

THE Nation.

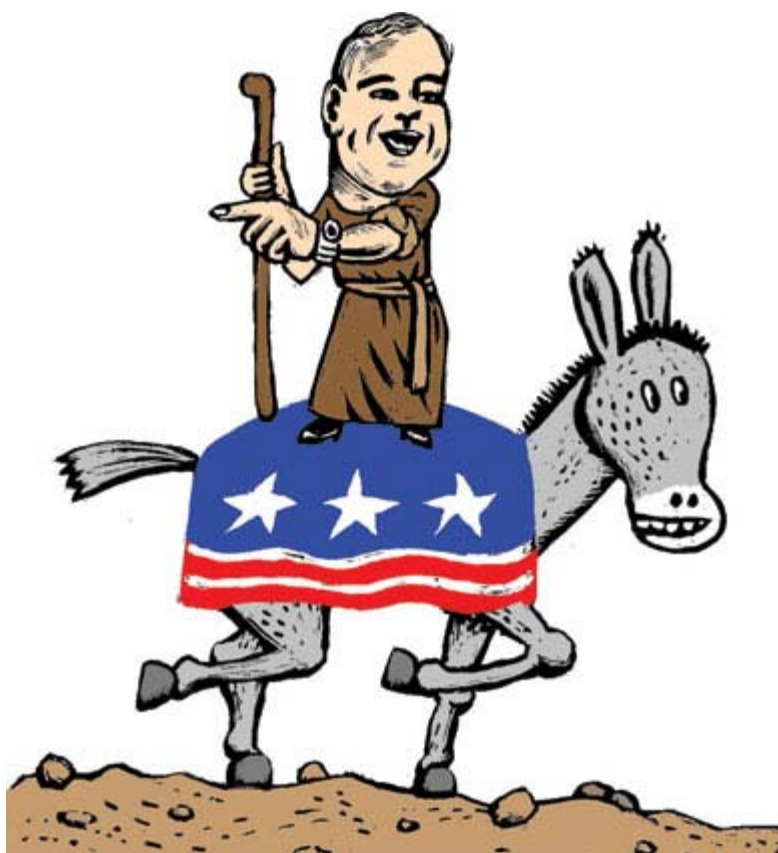
The Prophet

by **ARI BERMAN**

December 17, 2008

This article appeared in the January 5, 2009 edition of The Nation.

It's a week after the election and Howard Dean is speaking at the 92nd Street Y in New York City, giving an unusually full-throated argument for Democratic Party organizing in Oklahoma, the only state where John McCain beat Barack Obama in every single county. "I don't know when we're going to win Oklahoma, but we have a Democratic governor from Oklahoma, we have a Democratic Congressman from Oklahoma and what we need to do is go to Oklahoma, show up and explain ourselves in terms of the values that Oklahomans hold." Those values, Dean argued, aren't so different from those of New York City or anywhere else commonly thought of as Democratic territory. It just so happens that Oklahoma's aforementioned governor, Brad Henry, had given Dean a pair of cowboy boots, which he wore, to somewhat hilarious effect, throughout the Democratic convention in Denver.



PETER O. ZIERLEIN*

The former Vermont governor and chair of the Democratic National Committee (DNC) has become an unlikely advocate for Democrats across the country, particularly in so-called red America. His passion for showing up in unexpected locales is not based on wishful thinking or stubborn naivete but rather political necessity. Dean's favorite quote, which he repeats over and over, is Louis Pasteur's "Chance favors the prepared mind." The way he sees it, you never know when any state, even the Sooner State, might get a jolt of blue. After all, just look at what happened in 2006, when Democrats flipped both houses of Congress. Or this past November, when Barack Obama won Indiana, North Carolina and Virginia, along with three previously red Western states, and the party picked up Congressional seats in places like Alabama, Alaska, Idaho and Mississippi.

It almost feels like ancient history, but "four years ago the Democratic Party was in a very different condition," Doctor Dean says at the beginning of his talk at the Y. Republicans had just retained the White House, gained four seats in the Senate and three in the House, and held twenty-eight governorships. Bill Frist was Senate majority leader, Dennis Hastert was House Speaker, George Bush's approval rating was at a healthy 50 percent and Karl Rove planned a "permanent Republican majority." It was "not a fun time to be a Democrat," Dean cracks.

