

The media vs. Howard Dean

Democrats haven't voted yet, but reporters have got the story: The former Vermont governor is angry, gaffe-prone and unelectable. How do they know? Republicans, and anonymous Democrats, told them so.

By Eric Boehlert

When the Washington Post introduced readers to Howard Dean in a long Page 1 feature July 6, part of a series of "meet the Democrats" candidate profiles, the paper went for the jugular, literally, with a cartoonish, unflattering description to open the article: "Howard Dean was angry. Ropy veins popped out of his neck, blood rushed to his cheeks, and his eyes, normally blue-gray, flashed black, all dilated pupils."

Six months later, an extended version of that campaign narrative, polished by Republican talking-points memos and echoed day after day by the mainstream media, remains a constant of the campaign trail: Dean is a sarcastic smart aleck with foot-in-the-mouth disease, a political ticking time bomb. The former Vermont governor remains the front-runner among Democratic voters, but he's gotten increasingly caustic treatment from the media, which has dwelled on three big themes—that Dean's angry, gaffe-prone and probably not electable—while giving comparatively far less ink to the doctor's policy and political prescriptions that have catapulted him ahead of the Democratic field. Newsweek's critical Jan. 12 cover story, "All the Rage: Dean's Shoot-From-the-Hip Style and Shifting Views Might Doom Him in November," achieved a nifty trifecta that covered anger, gaffes and electability, all three of the main media raps against Dean.

Certainly Dean has an unorthodox political style. Unvarnished and blunt, his pronouncements on domestic and foreign policy are at times controversial, occasionally sloppy and, in any event, deserve press scrutiny. It's obvious Dean has changed his position on some policy matters, such as NAFTA. As a governor he supported the free trade pact; as a presidential candidate he does not. He once suggested raising the retirement age to protect Social Security; now he does not. And Dean's electoral formula is far from certain—he's the former governor of a tiny Northeastern state, and no one knows how far his Internet base will carry him in a long, brutal national campaign against the well-funded, disciplined Bush machine.

But a look at the last half-year of media coverage—from the contentious treatment Dean received on "Meet the Press" in late June, through the often harsh Time and Newsweek cover stories last week—raises the question: Has his anger been so uncontrollable, his campaign miscues so frequent, are his political chances so unlikely as to merit the unrelenting focus on anger, "gaffes" and so-called unelectability that has come to dominate reporting on Dean?

For Dean's top backer there must be a sense of déjà vu in all of this. In 2000, Vice President Al Gore suffered from chronically caustic coverage that clung to all sorts of fictional, Republican-inspired spin about the vice president being an unlikable, untrustworthy exaggerator. Suddenly, as with Gore in 2000, it seems Dean is battling not only his Democratic opponents and Republican Party officials, he's also wrestling members of the media's chattering class who view him with growing unease and even contempt.

Without the Gore press fiasco as a backdrop it might seem as if Dean were simply wading through an inevitable rough patch with the press—that pundits and reporters are practicing the usual baptism-by-fire, forcing the unlikely front-runner to earn his stripes. That's a legitimate, even expected part of any race for the White House. But watching the striking similarities between the way the D.C. press is covering Dean and how it treated Gore, and contrasting it with the way it has treated President Bush, it's becoming harder to avoid the obvious conclusion: that Democratic presidential front-runners and nominees are held to a higher, tougher standard by the Washington press

corps.

Remember how Gore was dogged in the press by often phony, Republican-crafted stories about how he couldn't be trusted? A classic case in point was the "Gore invented the Internet" story. The facts were simple: In March 1999 Gore gave an interview to CNN in which he artlessly said, "During my service in the United States Congress, I took the initiative in creating the Internet." He was referring to his landmark "information superhighway" speech, as well as his well-known leadership in delivering key government funding to help nurture the Net in the '80s and early '90s. For a few days Gore's CNN comments were ignored in the 24-hour news cycle. Then the RNC issued a press release mocking Gore's statement, and soon the urban legend about Gore having claimed to invent the sprawling Internet took root in the political landscape. Almost five years later, even though it's been relentlessly debunked, it's a weed that can't be killed. Just last month it bloomed again when Gore endorsed the Internet-savvy Dean, and Joe Klein, Clarence Page, Jeff Greenfield, and Tim Russert all reached back and dug it up for public consumption. Lazy media habits die hard.

Today, the parallels between the Dean and Gore press coverage are impossible to miss. There's the charge Dean is constantly trying to "reinvent" himself, which Gore was accused of in 2000. That Dean is "angry"; Gore was tagged a "savage campaigner" during the primaries. There's the often nit-picking obsession with the "gaffes" that supposedly bedevil Dean; for Gore the problem was "exaggerations." There's even a tedious debate in the press about whether the New York City apartment Dean grew up in was luxurious, just as pundits went back and forth, in all seriousness, over whether as a boy Gore grew up in a fancy "suite" or just an "apartment" inside Washington's Fairfax Hotel.

