

February 11, 2003
What It Takes To Win The White House

DLC Memo:
TO: Democratic Candidates for President
FROM: Al From and Bruce Reed
CC: John McCain
SUBJECT: Running for President

Congratulations on your decision to run for president. If you're lucky, you might be the first senator in your row to get into the race. You now hold the future of the Democratic Party -- and the country -- in your hands. The mountain you have to climb is steep and treacherous, but truth is on your side. As Trent Lott might say, "If you're elected, America wouldn't have all these problems!"

Of course, once you've made up your mind to enter the race, the biggest question on your mind is probably the same one Bill Clinton asked in 1991 after jumping in: "Now what?"

Here are some unsolicited suggestions about how to make sure the crazy journey you've just begun turns out well for you and for the country....

The Ghost of Democrats Past

Since Al Gore and Tom Daschle decided not to run, the conventional wisdom is that there is no front-runner in the Democratic race. That's not quite true. The real front-runner, fresh off its triumph in the midterms, is the Democratic Party's losing image. Your most formidable opponent isn't President Bush or your fellow contestants for the nomination. Your real enemy is the ghost of Democrats past.

Don't let your party get you down. Let's not forget: Democrats were responsible for most of the social and economic progress of the 20th century. In the 1990s, Democratic ideas and leadership helped restore America's confidence and prosperity at home and helped spread peace throughout the world.

But politics isn't always fair. The doubts Democrats worked so hard to dispel in the 1990s -- that they loved government and taxes too much, and cared about security and values too little -- have returned. The pounding Democrats took in the 2002 elections made painfully clear that no Democratic nominee can beat Bush without first changing the face of the Democratic Party.

In other words, many Americans already have questions about your character even before they've heard your name. From the outset, they will view you through the prism of Democrats who have run before. They will not just be taking the measure of where you stand, they will be wondering what you're made of.

You have no time to waste in proving you're your own man, not your party's. The Bush team will raise and spend \$200 million over the next 18 months to dredge up every bad Democratic stereotype. With each chance you get, you have to start right away running against that stereotype. If you want to win the presidency in 2004, you have to redefine the Democratic Party in 2003.

In politics, every problem is an opportunity. No party has ever needed definition, or redefinition, more than the Democratic Party today. Just before

the midterm elections, the Gallup Poll found that by 60 points, Americans believed Republicans would do a better job than Democrats on their top priorities -- national security and the fight against terrorism.

But party perceptions are a wonderful foil for an insurgent candidate looking to define himself. Clinton won as a different kind of Democrat in 1992. George W. Bush stole a page from the New Democratic playbook and won in 2000 by promising to be a different kind of Republican.

Presidential elections are the one window every four years that our country has to define itself. In the same way, primaries are the one window a party has to define itself. The rest of the time, any party is a cacophony of voices and a jumble of interests. But from the moment it chooses a nominee until the election is over -- or its nominee magically becomes president -- a party has one voice and one mission. We pray it will be a worthy one.

You can't afford to be subtle about defying the Democratic stereotype. As Al Gore discovered in 2000, you can put forward a New Democrat policy agenda and Republicans will still try to put you in an Old Democrat lockbox. Every campaign needs its "Sister Souljah" moment to demonstrate that the candidate will speak truth to power -- and to make sure the public sits up and takes notice.

Here's the good news: If you work at it, the ghost of Democrats past is a front-runner you can beat. You're already off to a good start. Last November, we urged Democrats to put security first and turn up the heat on the Bush administration for doing too little to help secure the front lines here at home. By the end of December, a front-page story in The New York Times reported, "Democratic contenders for president are beginning to challenge President Bush's record on terrorism." The ghost is already on the run.

The Job Interview

Former President Clinton, the only Democrat in half a century to succeed at it twice, says that running for president is like a job interview with the American people: You have to give them a reason to hire you and a reason to fire the other guy.

We'll get to the firing part in a moment, because it's important. But the first part -- why we should hire you -- is the greater and more urgent challenge. You will not win, nor will you deserve to, unless you spell out in specific terms where you want to take the country. The American people want to know what you'll do for them, what you'll ask of them, and whether you have what it takes to make your vision come true for them. As Clinton said in his announcement speech, "We don't need another president who doesn't know what he wants to do for America."

