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The Myth of the Democratic Establishment

Howard Dean's grassroots rebellion against the power that isn't.

By Nicholas Confessore

It's not hard to discern the strengths that have turned Howard Dean from a dark-horse candidate to the clear frontrunner for the Democratic presidential nomination. Over the last six months, the former Vermont governor has sparked a hardy, dedicated movement of more than half a million grassroots followers. Dean and his staff have harnessed the Web in innovative ways to organize and expand his following, huge crowds of which emerge at Dean's major campaign appearances. He's not only raised far more money than any other Democratic candidate; he's also taken about half of it in donations of less than $200, displaying a flair for small-donor fundraising in a party that has traditionally been terrible at it. And Dean has accomplished all this by taking a plain stance against a popular war and criticizing the Bush administration as often as possible, with an appealing bluntness few professional politicians are capable of pulling off.

But perhaps Dean's most impressive feat, admirers and critics alike agree, has been "taking on the Washington Democratic establishment," as pundit Tucker Carlson recently put it on CNN. Dean has faced a phalanx of Washington-based candidates—Rep. Richard Gephardt (D-Mo.), Sen. John Kerry (D-Mass.), and Sen. Joe Lieberman (D-Conn.)—each of whom enjoys such establishment advantages as name recognition, a passel of ace political consultants, and deep Beltway roots.

When those candidates didn't quite catch fire, Gen. Wesley Clark entered the race, promptly earning the explicit or implicit backing of many leading Democrats, including former President Bill Clinton, whose fundraising network helped Clark build up a substantial war chest in a matter of weeks. But Dean has kept racking up poll leads and fundraising totals, leaving Washington insiders wondering how he could resist the establishment's onslaught. As one columnist for The Christian Science Monitor wrote in December, "Most establishment Democrats and liberals in the news media are waiting for someone—anyone—to dethrone former Vermont Gov. Howard Dean as the party's presidential front-runner." Dean's own campaign sees itself as locked in mortal combat with "a pretty strong establishment" as campaign manager Joe Trippi described it in a December appearance on "This Week."

A week before Christmas, I decided to seek out the Democratic establishment, hoping to stride through its halls of power and behold its vastness firsthand. Catching a cab a few blocks from the White House, I made my way down K Street, passing by the trade associations and corporate offices that today rarely hire a lobbyist without approval from Republican leaders on the Hill. Veering onto Massachusetts Avenue, we drove by the gleaming wedge of glass and concrete that houses the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank spearheading President Bush's effort to privatize Social Security, and circled around the Capitol, where Republicans control both chambers of Congress and Democrats have trouble lining up rooms to caucus in. We passed by the Heritage Foundation, numerous alumni of which now help set national policy in the Bush administration, turned right, and meandered over to Capitol Hill, a funky neighborhood perpetually on the verge of gentrification.

The driver let me off in front of a modest, four-story brick office building which houses, among other things, a temp agency, a dry cleaners, and the National Barley Growers Association. The security guard ignored me as I slipped into the elevator, rode to the top floor, and stepped out into the modest, pastel-colored reception area of the Democratic Leadership Council, which helped get the last Democratic president into office, and whose early and frequent criticisms of Dean have helped highlight his fight against the Washington establishment. I was led through a quiet warren of cubicles to

the large, paper-strewn office of Bruce Reed, the DLC's president, chief policy thinker, and resident wit. Reed is a cheerful, outgoing sort who usually appears younger than his 43 years. But today, an air of resignation lurks behind the smile.

When I ask him what the establishment is doing to stop Dean, Reed grimaces slightly, as if he's just taken a sip of castor oil. "What are we doing to stop him?" asks Reed. "From our standpoint, this has always been up to the candidates themselves." Reed and his colleagues at the DLC—often painted by liberals as a centrist Death Star, bulging with corporate money and insidious influence over party affairs—have published a few op-eds comparing Dean's candidacy to George McGovern's disastrous 1972 run. But that's about it. Some DLC operatives are working with Lieberman, others with Edwards. The New Democratic Network, a DLC-descended PAC, hasn't attacked Dean; instead, they've praised his use of the Internet to build a campaign organization. "Let's back up to your central premise," Reed continues, gazing wearily at a 7-inch-tall cup of Starbucks sitting before him on a conference table. "There is no establishment. We"—meaning Washington Democrats—"are a constellation of interest groups and ideologies and congressional voices. The evidence that there isn't an establishment is just the mere fact that we have so many candidates—and such a collective inability to choose between them."

