

The Inside Agitator

By MATT BAI | NYTimes Magazine | October 1, 2006



At D.N.C. headquarters in Washington, Dean meets with his communications staff.

Not all states are equal on an election map, and Alaska is one of those less populous states — like Kansas or Idaho or Alabama — that national Democrats almost never bother to visit. For one thing, just getting there presents a logistical ordeal: the journey from Washington takes as long as it would to reach, say, Nigeria, and even then you sometimes need a hydroplane to get around. And more to the point, there aren't a whole lot of people to see once you get there. Registered Republicans outnumber Democrats by a margin of 2 to 1 in oil-crazed Alaska, which hasn't sent a Democrat to the House or Senate in more than 30 years. To put it another way, there were more Democrats in Central Park for the Dave Matthews concert a few years back than there are in the entire state of Alaska — all 656,000 square miles of it.

It seemed somewhat bizarre, then, when Howard Dean, the chairman of the Democratic National Committee, chose to make the long odyssey to Alaska at the end of May, near what was the beginning of one of the most intense and closely contested national election campaigns in memory, when every other Democrat in Washington was talking about potentially decisive states like Ohio, Pennsylvania and Connecticut. It was also strange that no one in Democratic Washington seemed to know he was going. Although I had been following Dean closely for months, I found out about the trip accidentally and invited myself along — an intrusion that Dean seemed merely to tolerate. We met up first in Las Vegas, where he was making appearances with Harry Reid, the Senate minority leader. Dean, who enjoys his image as an unpretentious

New Englander, is given to finding his own flights on discount Web sites, so it's sometimes hard for even his own staff to track his itinerary. On the morning we left for Alaska, Dean went missing for a good half-hour. It turned out that he was in the business center of the MGM Grand, where he had been trying to figure out how to print his boarding pass but somehow ended up in an impromptu game of online backgammon with a guy who claimed to be in China.

Touching down in Anchorage, we were greeted by Jonathan Teeters, a 25-year-old former offensive lineman at the University of Idaho who had been hired to help the state party begin to organize Democrats. It took less than 10 minutes, as Teeters drove us through a pounding rainstorm to the state headquarters, for Dean, seated in front, to unleash his usual brand of havoc on a state unaccustomed to it. First, he absently asked Teeters what kind of radio interviews he would be doing during his 24-hour stay and was told that he was booked on the local Air America affiliate, the only liberal radio option in town. This is what party chairmen get paid to do — rally the faithful, collect their money and urge them to vote.

"Bull," Dean snapped, using a slightly more elongated version of the term.

"Huh?" Chris Canning, Dean's personal aide, suddenly looked up from a loose-leaf binder. He seemed to think he had misheard.

"I'm not going to do that," Dean replied firmly, craning his neck to address Canning in the back seat. "I didn't come all the way up here just to talk to people who already agree with us. I want to talk to everyone else. I'm fine with doing Air America, but we have to do something else too. Isn't there some conservative show we can do?" Teeters warned that the few right-wing shows in town could get nasty for the chairman. "If you can set something else up too, great," Dean said with finality. "Otherwise, I won't do Air America."

Then Dean wanted to know how many organizers the state party now had on the ground, and Teeters told him there was just one: Teeters himself. The D.N.C. created his job — along with a position for a communications director — last year as part of Dean's signature program, known as the 50-

state strategy. Under this program, the national party is paying for hundreds of new organizers and press aides for the state parties, many of which have been operating on the edge of insolvency. The idea is to hire mostly young, ambitious activists who will go out and build county and precinct organizations to rival Republican machines in every state in the country. “We’re going to be in places where the Democratic Party hasn’t been in 25 years,” Dean likes to say. “If you don’t show up in 60 percent of the country, you don’t win, and that’s not going to happen anymore.”

In paying for two new staffers, Dean had, virtually overnight, doubled the size of Alaska’s beleaguered state party, which used to consist of only an executive director and a part-time fund-raiser. But now, as Dean considered the vastness of the state’s landscape, he decided that one organizer wasn’t enough. “In most states, we have three or four,” Dean said, thinking out loud. “Seems like you should really have more. We should be able to find that money in the budget.”

That night, after meeting with Dean at the sad little storefront office that houses the state party, Alaska’s party chairman, Jake Metcalfe, announced to 400 assembled Democrats at a fund-raiser that Dean had just promised to hire an additional organizer for the state. The ballroom erupted in grateful applause as Dean sat there beaming. The members of his staff, gently rolling their eyes, began calling back to Washington, warning the political staff that they would need to find the money for yet another salary in, of all places, Alaska.

In just a few hours, Dean had nicely demonstrated why so many leading Democrats in Washington wish he would spend even more time in Alaska — preferably hiking the tundra for a few months, without a cellphone. It’s not that Democrats in Congress don’t like the idea of building better organizations in the party’s forgotten rural outposts. Everyone in Democratic politics agrees, in principle, that party organizations in states like Alaska could use help from Washington to become competitive again, as opposed to the rusted-out machines they have become. But doing so, at this particular moment and in this particular way, would seem to suck away critical resources at a time when every close House and Senate race has the potential to decide who will control the nation’s post-election agenda, and when the party should, theoretically, be focused on mobilizing its base voters — the kind of people who live in big cities and listen religiously to Air America.

