

## Is Dean “a Liberal”?

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Which strategy is most likely to win the White House for the Democrats? There's no more important question before the Party, and none with so illusive an answer.

The Democratic Leadership Council advocates a same-old-same-old approach: a candidate funded with corporate money with centrist-to-right positions on the issues. Progressives, their candidates and platforms, will win no more than a handful of states at best, DLC members argue.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The Washington Post has editorialized, “The centrist Democratic Leadership Council inveighed last month against Mr. Dean as representing the party’s ‘McGovern-Mondale wing, defined principally by weakness abroad and elitist, interest-group liberalism at home.’” Editorial, “The Doctor is (Officially) In,” Washington Post, June 28, 2003, p. A24. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/ac2/wp-dyn/A43459-2003Jun27> (last visited July 9, 2003). The Washington Post repeated the Dallas Morning News’ report that “many top Democrats’ are worried a Dean nomination would produce an electoral wipeout of George McGovern and Walter Mondale dimensions.” Howard Kurtz, “Dean Now Under a Sharper Scope,” Washington Post, July 1, 2003, p. C01, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/ac2/wp-dyn/A54576-2003Jun30?language=printer> (last visited July 9, 2003). Norman Solomon takes issue with “centrist” and “elitist”: “A recent memo by a pair of DLC honchos, Al From and Bruce Reed, linked the party’s progressive-leaning activists with ‘elitist, interest-group liberalism.’ The salvo is laughable. It would be difficult to find any organization of Democrats more deserving of the ‘elitist, interest-group’ tag than the DLC, which has long been funded by oil, chemical, insurance and military-contracting corporations – and has served their interests.” Norman Solomon, “Howard Dean Tacks Right,” Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR), July 2, 2003, reprinted at <http://www.tcgreens.org/gl/articles/20030702051521863.html> (last visited July 9, 2003). Ironically, William Saletan says of Dean and the DLC, “Most of what Dean said on Meet the Press Sunday morning could have been written by the Democratic Leadership Council. . . . He indicated that he . . . might raise the retirement age. He deferred to states and churches on gun control and gay marriage. . . . Dean’s defense of the death penalty . . . was even more eyebrow-raising. . . . Executing killers because they might get out on a ‘technicality’? That isn’t just pro-death penalty. It’s anti-due process.” William Saletan, “What Liberal Messiah?” Slate, June 23, 2003. <http://slate.msn.com/id/284735> (last visited July 9, 2003).

Some in the Congressman Dennis Kucinich camp, by contrast, argue precisely the opposite. Same-old-same-old won't cut it, they say. Democrats need to return to their natural working class (and working poor) constituency, and offer a progressive platform in sufficiently stark contrast to President Bush's policies to bring the apathetic, turned-off half of the electorate back into the voting booths of America. (For whatever reason, President Bush's chief political adviser, Karl Rove, has said of Dean, "Yeah, that's the one we want [to run against]."<sup>2</sup>)

Either strategy involves high risk. There are no sure things in politics.

Dean, dubbed a "liberal" by the media (and "too liberal" by the DLC), shuns the label. As he puts it, "I think it's pathetic that I'm considered the left-wing liberal."<sup>3</sup>

To challenge Dean's liberal credentials is in no way to disparage his candidacy. Indeed, if the DLC is correct that the Democrats can't win with a liberal anyway they will need a centrist. According to this theory, the more centrist Dean is the more viable he (or any others) are as candidates.