Roger Mudd did every prospective presidential candidate an enormous favor in 1980 when he asked Ted Kennedy the immortal question, "Why are you running?" Years later, it's remarkable how many candidates still stumble over the answer. The explanation is simple and disturbing: Most people don't run for president because of all the things they want to do for the country. They run because it's the biggest job on earth and they think they might win.

By now, scores of old Democratic hands have urged you to start worshipping that holy trinity of political campaigns: money, organization, and the fickle god, "message." All are good to have, and no campaign will get far without them, but they're just the grease of campaigns. Ideas and purpose are the engine.

The great, underrated virtue of our presidential process is that, unlike every other political contest, presidential elections always matter and almost always are about something. House, Senate, and gubernatorial races rarely change the course of history. Presidential races usually do. As a result, they are perhaps the only time most voters take a good, long look at the lasting implications of their decision.

In other words, no matter how often they grumble about choosing between the lesser of two evils, Americans take the decision about their president very seriously -- and so should you. You have to win people's hearts and minds, earn their respect, and keep their trust. It is not enough to run against the way things are. They're not hiring you to tell them about America's problems. They're hiring you to solve them.

Here again, you have to overcome a bum Democratic rap. In the November 2002 Gallup Poll, 60 percent of Americans said Republicans had a clear plan for America's future. Only 30 percent thought Democrats did. That was a devastating setback for a party whose mission is to solve problems. The biggest favor you can do for yourself, your fellow Democrats, and the country is to spend the coming year doing your level best in the Idea Primary.

Here Are 10 of the Best Ideas to Pursue:

1. Make America safe again by shaking up the intelligence bureaucracy, hardening targets, and beefing up local law enforcement.

2. Restore economic growth by putting the government's house in order, keeping the private sector honest, opening new markets, and expanding opportunity for all, not granting special favors for the privileged few.

3. Promote democratic capitalism and corporate responsibility to make sure those who do the work and play by the rules, not just those at the top, share the benefits of growth.

4. Ask more Americans to serve their country in military and national service and civil defense, and give more young people the chance to earn their way through college.

5. Reform the tax code to reward work, family, and opportunity instead of wealth and privilege.

6. Make sure every working American has the same kind of access to health care as members of Congress.

7. Give parents more choices so they can balance work and family, by expanding family leave and restoring a culture that puts family first. 8. Demand more from teachers and reward them for it.

9. Make sure every child has the love and support of two parents by making parental responsibility a way of life, not an option, and require absent parents who owe child support to go to work to pay it off.

10. Take back control of America's destiny with an energy plan to pioneer new energy-efficient technologies and develop a 50-mpg SUV.

Whatever you put on your list, it's important to aim high and be specific. The only sane reason to run for president is a burning desire to do a lot with the office. If you have a clear idea where you want to take the country, you can overcome any political odds. If you don't, you won't win, and you wouldn't get far in the job even if you did. This has always been the case, and more so since 9/11. Now more than ever, the one reason to seek the presidency, and the only way to win it, is to unite people behind a cause that is larger than your candidacy.

The Idea Primary is a dress rehearsal for the big job interview with the American people in the fall of 2004. If you're lucky enough to make it that far, you can be sure you won't beat President Bush on the basis of money (his campaign will be able to print it), organization (Republicans finally learned how), or tactics (the current White House's trademark). The power of your ideas, the force of your values, and the strength of your purpose are the only weapons the mighty Death Star might not survive.

The Trouble with W

Candidates devote too little time to the first part of the job interview: why we should hire them, and they spill far too many words, with too little impact, on the second: why to fire the incumbent. Don't be too despondent over the president's poll ratings. They're a good reminder of a universal truth: Incumbent presidents are almost always very hard to beat. Of the 17 presidents in the last century, only four (Taft, Hoover, Carter, and the first Bush) lost after one full term, each under pretty miserable circumstances.

