

Nothing But 'Net

Howard Dean's protest campaign has found a niche online. Could it be the next dot-com bust?

by **Randolph Court**

When the books closed on the Democratic presidential aspirants' second-quarter fundraising drives, it was clear that Howard Dean's anti-war, anti-Bush rhetoric, combined with his use of the Internet, had successfully whipped up a sizable bloc of liberal, protest-oriented supporters in the early stages of the campaign. He had raised more than \$10 million since the start of the year, much of it in small donations through the Web; well over 50,000 supporters were gathering to support him through *Meetup.com*; and he had won a 44-percent plurality in the straw poll staged by the online liberal activist group *MoveOn.org*. There was a fevered buzz: Dean, everyone surmised, had ascended into the "first tier" of presidential candidates.

But the buzz largely missed what should be an alarming revelation for Democrats: The Internet may be giving angry, protest-oriented activists the rope they need to hang the party. The vaunted new medium for grassroots political organizing may in fact be contributing to the Iowafication of the nominating process, disproportionately magnifying the voices of the activist groups with the loudest, most combative, and populist voices.

The effect has been like two currents flowing together: Caucuses like Iowa's are briar patches where born and bred activists flourish. They are run according to complex procedures, and they exclude independents. The arrival of the Internet



CYBER TROOPS: The Dean campaign hopes grassroots meetings, like this one in Austin, Texas, will turn mouse clicks into shoe leather and votes.

has provided a powerful set of tools for activists to get organized well in advance of the already front-loaded nominating season—a period when, almost by definition, activists are the only ones focused on politics. Using the Internet, Dean has achieved a virtual mind meld with those activists by capitalizing on their visceral hatred of President Bush and disdain for moderate Democrats. When all is said and done, the new dynamic could lead Democrats right into the hands of President Bush, who wants nothing more than a liberal Democratic opponent.

That Howard Dean has been the one to prove to the political world how the new dynamic works is a bit of a surprise. As governor of Vermont, he styled himself as a centrist. But on the presidential campaign trail, Dean tacked early and dramatically to the left, not just opposing the war in Iraq, but actually demonizing centrist Democrats who supported it. His borrowed refrain was, "I'm here to represent the *Democratic* wing of the Democratic Party." And it was that message that seemed to pay him the greatest dividends on the Internet. It resonated powerfully with the influential, protest-oriented *MoveOn.org*

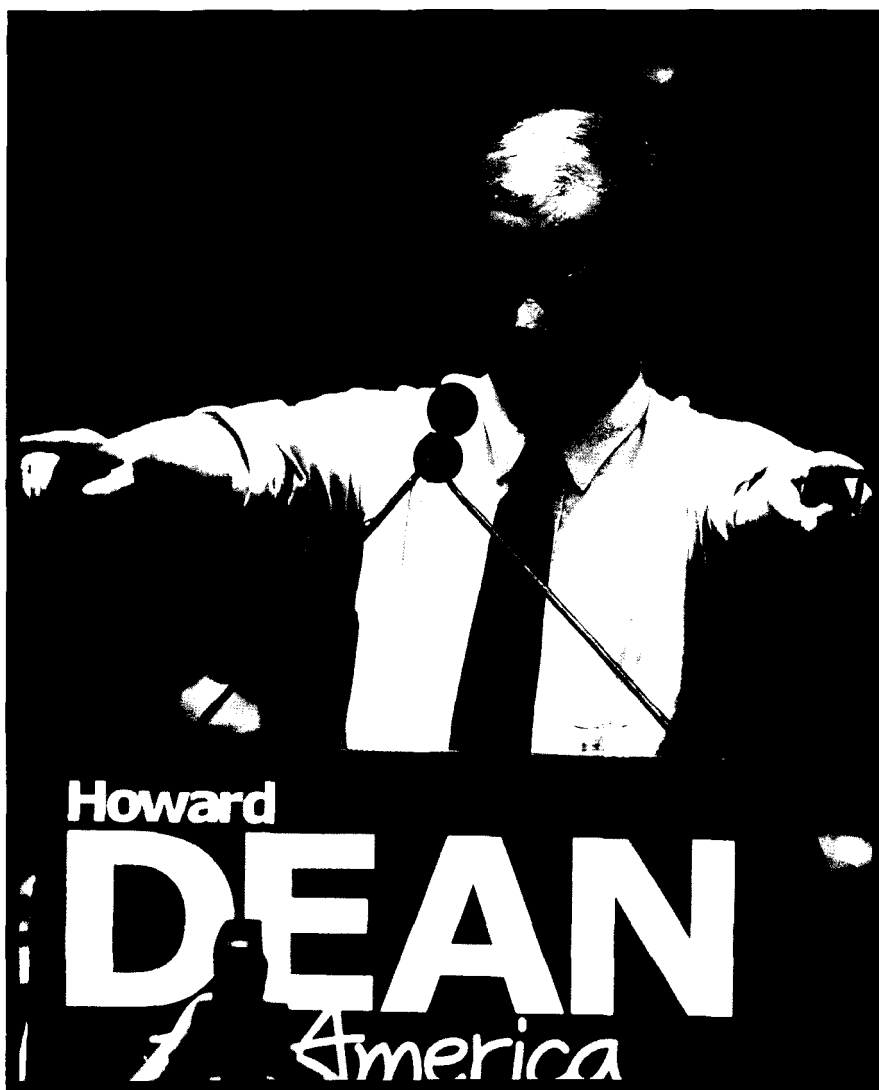
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crowd, whose willingness to pony up cash for its causes was a decisive factor in Dean's second-quarter fundraising efforts.