New York Times columnist David Brooks recently ridiculed Dean for beginning "a sentence with, 'Us rural people . . . ' Dean grew up on Park Avenue and in East Hampton. If he's a rural person, I'm the Queen of Sheba." Somebody might want to tell Brooks (or his editor) that Dean has spent half his life living in *Vermont*, and his wife still practices family medicine in the tiny town of Shelburne (pop: 6,618). Meanwhile, of course, the Andover, Yale and Harvard-educated Bush's claim to a pure Texas pedigree is rarely questioned.

Dean's real media sin, aside from some clumsy misstatements, seems to be that he's running as an outsider, which always breeds contempt among the Washington press corps. As governor of Texas, Bush pretended to run as an outsider in 2000, but nobody in the news business took the claim seriously. Dean, though, seems bent on it, including taking aim at the Beltway press. When he officially announced his candidacy with a June 23 speech, he asked rhetorically, "Is the media reporting the truth?" And instead of schmoozing reporters on the campaign trail and handing out playground-type nicknames the way Bush did in 2000, Dean treats them professionally, but pushes back when he thinks they're wrong.

Perhaps not surprisingly, it's the Washington Post—particularly its editorial and Op-Ed pages, which double as the house organ of the D.C. establishment—that has taken the lead role in deriding the surging outsider. But the rest of the press also seems eager to play along with the established, critical Dean narratives.

By some measures, Dean's media troubles began with his June 22 appearance on "Meet the Press." During the hour-long sit-down, Dean faced off against a clearly combative host, Tim Russert, who prepared for the interview, in part, by asking the Bush Treasury Department to produce what the Washington Post called a "highly selective" analysis of the Democratic tax program, including rolling back scheduled tax cuts. Later in the program came a pop-quiz question about how many men and women currently serve in the military. When Dean said he didn't know the exact number and complained it was like asking him "who the ambassador to Rwanda is," Russert shot

back: “As commander in chief, you should know that.” Dean estimated there were between 1 and 2 million men and women in active duty; according to the Pentagon, there are 1.4 million.

What a sharp contrast to ’99, when Russert had a warm, respectful one-on-one with then-candidate Bush. When the host sprang a specific policy question on Bush about how many missiles would still be in place if a new START II nuclear weapons treaty were signed, Bush answered: “I can’t remember the exact number.” But unlike his session with Dean, Russert dropped the topic without lecturing Bush that “as commander in chief, you should know that.”

Beltway insiders clucked over Dean’s June appearance on NBC’s mighty “Meet the Press,” labeling him evasive and unprepared. But lots of party faithful saw something else—a candidate who would stand up to biased, big-foot pundits—and flooded the campaign with contributions that day. Instead of marking Dean’s leveling-off point, “Meet the Press” marked the beginning of his ascent to undisputed front-runner status.

In the wake of “Meet the Press,” the Washington Post on July 1 reported that a “new contentiousness” was creeping into Dean’s press coverage. The paper made that a self-fulfilling prophecy on July 6, uncorking the Page 1 Dean profile that opened with the image of the former governor’s bulging veins. In fact, in just two summertime features the Washington Post managed to use the following words to describe Dean: “abrasive,” “flinty,” “cranky,” “arrogant,” “disrespectful,” “yelling,” “hollering,” “fiery,” “red-faced,” “hothead,” “testy,” “short-fused,” “angry,” “worked up,” and “fired up.” And none of those adjectives were used in a complimentary way. In fact the Post, in an Aug. 4 Is-Dean-mean story, took pains to distinguish him from Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, whom the paper termed “brilliantly cranky.”

Soon the rest of the press was lavishing attention on Dean’s temper—researching it, analyzing it, trying to document it. Both Time and Newsweek’s August cover stories on Dean dutifully dwelled on the issue of anger. For Republicans the anger angle fit perfectly with the party’s plan to attack Dean personally rather than politically. As was true with Gore in 2000, the GOP spin machine is paying less attention to Dean’s policy agenda than to his alleged personality defects: “Arrogance” and “anger” are high on that list.

Picking up on the press’s handiwork, RNC chairman Ed Gillespie amplified the theme in September, accusing Democratic candidates of using “political hate speech” in their attacks on Bush. Soon the Bush reelection campaign Web site featured an anti-Dean video dubbed, “When Angry Democrats Attack.” More recently, a December RNC press release insisted Dean’s “Foreign Policy Attack Based on Anger Not Facts.” Bush himself sent out a fundraising letter, asking for help fending off “angry attacks” by Democrats. And last week Rush Limbaugh declared Dean to be “mad,” “angry” and “fit to be tied.”

