

THE RACE TO THE WHITE HOUSE

Gore Sheds His Centrist Suit for a Decidedly Populist One

Written off by some, the 2000 Democratic nominee is ramping up the anti-Bush rhetoric, and people are taking note.

By Eric Slater

BOISE, Idaho—Al Gore cut something of a lonesome figure standing by himself in the lobby of the Doubletree Riverside Hotel with no aides in sight, raccoon-eyed and with a puffy face from a ski slope sunburn. Some in the crowd stopped to say hello, while others seemed content pretending they hadn't noticed the former vice president.

Long moments passed as Gore waited silently for another hand to come forward for a shake.

But a short time later, within minutes of taking the stage in the hotel's packed ballroom last month, a growling, preaching, sweating Gore delivered a no-holds-barred, anti-Bush administration speech that had the crowd of 1,000 Idaho Democrats whooping, hollering and whispering.

"If he'd have spoken like this last time around," a young volunteer said quietly to another, "he'd be president now." It might be more accurate to say that the last time around, when Gore campaigned for the White House with his "people versus the powerful" theme, it simply didn't resonate like the more fiery version has recently.

Gore remains one of America's best-known politicians, but his image even among some Democrats has become less than flattering—and at times an object of ridicule.

His monotonic debate style during the 2000 presidential campaign became a staple of "Saturday Night Live" sketches. That year's race began as his to lose, many believe, and although the Florida ballot recount still infuriates many Democrats, Gore in the end did lose it. Then he grew a beard—noted by comedians—and for the most part checked out of public life.

He returned to the spotlight—cleanshaven—most notably in late 2003 to back former Vermont Gov. Howard Dean in this year's Democratic presidential contest. Not only did Gore neglect to forewarn his former running mate—Connecticut Sen. Joe Lieberman, who was also seeking the nomination—but his endorsement coincided with the start of Dean's spectacular plummet from front-runner to has-been.

Gore, it seemed, could do no right. Some politicians began sarcastically calling him "The Cooler," a reference to a recent movie about a Las Vegas loser whose luck is so bad that he is employed by a casino to spread it around.

What has gone mostly unnoticed, however, is a change in the man's voice. It is often now that of an unapologetic populist—more like that of his father, the late Tennessee Sen. Albert Gore; more like it was when the younger Gore won a House seat in the 1970s, before his failed 1988 bid for the White House and before he followed Bill Clinton up the center of the party's ideological spectrum to the vice presidency in 1992.

His Boise speech offered vintage examples of his ramped-up rhetoric. "The right wing . . . has now intimidated the formerly moderate Republicans," Gore told the crowd. "The right wing has taken over the Republican Party. . . . In order to win their victories, the right wing relies on the politics of fear . . . and the repetition of big lies."

It remains unlikely that Gore will be a major player in the 2004 campaign. Sen. John F. Kerry of Massachusetts, the presumptive Democratic nominee, was on the short list of his potential running mates in 2000. After Gore's endorsement of Dean, however, the Kerry camp has not reached out to him for advice or campaign help.

Gore, for his part, has largely avoided the press, and he did not reply to requests for an interview for this story.

But as shown by his Boise appearance and a series of other speeches in recent months, he could carve a place for himself among Democratic partisans who continue to hunger for harsh attacks on President Bush.

“Right after 2000, he thought the right thing for the country was to not be involved in the earliest months of the Bush administration, to let the country heal” from the contested election, said Chris Lehane, press secretary for Gore’s presidential campaign. “Now he sees that the Bush administration has taken us down some very dangerous paths . . . and he does feel the need to speak out.”

Lehane added: “He has a powerful message: ‘I told you it was going to happen. It happened.’ He has a certain moral standing in the party.”

Gore signaled his turn away from his party’s centrists at the 2000 Democratic National Convention in Los Angeles, when he employed the phrase “the people versus the powerful.” The message, however, largely failed to catch on.

“It had a contrived feel,” Will Marshall—who along with Gore, Clinton and others helped found the centrist Democratic Leadership Council in 1985—wrote after Gore’s loss to Bush. “Gore’s combative ‘populism’ was jarringly out of sync with a population basically satisfied with the country’s direction and heartily sick of partisan warfare.”

But with questions lingering over the justifications for the war in Iraq, much of the public anxious about the economy and Democrats united around the “anyone but Bush” theme that has emerged from the party’s primary season, Gore’s current message seems to be finding an audience.

In Boise, he employed self-deprecation to pave the way for his harsh criticisms of Bush. He called himself “a recovering politician. I’m on about Step 9.” He spoke of driving one day in Tennessee and looking behind to find no vice presidential motorcade. “You’ve heard of phantom-limb pain?” he quipped.

Then he lit into almost every aspect of the Bush administration. “I think this is the worst foreign policy that any president has ever made in the history of the United States,” Gore said. He called John Ashcroft “the worst attorney general we’ve ever had.” Because of his penchant for secrecy, “George W. Bush reminds me of Richard Nixon more than any of his predecessors.”

A few weeks earlier, Gore addressed an especially tough crowd, Tennessee Democrats, many of whom have not forgiven him for losing his home state in 2000. The audience in the packed Nashville hotel ballroom grew throughout his speech as word spread to those sipping drinks outside that the famously staid Gore was stealing the show.

The crowd was on its feet as Gore quoted his father, after the elder Gore lost his reelection bid in 1970: “The truth shall rise again!”

“What you see now is the quintessential Al Gore,” said Donna Brazile, Gore’s campaign manager in 2000. “When you’re not competing for votes, you can sing a much broader tune. He’s not running for president. It’s not that he wasn’t himself [in the 2000 race]. It’s a different time.”

Indeed, the political terrain has changed so much since the 2000 race that some who know Gore say the perception that he is moving to the left is partly contextual: His stances have appeared to shift because the Bush administration has moved the Republican Party to the right.

“He was a founding member of the DLC, and is still moderate on trade, economic policy and other issues,” said a former senior advisor to Gore. “I don’t see much that’s changed since 2000. What’s different is the atmosphere.”

A spot slightly to the left of the Democratic center is where Gore has always felt most comfortable, many who know him say—a place from which he can expound on his concerns over class, race and the environment.

During the 2000 race, for example, Gore wanted to speak much more about the environment, one of his most beloved issues, according to one former advisor. But he

was talked out of it by his strategists because the issue simply wasn't a top concern for most voters.

"I've always thought one of our mistakes in 2000 was not talking enough on the environment—not because it polled in the top two or three questions; it didn't—but because he really felt strongly about it and people wanted to hear him," the former advisor said. "He was very passionate and emotional about it, [and] it would have shown leadership on an issue.

"It's one of the lessons I learned," the advisor added. "Let your candidate be himself."