That's why it's so important for anyone hoping to unseat Bush to make the right case. You will never convince America to dislike the man, and you shouldn't begrudge him his few successes. You're not trying to tell Americans they were wrong to rally behind their president when the nation went to war. Elections are never about the past; they're about the future. You should thank the president for his service, but raise serious, legitimate doubts about keeping him around any longer.

For all Bush's popularity, such doubts are not far beneath the surface. Americans aren't at all sure the country is moving in the right direction. According to a January 2003 Gallup Poll, 56 percent of Americans are dissatisfied with the way things are going in the United States. They're frightened about whether their government has done enough to protect them from another terrorist attack. They're deeply worried about the economy --whether their incomes will start going up again or they'll ever recover enough savings to retire. They fear that the country's values are out of whack, and they're tired of working harder and making less, while too many corporate leaders take their money and run.

Moreover, the American people still have deep misgivings about the Bush administration. They know the president cares a lot more about corporations and the wealthy than he does about people like them. They know the Bush White House will always side with business over any competing interest, from the environment to health care to the family. They don't believe the president has changed the tone in Washington. They respect the president's resolve after 9/11, but still wonder if he's out of his depth at home and abroad.

In short, Americans are no fools: They know this president's strengths and recognize his weaknesses. Even though Democrats have been too meek in making the case against him, the jury on George W. Bush is still out.

What kind of evidence will Americans find persuasive? A Democratic candidate's first instinct may be to bombard the voters with hot rhetoric and dry facts: distribution tables, deficit projections, before-and-after pictures of the baseline for Head Start. All those arguments have merit, but they do more to rile up the converted than to change enough minds to make a difference in the election. Americans are understandably wary of statistics and expert testimony. Unless you weave them together to tell a coherent story, voters will assume you're just picking and choosing to suit your interests -- and they'll be right.

The far more objective and credible way to attack Bush and the Republicans is not to hold them to the Democratic Party's standards, but to hold them to the standards they set for themselves. The administration will spend the next two years insisting that the president has kept his promises. Your job is to show that in the ways that matter, he has not.

President Bush promised to change the tone in Washington, but instead has exploited Americans' fears to his political benefit. He promised to unite the country, but his agenda is designed to divide us. He promised to restore integrity to the Oval Office, but all too often he has sided with special interests instead of the nation's long-term interest. He promised to restore responsibility in our country, but he has spurned it in his budget and failed to demand it from his cronies. He promised to be a different kind of Republican, but he can't say no to his party's right-wing base. He promised a new era of compassionate conservatism, but he has pursued an economic plan that offers compassion only to those who need it least, and goes against the great conservative tradition of insisting that government should not give away money it does not have.

You don't have to abandon your policy arguments. But the stakes are higher and the terms are much different in the wake of 9/11. The 2004 election will be about our values, not our lockboxes. To win that debate, you need to make a moral critique of the Bush administration, not just a programmatic one.

Watch for Falling Rocks

It is too early to know whether the president's performance and the country's condition will provide a big enough opening for a Democrat to win. But we already know this much: Any Democrat will have to do almost everything right to unseat a sitting president and a savvy White House. That means dodging the four big boulders that crush almost every Democratic candidacy:

Talk to the country, not to the Congress. Members of Congress don't elect presidents; voters do. By definition, beating an incumbent president requires tapping into popular discontent with Washington. That will never happen if you try to wage this campaign from one end of Pennsylvania Avenue against the other.

That's a particular challenge this time around, when most of the candidates work on Capitol Hill. In the past 220 years, only two sitting senators have been elected president. We've sent more governors than that to the White House in the past two decades.

But risumi is not destiny: The real handicap is not a congressional background, it's a congressional mindset. Look at the recent presidential bids of two sitting senators, Bob Dole and John McCain. Dole could never shake the insider lingo or methods of Congress. The only bright spot in his entire campaign was the day he resigned as majority leader. McCain, by contrast, never

set out to be legislator-in-chief. He got on a bus and never looked back, and ran as an insurgent against Congress. He came within a nasty smear campaign of pulling off the greatest political upset in his party's history.