Reed's point is hard to dispute. Liberal Democrats are as divided as centrists; many went early for Kerry, the early "establishment" candidate who has lately flopped. Labor is split down the middle, with the old industrial unions backing Gephardt, a longtime ally, and the service unions edging towards Dean. Most congressional Democrats and members of the Democratic National Committee—who, as convention "superdelegates," could conceivably swing behind and energize an anti-Dean candidate—are less interested in challenging the front-runner than in gauging the precise moment of his inevitability. "You have to realize, these people are all followers. Not leaders," says one Democratic strategist. "They put their finger to the wind." Democratic donors are also split. After Dean, no candidate has earned a sustained edge in campaign cash. Even the Clinton wing of the party, by some accounts the puppet masters behind the "stop Dean" movement, aren't much more than an inchoate collection of pollsters, consultants, and former White House staffers divvied up among the rival campaigns of other candidates. "You could undoubtedly find an enormous number of people who would want to stop Dean," one Democratic strategist told me in December. "But there's nowhere to go with them. What are you going to do—spend the holidays convincing other candidates to drop out of the races?"

There is, to be sure, a group of Democrats in Washington who think of themselves as part of an establishment. They have helped raise money for and steer talent to different candidates for the party's nomination. They have access to the press, to whom they have dispensed a litany of on-and-off-the-record doubts about Dean's electability. They convene for anxious steak lunches at the Palm. But to call them an "establishment" is like calling the House of Lords a force in British legislative affairs. It is almost impossible to exaggerate how incoherent today's Democratic establishment is, or how little power it has to accomplish anything of substance. Howard Dean has overcome many hurdles on his way to becoming the Democratic frontrunner. But the Democratic establishment is not exactly at the top of the list.

Party crashing

The absence of a true Democratic establishment is the central fact not only of the current presidential contest, but also of the last three years of Beltway politics. Washington Democrats are not wholly without political and strategic assets. But when you put it all together, there's not much to look at.

Democrats not only lack control of the White House and either chamber of Congress,

they don't even have strong party institutions to fall back on. Not long after the 2000 elections, party chieftains installed fundraising Wunderkind Terry McAuliffe at the Democratic National Committee with a mandate to rebuild the party's long-dilapidated political infrastructure. He's succeeded about as well as anyone could, considering that after he became chairman, those same party chieftains successfully pushed through Congress a campaign finance reform which deprived the DNC of most of its income. These days, McAuliffe is reduced to bragging that his new small-donor program brings in enough money to cover the DNC's operating expenses.

The Democrats also lack the kind of idea factories which, in the absence of controlling any branch of government, are vital to helping parties formulate policy and strategy. The Brookings Institution, supposedly the brain trust of left-leaning intellectuals, houses a number of former Clinton policy hands and publishes well-turned monographs on nuclear nonproliferation and pension reform. But it's hardly a node in the Democratic resistance—until recently, it was run by a Republican. The foremost advocacy-oriented think tanks on the left—the Economic Policy Institute, the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, and the DLC's Progressive Policy Institute—together spend about as much in a year as does just one of the three prominent conservative policy shops, the American Enterprise Institute. Meanwhile, the pressures of Republican rule are beginning to undermine the Democrats' relationship with such long-time allies as the AARP, which recently endorsed GOP-authored prescription-drug legislation, handing Bush a major legislative victory to tout during his reelection campaign. And while Beltway Republicans can count on the likes of the *The Washington Times* and the FOX News Channel to function as de facto party organs, the Democrats have no such relationship with the mainstream media. NPR has a liberal temperament but, to say the least, lacks a Rush Limbaugh-like taste for political warfare. And *The Washington Post*, once the liberal Beltway media's high command, if anything now reflects a center-right perspective. The paper's editorial page, having spent the Clinton years hyperventilating about Whitewater, opined that Enron's White House contacts weren't worth a congressional investigation and strongly supported the war in Iraq.

