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DEAN CAMPAIGN EMPOWERS HIS SUPPORTERS VIA INTERNET

Control: Web-logs and links give Howard Dean's supporters more freedom to campaign how, where and when they want.

By Kenneth S. Baer

Howard Dean allowed his supporters to make one of the most important decisions he might confront during the nominating campaign: whether or not he would accept federal campaign matching funds.

The fact that a presidential candidate publicly discussed this decision before making it yesterday is shocking in and of itself - and the fact that he submitted himself to a vote is unprecedented.

While this "money poll" was dismissed (perhaps rightfully so) as a stunt to give political cover to a decision to withdraw from the public financing system - a decision that Dean and his campaign manager, Joe Trippi, clearly wanted to make - such a dismissal is only blinding people from what is really going on in Burlington, Vt.

Simply, Howard Dean is running the most radical campaign in a generation. The former Vermont governor's political team is reinventing how campaigns are run, rejecting a decade-long trend toward near-Orwellian campaign centralization (which has reached its apotheosis in the Bush administration) and trading that control for a more energized group of supporters.

To understand how radical the Dean campaign is, one needs to appreciate how influential the success of the Clinton campaign in 1992 has been on the practice of politics.

The Clinton campaign was run in a way that took the lessons of Michael Dukakis' defeat in 1988 very seriously, especially how then-Vice President George H.W. Bush was able to overcome a 17-point deficit by seizing on two silver bullets found (ironically, by other Democrats) in Dukakis' record: the Pledge of Allegiance and Willie Horton.

Not wanting to suffer a similar fate, and admiring how successful the Bush team was, the Clinton campaign - as both Democratic and Republican campaigns have done since - put a premium on research. Facts became the offensive and defensive weapons of choice. Scores of young operatives now have cut their teeth poring over pages of the Congressional Record, digging in statehouse archives and tracking their opponents' every move. What's more, they are acutely aware that the other side is doing the same thing to them, adding a layer of caution to every step.

With this degree of scrutiny comes an obsession with message discipline. Like Clinton's

"It's the economy, stupid," campaigns try to boil their pitch down to its essence, and then push it unadulterated through every press release, television ad and campaign event with a zealotry bordering on the cult-like.

As a result of this desire to be "on-message," campaigns are run from the top down. The campaign's senior staff spends hours making sure that the allied groups, surrogates and satellite offices are reading from the same script. The Clinton team took this a step further by setting up a "war room" in its Little Rock, Ark., headquarters to quickly respond to incoming charges and to coordinate the daily dose of the campaign's message. In this world, dissent from the plan is a distraction not to be tolerated, and the war room is the enforcer.

Howard Dean has a message, and undoubtedly has a staff of researchers combing through Sen. John Kerry's voting record and every word ever published about retired Army Gen. Wesley K. Clark. But the Dean campaign has rejected this top-down model of rigid message discipline and replaced it with a model that uses the Internet to empower its supporters with a huge degree of freedom.

The Dean campaign's blog (as the Internet diary Web-log has come to be known) gives a platform for anyone to write anything they want for anyone else to read. Its official Web site links to more than 200 other sites supporting his candidacy - from Geeks for Dean to Baltimore for Dean and the Dean Defense Forces. Through these sites and the blog postings, the campaign effectively has no control over a huge amount of content on its Web site. Attempting message discipline in this environment is futile.

Dean supporters are also allowed to print their own posters and campaign where they want, when they want. The Dean campaign has posted online its field training manual for the world to see. In this, Dean might not have an "organization" all over the country, but he has generated a campaign in 50 states.

Finally, the Dean campaign has revolutionized political fund raising by making it almost entirely transparent. Where other campaigns play a sophisticated game of expectations-setting and breaking with the press, the Dean operation "brings out the bat" - a baseball bat graphic on its Web site that changes colors as money is raised online and progress is measured in real time. For Beltway insiders, the bat has become the most compelling political entertainment since Aaron Sorkin left The West Wing.

Taken together, the Dean campaign has sacrificed a substantial measure of message discipline and day-to-day control in exchange for a healthy dose of popular empowerment and the energy it brings.

While thousands of supporters of campaigns from Clinton '92 to Bush '04 had the heady feeling of being part of something larger than themselves, the Dean operation has offered them more. It has been able to use the Internet to enable its supporters to take an active role in the campaign - a luxury once reserved at this stage to voters only in Iowa and New Hampshire and political junkies willing to move there.

Dean's blog - Blog for America - acts as a virtual Dean support group, a source of campaign information and a vehicle for Dean backers to offer advice to the campaign staff. The monthly "meet-ups" for supporters are run in a way that enables the grass roots to pick meeting sites and set the agenda. And the plebiscite on the question of

public financing was another way for Dean supporters to feel as if they are campaign insiders.

By using the Internet to lower the bar of participation in presidential politics, the Dean campaign has created a growing group of adherents who, as they become more personally invested in the campaign, literally invest more - in time and money. This, in turn, not only powers the rest of the operation (such as the field organization) but also fuels efforts to attract more supporters to the cause.

Whether Howard Dean can win the presidency is questionable. He has yet to put forward a positive vision for the country, and a number of his policy stances - on gay rights, tax cuts, trade and America's role in the world - place him far to the left of the political spectrum.

But no matter the success of the individual candidate, the success of the Dean operation cannot be questioned. The era of the war room has ended. The era of the chat room has begun.

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