

The Democratic Revival

A Sample Column for Review

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A year is a lifetime in politics.

Last winter, we Democrats were reeling from our disastrous defeats in the fall of 2002. And what a fall it was. Despite categorical predictions and historical precedents, we lost seats in the House to the party of a president mid-term. Most damning of all were polls in which a majority of Americans condemned our party and policies as "losers." "Losers"!

There was a wealth of reasons, and no dearth of scapegoats, for our fall from grace, as the party that had presided over eight years of relative peace and unprecedented prosperity, to political pariahs, just two years later. The public had rallied behind the president who led us through the horrors of 9/11. He framed the election as a referendum on security; and regardless of the public's ambivalence towards his march to war, whenever security is the issue the GOP wins. The Democratic leadership failed to voice a strong and clear message of its own, on practically any issue. Our party had been divided and conquered by the president's setting the agenda; on votes for his tax cuts or war powers, far too many lawmakers broke ranks with our party for dissent on either issue to serve as a rallying cry.

The GOP controlled all three branches of the federal government and the terms of the national debate.

Our party was a "loser." And the nation, too.

Then, in the winter of our discontent, there arose a son, not of York, but of New England: As bright, hot, and unrelenting as the summer sun was former Governor of Vermont, Howard Dean M.D.

The feisty physician shocked both Democratic and Republican establishments, by condemning the "complicity" of the parties, particularly in the "unprovoked war" on Iraq but also in everything from taxation to healthcare. Still politically incorrect to be branded "liberals," we "progressives" had a champion!

Millions of Americans, particularly the youngest or the best educated, who had felt their intelligence insulted by the powers that be, now felt empowered by the things that might be. These true believers heeded the call of this secular evangelist and—particularly through the new medium of the Internet—poured tens of millions of dollars into his presidential campaign, and turned out by the millions in small "meet-ups" nationwide.

The Democratic Party, all but dead, had arisen, fiery and formidable, a phoenix in reverse.

The months went on. The deaths went on, even after a "Mission Accomplished." The jobs went overseas, even as a "recovery" continued. The credibility of the administration (allegedly elected for its integrity) went out the window, as no weapons of mass destruction were found and hundreds of billions of taxpayers' dollars were lost (in a quagmire overseas, tax cuts for the rich, and Medicare "reform"). As the party in power enjoyed less favor, the "mad doctor" from Vermont made more sense, to more people ... including some politicians within the establishment he continued to rail against.

By the end of last year, there were more Democrats running for president than most voters can remember, their campaigns happily roasting the incumbent over the fires of discontent ignited by the firebrand from Vermont, their means often flattering by imitation (no candidate caught dead without blog or meet-up).

Then something extraordinary happened. The president delivered on a promise he made: Our troops pulled out the Ace in the hole.

History was rewritten—removing the Butcher of Baghdad, not his boasted weapons of our mass destruction, became the justification *a posteriori* for war—and the campaign of the doctor who had prescribed just peace was destined to become just history.

Often "over the top," his rhetoric had been excused if not esteemed as straightforward and bold, forgivable in excess for the righteousness of its cause. Most, however, now considered his outspokenness recklessness, a liability for achieving an even greater cause, now seemingly within reach: the winning of "the middle," once scorned but now courted, to wipe that damned smirk off the face of the "winner" who had made us—and our cherished beliefs—such miserable "losers."

The candidates farthest to the Left and the Right failed first; those deemed most "electable" (most Kennedyesque, in heroism, name, charisma, or hair) gained quickly the favor of record numbers of voters in primaries and caucuses nationwide.

As the general election approaches, as the president spends from his most massive of war chests, his deficit in the polls will shrink as surely as that in our budget will grow; but one fact will remain unchanged: The Democratic Party was revived from its near-death experience by a doctor named Dean.