Washington Democrats have recognized their own disarray, and complain about it often. Yet they have continued to behave in many respects as a party in power, negotiating with Republican leaders on the Hill as if they, and not the GOP, govern the nation. "Democrats are inclined to legislate," says Chris Jennings, who ran the health-care portfolio during the Clinton administration. "They always want to be the dealmaker." Nowadays, however, instead of making a deal, the Democrats usually get rolled. Most recently, Sen. Edward Kennedy (D-Mass.) helped congressional Republicans craft their prescription-drug proposal on the understanding that it would not include provisions aimed at privatizing Medicare—provisions which nevertheless made their way into the final legislation, unveiled in December and now signed into law. "It's not just that Ted Kennedy was the old liberal lion, but that he supposedly knew how to play the game," says one union strategist, describing the shock many Washington Democrats felt at how the Medicare debate played out. "He's been on the Hill for 40 years. How could he get conned like this?"

Even as out-of-power Democrats act like establishmentarians, the city's ascendant GOP ruling class retain the instincts of revolutionaries. For three years, Democratic voters and activists across the country have watched the Republican Party assail, with seeming impunity, everything they hold dear. Aside from filibustering the GOP's energy plan and blocking a handful of exceptionally reactionary judicial nominees, there are few success stories to which Democratic leaders can point. There's no question that this experience has created a wellspring of anger against both congressional Republicans and President Bush. But the GOP's romp has also elicited from the Democratic grassroots a deep contempt for the party's Washington leadership. That frustration is the defining characteristic of the ongoing primary contest, dwarfing debates over policy, ideology,

or electoral strategy. Dean and his movement have risen up to do battle against an establishment that doesn't really exist—which is why he will almost certainly be the next Democratic nominee. "Dean's people are motivated, they're coherent and cohesive," says one Democratic insider. "They're giving him money hand over fist. And he can just knock over this Potemkin village."

Demise of the machine

The Democratic establishment was once vigorous and powerful, encompassing not only Washington's Hill barons, party officials, and a large labor movement, but also the heads of various state and city Democratic organizations, ranging from the courthouse cliques of the Solid South to Richard J. Daley's Chicago machine. The old Democratic establishment was not necessarily democratic, and not always progressive. But by linking the local and state institutions that engaged average citizens to the Washington elites who crafted legislation, this establishment provided crucial capacities to the Democratic Party. It could hash out compromises on everything from labor law to presidential candidates (often in the proverbial smoke-filled room). In the days before television, it communicated the party's message and organized rank-and-file voters. And for three decades, this establishment held together the disparate blocs—conservative Southerners, urban autocrats, blacks, union members, and northern liberals—that made the Democrats a majority party. Between the 1930s and 1960s, the Democrats won seven out of nine presidential elections and usually controlled both houses of Congress as well.

But the same forces that dismantled the old Democratic coalition during the next two decades also dismantled the old Democratic establishment. Conservative whites deserted the party over its support for civil rights and began to vote Republican. The labor movement began a slow decline in membership and influence. Civil-service laws whittled away at the power of the big-city machines. What prerogatives the Democratic establishment retained were slowly stripped away by liberal reformers within the party. During the late 1970s, a DNC-sponsored commission chaired by George McGovern eviscerated the establishment's power over nominations, linking delegate selection to the outcome of primary elections rather than the fiat of state-level party bosses.

The reformers succeeded in breaking up the old system. But the effect was less to devolve power to the party's grassroots than to shrink what had been a national Democratic establishment into a largely Washington-based one, which absorbed the reformers into its ranks. Power flowed away from the disintegrating state organizations and to a growing array of Washington-based pressure groups descended from the civil rights, feminist, consumer, and environmental movements. But these—the Children's Defense Fund, Common Cause, and Public Citizen, among others—increasingly were Beltway-based organizations run by professional activists. They raised money from members but didn't involve them much in day-to-day politics the way, say, neighborhood party organizations turned out voters in return for filling potholes. These groups influenced politics largely through endorsements, lobbying their allies on the Hill, direct mail, and media campaigns. (The exceptions were labor and the black urban machines which supplanted the white ethnic ones, both of which could still turn out voters the old-fashioned way.) Similarly, as advertising and free media began to supplant state parties and urban machines as the establishment's conduit to voters, a burgeoning class of Washington-based pollsters, political consultants, and fundraisers came to the fore. The reign of the bosses gave way to the reign of the experts.