It’s true that adding a second organizer in Alaska will cost the national party only a modest sum, maybe \$35,000 this year, but that same money could pay the salaries for canvassers in Pennsylvania or Connecticut, where a few thousand votes could mean the difference between swearing in Speaker Hastert or Speaker Pelosi next January. Overall, Dean’s investment in state parties could cost the D.N.C. as much as \$8 million this year, every dime of which could be crucial when you consider that the Republican National Committee says it will pour as much as \$60 million into local races to defend its Congressional majorities. (The D.N.C. has pledged to spend \$12 million on this fall’s races.) With the president’s approval ratings stuck around 40 percent, and polls suggesting that the Democrats may have a real chance of rolling back 12 years of Republican rule, numerous Democratic insiders are privately and, at times, publicly deriding the 50-state strategy as an indulgence that could cost them their best and last opportunity to sweep away the Bush era, once and for all.

This conflict between the party’s chairman and its elected leaders (who tried mightily to keep local activists from giving him the job in the first place) might be viewed as a petty disagreement. But in fact, it represents the deepening of a rift that has its roots in the 2004 presidential campaign — a rift that raises the fundamental issue of what role, if any, a political party should play in 21st-century American life. Dean ran for president, and then for chairman, as an outsider who would seize power from the party’s interest-group-based establishment and return it to the grass roots. And while he has gamely tried to play down his differences with elected Democrats since becoming chairman, it seems increasingly obvious that Dean is pursuing his own agenda for the party — an agenda that picks up, in many ways, where his renegade presidential campaign left off. Now, at power lunches and private meetings, perplexed Washington Democrats, the kind of people who have lorded over the party apparatus for decades, find themselves pondering the same bewildering questions. What on earth can Howard Dean be thinking? Does he really care about winning in November, or is he after something else?

The mere fact that Democrats would consider a “50-state strategy” to be novel — as if a national party might reasonably aspire to something less — says volumes about the rapid deterioration of the party that was, for most of the last century, America’s dominant political force. Back when Democrats

were the established majority, the state parties were run by bosses who doled out jobs and delivered votes, while the national party, functioning as a subsidiary of whoever happened to occupy the Oval Office, worried about electing presidents. For decades, the party claimed a sizable majority of the nation's governors, senators and congressmen, and in every one of the states where it controlled those seats, there was a centralized organization — a party “infrastructure,” in the parlance of today's activists — whose job it was to recruit candidates and make sure voters got to the polls.

All that began to change with the social movements of the 1960's and 70's, which redefined the Democratic Party, in the minds of many rural voters, as mostly a coalition of urban blacks and high-minded intellectuals. From the Deep South up through the populist Plains, voters began abandoning Democratic candidates at the polls, and the old state machines found themselves out of power and starved for patronage. Slowly, the parties in these states atrophied, laying off staff members and allowing their network of local volunteers to dwindle. “We were on the verge of extinction, pretty much,” Barry Rubin, the executive director of the Nebraska Democratic Party, told me recently.

When Dean took over the D.N.C. last year, he sent assessment teams, made up of veteran field organizers and former state party officials, to every state. A typical assessment report on one rural state — I was allowed to see the report only on the condition that I not name the state involved — bluntly stated that its local activists were “aging” and that its central committee was “dysfunctional.” In most states, there were hardly any county or precinct organizations to speak of. More than half the states lacked any communications staff, meaning that no one was there to counter the Republican talking points that passed from Washington to the state parties to the local media with a kind of automated precision.

For the Democrats, winning presidential elections came to mean doing so without any help from the South or West, and that, in turn, meant cobbling together a relatively small number of so-called battleground states rather than running a truly national campaign. The D.N.C. quit doing much of anything in conservative rural states, and the party's presidential candidates didn't bother stopping by on their way to more promising terrain. Every four years, the national party became obsessed with “targeting” — that is, focusing all its efforts on 15 or 20 winnable urban states and pounding them

with expensive TV ads. The D.N.C.'s defining purpose was to raise the money for those ads. The national party became, essentially, a service organization for a few hundred wealthy donors, who treated it like their private political club.

None of this was much on Howard Dean's mind when he set about running for president in 2003 with drab notions of health-care reform and a balanced budget; by the time he made his infamous “scream” speech in Des Moines a year later, however, Dean had become a folk hero for marginalized liberals. How this happened has been largely misunderstood. Dean has been credited with inciting an Internet-driven rebellion against his own party, but, in fact, he was more the accidental vehicle of a movement that was already emerging. The rise of Moveon.org, blogs and “meet-ups” was powered to some extent by the young, tech-savvy activists on both coasts who were so closely associated in the public mind with Dean's campaign. But the fast-growing Internet community was also a phenomenon of liberal enclaves in more conservative states, where disenchanting Democrats, mostly baby boomers, had long felt outnumbered and abandoned. Meet-ups for Dean drew overflow crowds in Austin, Tex., and Birmingham, Ala.; what the Web did was to connect disparate groups of Democratic voters who didn't live in targeted states and who had watched helplessly as Republicans overran their communities. These Democrats opposed the war in Iraq, but they were also against a party that seemed to care more about big donors and swing states than it did about them. Attracted to Dean's fiery defiance of the Washington establishment, these voters adopted him as their cause before he had ever heard of a blog.