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<sup>2</sup> Juliet Eilperin, "Rove Spends the Fourth Rousing Support for Dean," Washington Post, July 5, 2003, p. A05. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A10541-2003Jul4.html> (last visited July 9, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> The Dean quote appears in Evelyn Nieves, "Short-Fused Populist, Breathing Fire at Bush," Washington Post, July 6, 2003, p. A01. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/ac2/wp-dyn/A11710-2003Jul5?language=printer> (last visited July 9, 2003). The author continues, "Over and over on the campaign trail, he tells audiences that he is a fiscal conservative . . ." She quotes former Democratic Governor of Vermont Tom Salmon as saying, "[Dean's] being called a liberal is one of the great white lies of the campaign." Norman Solomon comments that "In an interview on NBC's 'Meet the Press,' Dean delivered a one-two punch against economic justice. He advocated raising the retirement age for Social Security, and he called for slowing down the rate of increases for Medicare spending." Later that day, at the Rainbow/PUSH Coalition Forum, in response to the Kucinich appeal to use cuts in bloated Defense Department budgets as a way of funding social programs, Dean said, "I don't agree with Dennis about cutting the Pentagon budget . . ." As Solomon sums it up, "Usually, major-party candidates wait until they have a lock on the presidential nomination before diving to the center. Eager to avoid being hammered by the national press corps for supposed liberalism, Dean hasn't bothered to wait." Norman Solomon, note 1. William Saletan writes, "Dean isn't nearly the left-winger his fans or critics imagine." William Saletan, note 1.

Moreover, the most traditional strategy for Democrats and Republicans alike is to position oneself to appeal to party regulars in order to win the nomination (“liberals” for Democrats, “conservatives,” or “radical right” for Republicans), and then shift to the center (or beyond) to try to win the election.

Vermonters think there is considerable evidence that this is what Dean has been doing.<sup>4</sup> Others charge it’s a deliberate strategy to take different positions – for example, on the Iraq war – in different parts of the country.<sup>5</sup> Even if true, however, this has been a common, and often winning, approach.

But for those Democratic activists who *are* looking for the most liberal or progressive choice, and believe *that* to be the Party’s best strategy, most are narrowing their selection to Dean or Kucinich. And in doing so they really deserve, and need, to know Dean’s record and actual positions – with citations to sources. That is what his paper is designed to provide.

**Position on the political spectrum.** Having attended the Republican National Convention in 1964, Dean became “increasingly uncomfortable with the Republican right but equally repulsed by the Democratic left [and] slowly began gravitating to the exact political center,” according to the

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<sup>4</sup> “Most Vermonters would say that Dean the Passionate Populist . . . is a Different Dean from the one they know.” Evelyn Nieves, note 3. See also her quote from former Vermont Governor Salmon in that endnote. The Washington Post’s Howard Kurtz reports, “more journalists are highlighting the gap between Dean’s fiery liberal rhetoric and his more moderate record in Vermont.” Howard Kurtz, note 1.

<sup>5</sup> “[S]ources close to other Democratic candidates are counterattacking, accusing Dean of turning up the volume on his passionate antiwar rhetoric in relatively liberal Iowa and then muting his war criticism in the more conservative key primary state of South Carolina,” Jim Geraghty, “Dean’s Rhetorical Twister,” National Review Online, March 28, 2003, <http://www.nationalreview.com/comment/comment-geraghty032803.asp> (last visited July 8, 2003). Time magazine asserts, “His knowledge about many issues . . . is sketchy at best. . . . He isn’t above political opportunism of the basest sort – he has changed his position on free trade to suit Iowa’s protectionist labor skates, and a cynic might argue that his position on Iraq was a clever response to a market void.” Joe Klein, “Why Dean Isn’t Going Away,” Time, June 30, 2003, p. 19, <http://www.time.com/time/columnist/klein/article/0,9565,460397,00.html> (last visited July 9, 2003).