But although this post-1972 Democratic establishment owned a huge chunk of Washington real estate, it was not particularly well-organized. The younger members of congress and newly-assertive liberal activists coexisted uneasily with the remnants of the pre-reform establishment. By Ronald Reagan's first inauguration, the DNC and other party organizations were metaphorically atrophied and, at times, literally bankrupt.

For most of the 1980s, the Democrats had no clear leader and, after three successive presidential losses, no governing ideology to replace the old Cold War liberalism.

What gave the Democratic ruling class power was its permanence. Decades of Democratic dominance in Washington had bequeathed a wealth of experience and talent, people who knew the levers of power and how to work them. Many of Washington's key trade associations, law firms, and lobby shops were run by operatives who had cut their teeth in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations. (Among the last of them is Jack Valenti, the former Johnson aide and long-time head of the Motion Picture Association of America, who this year announced his decision to retire.) Control of the House and Senate helped the congressional wing of the party extract jobs and campaign contributions from Republican-leaning business interests, while giving Democratic-leaning interests a purchase on policymaking and at least some incentive to cooperate and compromise with one another. With a majority in the House, Democrats could control the committee staffs, which provided a research engine to develop and implement policy. The Speaker's Office, especially under Rep. Tip O'Neill (D-Mass.), provided a message of the day around which other Democrats and their allies could align themselves. Indeed, to many Democrats—not to mention many Republicans—the permanence of Democratic rule on the Hill was an accepted fact of Washington life.

When it came to presidential primaries, the Washington-based Democratic establishment wasn't as dominant as its earlier incarnation. Small groups of party officials could no longer handpick delegates and tell them whom to vote for. Insurgent or "entrepreneurial" candidates could in theory win the nomination simply by winning the affections of Democratic primary voters, as Jimmy Carter did in 1976. But thanks to the earlier campaign finance reforms, a candidate's ability to raise money became the chief criteria for whether or not he or she could make a successful run for the nomination. During the early 1980s, party leaders reasserted their power by front-loading the primary schedule. That made it hard for later entrepreneurial candidates, such as Gary Hart, to raise money quickly enough to sustain a surge, and put a premium on the fundraising advantages that usually accrued to candidates blessed by the establishment, such as Walter Mondale. Day to day, the establishment could exert real power in Washington even when on the defensive. Not long after Reagan's 1980 victory, for example, a group of party strategists began to meet biweekly with O'Neill's general counsel, Kirk O'Donnell, to plot strategy. Seizing on Reagan's proposal to cut the Social Security benefits of some retirees, the Democrats began to introduce legislation to put House conservatives on the wrong side of the issue. "It was drip, drip," says Tony Coelho, the former California congressman who at the time ran the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee. "We created a voting record where the Republicans were voting wrong on Social Security and so forth. They were winning, but in '82, we ran against them on a lot of the stuff we had forced them to vote on. We picked up 26 seats and then we kept going from there."

Every scrap of power this establishment possessed in Washington, however, was contingent on Democratic control of Congress. The labor movement was not nearly as large or vigorous as it had once been. Left-leaning pressure groups derived most of their power not by mustering large, active memberships on the ground, but through their access to and tight alliance with Democrats on the Hill. And all along, the foundations of that majority were rotting away. Electorally, Democratic rule in the House and Senate rested on a large contingent of Southern conservatives whose constituents had been reliably voting for Republican presidential candidates for over a decade. Financially, congressional Democrats had, through the 1980s and early 1990s, become dependent on campaign cash from corporate special interests, who gave to them not out of ideological sympathy but in return for tax breaks, subsidies, and other giveaways that gave the party the appearance—and often the reality—of decadence and corruption. Some of that money went to build voter lists and send direct mail, but the Democrats never really

created a permanent, enduring party infrastructure: a grassroots fundraising capacity and policy and message shops independent of the Hill.