How quickly things change. Four years later Democrats elected Obama with 67 million votes. They picked up seven seats in the Senate (with Minnesota still pending at press time) and twenty-one in the House, and they hold sixty of ninety-nine state legislative chambers. Obama's extraordinary campaign and Bush's remarkable mishandling of the country's domestic and foreign policies deserve much of the credit for the Democratic Party's resurgence, but so does Howard Dean. Before virtually any major politician, Dean not only sensed that the era of Republican ascendancy could be stopped but also how to do it, first through his trailblazing though unsuccessful presidential campaign of 2004, and then through his forceful stewardship of the party as DNC chair since 2005. "Dean gave the party a mission and a focus," says Paul Tewes, a top Obama strategist who ran day-to-day operations at the DNC during the general election. "That's a big deal when you're out of power." DNC member Donna Brazile calls Dean "one of the unsung heroes of this moment."

As he prepares to step down as DNC chair in January, giving way to Obama's handpicked successor, Dean has cemented his legacy as a prophetic, if underappreciated, visionary in the party [see Berman, "The Dean Legacy," March 17]. When pundits saw the country hopelessly divided between red and blue--with the blue part of the map restricted to the West Coast, the Northeast and an increasingly embattled Midwest--Dean argued that the party had to compete everywhere. After the epic meltdown of his presidential campaign, punctuated by the endlessly looped "Dean scream" after the Iowa caucus, Dean took one of the most thankless jobs in Washington and turned it into a laboratory for one of the most exciting experiments in modern Democratic Party history. He radically devolved power away from Washington by cultivating a new generation of state political organizers and lending support (and money) to long-forgotten local parties, bucking the Beltway establishment and enabling grassroots activists. He rehabilitated his party, and his image, in the process. Dean's fifty-state strategy, as it came to be known, "fertilized the landscape" for Obama's fifty-state campaign, Brazile says. If his strategy is extended during the Obama administration, we'll find out what a true fifty-state party looks like.

At the 2004 Democratic convention, Dean, who was running Democracy for America, the grassroots organization he founded after his presidential bid, met with state chairs from around the country and heard all about their woes. "They were all talking to me about how hard it was to win governorships and Congressional seats and state legislative races because nobody would put any money in except in the presidential race," Dean recalls in an early December interview in his Washington office. He'd learned during the primary that year how much the party had atrophied organizationally, "lurching from one election to the next," slicing the electorate into narrower and narrower targets (remember Florida and Ohio?). The meeting with the state chairs confirmed his worst fears. "I realized we weren't a national party anymore," he says.

A few months later the state chairs asked Dean and the other contenders for DNC chair to give \$200,000 a year to each state party. Dean enthusiastically embraced and enlarged the plan en route to easily winning the DNC race and gave every state the resources to hire at least three or four organizers and access to a high-tech database of voters, which became the twin cornerstones of the fifty-state strategy. Under Dean, battlegrounds like Ohio still took priority, but every state got something. That might not sound like much, but it was practically a revolution within the Democratic Party, which tended to view the DNC as a PR agency and ATM for Congress and/or the White House. "We had a great building and no debt," Dean says, referring to the work of his predecessor, the high-flying Clintonite Terry McAuliffe. "But there was essentially no technological infrastructure and no political infrastructure of any worth." The states, by and large, had been left to fend for themselves.

Indiana is a good example. When Dan Parker became chair of the state party in November 2004, his first

order was to slash his staff in half after Democrats lost the governor's mansion. Indiana, like so many states, had been written off by the national party--the last Democratic presidential contender to carry it was Lyndon Johnson. But Dean gave Parker the money to hire three field organizers and a full-time communications director, the first the state had ever had. (When Dean came in, thirty states had no such important position.) In 2006 that staff worked on three competitive Congressional races long before the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee (DCCC) arrived. The party picked up all three seats that year and elected a record number of Democratic mayors in 2007. By the time the Democratic primary rolled around this past May, Hoosier Dems had been revitalized, and Obama--to the surprise of many--invested heavily in the state, visiting forty-nine times. On November 4 Obama won Indiana--a state John Kerry lost by twenty points--by 26,000 votes. "We're a poster child for the fifty-state strategy," Parker says.