American Spectator's Robert Dreyfuss. Even today Dean describes himself as "to the right of Bush" on some issues (balanced budget and radically increased spending on homeland security), and rejects the label "liberal."<sup>6</sup> Those who know him best, or have written about him in depth, agree. Says Robert Dreyfuss, "He's a hard-nosed, penny-pinching fiscal conservative who seems to delight in sticking his thumb in the eye of the Democrats on the party's ever-shrinking left wing." In fact Dean clashed so "often with [Vermont's legislative] Democrats over taxes and spending [that he drove] many liberal-left Democrats into the arms of the Progressive Party and of Representative Bernie Sanders, Congress's lone socialist."<sup>7</sup> (One can assume, given the Democrats' attacks on Ralph Nader following the 2000 election, that what Dean produced in Vermont is precisely what the Party seeks to avoid in 2004.) Economist Max Sawicky says Dean "often turned his acerbic words on the left wing of his own party. . . . [He] supported Vermonters' right to carry concealed weapons and resisted many spending proposals." And, quoting political scientist Garrison Nelson, "His born-again liberalism has caught a lot of us by surprise."<sup>8</sup> Elizabeth Mehren of the Los Angeles Times quotes Dean's "determination to 'make sure this party comes back to its center.'"<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> See Evelyn Nieves, note 3, and text at that note call. Dean says of himself, "I'm not an old-fashioned, 1960s liberal."

<sup>7</sup> Robert Dreyfuss, "The Darkest Horse," *The American Prospect*, July 15, 2002, <http://www.prospect.org/print/V13/13/dreyfuss-r.html> (last visited July 8, 2003).

<sup>8</sup> Max Sawicky, "My Last Howard Dean Post for the Day," <http://maxspeak.org/gm/archives/00001269.html> (last visited July 9, 2003).

<sup>9</sup> She quotes Republican John McClaughry's characterization of Dean as "such a centrist that some [Republicans] considered him 'a Republican in drag. . . . A lot of people in Vermont look at Howard Dean today and they don't see the Howard Dean who was governor. He has reshaped himself to appeal to a faction of the Democratic constituency.'" Elizabeth Mehren, "Howard Dean: Wealthy Former Doctor and Longtime Vermont Governor Established Himself as Outsider by Condemning Iraq War," *Los Angeles Times*, June 1, 2003. <http://www.uvm.edu/~uvmpr/uvmclips/MayClips/NelsonDeanLATimes.htm> (last visited July 9, 2003). Norman Solomon quotes an AP characterization of Dean as "a moderate at best on social issues. This is, after all, the governor who has at times tried to cut benefits for the aged, blind and disabled, whose No. 1 priority is a balanced budget." Norman Solomon, note 1.

**The Iraq War.** Both Dean and Kucinich have criticized the Bush Administration's Iraq war. However, most of Dean's criticism came *after* the war; all he was advocating in February 2003 was a 60-day delay before starting the war<sup>10</sup> – a delay roughly equivalent to the Bush timetable. Kucinich organized two-thirds of the House Democrats to vote against the resolution supporting the war – a resolution, not incidentally, drafted by presidential candidate Congressman Dick Gephardt. He has not wavered in his opposition since long before deciding to run for president.

**Sexual orientation.** Both Dean and Kucinich advocate gay and lesbian rights. Again, however, Kucinich would seem to have the more consistent position. Although Dean says that, "Bringing civil unions to Vermont was 'the most important event in my political life,'" Mark Steyn reports that "at the time he was going round the state telling folks he was only doing it because the Vermont Supreme Court made him, and, instead of the usual showboating public ceremony, he signed the legislation behind closed doors."<sup>11</sup>

**Bush Tax Cuts.** Both Dean and Kucinich would undo the Bush tax cuts. However, as Vermont governor, Dean did as much for his rich as Bush has done for his. Robert Dreyfuss writes that, "Inheriting a fiscal crisis from

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<sup>10</sup> "Dean suggests seeking a new U.N. resolution that gives Iraq 60 days to disarm or face military action." Thomas Beaumont, "Candidate Dean rips rivals' stances on war with Iraq," Des Moines Register, Feb. 9, 2003. <http://desmoinesregister.com/news/stories/c4789004/20448207.html> (last visited July 8, 2003). See also, AP, "Dean First to Single Out Democratic Rivals for Criticism," CNN.com, March 28, 2003, <http://clinton.cnn.com/2003/ALLPOLITICS/03/28/sprj.irq.democrats.ap/> (last visited July 8, 2003). "[O]n Feb. 20, [2003,] Dean told Salon.com that 'if the U.N. in the end chooses not to enforce its own resolutions, then the U.S. should give Saddam 30 to 60 days to disarm, and if he doesn't, unilateral action is a regrettable, but unavoidable, choice.' . . . [S]ources close to other Democratic candidates are counterattacking, accusing Dean of turning up the volume on his passionate antiwar rhetoric in relatively liberal Iowa and then muting his war criticism in the more conservative key primary state of South Carolina." Jim Geraghty, note 5.

