

Howard Dean named Democratic chairman: cosmetic change for a right-wing party

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Former Vermont governor Howard Dean, whose front-running campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination was derailed by opposition from the party establishment a year ago, was elected chairman of the Democratic Party on Saturday. Dean was elected by a voice vote of the Democratic National Committee (DNC), after a two-month contest in which six other candidates—none of them nearly as well known nationally—dropped out one by one.

The turning point in the campaign—confined to the 447 voting members of the DNC—came on January 31, when the Association of State Democratic Chairs gave its endorsement to Dean, overturning a vote by its own executive committee. The executive committee initially split three ways, with six votes for Dean, five for Donnie Fowler, son of former DNC chairman Don Fowler, and three for former congressman Martin Frost of Texas. Frost's supporters then switched their backing to Fowler, to block Dean. But the larger body, comprising all the chairmen and vice-chairmen of state parties, backed Dean by a margin of 56 to 21.

Until then, the congressional Democratic leadership had made no secret of its opposition to Dean's candidacy to head the party, sponsoring first Frost and then former congressman Timothy Roemer, a member of the 9/11 commission, for the top job. These two candidates, both associated with the right-wing Democratic Leadership Council, failed to win much support. After the state chairs' vote, however, any prospect of a stop-Dean campaign faded.

This was clearly signaled by Senator John Kerry, the defeated Democratic presidential candidate. Asked on NBC's "Meet the Press" interview program whether Dean was acceptable, in view of his past opposition to the Iraq war and criticism of congressional Democrats during the presidential nomination contest, Kerry said

he had no problem with his former rival as a potential party chairman. But he added that Democrats in Congress were "not looking for a spokesperson in the chairmanship."

(In US politics, the party chairmanship is a post usually reserved for a fundraiser or behind-the-scenes political operative like Dean's predecessor, Terry McAuliffe, rather than for an elected official or potential candidate. In announcing his candidacy for the position, Dean ruled out seeking the Democratic presidential nomination in 2008.)

In the last few days before Saturday's official DNC vote, Dean made the rounds in Washington, meeting with Senate Minority Leader Harry Reid, House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi, and other top Democrats. In each case, according to press reports, he gave reassurances that he would focus on building up local and state Democratic organizations while leaving policy matters to congressional leaders.

Repeatedly asked by reporters about his position on the war in Iraq, Dean declined to discuss it, saying that was a matter for Congress, and adding that there was "no need to make announcements on anything I won't be voting on soon." For his part, Reid said Friday, "I think Dean knows his job is not to set the message. He's to execute the message that comes from Democratic leadership."

In his acceptance speech Saturday, Dean mentioned Iraq only once—criticizing Bush for not including the cost of the war in his budget message to Congress. When directly asked by the press, he replied, "My views are well known, but most of the policy pronouncements will be coming from the leaders in Congress and not from me."

The tone of the acceptance speech was both low-key and right-wing, presenting the Democratic Party as the

party of “fiscal responsibility,” and attacking the Bush administration for bringing “Enron-style accounting to the nation’s capital.” Dean focused almost exclusively on domestic issues, such as opposition to Bush’s plan for Social Security privatization.

While saying nothing against the war in Iraq, Dean presented the Democratic Party as an advocate of “strong and smart” policies on national security issues. “It was Democrats who pushed to create a Department of Homeland Security,” he said. “It was Democrats who pushed to make our airlines safer. It is Democrats who are now working to make sure we close the remaining gaps in our security. It was Democrats who demanded reform of the intelligence community. And it is Democrats who are pushing for a foreign policy that honestly deals with the threats of today, and the threats of tomorrow—like securing the nuclear materials around the world.”

This latest incarnation of Howard Dean demonstrates that his posture as an antiwar candidate in 2003-2004 was based not on principle, but on using the mass opposition to the Iraq war as the fuel for an otherwise struggling presidential campaign. Dean—as his advisers and aides are now repeatedly telling the press—has returned to the political track he laid down in 12 years as governor of Vermont, marked by emphasis on fiscal conservatism and moderate liberalism on social issues.

Even on these issues, the emphasis should be on “moderate” rather than liberalism. Dean expressed his agreement with the speech last week by Senator Hillary Clinton, urging the Democratic Party to appeal to anti-abortion zealots by supporting efforts to prevent unwanted pregnancies, and thereby cut down the number of abortions. He called this approach “right on target,” adding, “Democrats aren’t pro-abortion. Our belief is not that we’re pro-abortion, but we do believe that a woman has a right to make up her own mind.”

Dean said that his major focus would be on building the Democratic Party organization in states in the south and west which voted for Bush. This would include appeals to fundamentalist Protestant and conservative Catholic voters. “We are definitely going to do religious outreach,” he said. “The social mission of the Democratic Party is the same as the social mission of the Catholic Church.”

In spite of these protestations, there have been attempts in the media to portray Dean’s victory as a

shift by the Democrats to the left, or even as a takeover of the party machinery by insurgent or antiwar forces. Nothing could be further from the truth.

In his recent television interview, Senator Kerry specifically praised Dean’s role in the presidential race after abandoning his own campaign for the nomination. Dean debated third-party candidate Ralph Nader, and devoted his efforts to opposing any breakaway from the Democratic Party by antiwar voters angered by the Kerry-Edwards ticket’s support for the war in Iraq.

Similar considerations underlie Dean’s decision to run for DNC chairman. Evidently anticipating an upsurge of popular sentiment against Bush’s policies of war and social reaction, Dean is seeking to give the Democratic Party a political facelift, to insure that any political movement against the Bush administration does not break out of the confines of the bourgeois two-party system.

In an interview in December on “Meet the Press”, Dean spelled out his goal of reviving the Democratic Party: “I’m hoping actually, oddly as it sounds for me, to be a somewhat of a consensus person. I’m hoping that we’ll be able to bring all the factions together. It’s going to take some time, because I really fried the party while I was out there running for president, I think with some good reason. But I am a Democrat. I think the Democratic Party is a far better vehicle for reforming America than some other vehicle that you’d have to start from scratch or some interest group.”

In other words, Dean’s role is to give whatever credibility he may retain among opponents of the war in Iraq to block any effort to “start from scratch”—i.e., build an independent political party genuinely opposed to American imperialism and its wars of aggression.



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