If Indiana was ignored by the national party, then a place like Alaska--5,000 miles from Washington--didn't exist. Dean was roundly mocked, including in a *New York Times Magazine* profile, for visiting and investing in the Last Frontier. "The idea that you're going to put money in a place like Alaska seemed insane," Dean says, "because you could take the same amount of money and maybe win a House seat in California with it. That was the thinking here. The problem is, that's a totally short-term strategy." The DNC's investment increased the size of the Alaska party staff from one to four. More important, "it made Alaskans proud to be Democrats again," says state chair Patti Higgins. When opportunity struck, as Dean predicted, Democrats were ready. "It doesn't look so dumb now that Ted Stevens got indicted [in July] and today we have a Democratic senator from Alaska," Dean says. "But without a voter list and a party that knows what it's doing and is well trained and staffers that are up there for four years, we don't win that seat, plain and simple." Not only did former Anchorage mayor Mark Begich knock off Stevens; Democrats ran their strongest challenge yet to Alaska's lone Congressman, Don Young, who's held the seat for thirty-five years, and polls showed Obama leading in the state before John McCain tapped Sarah Palin as his running mate. Now the party is focused on ousting Palin from the governor's mansion in 2010. When I spoke to Higgins, she was heading to a press conference to denounce Palin, who was campaigning in Georgia that day, as "AWOL from Alaska."

Transferring power away from Washington, not surprisingly, didn't sit well with many Beltway power brokers, who wanted DNC money spent on TV ads in targeted races. Dean's clashes with DCCC head Rahm Emanuel are now the stuff of legend. "I know how hard it was and the kind of criticism he took, when all they wanted the DNC to do was raise money and send it downstairs to the DCCC and across the street to the Democratic Governors Association and down the block to the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee," recalls Donna Brazile. "And Dean said no: we're going to play, we're going to have a role, we're going to be a part of this."

Dean's doggedness became a virtue. The 2006 takeover of Congress, when Dems captured seats in many under-the-radar conservative districts, silenced the doubters, including Emanuel. When James Carville suggested after the election that Dean be replaced by right-leaning Democratic Leadership Council chair Harold Ford Jr., Dean called his remaining critics remnants of the "old Democratic Party." He was right. "Dean won the argument, there's no doubt about it," says Elaine Kamarck, an influential DNC member and professor at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government. "Rahm was the beneficiary of Dean's strategy," Brazile says. "He would never admit it, but the fact that we put organizers in Indiana, put organizers in Mississippi, put organizers out West, that helped him build the supermajority we have today on Capitol Hill." (Asked by talk-show host D.L. Hughley if he felt "vindicated," Dean joked, "I might have been right, but I'd rather be chief of staff.")

Almost nobody is questioning the fifty-state strategy anymore. Dean's popularity among party activists has never been greater. At a December DNC meeting in San Diego, party leaders from New Hampshire to Kansas to Nevada spoke about how their states had been transformed, with Dean's help, in under four years. The state chairs passed a resolution praising Dean for taking "on all foes to defend the inherent brilliance" of the fifty-state strategy, and calling him "the most successful Democratic chairman in decades." (He's certainly the least pretentious: Dean took the same JetBlue red-eye back to New York as I did. "I only take red-eyes," he told me as we boarded.)

If '06 hinted at the strategy's potential, then '08 proved its wisdom and importance. "All the things they did to prepare the party for 2008 as part of the fifty-state strategy made the transition to the general election much easier for us," says Obama strategist Tewes. Across the country, during a prolonged Democratic primary, the party registered, recruited and turned out a record number of Democrats, independents and even Republicans. On May 10, after virtually clinching the nomination, Obama launched a huge, fifty-state voter registration drive. The numbers were astonishing: in North Carolina alone, the party registered 800,000 new voters between January and election day. The total number of new voters registered in the nine formerly red states that Obama carried eclipsed the margin of victory in each of those states. With his state-of-the-art organization, seemingly limitless resources and message of change and inclusion, Obama became the first candidate in a long time to run a genuinely national campaign, with offices and engaged volunteers in every state until the very end.