When Bill Clinton took office in 1993, the party looked healthy. Democrats commanded the White House, respectable majorities in the House and Senate, and control of 40 statehouses; Democratic governors represented eight-tenths of the U.S. population. Clinton annexed the DNC to the White House political shop, and directed its chairman, David Wilhelm, to focus all his efforts towards passing health-care reform. That move was understandable at the time. But instead of universal health care, the party got a legislative debacle that deprived the Democrats of a clear success on which to run. Combined with the House banking scandal fomented by Rep. Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.) and his allies, the passage of NAFTA (which depressed the labor vote), and Clinton's 1993 tax hike (which motivated the GOP base), the result was decisive. In November 1994, the Democrats lost control of both Houses of Congress for the first time in four decades.

Base instincts

The conservatives who took over the House in 1995 were organized very differently from the Democrats they overthrew. They had built their movement largely without control of governmental institutions, in the shade of Democratic rule. During the 1970s, with the help of newly energized right-wing donors, conservative activists had begun to build a relatively small network of advocacy think tanks, media outlets, legal advocacy shops, and ideological pressure groups to counter both the Democratic establishment and what they viewed as a compliant, dissolute Republican establishment. During the 1980s, this "counter-establishment," as journalist Sidney Blumenthal called it, challenged the GOP old guard for dominance in the White House and on the Hill. They built up a critique of liberalism and a system of institutions that, by combining policy, political, and media functions under one roof, could sustain their movement in the wilderness.

Far from demoralizing the conservative counter-establishment, Clinton's 1992 victory caused it to gel. Grover Norquist's famed Wednesday Group began meeting not long after Election Day, coordinating key conservative interest groups, Hill staffers, and media. Think tanks like AEI and Cato expanded to absorb the exodus of policymakers from the Bush administration, keeping conservative talent within the Beltway. While right-wing media outlets attacked Clinton's character, conservative backbenchers brought together social conservatives and business lobbyists—uneasy partners in the GOP coalition through the 1980s—to leach support from his policy agenda and lay the groundwork for a counter-attack. When the GOP took over Congress in 1995, the counter-establishment fused with the Republicans' congressional wing to become, in effect, Washington's new ruling class.

But although the Democratic establishment was effectively dead, its members were slow to pick up on the fact. Gingrich's implosion in 1995, followed by modest Democratic pickups during the next few election cycles, lulled House Democrats—and the interest groups which radiated outward from them—into believing that they could retake the Hill without the kind of spade work that the conservatives had invested. Most importantly, the Clinton White House lent the rump Democratic establishment some of the capacity they had with Congress. Although he had been in many respects a Beltway outsider, Clinton's popularity, political acumen, and fundraising prowess lent Washington Democrats the appearance of vitality, even as their brethren at the state and local level continued to lose ground and the soft-money scandals of the mid-1990s decimated what remained of the party's infrastructure. Control of the executive branch provided thousands of jobs to Democratic policy experts, while the White House itself acted as a centripetal force on the party's congressional caucus and disparate interest groups. The president himself represented "a single voice that could define the debate" and drag the rest of the party establishment along behind him," noted Bruce Reed, while the White

House provided "a table to sit around" to resolve disagreements and formulate strategy.

All of that was lost in 2001, when George W. Bush entered office. Without institutional support, the Democratic establishment fractured into its constituent parts, none of them dominant in terms of money, message, or ideology. Unlike conservatives, the Democrats hadn't built up a farm team of ideological institutions to absorb the governing experience and political talent streaming out of the White House. As Kenneth Baer, a Democratic consultant and former White House speechwriter, lamented in Slate a month after Bush's inauguration, "One way to explain the party's post-election drift is that the people who best understand the intersection of policy and politics—those most able to craft a Democratic response to Bush—are scattered to the wind."