“What our campaign was about, not that I set out to make it this way, was empowering people,” Dean told me recently. “The ‘you have the power’ stuff — that just arose spontaneously when I realized what incredible potential there was for people to get active who had given up on the political process because they didn't think either party was helping them.”

Over the course of the campaign, Dean turned into an apostle, in politics, of the economic concept of “disintermediation” — the idea that, in the Internet age, voters could connect with candidates, and with one another, without the party acting as the conduit. In a sense, this is what his candidacy was all about. He still believed, though, that only a strong national party could mobilize voters on Election Day. At the Democratic convention in Boston,

six months after he dropped out of the presidential race, he met with frustrated delegations from 18 “untargeted” states, meaning that the national party and its candidate, John Kerry, had completely ignored them. Dean was appalled. “The best window we have to talk to Democrats, the time when they pay the most attention, is in the presidential campaign,” Dean told me, “and we were just saying to the people of those 18 states, ‘We’re not interested in you.’ You cannot be a national party if you say that to anybody. Anybody.”

It didn’t take long, after the election, for a new band of Democratic outsiders — some inspired by Dean’s campaign, others not — to begin asserting themselves on the local level. In Maryland, Terry Lierman, a venture capitalist who had been one of Dean’s campaign-finance chairmen, ran for state party chairman, despite having had no previous involvement in local Democratic politics, and won. In North Carolina, Jerry Meek, a 35-year-old lawyer, took over the state party on a promise of re-energizing county organizations, even though both the governor and the state’s leading national figure, John Edwards, strongly backed an inside candidate. Colorado and Arkansas, too, rejected incumbent chairmen in favor of obscure newcomers. In Texas, Fred Baron, a trial lawyer and Democratic contributor, established a privately financed effort to rebuild the Texas state party from the ground up — without the party’s consent.

Meanwhile, the bloggers who supported Dean were taking up the same cause, inciting sporadic local rebellions. Chris Bowers, an influential blogger on the leftist site MyDD.com, demanded that the national party focus less on targeting races and more on recruiting candidates to run in every Congressional district in America. Bowers’s call for individual activists to overwhelm and rebuild their local parties became a rallying point for the emerging Netroots party-reform movement. Setting his own example, Bowers got himself elected the captain of his local precinct in Philadelphia’s 27th Ward and then won a seat on the party’s state committee.

The question for Dean was how to harness and aggregate this state-by-state uprising that he had, by example, helped to create. Immediately after dropping out of the presidential race, he formed a political action committee called Democracy for America, whose mission was to raise money for “progressive” candidates seeking local offices, from mayoral and Congressional seats down to the local water board. This was revolt on a small scale, however,

and Dean continued to ponder some grander strategy. He admits now that at the time he considered forming a third party, deciding, ultimately, that such ventures never went far in American politics.

Like Ronald Reagan, whose activist insurgency during the 1976 primaries failed to topple the Republican president, Gerald Ford, Dean might have begun work instantly on the next presidential race, building on his support among the Democratic base. But unlike Reagan, Dean had always exhibited more passion for campaigning among the grass roots than he did for the prospect of actually being the nation’s president; he seemed less focused on changing the country than he did on changing the party. And the best way to do that, he concluded, was to run for chairman.

Dean, the celebrity candidate in a crowded if rather underwhelming field, campaigned on what seemed like a brazenly political promise to lavish spoils on the forgotten state parties, whose local activists held most of the votes for the chairmanship. The outcome was never much in doubt, although some skeptical Democrats refused to support him. Metcalfe, the Alaska chairman, told me that he supported Simon Rosenberg, a party strategist. “Simon was saying, ‘I don’t know if I can fund all the states,’ and I thought that was honest,” Metcalfe said. “Dean said he would give money to all the states, and I thought, That’s not going to happen — not out here. I thought I was being realistic. He proved me wrong.”

There were awkward moments during Dean’s first months in Washington, early in 2005, when he found himself working among the party leaders he had repeatedly maligned. In his first official visit to the newly renovated D.N.C. building, Dean was greeted in the lobby by his predecessor, Terry McAuliffe, a close friend of the Clintons and probably the most gifted fund-raiser in the party’s history, whom Dean’s supporters had long pilloried as the personification of a party run by hacks and obsessed with corporate money. McAuliffe, a man of maddeningly good cheer, pointed to the new wall-size glass building dedication in the lobby, which featured McAuliffe’s name at the very top, followed by a list of contributors. “Now, Howard,” he said, “don’t you go chiseling that down.”