It's worth a look at how Dean used the Internet to build his early momentum. It is a story with useful lessons for future campaigns and at least one cautionary tale for Democrats and Republicans alike. The lessons have to do with specific techniques—some technical, some tactical—that the Dean campaign has proven can be successful in drumming up support online. The cautionary tale is about red-faced anger and indignation of the irrational sort that most appeals to activists and “base” voters on either end of the political spectrum. That brand of outrage has proven to be potent fuel for fanning a populist fire online. The medium and the message help the outraged find each other.

There is no question that Dean has broken new ground to get to the point where he now sits. The Internet is not a sideline or an add-on to his strategy; it has been central. His campaign has not one website, but many, including an array of volunteer-run sites, such as *deandefense.org*, the staging area for the “Dean Defense Forces,” a rapid response network that aims to saturate the Internet and the news media with pro-Dean opinion pieces at even the slightest provocation from some opponent or detractor. For instance, the defense forces fired angry emails at the Democratic Leadership Council's website after a political memo last May warning of the dangers of kowtowing to interest groups on the left.

Meanwhile, in addition to its standard-fare official website, *deanforamerica.com*, the Dean campaign also maintains a weblog called *blogforamerica.com* that plays a curious role in keeping activist supporters emotionally invested and engaged in the campaign. To read the blog is to enter a sort of free-ranging, interactive version of “The War Room,” the cult documentary film about the 1992 Clinton campaign, which focused largely on the campaign workers, and not on Clinton. On *blogforamerica.com*, Joe Trippi, Dean's campaign manager, is a revered hero, as James Carville was in the Clinton campaign



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film. A team of webmasters buzzes around the website, carrying out Trippi's instructions, just as traditional campaign aides did around Carville. The webmasters and Trippi post frantic comments—as frequently as dozens of times a day—about each new detail in the campaign: preparations for upcoming events, fundraising drives, letter-writing efforts, speeches, and opposing candidates' spin. The postings are often in the first person, and they frequently drift informally from the business at hand into the campaign workers' personal trials, tribulations, exhaustion, and need to do laundry. It is part sitcom, part soap opera. Enthusiastic campaign supporters participate in the drama, posting their own comments in related

discussion areas. The interactivity and the cacophony of voices help create a sense of energy—the feeling of a *movement*.

“People want to know what's going on in the campaign. They want that connection,” said Max Fose, Internet manager of the McCain 2000 campaign. Plus, the Internet is a naturally hungry medium; it wants to be constantly updated with fresh material to keep people coming back. “The blog is an excellent idea,” said Fose. “They're feeding the beast.”