Responsibility for crafting a Democratic strategy and message defaulted to the minority leaders in the House and Senate, Gephardt and Sen. Tom Daschle (D-S.D.). But although they had some early successes—notably, capitalizing on White House arrogance to convince Sen. Jim Jeffords (I-Vt.) to abandon his party, giving Democrats control of the Senate—Daschle and Gephardt couldn't create an effective opposition. One problem was that the Democrats still didn't understand how tenuous their hold on power really was. When the Enron scandal boiled over in early 2002, for instance, Joe Lieberman—at the time chairman of the Senate Government Affairs Committee—argued that the Democrats shouldn't "rush to judgment" and waited five months to subpoena the White House regarding administration officials' contacts with Enron executives, by which point public interest in the firm's bankruptcy had waned. Democrats also lacked the P.R. capabilities that conservatives had built up during their years out of power. When conservative activists and media outlets began to attack Daschle as "an obstructionist" for blocking Republican energy legislation—one group, the Family Research Council, ran ads comparing him to Saddam Hussein—the Democrats had no war room equipped to bombard newspapers with letters to the editor, demanding an apology. Nor could Democrats muster an army of chat-show surrogates who would aggressively parrot the party line on tax cuts.

Part of the problem, of course, was that there was no party line—on tax cuts, or anything else. Without an apparatus to build consensus around effective message, strategy, or policy, the Democrats spent the first two years of the Bush administration, in the midst of a recession, without an economic plan. As the GOP aggressively pushed massive a series of long-term tax cuts mostly benefiting the wealthy, the Democrats split, with liberals preaching total opposition, moderates favoring modest tax cuts for the middle class, and a few conservatives jumping ship to support Bush's plan. The plan which in retrospect made the most tactical and substance sense—massive, short-term cuts for the middle class, financed by payroll-tax reductions—was promoted by some party leaders, including former Labor Secretary Robert B. Reich. But without a mechanism for dragging other Democrats on board, the party was left without a national economic message to campaign on. They decided to talk a lot about a Democratic prescription-drug plan instead—and found out, too late, that voters couldn't tell their proposal apart from the Republicans'.

Without strong party institutions, the Democrats became even more dependent on the resources of their special interests—and even less willing to break with those interests even when doing so would have been politically prudent. There is no better example than the 2002 debate over creating a new department for homeland security. Democrats came up with the idea, while Republicans spent five months resisting it. But when Bush decided to support it—with provisions that would have given him authority to hire and fire employees of the new agency and dissolve their collective bargaining agreements—Senate Democrats blocked the bill out of deference to public-employee unions. On the campaign trail that fall, Bush successfully painted Democratic candidates like Vietnam veteran Sen. Max Cleland (D-Ga.) as soft on terrorism, arguably costing Democrats control of the Senate.

It took another year for Democrats to begin sorting through the lessons of that defeat. And only when the failures of Bush's Iraq policy—misleading statements in the State of the Union, failure to find weapons of mass destruction, and chaos on the ground—became evident did establishment Democrats, including those running for president, find their voices and begin aggressively criticizing the president. But by then, it was too late. Dean had gotten there first.

Primary schooling

Since last winter, the 2004 primary campaign has been, for all intents and purposes, a referendum on the Washington establishment, held by the party's grassroots. Rank-and-file Democrats love Dean not so much because he's "taken on" a powerful Washington establishment, but because he has tapped voters' fury and dismay that the establishment seems so powerless—even with half the popular vote behind it. It's because the establishment is pathetic, not powerful, that these people support Dean.

This grassroots fury against the "Washington Democrats"—as Dean likes to call them—is the only factor that clearly explains his extraordinary ascent and the striking inability of any other candidates to catch fire. Certainly it's got little to do with his stance on individual issues. Yes, Dean came out against the war resolution that other establishment candidates voted for. But Wesley Clark also opposed the resolution. And while Clark has been derided for supposedly flip-flopping on how he would have voted on the war resolution, Dean himself has split hairs. He supported an alternative resolution, sponsored by Sen. Joe Biden (D-Del.), that was only slightly less of a blank check than the one that actually passed. In most other respects, Dean's views are hardly different from his establishment rivals. He's more traditionally liberal on tax cuts (he'd repeal all of them, where Lieberman and Edwards would keep the middle-class cuts), but of the five major candidates, his health-care proposal is the least radical. His ideas to expand federal aid for child care and higher education are, as Ryan Lizza pointed out in *The New Republic* recently, rather Clintonesque. Despite efforts by centrist intellectuals and some journalists to limn his candidacy as a liberal-versus-center battle, issue by issue, it doesn't add up. If voters had wanted a left-liberal candidate, Dennis Kucinich or Al Sharpton would be leading the polls. Dean's supporters are not stupid. They know that in Dean, they are getting a flinty, balanced-budget governor who opposes gun control and favors welfare reform. But that's not the source of their admiration. Dean's supporters love him because, unlike everyone else in those endless debates, he's not tainted by association with the hapless Washington establishment.