Lately, it’s been hard to tell where GOP spin ends and independent analysis begins. On Dec. 28, the New York Times wrote, “President Bush’s campaign has settled on a plan to run against Howard Dean that would portray him as reckless, angry and pessimistic.” Two days later a Times headline described Dean as “prickly.” On Jan. 3, the paper ran an entire article about Dean’s temper.

And yet the anger issue may be fading, perhaps because reporters and pundits haven’t actually been able to uncover Dean’s temper. As the Times conceded in its obligatory Dean-is-angry article, nobody has seen him explode during this entire campaign. (The Times did manage to detail, secondhand, how years ago as governor, Dean once slammed his fist on a table.) Despite being publicly attacked by his Democratic rivals, by centrists at the Democratic Leadership Council, by Republicans, and by pundits (last month Slate magazine compared Dean to a “suicide bomber”), the candidate has kept his cool throughout.

More bad news for that beloved press story line: Seventy-six percent of Democrats

consider Dean “likable,” according to the latest CNN/Time poll. And among the larger pool of respondents, including Republicans and Independents, by a margin of nearly 2-to-1 they consider Dean to be an “optimist,” not a “pessimist.” (In addition, 40 percent opt for either “moderate” or “conservative” to describe Dean; just 24 percent pick “liberal.”) It’s the press, egged on by Republican spin and eager to play the role of hardheaded analyst, that has latched onto this notion that Dean is too passionate to be president.

But with the anger angle on the decline, the gaffe narrative is clearly gaining momentum, with obvious echoes of the press’s obsession with Gore’s exaggerations. Just as there was with Gore, there is often a nugget of fact that gets a much larger press story going: Dean did, in fact, wind up apologizing for his remarks about “wanting to be the candidate for guys with Confederate flags on their pickup trucks,” and he’s had to spend a lot of time explaining his comment about believing that if Osama bin Laden is caught, he deserves a trial to determine his guilt for 9/11.

But looking at just one staple of the gaffe stories—Dean’s remarks to radio host Diane Rehm about the “theory” that Bush was warned about 9/11—shows the way the media has sometimes colluded with the RNC and Republican pundits to distort Dean beyond recognition. When Rehm asked Dean in a Dec. 1 interview why he thought Bush wasn’t more forthcoming with the commission investigating the terrorist attacks, Dean replied, “The most interesting theory that I’ve heard so far—which is nothing more than a theory, it can’t be proved—is that he was warned ahead of time by the Saudis.”

For days Dean’s 9/11 comments drew little or no press attention. Reminiscent of Gore’s Internet legend “gaffe,” it wasn’t until the RNC research department stepped in, and conservative outlets hyped the incident, that the story took root in the mainstream press. Dean gave the interview Dec. 1, and it was ignored until Dec. 5, when Charles Krauthammer hyped it in his Washington Post column. On Dec. 7, Chris Wallace pressed Dean about the comment during an interview on “Fox News Sunday.” On Dec. 9, the RNC issued a press release (“Dean Sinks to New Low”), hoping to spark more interest in the story. On Dec. 11, Republican-friendly columnist Robert Novak weighed in, citing Krauthammer’s column approvingly and condemning Dean for having “neither apologized nor repudiated himself for passing along this urban legend.” By Dec. 18, the 9/11 episode had been embraced by reporters, serving as the Post’s lead example in a huge Page 1 story about Dean gaffes. Today, the episode is routinely included in media shorthand accounts of Dean verbal miscues.

But if December represented a kind of zenith in Dean-gaffe reporting throughout the media, the Washington Post still managed to stand out, with a month-long negative focus on the Democratic front-runner in its news and Op-Ed pages as well as in lead editorials. It began with Krauthammer’s Dec. 5 column, when the columnist, eager to prove Dean mentally unstable, was reduced to doctoring TV transcripts in hopes of transforming humorous banter into paranoid ravings. One week later, Post columnists Richard Cohen and David Broder teed off on Gore on the same day for endorsing Dean. Cohen belittled Gore for having “knifed [Sen. Joe Lieberman] in the back,” while Broder dubbed the endorsement “one of the more eccentric developments in modern political history.”

The Post signaled the arrival of gaffes as a big-time theme when the paper went Page 1 on Dec. 18 with an exposé examining Dean’s history of “making statements that are mean-spirited or misleading.” Worse, huffed the Post, “he made allegations—some during his years as governor—that turned out to be untrue.” But just as with the Gore exaggeration scandal, some of the paper’s proof seemed thin. The story cited a mundane back-and-forth disagreement between Dean and Rep. Gephardt over their competing healthcare proposals, the sort of dispute that’s a staple of every presidential campaign, as

well as a 6-year-old comment Dean once made about a Vermont farmer who may have had too many cows in his barn. Dean dutifully apologized to the farmer.

