

JUNE 26, 2003

Tilting Democrats in the presidential race

The corporate Democrats who greased Bill Clinton's path to the White House are now a bit worried. Their influence on the party's presidential nomination process has slipped. But the Democratic Leadership Council can count on plenty of assistance from mainstream news media.

For several years leading up to 1992, the DLC curried favor with high-profile political journalists as they repeated the mantra that the Democratic Party needed to be centrist. Co-founded by Clinton in the mid-1980s, the DLC emphasized catering to "middle class" Americans — while the organization filled its coffers with funding from such non-middle-class bastions as the top echelons of corporate outfits like Arco, Prudential-Bache, Dow Chemical, Georgia Pacific and Martin Marietta.

In a 1992 book, "Who Will Tell the People," political analyst William Greider noted that the Democratic Leadership Council's main objective was "an attack on the Democratic Party's core constituencies — labor, schoolteachers, women's rights groups, peace and disarmament activists, the racial minorities and supporters of affirmative action." During the eight years that followed, President Clinton "moderately" shafted many of those constituencies.

Clinton proved to be a political survivor. But his presidency led to the destruction of Democratic majorities in both the House and Senate.

Now, the Los Angeles Times reported in late June, "the centrist 'New Democrat' movement is struggling to maintain its influence in the party as the 2004 presidential race accelerates." DLC stalwart Sen. Joe Lieberman is getting nowhere. Other DLC-friendly candidates, such as Sens. John Kerry and John Edwards, are hardly catching fire.

A recent memo by a pair of DLC honchos, Al From and Bruce Reed, linked the party's progressive-leaning activists with "elitist, interest-group liberalism." The salvo is laughable. It would be difficult to find any organization of Democrats more deserving of the "elitist, interest-group" tag than the DLC, which has long been funded by oil, chemical, insurance and military-contracting corporations — and has served their interests.

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One of the key "New Democrats" is DLC favorite John Breaux, a senator from Louisiana who distinguished himself by trying to protect deregulation measures approved in early June by the Federal Communications Commission. Breaux unsuccessfully proposed amendments to help TV networks to further consolidate media ownership. His efforts were even too flagrantly corporate for many Republicans on the Senate Commerce Committee.

Despite its setbacks, the Democratic Leadership Council need not despair. Most of the nation's political journalists, including pro-Democrat pundits, insist that the party should not nominate someone too far "left" — which usually means anybody who's appreciably more progressive than the DLC. That bias helps to account for the frequent mislabeling of Howard Dean, the former Vermont governor who has risen to the top tier of contenders for the 2004 Democratic presidential nomination.

After seven years as governor, the Associated Press described Dean as "a moderate at best on social issues and a clear conservative on fiscal issues." The news service added: "This is, after all, the governor who has at times tried to cut benefits for the aged, blind and disabled, whose No. 1 priority is a balanced budget."

When Dean officially announced his presidential campaign on June 23, some news stories identified him with the left. It's a case of mistaken identity. "He's really a classic Rockefeller Republican — a fiscal conservative and social liberal," according to University of Vermont political scientist Garrison Nelson.

As a fiscal conservative, Dean is aligned with the status quo of extreme inequities. That alignment was on display during a pair of June 22 appearances.

In an interview on NBC's "Meet the Press," Dean delivered a one-two punch against economic justice. He advocated raising the retirement age for Social Security, and he called for slowing down the rate of increases for Medicare spending.

Later in the day, at a Rainbow/PUSH Coalition forum, Dean went out of his way to emphasize support for out-of-control military spending after a rival candidate, Rep. Dennis Kucinich, said that "the only way we're really going to close the (digital) divide in this country is to start cutting the Pentagon budget and put that money into education." Dean's response: "I don't agree with Dennis about cutting the Pentagon budget when we're in the middle of a difficulty with terror attacks."

The next day, at his official campaign kickoff, Dean gave a 26-minute speech and didn't mention Iraq at all. It was a remarkable performance from someone who has spent much of the last year pitching himself as some kind of anti-war candidate.

Dean is already sending a message to his announced supporters among peace and social-justice advocates: Thanks, suckers.

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Usually, major-party candidates wait until they have a lock on the presidential nomination before diving to the center. Eager to avoid\ being hammered by the national press corps for supposed liberalism, Dean hasn't bothered to wait. ■

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