

DAILY EXPRESS

## Stalled Process

by Jonathan Cohn

For most of last night, it looked like nothing could be more embarrassing for Howard Dean and his supporters than his distant third place showing in the Iowa caucuses. Then Dean took the stage at his campaign headquarters and started talking.

Actually, if Dean had merely been talking, that would have been fine. But Dean wasn't talking. He was screaming, turning red in the face, jabbing his index finger in the air, carrying on and on about all the states in which he was going to compete. At one point, he congratulated the two men who had beaten him, John Edwards and John Kerry. But he did so without a hint of grace, vowing instead to fight them in a way that seemed positively silly—and maybe even a little scary.

Now, one speech does not a campaign unmake. The same goes for one state's caucuses. Dean still has enormous political assets as the nomination battle turns to New Hampshire and beyond. As of this morning, anyway, he is still leading in the national polls and most of the state polls. He still has the most money and the most extensive national organization. But none of that will do Dean any good if he doesn't grasp why he lost Iowa. And nothing he or his advisers said last night suggests they get it.

The spin from Dean headquarters seems to be that third place in Iowa is impressive given where Dean started a year ago. That'd be true if Dean was an unknown candidate who'd surged ahead in the final weeks. But by now Iowans know Dean as well as anybody outside of Vermont. He spent more time (not to mention money) campaigning there than any other candidate, which is why he first took the lead there and seemed to have such a lock on the vote. But when it came time for Iowans to caucus, Dean couldn't appeal beyond a narrow group of supporters, much as Dean critics predicted all along (despite protests from the likes of yours truly).

All of the polls—not just the Zogby tracking polls, whose accuracy was somewhat in question—detected Dean's support dropping while Edwards's and Kerry's surged. And the numbers appeared even worse upon closer inspection. For example, just 14 percent of Iowans listed Dean as their second-choice candidate, far behind the other candidates. Iowans may not have agreed about who they liked best, but they seemed to agree about whom among the major candidates they liked least. All of this jibed with anecdotal evidence from correspondents in the field, who reported that enthusiasm at Dean rallies had waned while Edwards and Kerry were playing to packed houses. (How about that? The press got it right.)

Both Dean and his campaign manager, Joe Trippi, have complained about the unfair treatment they've gotten lately—and, certainly, they have a point. As the putative front-runner, Dean has endured a withering assault for months now, while his rivals have largely avoided that level of scrutiny. The peculiar four-way dynamics of Iowa made this problem even worse. By far the most intense sniping among the candidates was between the two men who until this week were the leaders, Dean and Dick Gephardt. The attacks obviously hurt both men, allowing Edwards and Kerry to move up in the polls. In addition, on caucus night, in any precinct where Gephardt wasn't viable, his supporters likely went to Edwards and Kerry—precisely because the feud between their man and Dean had become so intense.

Still, tonight's results confirmed flaws in Dean that will dog him beyond Iowa: It's likely that the voters who started following the campaign late were precisely those who found Dean's persona, politics, or platform the least appealing. (A video clip of Dean dressing down a heckler at a campaign event got replayed over and over in Iowa in the run-up to the caucuses.) And some voters surely got cold feet about nominating a guy

who seemed so unpredictable and untested. And some probably just got tired of Dean's shtick, particularly since his rivals have co-opted the best parts of it while offering voters something else Dean hasn't: an optimistic vision for the future (Edwards) or veteran steadiness (Kerry).

But it's likely that Iowa has revealed an even deeper problem for Dean. It's become a cliché to say that Dean's campaign message is more about process than message, but lately it's been true. Take, for example, something Dean said during an ABC interview broadcast just yesterday, in response to a question about why he was the best candidate:

The first [reason] is I can win. We have an enormous base behind us that really wants to change the country. It is energy and excitement. It is what the Republicans built for a long time. Now, we've built it on the Democratic side, and that's what most Democrats want. . . . And I think the other guys are gonna have a tough time because they can't build those kind of, those kinds of, that kind of enthusiastic base. The second is my record. I'm a governor, everybody else is a senator or a congressman. They talk about health insurance. We've done it for most people. They talk about balanced budgets. I balance budgets for a living, so those are the two things. And the third thing is and this may be the most important other than maybe the "I can win" argument, is I'm willing to stand up for what I believe. I opposed the war when 70 percent of the American people didn't agree with me. I did it because I thought it was the right thing to do. . . .

The problem isn't so much what Dean said; it's the order in which he said it. All too frequently in the last few weeks, Dean has emphasized his movement at the expense of his message. Yes, he was just responding to his critics, who were constantly questioning his electability. But the way to answer those critics was to keep his issues—and his record—front and center, and let the poll numbers speak for themselves.

Even worse, when Dean did turn to issues, he didn't look ahead—he looked backwards, to the war. When his Iowa poll numbers first started dropping, he went on the air with an ad attacking other candidates for supporting Bush on the Iraq war resolution. As *Time's* Joe Klein has observed, Dean needed to show that he has a second act—both to win Iowa and to win the nomination, to say nothing of the general election. He didn't.

Iowans detected this. Perhaps the single most startling (and devastating) revelation in the entrance polls was that Kerry actually did better among the 75 percent of voters who opposed the war. Clearly, even those voters who share Dean's view on the war want something more from a candidate—and they weren't getting it from him. If Dean can't even win over Iowa peaceniks, well, then his prospects look pretty dim indeed.

There may yet be time for Dean to have his second act; the suddenly muddled field should give Dean at least some respite from the attacks he's been getting lately. But it will do Dean no good if he keeps acting like he did in the last few weeks. If Dean hopes to break out of his ghetto of support, he'll have to show that he's about more than opposing the war and empowering young people—both fine things (depending on what you think of the war), but hardly the foundation of a successful presidency. Dean will have to remind people of his record and his ideas. If Dean can't do that, then his campaign will be over. As it should be.