Not long after, Dean sat down with the party’s Congressional leaders, Harry Reid and Nancy Pelosi, who had tried, ineptly and with almost comical desperation, to find a candidate who could stop him from becoming chairman. Reid and Pelosi promised to work with Dean, but they asked him to

resist speaking out on key policy positions and acting as if he were the party's public face. In other words, Dean would be doing everyone in Washington a favor if he would just stay out of sight and raise money.

The latter goal proved challenging. The truth was that neither Dean nor the aides he brought with him from the presidential campaign knew much about the inner workings of the national party, and some of what they assumed they understood, based on contempt for anything they perceived to be the status quo, turned out to be more complicated than it first appeared. Determined to break the grip of millionaires on the party apparatus, Dean's team came into the D.N.C. with a plan to raise huge sums of money online, as Dean had done during the presidential campaign. Dean didn't bother reaching out to many of the party's top contributors, who were as suspicious of him as he was of them. But getting small-dollar donors excited about an established party proved a far more arduous task than getting them excited about an insurgent campaign. The situation grew perilous until, several months into his term, Dean relented and brought in one of McAuliffe's old acolytes, Jody Trapasso, to get the fund-raising operation in order. Trapasso introduced Dean to the big spenders, pushing him to devote a few hours of every day to making calls until the checks started rolling in.

Dean was discovering that he needed to find some Washington insiders to trust, after all — and he found them in what seemed an unlikely quarter. In his primary campaign in 2003, Dean struck up a friendship with Tina Flournoy, a well-respected operative who worked with Al Gore and Joe Lieberman during the 2000 presidential race and who now held a senior position at the American Federation of Teachers, one of the party's most influential unions. Flournoy was also a charter member of an informal dinner clique whose members referred to themselves, good-naturedly, as the Colored Girls. The core group included several African-American women who had reached the highest echelons of Democratic politics. Donna Brazile, the veteran organizer who managed Gore's presidential campaign, was a regular; so were Minyon Moore, a consultant who worked in the Clinton White House; Yolanda Caraway, a public-relations specialist; and Leah Daughtry, who was McAuliffe's chief of staff (and who was retained in that job by Dean). Guest speakers at their dinners frequently included probable presidential candidates and top members of Congress. During the race for chairman, Flournoy

brought Dean in as well, and he quickly clicked with the group.

Dean tapped Flournoy to run his transition team, and although she later returned to her job at the teachers' union, it is now common knowledge among Democrats in Washington that few big decisions are made at the D.N.C. without Flournoy's approval. The Colored Girls, as a whole, are unusually influential with Dean. It's an odd pairing, given that Dean governed one of the whitest states in the country, but what Dean and these women share is resentment, sometimes subtle and sometimes not, of the elite Washington Democrats who have always run the national party. Activists like Flournoy and Brazile have attained star status in the party, but they have never thought of themselves as insiders. This is partly because they are black women in a party dominated by white men — men who often seem to prize them more as symbols of diversity than for their expertise. But it is also because the women came up in Democratic politics as local field operatives — that is, as young organizers who knocked on doors, principally for Jesse Jackson — in an era when all of the power in the party was concentrated in the hands of the Washington consultants who made TV ads and polled the electorate. Dean came to Washington vowing to take power from the insiders and give it, instead, to ground-level activists. "That's our loyalty to Dean," Brazile says. "He gets it."

With help from Flournoy and the others, Dean cultivated an outsiders' culture inside the D.N.C. building. (It is more than symbolic that Dean himself never moved to Washington; he stays at the Capitol Hill Suites a few days a week before heading back to Burlington, Vt.) Dean's political staff hails largely from the state organizations, rather than from Washington; his political director, Pam Womack, formerly ran the Virginia party and the National Governors Association. Top Washington reporters and senior aides on Capitol Hill frequently complain that they now have trouble getting their calls to the D.N.C. returned, while state activists rave about the new responsiveness at headquarters.

Flournoy also introduced Dean to the pollster Cornell Belcher, who became a constant fixture inside Dean's D.N.C. Belcher, a deep thinker and jazz aficionado who wears suit coats with unlaced Converse sneakers, had been an outsider, too, in the sense that he didn't fit into the capital's pinstriped culture and wasn't well known before Dean started taking him to meetings on the Hill. In public ap-

pearances, Dean almost always refers proudly to the fact that he has retained a “37-year-old African-American pollster” to shake up the staid Washington crowd. In fact, the main theme of Belcher’s work concerns the white middle-class men and women who have deserted the Democrats in recent years. These voters care more about their faith and the character of their communities than they do about individual issues, Belcher says, and Democrats do better with rural and small-town voters when they frame their positions as values rather than as policy prescriptions. This is not an entirely new insight, but to Dean it is critically important. In his mind, it means that any voter in any state can be a Democrat, if only you bother to talk to him, and if only you make the right kind of argument.

The ultimate manifestation of this philosophy, of course, is the 50-state strategy, under which, for the first time, the national party has begun directly financing the staff at all but a few state headquarters. It’s probably fair to say that if there hadn’t been a quagmire in Iraq or a Hurricane Katrina — if the White House’s political fortunes hadn’t imploded over the last year — the 50-state strategy would not have aroused much opposition among Washington Democrats. It was only when they realized that they actually had a chance to take back the House, and maybe the Senate too, that Democratic leaders began to ask, with increasing urgency, what it was that Dean was doing with all the party’s money.