That very same day, the editorial page uncorked what ABC News' the Note dubbed "a button-popping, eye-bugging anti-Dean editorial." In it, the Post leveled the ultimate insider insult, labeling the candidate's views on foreign policy "beyond the mainstream," with the paper hinting that Bush's new policy of preventive wars was the new American mainstream. (The next day Dean told reporters voters can believe him "or they can believe the Washington Post.")

Ten days later, the Post flipped the coin on the Dean-is-angry angle and, in an argumentative article, mocked Dean's optimistic campaign call for a return to '60s idealism. The same day, yet another unsigned editorial appeared, informing readers, "We are troubled by aspects of Mr. Dean's character and personality."

Then on Dec. 31, Post columnists rang out the year with a double-fisted round of Dean bashing. "At long last, the revelation I've been waiting for: the reason why—beyond the prospect of epic, McGovernesque defeat—I feel so uneasy about Howard Dean," wrote Marjorie Williams. (The answer was he's a doctor.) On the same page came was this nearly identical, McGovern-referencing lead from Harold Meyerson: "I've got this Howard Dean problem, and it's not that I think he's George McGovern. Actually, I think he's John Wayne." (Apparently Post columnist E.J. Dionne never got the memo about Dean; he continues to defend the Democratic front-runner.)

One staple of news and opinion stories that cast Dean as headed for a McGovern-style drubbing is a fair-seeming grounding in *Democrats'* worries that Dean can't win. But it's worth noting that such stories almost never name these Democrats—except the other candidates for the nomination—who are allegedly wringing their hands over Dean. For its 2,800-word cover story last week, Newsweek found just one for an on-the-record quote: former Clinton aide James Carville. Syndicated columnist Novak filled an entire Dec. 22 dispatch about the "Dean dilemma" by referring vaguely to "thoughtful Democrats," "a sage Democratic practitioner," "a party loyalist" and "Democratic savants," all anonymous, who were all sick about Dean's surge. Novak never bothered to tell readers if any of those unnamed Democrats had ties to Dean's campaign competitors.

And yet, with all the focus on electability, most stories seem short on data that proves their thesis. Last week's Time story on Dean seemed to bury its lead, waiting until the 23rd paragraph in a 27-graph story to inform readers that, according to the magazine's own new polling data, Dean trails Bush by just six percentage points in a head-to-head matchup. That, despite a recent wave of good news for Bush on the economic and foreign policy front. It was a key fact that undercut the guts of the Time story (and every other Dean feature of late), which dwelled on doomsday scenarios for the Democrats if Dean is nominated. Others polls have shown the race to be less competitive, but the most recent Newsweek survey conducted Jan 8-9 found Dean trailing Bush by eight percentage points. That's hardly the making of an automatic rout, considering exactly four years ago Gore trailed Bush by 17 points, according to a January 2000 CNN poll. In the end, of course, Gore earned more votes than Bush.

To be sure, part of this winter's negative press barrage stems from the media's natural push to create a closer, more interesting horse race as votes in Iowa and New Hampshire approach, just as the press worked hard to prop up Sen. Bill Bradley's long shot against Gore in 2000.

On Monday, the Wall Street Journal breathlessly uncovered "signs of shakiness in front-runner Howard Dean's once commanding lead." The proof? A new poll by John Zogby that showed Dean leading Rep. Dick Gephardt by just two points in Iowa. But every pol knows Dean has *never* held a commanding lead in Iowa, which has always been considered a tossup state, since Gephardt hails from neighboring Missouri. The Journal also vaguely reported that "a separate poll showed retired Gen. Wesley Clark inching closer to Mr. Dean in New Hampshire." Since the paper doesn't bother to say

which poll it's citing, perhaps it was the most recent American Research Group tracking survey, which does indeed show Clark inching up . . . and still trailing Dean by 16 points. That's not to suggest Dean has the nomination wrapped up. He doesn't. But for some reason the Journal, out to prove Dean's commanding lead is gone, fails to reference his 16-point lead.

After his defeat in 2000, a bitter-sounding Gore talked to the New York Observer about the media's rightward drift, and the way reporters piece together negative narratives for Democrats: "Something will start at the Republican National Committee, inside the building, and it will explode the next day on the right-wing talk-show network. And then they'll create a little echo chamber, and pretty soon they'll start baiting the mainstream media for allegedly ignoring the story they've pushed into the zeitgeist."

In Dean's case, it's a little more complex: Sometimes the narrative starts with the mainstream media and gets picked up by the RNC, sometimes it's the other way around. What's beyond debate is that there's a media echo chamber—and its focus has been on Dean's flaws. And if the trend continues, more voters may agree with Gore about the rightward bias of the media. In a remarkable poll released Monday, the Pew Research Center found that 29 percent of Democrats think campaign coverage is tilted toward the GOP, up from 19 percent in 2000. If Dean is the nominee and the media trend continues, you can expect that number to jump again sharply by 2008.

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