<sup>11</sup> Mark Steyn, "Democrats Are Turning to . . . This Guy?" Chicago Sun-Times, July 6, 2003, <http://www.suntimes.com/output/steyn/cst-edt-steyn06.html> (last visited July 8, 2003).

Snelling, Dean slashed the budget and dramatically reduced taxes . . . outmaneuver[ing] the Democratic leadership . . .”<sup>12</sup>

**Business and Environmental Issues.** Robert Dreyfuss tells the following story. “Not surprisingly, business groups have tended to back Dean since 1991. ‘He’s been a strong supporter of many of our baseline issues,’ says Chris Barbieri of the Vermont Chamber of Commerce. IBM’s O’Kane says, ‘For the most part, business has viewed him favorably.’ . . . When the plant in Essex Junction pulled for a highway construction project that environmentalists opposed, Dean took the company’s side. . . . Dean told a press conference, ‘There have been very few things that they’ve asked for that they haven’t gotten.’”<sup>13</sup>

**Death penalty.** Dean makes no secret of his support for the death penalty; he says as much on his Web site (quoted below). But this may have been a recent conversion; as Evelyn Nieves reports, “He went from being against the death penalty to supporting it in limited cases.”<sup>14</sup>

**Gun Control.** When it comes to gun control Dean’s position has remained relatively consistent. He proudly boasts, “I have an A rating from the National Rifle Association,”<sup>15</sup> and says of himself, “I am probably the most conservative of the candidates when it comes to gun control.”<sup>16</sup> The Chicago

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<sup>12</sup> “Dean has been guided for more than a decade by a behind-the-scenes kingmaker named Harlan Sylvester, a senior executive at Salomon Smith Barney . . . Sylvester praises Dean for forcing through a dramatic tax cut . . . over the objections of ‘the left of the party [who] wanted to soak the wealthy . . . That’s [the top one-quarter of one percent] 829 people, and a lot of them are clients of mine.’” Robert Dreyfuss, note 7.

<sup>13</sup> Robert Dreyfuss, note 7.

<sup>14</sup> Evelyn Nieves, note 3.

<sup>15</sup> Robert Dreyfuss, note 7. “He consistently earned top approval ratings from the National Rifle Assn,” according to the Los Angeles Times’ Elizabeth Mehren, note 9. The Washington Post editorialized, “[He] earned an ‘A’ rating from the National Rifle Association – he favored residents’ right to carry concealed weapons . . .” Washington Post, note 1.

<sup>16</sup> Evelyn Nieves, note 3.

Sun-Times' Mark Steyn reports that, "Dean reckons he can use his record on gun control (Vermont has none) to ditch the Northeast liberal baggage and sell himself to Southern white males."<sup>17</sup>

**Upbringing, family and class.** Robert Dreyfuss writes in the American Prospect, "Born . . . into a wealthy New York family – his father and grandfather were stockbrokers, his mother an art appraiser – Dean grew up in the Hamptons and on Manhattan's Upper East Side, attending elite private schools before going to Yale University. . . . [H]e recalls accompanying his father to the GOP's 1964 convention . . . . After college, Dean followed his father to Wall Street, spending two years as a broker."<sup>18</sup>

**Personality and style.** By June of 2003 Dean had already found it necessary to try to apologize for his attacks on fellow candidates Gephardt, Edwards, and Graham – but has yet to apologize to Kerry.<sup>19</sup> Evelyn Nieves reports in the Washington Post that Dean "has been called 'brusque,' 'brash,' 'blunt,' and 'belligerent'; a few more choice words on his part, and critics will be questioning whether he has the diplomatic skills needed . . . ." She quotes a Burlington, Vermont, reporter, "Sometimes Howard's tongue is faster than his brain," and notes, "Even supporters on Web logs said they thought Dean looked unprepared" on "Meet the Press."<sup>20</sup> Elizabeth Mehren of the Los Angeles Times reports "he can be prickly and sometimes mangles his facts."<sup>21</sup> The Washington Post's Howard Kurtz says Dean's "sometimes

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<sup>17</sup> Mark Steyn, note 11.