Feeding the beast with *what*, though? The Dean campaign message that has stirred such a storm of interest online isn't really a message at all; it's a mood. While many other candidates in the race have put forward a menu of proposals large

and small that they would undertake as president, Dean in the early stages of the campaign has in effect said to his audience, “My blood is boiling. If yours is, too, then I’m your guy.”

That mood message has succeeded at revving up people animated by their hatred for Bush, their lingering resentment over the Florida election fiasco in 2000, and their more recent opposition to the war in Iraq. Trolling the discussion boards in some of the unofficial Dean fan sites, one finds scores of people who say they are backing Dean because, as one poster says, “Bush is evil.”

Dean channeled that anger into his appeal to the 1.4 million protest-oriented members of *MoveOn.org*. “If you are as tired and angry as I am about the manipulation and lies, then please join my campaign,” he said in his plea for the group’s endorsement in its June 24-25 online primary vote.

MoveOn.org was quick to point out that the total of 317,000 votes cast in its mock primary surpassed the total number of votes cast in the 2000 New Hampshire Democratic primary, Iowa caucus, and South Carolina caucus combined. But who were the *MoveOn.org* voters? It’s a big mystery. The group asked pollster Stan Greenberg to conduct a telephone survey of its online primary voters to verify the results of the vote. (Everything checked out as legitimate.) As part of the verification process, Greenberg also asked demographic questions and found, not

Internet adventure may fall short because, at the end of the day, his supporters are still a small band in a big parade. In fact, they’re probably not even representative of the online population’s opinion. A January 2003 Pew Research Center poll found that 67 percent of Americans go online to browse the Web or use email, and of those people a significant plurality—41 percent—said they consider themselves to be political moderates. The next biggest group—35 percent—identified themselves as conservatives. And just 19 percent said they were liberal. That picture was corroborated by party affiliation. Thirty-two percent of those who go online said they are Republicans. Twenty-nine percent said they are Democrats. And a plurality—38 percent—said they are not affiliated with either major party. These are the same trends that have long been apparent in offline polls by Gallup and others.

“The Internet is a bell curve,” said Jonah Seiger, an Internet strategist and visiting fellow with the George Washington University Graduate School of Political Management. In other words, if you plotted everyone’s political views on a left-to-right scale, you would find a big bulge in the middle. “The edges are active, but smaller,” said Seiger, “and the vast middle is open to arguments.” So the electoral math that has plagued Democrats since well before the rise of the Internet is still true in cyberspace: The party cannot put together a winning coalition

without appealing to moderates.

They are animated in their opposition to the war in Iraq and their concern for civil liberties, he said. It is quite likely, of course, that the reason Boyd hasn’t seen any evidence of political activity in the middle of the political spectrum is because moderates don’t frequent *MoveOn.org*. Instead, they likely spend their online time elsewhere, doing mundane civically oriented things, such as reading mainstream news sites. In May 2003, for example, *MoveOn.org*’s website had about 436,000 unique visitors, according to the audience measurement consultants comScore Media Metrix. In the same period, *CNN.com* had 22.7 million unique visitors; AOL’s news sites had 24.2 million; and *MSNBC.com* had 21.8 million.

But there is also another, simpler explanation for why fringe groups would be using the Internet better than mainstream campaigns: “Because they have to,” said Fose, McCain’s Internet manager.

Certainly, the fringes of the political spectrum are active online on heavily trafficked discussion boards such as the left-wing *democraticunderground.com* and the right-wing *freerepublic.com*. Dean’s fiery message resonates in the left-wing haunts. He is the favorite son on *democraticunderground.com*, according to the site’s proprietor, David Allen, and the people posting on that site are an animated bunch. Much of what they post—about Bush, and about moderate Democrats—would not be appropriate to repeat here.

But the question remains: It’s easy to activate the activists, but what about everyone else?

That will be the real test. Recent political history strongly suggests a liberal protest coalition simply doesn’t add up to enough votes for a Democrat to win a national election.

Perhaps the closest parallel to the Dean strategy is the dot-com companies of the late 1990s: Accumulate eyeballs now and fill in the blanks on their business plans later. If, in the end, the early hype and glory of Dean’s Internet campaign goes the way of the dot-com bust, then historians may rightly conclude it was for similar reasons. ♦

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surprisingly, that *MoveOn.org* members are younger than the actual electorate, and better educated. But that still leaves the most vexing question about the impact of Dean’s online juggernaut: How does online politics relate to offline politics? How many of the people who “click here” will also get out and walk precincts, or even vote? What issues and messages most resonate in cyberspace, and how will that affect the larger political debate and the elections?

