

THE THIRD DEGREE

A Painter's Vote

Laura Owens

There is a certain self-consciousness that comes with getting involved in any cause or subscribing to any belief system. In the past I like to think I was easy going and fun to be around but now I'm afraid my compulsive obsession with politics is thoroughly annoying to many of my friends. I have poured money into PACs and candidates, begged friends to give money and artworks for fundraisers, written letters, participated in phone banking and signature drives. My current plans include moving back to Ohio to register voters in a key swing state over the summer. Wanna come?

Although it is now a hazy memory, the turning point must have been logging onto the PNAC (Project for the New American Century) website. It was like finding the anti-conspiracy. With radical zeal for intervention and superpower domination, the neo-conservative foreign policy of preemption and regime change had been laid out by Wolfowitz in his Defense Planning Guidance way back in 1992. Rumsfeld, Cheney, and many more with strong ties to the administration have been waiting patiently for the opportunity to enact their hawkish military strategy for years, announcing it to the world, forming think tanks, writing papers—it was all there.

My first impulse was to raise money or start working for the Democrats. But it looked as if they had all taken the little blue pill, standing and applauding Bush's hawkish State of the Union address and promising to sign his resolution. As leader of the house at the time, Dick Gephardt in particular seemed almost to run to the Rose Garden and shake hands with Bush in order to prevent dissent or even discussion amongst house Dems.

In contrast, Howard Dean spoke out against the "unilateral invasion" and even stridently attacked those congressional Dems who, with their eyes on the '04 election, were trying to hedge their bets vis-à-vis the war. Recently his campaign



has assumed the position of an insurgent tough guy who will stand up to the radical ideas of the president. With a no-frills bottom-up organizational structure fueled mainly by small donations and encouraging active participation via blogs, meet-ups and a DIY spirit, the campaign has seen a steady rise to the top of the rather large heap. (The Draft Wesley Clark people seemed also to be riding this same spirit but that quickly fell apart when Clark hired top-down management-style campaign staff, many of whom had worked for the Clintons.) However before Dean could catch fire in terms of fundraising and endorsements, a steady stream of "Stop Dean" voices could be heard from the top of the Democratic Party.

Al From and Bruce Reed head the Democratic Leadership Council, one of many centrist groups who refer to themselves as the New Democrats. They were the driving force behind Bill Clinton's '92 victory and have issued regular scathing memos warning of the downfall of the Democratic Party if Dean wins the primary. On May 15 From wrote, "What activists like Dean call the Democratic wing of the Democratic Party is an aberration: the McGovern-Mondale wing, defined principally by weakness abroad and elitist, interest group liberalism at home. That's the wing that lost 49 states in two elections, and transformed Democrats from a strong national party into a much weaker regional one." The DLC represents the pro-NAFTA, middle-class tax cuts and welfare reform move over to the swing voter in the center

strategy that worked so well for Bill Clinton.

Or did it? Maybe Clinton's charisma and the Ross Perot campaign were key. One could also argue that the "move to the center" strategy is more specifically a winning fundraising strategy, appealing to professionals who tend to be pro-business, fiscal conservatives, yet social liberals. The downside has been that, over the past decade, in trying to appeal to that elusive swing voter, the Clinton/DLC strategy alienated many so-called traditional democrats. Since '98 the Democrats have been bleeding seats in the house and senate, and the erosion of the base cost Gore the election when the "dissent" vote, a crucial two percent, went to the Greens in 2000.

Why the resistance to Dean from the leadership? Is it that he is "out of the mainstream"? In a recent article in *The New Republic*, Ryan Lizza writes: "The division in the party over Dean is less about ideology than about power." Lizza observes that Dean's insurgency candidacy, if successful, would mean a great upset for those at the top of the Democratic Party. People like Terry McAuliffe and other Clintonites who lead the party would likely be out of power and out of their offices as leaders of the DNC. New speculation about Hillary jumping into the race this June to save the party was tinged with this Washington elite versus the little guy from Vermont dramatic arch.