Obama's success at building a national organization across the map, from the bottom up, surprised even Dean. "I thought we needed a long-term business plan, and we needed to stick to it," Dean says. "Little did I know we were going to have this incredibly charismatic candidate who would do it all in four years. I have to say it happened a lot faster than I thought it would." Now even Republicans, having seen their strongholds reduced to the Deep South, want to emulate Dean, with candidates for RNC chair proposing their own version of the fifty-state strategy.

After a historic election night, on November 5, the fifty-state strategy's nearly 200 local organizers woke up to the news that their contracts were expiring on November 30. The e-mail from headquarters called it a "bittersweet moment." Until further notice, the program had taken a leave of absence. Once again, the party's grassroots activists were on their own, awaiting marching orders.

Dean and his allies are hopeful that the strategy is simply on brief sabbatical, while the Obama administration conducts a postelection review and decides whom to install as new leader (surprisingly few names have been floated for the job). "I think they'll do it their way, but I think they'll continue it because it worked for them," Dean says. "This is the candidate who expanded the playing field in a way we haven't seen for a long, long time." In 2007, at the beginning of the Democratic primary, the state chairs persuaded all the potential nominees to commit to funding the fifty-state strategy should they become president. Now they're looking for Obama to keep his pledge. "We've made it very clear that we think the program was a great success, and we'd like to see it continue," says Mark Brewer, head of the Michigan Democratic Party and head of the state chairs.

Discussions are ongoing among Obama's top strategists about how to institutionalize their network of supporters and how to use the DNC. "I absolutely think the DNC should have a fifty-state strategy," says Obama deputy campaign manager Steve Hildebrand. "I think there needs to be an evaluation of exactly what that means. It's an expensive endeavor. And the way it was done this time doesn't mean that's the way it has to be done every time." Dean clearly wants the party to become the new center of Obama's movement. "I would like the DNC to not only be what it is today but to be the grassroots arm for support

of Obama's policies," he says.

Obama's advisers are debating whether to create a separate organization to house the valuable assets from the campaign--particularly the coveted 13 million-name e-mail list, which is likely to grow--or to fold the Obama network into a quasi-independent entity within the DNC (think of a vast, Obama-centric MoveOn.org, tentatively known as Obama for America 2.0). "Going forward, they are committed to having a robust operation at the party," says a former DNC official close to the Obama campaign. "Most of Obama's grassroots infrastructure is going to go to the DNC. That's the prevailing gossip of the past few weeks, and it's been pretty consistent." Others aren't so sure; a few DNC members in San Diego privately worried that Obama would make the DNC and state parties mere figureheads, subsumed by the Obama wing of the party.

Party veterans like Kamarck are urging the sometimes insular Obama team not to take the broader party for granted. "People always want to keep their own organizations, but the problem is then they go away with the candidate," Kamarck says. "If you want to build a lasting legacy, you have to do it through the party. In the years of Republican dominance, which we now hope is over, one of the things that was striking was how institutionalized the RNC was. They had stable teams, personnel; it wasn't a revolving cast of characters. It was really the place they built a base of strength from."

The DNC could become the place where, as Simon Rosenberg of the New Democratic Network puts it, "Obama can reinvent the party apparatus around the model he just used to win the presidency." With redistricting on the horizon in 2010, as state legislatures determine the makeup of Congress for years to come, "the Obama team has a massive incentive in this coming election cycle to run a national fifty-state, bottom-up, grassroots campaign," Rosenberg says.

Dean, for his part, wants to move from electoral politics back to his original passion, public policy. "Whether it's inside the administration or out, that's up to the Obama folks," he admits. "With a little of God's grace I have ten or fifteen more years of working activism in me, and I'll use it to continue a progressive agenda."

About Ari Berman

Ari Berman is a contributing writer for *The Nation*, covering national politics and the 2008 election, and an Investigative Journalism Fellow at The Nation Institute. [more...](#)

Copyright © 2008 The Nation