But the Democrats' grassroots aren't the only ones who find the establishment lacking. Increasingly, the establishment finds itself lacking, too. The Medicare debacle, in some ways the party's signal defeat of the last three years, seems to have made a particular impact. "It illustrated to them that it was possible to bypass the Democratic Party on legislation, even on an issue that they believed they were the ultimate arbiter of," says Chris Jennings. Whereas Senate Democrats were afraid to oppose flat-out any bill that offered hundreds of billions in benefits to seniors, top Democrats in the House took a close look and decided to dig in their heels. The lock-step Republican majority passed the bill anyway, but many observers noted that, under pressure from House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi, only 16 Democrats voted for the bill—drawing a clear line in the sand on a piece of legislation which now faces growing criticism from those it was supposed to benefit.

There are also the first hints that Washington's Democrats have learned a thing or two from the conservative insurgents who displaced them. In early December, I sat down with John Podesta, who was the last chief of staff to serve under Clinton, in the sparsely-furnished corner office of his new think tank, the Center for American Progress. "Good riddance," he replied when asked about the decline of the Democratic

establishment. "It wasn't really working." Podesta is one of a small but growing group of Washington Democrats who have begun to recognize not only the depth of their disarray, but also of how badly equipped the party is to change. And they've taken the first steps towards building the kind of institutions that sustained conservatives during the 1970s and 1980s. Podesta, like the men who founded the key advocacy think-tanks on the right, is a political operative, not an academic. (He holds a law degree, but no Ph.D.—a credential required for permanent employment at a place like Brookings.) Instead of monographs, his think tank produces op-ed-style policy briefs and the "Progress Report," a trenchant, opinionated roundup of Republican legislation and policies produced daily by the communications staff. Meanwhile, a new wave of the so-called 527 organizations—each a coalition of Democratic-leaning interest groups, including labor—have sopped up the funds that used to fill the DNC's soft-money accounts. And instead of blowing it all on television ads, as the party did for so many years, most of the 527s have funneled the cash into massive, well-coordinated turnout and voter contact operations in preparation for the 2004 elections.

Increasingly, Washington Democrats have begun to understand what Dean's candidacy can offer them. For the last two decades, the establishment has tried to organize voters indirectly, through pollsters, pundits, and consultants rather than directly, through "people who connected with voters, who could control different power structures across the country," says one labor strategist. Unlike the old machines, Dean's burgeoning organization is fundamentally decentralized and democratic. (One popular Deaniac slogan: "Dean is the messenger. We are the message.") But by collaborating with a far-flung network of pro-Dean blogs and Web sites, while using such tools as Meetup.com to bring activists together on local college campuses and in neighborhood bars, Dean's campaign involves his supporters at the granular level, rather as Daley's aldermen and ward heelers did. "We didn't keep building the infrastructure of the party," notes Coelho, who many in the party still hold responsible for the Democrats flat-footedness leading up to the 1994 elections. "It's time to permit the system to move on. [Dean's people] are creating a new group that will take over at some point, and I think that when they do, our party will be stronger than in the past."

But even as Dean continues to occasionally bash Washington Democrats in public, his top staff—including his campaign co-chairman, Steve Grossman, a former DNC head—have spent the last few months quietly reaching out to them. And for good reason: Should Dean win both the nomination and, next fall, the presidency, he will face a massive, motivated, well-funded Republican establishment that will work every day to defeat his agenda, no matter how liberal or centrist it is. As disorganized as they are, Beltway Democrats still constitute a valuable reservoir of talent, experience, and money. Without a rebuilt, robust Democratic counter-establishment, Dean will be a monumental failure as president. Howard Dean needs the Washington Democrats, in other words, as much as they need him.