This fall, the question of who will control Congress is likely to come down to about 40 Congressional districts and some dozen states with close Senate races, including such perennial battlegrounds as Pennsylvania, Ohio and Missouri. Candidates raise most of their campaign funds themselves, but they rely on additional money from Washington to pay for voter-turnout programs and last-minute TV ads. Each party has three separate entities to raise and disburse those dollars: a committee for Senate races, a second committee for House campaigns and the national party headquarters.

For Democrats, the fund-raising environment has improved over the last two years, as Bush has blundered from one legislative or foreign-policy disaster to another and as Democratic donors have seen the prospect of controlling at least one house of Congress — a notion that seemed unthinkable in 2004 — become a possibility. The Democrats who lead their party’s Senate and House campaign com-

mittees, Senator Chuck Schumer of New York and Representative Rahm Emanuel of Illinois, respectively, have done their parts to make the party competitive. The Democratic Senate committee, which narrowly outperformed its Republican counterpart in 2004, has opened up an even wider margin in this election cycle. The Democratic House committee, which raised only half as much as the G.O.P.’s committee did two years ago, has closed that gap somewhat and, at last count, had virtually the same amount in the bank as its rival. Over at the D.N.C., however, it’s a very different story. In 2004, the D.N.C., under McAuliffe, actually raised slightly more money than the Republican National Committee. Since Dean has taken over, however, the R.N.C. has taken an almost 2-to-1 lead in fund-raising, and going into the fall campaign it had more than \$39 million stashed away, compared with just over \$11 million for the Democrats. For Schumer and Emanuel, this discrepancy between the two parties is like a train coming down the track, and they’re the ones sitting in its path. The R.N.C. will dump tens of millions of dollars into individual House and Senate races in the closing weeks, through TV ads and get-out-the-vote operations, and Democrats won’t be able to counter it.

In a city rife with unchecked egos, few politicians exhibit the kind of unbridled self-assuredness for which both Emanuel and Schumer are known; to call the two of them pushy would be like calling Tom Cruise excitable. Emanuel, a triathlete who was Bill Clinton’s deputy chief of staff and enforcer, speaks in violent bursts of shrapnel, profanities flying in all directions. Schumer, like his native Brooklyn, can be, by turns, charming or downright dangerous, depending on which route delivers him faster to his destination.

Before this midterm election-year began, but not long after Dean became party head, Emanuel and Schumer decided that if Dean wasn’t going to raise anywhere near as much money as his rivals at Republican headquarters, then he ought to at least give them whatever resources he could muster. They went to work on Dean, pleading with him to transfer as much as \$10 million to the two committees to help them respond to the Republican TV barrage. Emanuel told anyone who would listen that back in 1994, when Republicans sensed a similarly historic mood swing in the electorate, the R.N.C. kicked in something like \$20 million in cash to its Congressional committees. (This argument was impressive, but not exactly true; the R.N.C. spent roughly that much on federal and local races

combined in 1994, and little, if any, of that money went directly to the committees themselves.) Dean categorically refused to ante up. Having opposed the very idea of targeting a small number of states and races, he wasn't about to divert money from his long-term strategy — what he calls the “unsexy” work of rebuilding the party's infrastructure — to pay for a bunch of TV ads in Ohio. He wanted to win the 2006 elections as much as anyone, Dean told them, and he intended to help where he could. But Democratic candidates and their campaign committees were doing just fine on fund-raising, and the party couldn't continue giving in to the temptation to spend everything it had on every election cycle — no matter how big a checkbook the Republicans were waving around.

For Schumer, Emanuel and their allies, this rejection was irritating enough. When they heard the stories of how Dean was actually spending the party's cash, however, it was almost more than they could take. Dean was paying for four organizers in Mississippi, where there wasn't a single close House race, but he had sent only three new hires to Pennsylvania, which had a governor's race, a Senate campaign and four competitive House races. Emanuel said he was all for expanding the party's reach into rural states — roughly half the House seats he was targeting were in states like Texas, Indiana and Kentucky, after all — but he wanted the D.N.C. to focus on individual districts that Democrats could actually win, as opposed to just spreading money around aimlessly. The D.N.C. was spending its money not only in Alaska and Hawaii, but in the U.S. Virgin Islands as well. Democratic insiders began to rail against this wacky and expensive 50-state plan. “He says it's a long-term strategy,” Paul Begala, the Democratic strategist, said during an appearance on CNN in May. “What he has spent it on, apparently, is just hiring a bunch of staff people to wander around Utah and Mississippi and pick their nose.”