Which is not to say that there aren't important differences when it comes to strategic vision. The pro-Dean camp



argues that bringing back that crucial two percent dissent vote and mobilizing an activist get-out-the-vote campaign in swing states, thus inflating their base vote, is key to the election. One thing all Democrats agree on is that the Republicans have been out-organizing them for many years now, whether by getting out their base vote, having the whole party stay on the talking-points memo of the week, or simply making the call to Roger Ailes at *Fox News*.

The DLC sees swing voters as a unified block that sits perfectly in the middle of an imaginary line reading left to right. Move over to the center, take your base for granted, and you win. But independent and centrist are not the same thing. The independent voter may be just that, independent, waiting to the last minute, and voting not on issues but emotionally. Living in a state that just got Schwarzeneggered, one is acutely aware of the importance of "gut" feelings. Think of Dole falling off the stage, Papa Bush's vomiting in Tokyo, Carter's lame attempt to Rambo the hostages back, and the aptly named Gray Davis. Unfortunately, "*Quien es mas machos?*" might be the important swing-voter question.

But the result of this counterproductive struggle within the party is paranoia. And a person can't be tough and paranoid at once. What's that? I think I hear Karl Rove chuckling in the background.

Of course, the conservatives have been delighting in sowing discord on many Sunday morning talk shows as well as on the conservative side of the *New*

York Times editorial page. Safire and Brooks are the first to speculate on Clinton conspiracies and Dean debacles. Hello! Shouldn't we be suspicious? When Tucker Carlson comes on CNN wearing a Dean pin, the "Dean is McGovern" meme starts spinning through the papers and the blogs go through yet another paranoid all-night parlor game of "what if we pick the wrong guy?"

Yet an overwhelming sense of fear and doubt on the part of the Democrats is understandable when you look at the cable TV and radio propaganda machine arrayed against them. If you haven't been watching *Fox News*, *Hannity and Colmes*, *The O'Reilly Factor* or *Scarborough Country*, it's almost impossible to understand the fluidity with which the administration can deliver their message. If you thought Rush Limbaugh going to rehab might have lowered the volume of the right-wing message machine, you are sadly out of touch. The level of confidence—or as Bush likes to say, "resolve"—that exists within the Republican party is unmatched. Week after week they are the ones who are "framing" the debate which results in dissenting voices sounding shrill, wimpy, and whiny. Certainly, the "Dems are weak on military and foreign policy" meme could be linked to a lack of coherence/confidence in the message as well as an unwillingness or inability for most to be perceived as the tough guy.

Other efforts by the right involve creating hostility between candidates' blogs by sending in factional trolls (sometimes termed "freepers" in reference

to the Free Republic website) posing as candidate X's supporter in order to disrupt candidate Y's blog. Reporting on family feuds within the party seems to be at an all-time high right now, and hopefully this is more about a story that sells than the real feeling amongst Dems on the street. ABB is a term used on various weblogs to connote "Anyone But Bush" and recently, after much argument, there is a growing consensus that at a certain point all this energy and devotion to particular candidates will be used in a concerted effort to get behind "the one." At the Harkin steak fry, a forum for the candidates in Iowa, keynote speaker Bill Clinton recently echoed this consensus when he asked the audience by all means to fall in love with one of the candidates, but come next summer let's all fall in line.

That said, I have no doubt that the future will see Dean as a pivotal figure in twenty-first-century American electoral politics, even if he falls off the planet today. His bottom-up organizational structure found its partner in the inherently DIY, rhizomatic, *social* structure that is the internet, thus initiating what seems like a new day in American political life. The DNC have been following Dean's success on the internet by starting their own blog, "Kicking Ass," thus capitalizing on the tougher-sounding message that has worked so well for him. No more little blue pills and handshakes, we're kickin' ass now.

THE THIRD DEGREE is a regular column by different writers on rotating critical issues. Los Angeles-based LAURA OWENS is a well-known painter and web enthusiast.

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