democrats and Republicans—identified with war, political corruption, social inequality and the destruction of democratic rights.

Now he tells his backers that the lesson of his defeat is that they must give this system another chance. His role, prescribed by the establishment and the media, is to corral the sentiments of social protest that he previously appealed to within the safe confines of the Democratic Party.

The formula of “beat George W. Bush in November, whatever it takes,” or “anybody but Bush” offers no way forward in achieving the aspirations of American working people. Rather, it is the political philosophy that has given rise to the present situation. Changing the occupant of the White House will not alter the social and economic system that has given rise to the bellicose and reactionary policies that have enjoyed the support of Democrats and Republicans alike.

That requires the building of a new, mass and independent political movement of working people fighting for the revolutionary transformation of society and an end to the domination of the American people by the profit interests of the financial elite.

The prerequisite for serious political change in the United States is a decisive and irrevocable break from the bourgeois two party system, of which the Democratic Party constitutes an essential pillar.

We call upon all those who are looking for a way forward to support the campaign of the Socialist Equality Party in the 2004 election.



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