Don't let the debate in Washington set your agenda or your critique. The president always sets the terms of the debate in Washington. You'll be better off if you make the debate on your terms -- and the country's. In 1992, none of the most important issues that launched Clinton's campaign -- national service, health care, welfare reform -- was even on the calendar in Congress. Your challenge is to address the problems that Washington has ignored or forgotten, and show that in important ways the incumbent is simply out of touch.

We have a hunch what those concerns might be: Government isn't doing enough to make people safe at a time when crime rates are creeping up again and the war on terrorism has no end in sight. People are working harder for the same wages, and seeing their families less. Folks don't understand why they're still paying the price for the corporate crime wave, while the wrongdoers aren't, and nothing much has changed.

But the only way to find out what's on people's minds is to hear them out. So use your time well in New Hampshire and elsewhere, by listening to real people, not just asking for their votes. You'll learn something, and your campaign will be much stronger for it.

Make challenges, not promises. In the long loneliness of the campaign trail, it's easy to think that nobody's listening, apart from the poor souls trapped in the same living room you're visiting. You know you're competing with the half-dozen other candidates they've already met, so why not get them to nod their heads by telling them what they want to hear? The trouble, of course, is that many of the heads you'll have nodding aren't even a good cross-section of those you'll have to win over for the primaries, let alone the general election. Many activists who turn out this early are hobbyists who have spent the past four years obsessing over the same pet issue or crank grievance they used to hijack the unsuspecting troupe of candidates who came to town the last cycle. Never forget: Your real audience is far beyond the room.

More important, these early days are the time when the cement will begin to set around your public imprint. The people and the press are meeting you for the first time, and the cliché is true: You'll never get a second chance to make a first impression. The reputation you have spent your life building back home won't carry much weight if you stray from it, even briefly, on the trail. The press and your opponents will see to it that every lapse is magnified beyond proportion. Even if you recover, the hits take awhile to shake: "Where's the beef?" (Mondale to Hart in 1984), the wimp factor (Newsweek on Bush I in 1988), "pander bear" (Tsongas on Clinton in 1992).

But there's an even better reason not to tell voters everything you think they want to hear: What they most want to hear is proof that you're for real. Promising a program for every problem reinforces the Democratic stereotype you need to dispel. Voters want answers, to be sure, but more than anything they want someone they can trust to deliver on promises, not just make them. You can't claim you're the most like McCain and campaign the most like Mondale. Making challenges instead of promises is what Being John McCain is all about.

Keep your eyes on the prize. One of the iron laws of politics is that taking the conventional path to the nomination leads to a nomination that's not worth having. It's called the beaten path for a reason! In any primary debate,

all the pressure is to please the party faithful. By definition, party caucuses leave out the vast swath of independent voters who don't align with either side.

How you respond to that pressure will determine whether you make it to the Oval Office or spend the rest of your life living down the fact that you lost more than 40 states. The days are gone when candidates could get away with telling different things to voters in different states, or running one direction in the primaries and the opposite in the general election campaign. The press and an army of opposition researchers are keeping track of every word. Every litmus test you sign up for at this stage will be hung around your neck, should you make it to the next. Don't forget: The real prize is the White House.

Be Clinton, not Mondale. By all means, capture your party's imagination -- but do it on your terms, not theirs. Don't look for the false unity that comes from shying away from every controversial issue, and reject the consultant consensus that stacking constituency upon constituency will add up to a majority. That strategy may work in a congressional race, but not in a presidential one. The presidency is about the whole, not the sum of the parts.

The only real way to unify a diverse party is to unite people behind new ideas and a higher purpose that make them forget their old labels. That's a winning formula for the primaries, especially since Democratic primary voters aren't nearly as ideological as most people think. And come November 2004, you'll be able to attract your base and the swing voters you need to win.

The journey you have just chosen will require all the courage, creativity, and fortitude you can muster. The only force powerful enough to sustain you is the one that spurred you to launch this quest in the first place: the belief that you can make America a safer, stronger, more prosperous nation. Over the long haul, the American people almost always get it right.

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