The disagreement with Emanuel and Schumer frayed Dean's already fragile *détente* with Washington's Democratic elite. Since coming to Washington, Dean had worked hard to forge a level of trust with Congressional leaders, subjugating some of his more combative impulses. In particular, he had formed what he thought of as a genuine friendship with Harry Reid. Nonetheless, the party's elected leaders and their legions of consultants remained uneasy about Dean. They suspected, correctly, that he strongly sympathized with outside forces — militant bloggers, disillusioned donors, Moveon.org —

that were fomenting rebellion at the grass roots. It didn't help that Dean's younger brother, Jim, a one-time salesman who had taken over the PAC Dean started, Democracy for America, was out there proselytizing for insurgent candidates like Paul Hackett, whom Schumer eventually muscled out of a Senate primary in Ohio, and Ned Lamont, who upended Joe Lieberman in Connecticut. While campaign laws prohibited the Dean brothers from coordinating their activities, Washington Democrats assumed that Jim Dean's job was to carry out the chairman's subversive wishes.

In separate conversations, Reid and Pelosi each asked Dean — Reid in his quiet way, Pelosi more stridently — to send some money to the two campaign committees. Dean rebuffed them too. But he did promise that the D.N.C. would help with get-out-the vote campaigns. Emanuel and Schumer then began pressing Dean for a specific field plan — that is, a blueprint for how the D.N.C. would spend money on mobilizing voters, and where. The argument finally exploded during a meeting in May among Dean, Emanuel and Schumer in Dean's third-floor office at the D.N.C. Emanuel told Dean that the 50-state strategy was a waste of money; Dean shot back that winning elections wasn't only about TV ads. Emanuel wanted to know what Dean was doing to help in California's 50th district, where voters were about to hold a special election. When Dean said he had organizers on the ground, Emanuel erupted. “Who?” he demanded. “Tell me their names!” Emanuel, who had a vote at the Capitol, stormed out of the meeting, cursing as he walked down the hall.

By now, the situation had as much to do with clashing egos as it did with the elections. “The issue here is not our field plan,” Dean told me. “The issue is an issue of control. I'm the new guy on the block, and they thought they were going to get me writing the check.” For his part, Emanuel, who had been a pivotal adviser in several national elections (he was the model for the character Josh Lyman in “The West Wing”), seemed annoyed that Dean wouldn't defer to Democrats with more experience. That Dean raised money by talking about the closeness of the 2006 elections — and then spent much of that money in states that had nothing to do with the midterms — made Emanuel, whose office sits a floor below Dean's in the D.N.C. building, want to reach through the tile ceiling and throttle him. “I'm for a long-term strategy,” Emanuel told me, “but I don't see how you have a long-term strategy if you take a historic election and walk away from it.”

What was remarkable about this fight, as it dragged on throughout the summer, was just how public it became, and the extent to which it seemed to be pulling influential Democrats into its vortex. Bren Simon, a wealthy Democratic patron from Indiana who has entertained virtually every leading Democrat at her second home in Washington, told me that she warned Emanuel and Schumer that she wouldn't write them any more checks if they didn't stop fighting Dean over his 50-state strategy. Then there was the morning early in the summer when Brazile ran into Emanuel on the steps of the D.N.C. building and started loudly lecturing him about his attacks on the chairman, in full view of party employees. Emanuel protested that he just wanted to win back the House. Two of the Democratic Party's leading strategists — one who had helped run the White House, the other who had managed a presidential campaign — stood there barking at each other on the street.

Underneath this clash of field plans and alpha personalities lay a deeper philosophical divide over how you go about rebuilding a party — which was really a dispute about cause and effect. Did you expand the party by winning elections, or did you win elections by expanding the party? Most party insiders had long put their faith in elections first, arguing that the best way to broaden the base of the party was to win more races. Schumer said as much in a written statement that his spokesman forwarded to me in response to my questions about his differences with Dean. "Our long-term goal is the same — a strong Democratic Party," Schumer stated. "But we" — meaning he and Emanuel — "believe that nothing does more to further that goal in 2006, 2008 and beyond than taking back the House and Senate so that we can implement a Democratic platform."

Recent history, though, would seem to undercut this theory. In the 1990's, the Democrats won two presidential elections behind a popular leader, and yet the party didn't grow. In fact, Democrats lost ground at every level of government except the White House and cemented their position as the party of coastal states. Steadily investing in political activity on the local level, as Republicans have done for years, seems to Dean and his allies a more realistic way for Democrats to expand the electoral map than simply trying, every four years, to piece together the same elusive majorities. Of course, every Democrat in Washington says he's for expanding the party's efforts beyond the familiar 18 or 20 battleground states, but only Dean, among his par-

ty's leaders, has been willing to argue that there is a choice involved, that you cannot actually invest for the long term unless you're willing to forgo some short-term priorities.

It takes courage, Dean told me, to try something new in the face of failure, which is why Washington Democrats were resisting his plan. "I think politicians are incredibly risk-averse, especially legislating politicians," he said. "This is like deciding to go to a psychiatrist — the risk of staying the same has to be greater than the risk of changing. And right now, in the history of the party, that's exactly where we are. The risk of doing nothing, the same old thing, is enormous. The risk of trying something new is much smaller. The risk of the 50-state strategy is much smaller than if we continue to do what we've been doing."