<sup>18</sup> Robert Dreyfuss, note 7. Evelyn Nieves writes in the Washington Post, "his father, grandfather and great-grandfather were investment bankers . . . ." Evelyn Nieves, note 3.

<sup>19</sup> Glen Johnson, "Mistakes, regrets – Dean's had a few," Boston Globe Online, June 18, 2003, [http://www.boston.com/dailyglobe2/169/nation/Mistakes\\_regrets\\_Dean\\_s\\_had\\_a\\_few-.shtml](http://www.boston.com/dailyglobe2/169/nation/Mistakes_regrets_Dean_s_had_a_few-.shtml) (last visited July 9, 2003).

<sup>20</sup> Evelyn Nieves, note 3. The Washington Post editorialized, "Mr. Dean's 'Meet the Press' performance was, to put it charitably, less than impressive. For a candidate whose appeal is based on a straight-talker image, his answers were at times waffling and evasive." Washington Post, note 1.

<sup>21</sup> Elizabeth Mehren, note 9. She also quotes Don Hooper, head of Vermont's National Wildlife Federation, as saying, "Not everything is filtered through his brain. And occasionally that gets him in trouble."

testy relations with the Fourth Estate aren't helping." He quotes the Baltimore Sun's Paul West: "It's a personality thing. He's not much of a schmoozer."<sup>22</sup>

**From His Own Web Pages.** Finally, here are some quotes from his own Web site, [www.deanforamerica.com](http://www.deanforamerica.com) (as of July 8, 2003):

Capital Punishment: "I believe the death penalty should be available for extreme and heinous crimes . . . [But it] should only be imposed after a fair trial."

Environment: "[T]here are legitimate concerns about provisions of the [Kyoto] agreement. . . . We have to make practical trade offs."

Homeland Security: "Governor Dean . . . would use these funds [from reversing the tax cuts] to establish a Homeland Defense Trust Fund . . . in addition to increased military, intelligence and police focus on offensive operation against terrorists . . . operating overseas . . . [and] our military special forces capabilities abroad . . ."

National Security: "We are attacking Baghdad with a war budget. We need a war budget here at home . . ."

Sensible Gun Laws: "I believe we should keep and enforce the federal gun laws we have . . . and then let the states decide for themselves what, if any, additional gun control laws they want . . . we need to resist attempts to tell states how to deal with guns . . ."

Universal Healthcare: "We'll establish an affordable health insurance plan people can buy into. . . . We shouldn't turn our back on the employer-based system we have now."

Welfare Reform: "Vermont was the first state to implement a statewide time-limited welfare program."

## **Conclusion.**

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<sup>22</sup> Howard Kurtz, note 1.



I conclude as I began.

This document is intended to provide – for Dean’s critics (who think he’s too liberal), supporters (who think he’s more liberal than he is), and those who are still making up their minds – a fuller, factual picture of Dean’s positions on the issues than either his critics or supporters have provided so far.

It is not an “opinion piece” written by me. I have only edited and organized the comments of journalists and others who have studied Dean and his record.

Fairly read, it will make him a more viable candidate in the eyes of the DLC-oriented Democrats (who may very well end up dominating the Democratic National Convention and dictating its candidate) who now believe him to be “too liberal.”

But it is also addressed to those actual, and potential, backers of Dennis Kucinich who find themselves confronting a choice between the two, want to choose the most progressive, and do not otherwise have access to this information.

An obvious disclaimer: This document was created without the knowledge or assistance of – nor has it even been seen, let alone encouraged or approved by – Dennis Kucinich or any member of his national campaign staff.

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