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tion without appealing to moderates.

MoveOn.org co-founder Wes Boyd doesn’t buy the big bulge theory of the Internet. In his experience, he hasn’t found what statisticians would say is a standard distribution across the political spectrum. “I believe we are working with a bi-modal distribution,” Boyd said. “There is no center.”

Boyd sees a big group of populists united in their outside-the-Beltway, “anti-elitist,” and anti-corporate points of view.

Bush's Double Whammy on Jobs

First Bush killed jobs with bad economic management. Now he's making matters worse by slashing assistance for unemployed and dislocated workers.

| by **Robert D. Atkinson**

American workers today face an economic double whammy: rampant unemployment exacerbated by simultaneous cuts in assistance to unemployed workers. The culprit in the first is a combination of economic forces and Bush administration policies. The culprit in the second is the Bush team alone.

Consider the facts: Between 1992 and 2000, with the Clinton administration in charge, the nation's economy generated more than 20 million new private sector jobs. Since George W. Bush took office in 2001, the nation has lost 3.1 million private sector jobs. At this rate, Bush will become the first president since Herbert Hoover to produce a net job loss during his first term of office, and the first since Eisenhower to produce a net job loss over any term of office.

On top of that, Bush will have to take the rap for turning a bad economic picture into a living nightmare for millions of workers by undercutting the very program designed to help them get through tough times and adjust to new economic realities: unemployment insurance (UI) and dislocated worker assistance. In its single-minded crusade to shrink the federal government back to 19th century levels, the Bush administration has even proposed the elimination of the government's quarterly mass layoff statistics, quashing the very data that puts the lie to its own policies.

Unemployment and underemploy-

ment add up to a national crisis. In addition to 3.1 million lost jobs, 1.4 million Americans are working part time even though they want full-time work. The unemployment rate shooting up from 4.1 to 6.4 percent makes more than 9.4 million Americans officially jobless. More than one-fifth of them have been without work for longer than six months, the largest proportion in a decade. Yet rather than strengthening UI and dislocated worker job search assistance and retraining support, the Bush administration casts these workers adrift without a life preserver. This approach should be replaced by a policy of equipping workers with the tools they need to cope.

Holes in the Safety Net. If suppressing embarrassing economic data were all the harm the administration was up to, it would be bad enough. But the Bush team goes farther: It has no qualms about driving the already meager levels of UI benefits even lower, leaving many unemployed workers barely able to scrape by. Consider its sins:

1) The Bush administration has consistently opposed temporarily extending UI benefits for workers who have exhausted their benefits. After the Sept. 11 attacks, the administration was willing to go along with a bailout of the airlines, but opposed providing extended benefits to the nearly 200,000 airline workers who lost their jobs in the aftermath. Bush initially opposed efforts passed by Congress in

May 2003 to extend UI benefits to millions of workers who had used up their benefits, despite the fact that the unemployment rate was rising. Moreover, during the early 1990s' recession, most workers who exhausted their benefits received 26 weeks of extended benefits. In contrast, in the current slowdown, the administration and the Republican Congress have grudgingly granted only 13 weeks.

2) Not content with just making sure workers don't get extended benefits, the Bush administration is also working to make sure that they get fewer benefits by reducing the tax that employers pay into the unemployment insurance trust fund. Laughably called the "New Balance," the administration's proposal would have cut the federal payroll tax paid by employers on the first \$7,000 of wages by three-quarters, from 0.8 percent to 0.2 percent. In addition, most of the federal rules governing the program would be repealed. Thanks to the long-established "race-to-the-bottom" dynamics of setting UI taxes and benefits in the states, the New Balance would almost certainly lead to most states imitating the low-tax, low-benefit states, resulting in not only lower benefits but also in millions fewer workers eligible to collect UI. Luckily, Congress did not take up the proposal in 2002, but a version of the proposal has resurfaced in the president's 2004 budget.

3) The administration has also proposed