But you can accept Dean's premise and still wonder whether his 50-state strategy is really the best way to go about building the party. Even some Democrats who support Dean's larger vision have doubts about whether he has built enough accountability into his model for financing state parties. Republicans, as I saw firsthand in Ohio during the 2004 campaign, demand certain metrics of their local organizers. Field workers are expected to sign up so many new voters, or knock on so many doors, by a given date, and people who don't meet their quotas and deadlines can find themselves replaced — even if they're volunteers. Republican staffs in the states are required to take part in an unrelenting succession of conference calls with Washington.

By contrast, Jonathan Teeters, the 25-year-old activist I met in Anchorage, told me that he wished he spoke more often with his superiors at the D.N.C. "It's kind of an as-needed thing," he said. "As far as I can tell, they trust me to get it done. As long as I'm staying in contact, and as long as we're having success, that's how they know we're getting it done." When I asked Teeters how he knew if he was having success, he mentioned having attracted several hundred people to "Democratic reunion" barbecues across the state. "The first thing we have to do is create this energy, so people know we're here and we're active," he said.

Dean has no illusions that the 50-state strategy will succeed in every state. "They're going to make terrible mistakes — I know that," Dean said. "You never make changes without people making mistakes." He said he had visited 46 states as chairman, and each time he goes into a state, he gets some sense of the progress on the ground.

Unlike past chairmen, who mostly traveled to see donors and do some interviews, Dean spends a fair amount of time visiting party offices and mingling with grass-roots activists. His trips to more rural, conservative states, however, the kind of places where a sizable segment of voters go to church and follow Nascar, also raise some complicated issues for his fellow Democrats. Dean is treated like a Beetle by rank-and-file activists who have rarely seen a party leader in their midst, but for the rest of the country, Dean is that lefty who howled on national TV. Some Democratic governors and candidates have avoided Dean when he has been in town, for fear that their opponents would portray them as extremists. Which underscores the peculiar situation of Dean and his 50-state plan: he is the one guy in Washington determined to deliver the Democratic message to every part of the country, but as it turns out, he is also a guy from whom much of America doesn't want to hear it.

It's not that Dean doesn't try his damndest to make himself palatable to culturally conservative voters. Acting on the advice of Cornell Belcher, his young pollster, he has taken to framing his positions in terms of faith and values, sometimes so transparently that it can make you wince. In Las Vegas, I heard Dean, who is not known to be a religious man, say to a Latino audience, "I don't expect the church to come out for gay marriage, but I do expect that we could say on an issue like this, 'What would Jesus do?' Equal rights under the law is not something that can be abridged by the Democratic Party, because it's really the law under Jesus Christ." The audience stared at him a little blankly, as you might stare at your mechanic if he rolled out from underneath your car and suddenly started speaking Latin.

Fairly or not, Dean has come to embody a species of Democrat that a lot of Americans of both parties find off-putting: the 60's antiwar liberal, reborn with a laptop and a Prius. On the day we landed in Anchorage, Tony Knowles, the former Democratic governor of the state, had just announced that he would run to reclaim the post. This was exciting news for Dean, since he and Knowles had served as governors together, and the two men would be attending the fund-raiser that night. But while we were at the party headquarters, the state party's executive director cautioned Dean, gingerly, that he should probably avoid getting too close to Knowles in public or saying nice things about him from the lectern. "I think he'd prefer to distance

himself from the national party as much as he can," the executive director, Mike Coumbe, said.

Later that night, at the fund-raiser, I approached Knowles and asked him if it was true that he felt he needed to put some space between himself and his old friend. "I think they're about to introduce me," Knowles said, glancing helplessly toward the front of the room. "I do want to answer your question." But he was already backing away.

When dean and I last spoke, in August, I wondered aloud if the entire 50-state program wasn't, in a very basic way, inconsistent with the larger philosophy that guided his 2004 campaign. If Dean believed in disintermediation, then why was he spending so much money to strengthen the intermediaries? Weren't the state parties essentially just middlemen between the voters and the Democratic National Committee? What Dean seemed to be creating was a multilevel field organization modeled after the political machines of the 20th century rather than a new party that fostered direct communication between local activists and their leaders in Washington.

"That would be true if we thought we had to be centralized," Dean replied, raising an index finger. In fact, he went on, the Democratic Party needed to be decentralized, so that grass-roots Democrats built relationships with their state parties but had little to do with Washington at all. "State parties are not the intermediaries," he said. "If I get them trained right, they're the principals."

In other words, I suggested, he was talking about "devolving" the national Democratic Party, in the same way that Reagan and other conservative ideologues had always talked about devolving the federal government and returning power to the states. "That's what I want to do," Dean said firmly.

This struck me as a radical idea, and one that went to the heart of what Howard Dean is really thinking. Now that Dean has wrested control of the national party, his real agenda, it seems, is to radically reduce its relevance, in the same way that Grover Norquist and his crowd of conservative activists talk about "starving the beast" of the federal government they now control. Once you understand that, it's easy to understand why Dean isn't troubled by having less cash in the bank than people think he should, and why he isn't concerned about quantifying the success of the state parties he's financing. In Dean's mind, every dollar that goes to Alaska or Mississippi, or even to the Virgin Islands, even if it isn't perfectly utilized, is a dollar that isn't going into the pockets of the Washington

syndicate of admen and pollsters who seem to profit more from each election cycle. And that is an end in itself. By shipping the party's money out of Washington as fast as he can collect it, Dean is trying to finish what he started three years ago — namely, the slow dismantling of the Democratic establishment.

This philosophical shift is bound to have consequences for the party's next presidential nominee. Dean argues that the 50-state strategy is actually going to broaden the playing field in 2008. By the time the next nominee is crowned, he says, a field network will already be in place, covering most of the counties and precincts in the United States; flip a switch, and the whole grid will light up with activity, from Baton Rouge to Boise. More than that, rebuilding Democratic ground operations in more states will force Republicans and their nominee to spend millions more dollars in states that the G.O.P. usually takes for granted, dollars that would otherwise be spent in the Midwest or in the pivotal Sun Belt.

This makes some sense, but it's also true that presidential candidates have long relied on the D.N.C. to do two simple things: underwrite TV ads and coordinate extensive field operations in a handful of perennially contested states — so much so, in fact, that every four years the nominee essentially takes over the D.N.C., installing his own strategists and fund-raisers to provide his campaign with air and ground support. If Dean isn't going to relinquish control or shift his resources into battleground states, the next nominee could find himself (or herself) outspent by the R.N.C. — and as piqued at Dean as Emanuel and Schumer are now.

Some more conspiracy-minded Democrats discern in Dean's decentralizing strategy the careful machinations of a shrewd and ambitious politician. After all, if the party's nominee loses in 2008, doesn't that set up Dean, potentially, as the grass-roots choice for 2012? Might this be his real plan — to strengthen the local activists who form his natural base of support while at the same time weakening the Washington apparatus that once tried to derail him?

It's an elegant theory, but it doesn't take into account Dean's basic ambivalence about electoral politics. In Vermont, Dean, a physician and part-time lieutenant governor, turned down the chance to run for governor, taking office only when his predecessor died. He may have run for president, as a former confidant of his once explained it to me, largely because he was looking for something to do.

Dean has never evidenced much in the way of Machiavellian ambition. It's easier to imagine him, several years from now, serving as a cabinet secretary, or maybe running a university, than it is to see him rising up to lead a Reagan-like revolt at a raucous nominating convention in Las Vegas or Phoenix.

the more immediate question is whether Dean can make it through this year's elections without becoming a permanent pariah among his party's elected leadership. In September, Dean finally reached a compromise of sorts with Rahm Emanuel. In the end, Dean didn't pull any money from his 50-state strategy, nor did Emanuel successfully pressure him into giving cash directly to the campaign committees. Dean agreed, in principle, to pour about \$2.6 million, on top of what he was spending on the 50-state strategy, into field operations in 40 targeted districts. "We have a basic understanding," Emanuel told me, sounding more peeved than conciliatory. "It's not everything I want, but I don't have any time to waste anymore, and I'm not waiting for Godot. I've got to get going." The deal seemed to ensure, at least, that Dean and the House campaign committee would be able to work in harmony through the elections. (Peace talks with Schumer were still going on.) It did not, however, do anything to resolve the underlying, more intractable disagreement: the importance of winning elections versus a longer-term investment in state parties. That argument will continue well after November's referendum on Republican rule.

Nor, clearly, did the compromise do much to endear Dean to his critics in Washington. "I'm not going to be on his holiday mailing list, and he's not going to be on my holiday mailing list," Emanuel snapped at one point during our conversation about Dean. "But this isn't about him or me." If Democrats fall short of retaking the House of Representatives in November, the party's elected leaders will almost certainly blame Dean for the near miss. They will say that he squandered their best chance in more than a decade to control the country. They will say it proves that Dean's risky strategy has badly hurt the party.

And yet, you could make a compelling argument that anything short of total victory in November would prove precisely the opposite. With polls consistently showing voters to be deeply nervous about a protracted war, high gas prices and stunted wages, this is that rare election that should turn less on tactics than on fundamental choices about the direction of the country; in other words, this

election season is about the fear and fury of the electorate, not the addition of a few more door-knockers in New Haven or some negative 30-second spot broadcast in Columbus. As the Democratic strategist James Carville told Al Hunt, the Bloomberg News columnist, in August, "If we can't win in this environment, we have to question the whole premise of the party."

Most analysts in both parties now believe that Democrats have better-than-even odds of winning at least the House. But if they don't, rather than dissect the mechanical failures that cost them a few thousand votes here or there, Democrats might be forced to admit, at long last, that there is a structural flaw in their theory of party-building. Even a near miss, at a time of such overwhelming opportu-

nity, would suggest that a national party may not, in fact, be able to win over the long term by fixating on a select group of industrial states while condemning entire regions of the country to what amounts to one-party rule. Which would mean that Howard Dean is right to replant his party's flag in the towns and counties along America's less-traveled highways, even if his plan isn't perfect, and even if he isn't the best messenger to carry it out. As another flawed visionary, the filmmaker Woody Allen, once put it, 80 percent of success is just showing up.

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