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Gore’s Blessing Won’t Help Dean

I remember the 1988 Presidential campaign, when then-Senator Al Gore came to New York City to receive the blessing of then-Mayor Ed Koch. It marked the beginning of the end of the Gore candidacy, which got less than 10 percent of the vote in that year’s Democratic Presidential primary in New York State.

Last week, Howard Dean came to Harlem to receive the endorsement of Mr. Gore. Both revealed their ignorance of the first rule of New York politics: You cannot use Harlem as a political sound stage without permission from Congressman Charles Rangel, New York City’s senior Democrat member of Congress, whose districts encompass upper Manhattan.

The media has treated the Gore-Dean alliance as the political equivalent of a “civvily union,” an alliance in which both men gain strength from each other. Mr. Gore gets reborn as a kingmaker in the 2004 election, with a future claim on Dean supporters in 2008, while Dr. Dean absorbs legitimacy from Mr. Gore’s blessing. Long before a single vote is cast, the former vice president wants to diminish the typical voter’s choice by convincing weak candidates to drop out of the race. And whatever friends Mr. Gore has made with Dr. Dean’s followers, he has damaged his standing with all those Democrats working for Wesley Clark, John Kerry, Richard Gephardt, Al Sharpton and Joseph Lieberman.

Contrary to the popular wisdom, Mr. Gore’s endorsement is the kiss of death for Dr. Dean. Mr. Gore and Dr. Dean share only one trait: anger. Mr. Gore’s is understandable—he was denied the Presidency though he won the popular vote. Dr. Dean has turned anger at President Bush and the war in Iraq into his signature issue—apart from his Internet fundraising base, it is his principal campaign asset. We know more about what Dr. Dean opposes than what he is for.

The Gore-Dean union has ceded the middle ground to the President, who can now position himself as a moderate despite his solid conservative record. Never have the Democrats given away so much ideological yardage before the Presidential primaries were even held. The Gore imprint poses a special risk for all Democrats, since the new Al Gore is substantially to the left of the old Al Gore.

Dr. Dean is part of a new trend in American politics: lawyers no longer dominate public service. Today, we have a heart surgeon as the majority leader of the U.S. Senate, a former wrestling coach as the Speaker of the House of Representatives, and a body-builder as the governor of California. Why shouldn’t a physician be the leading Democratic Presidential candidate?

Medicine is not what it used to be; health-insurance companies and H.M.O.’s have reduced the autonomy, status and income of doctors. In fact, the only doctors making real money in Manhattan are those who inject Botox and sculpt cheekbones.

Howard Dean wisely recognized his limits as a physician and found redemption in politics. It is no accident that he flourished in the world of Vermont politics. Vermont is 96 percent white, with no city that has more than 40,000 people. The entire population of Vermont—613,000—is much less than half the number of people who live in Manhattan. White male Protestants like Dr. Dean are an endangered political species in New York. The last one elected to high office in the state were John Lindsay, Nelson Rockefeller and former Lieutenant Governor Stan Lundine (and Mr. Lundine didn’t get elected on his own).

Dr. Dean fits in with all those free spirits who moved to the Green Mountain State after they discovered that they couldn’t make it in New York or Boston. Vermont does have beautiful ski slopes, but they lack the grandeur of Vail or Sun Valley. Despite the state’s drawbacks—or perhaps because of them—Vermont has emerged as a haven for residual hippies, displaced elites and émigrés from New York like Congressman Bernie Sanders or those ice-cream promoters who answer to the names of Ben and Jerry. (They, of course, recognized the limits of any industry based in Vermont and wisely sold out to Pillsbury.)

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Now we are faced with the prospect of a Dean candidacy for President. Although Dr. Dean’s campaign is driven by his “outsider” status, his Presidential campaign in New York relies on old-fashioned power-brokers. Union leader Dennis Rivera, Queen County Democratic leader Tom Manton, and City Council Speaker Gifford Miller and his crew of loyal Council members are guiding the effort to make Dr. Dean the Democratic nominee. Only in New York could an outsider be so actively supported by insiders.

Dr. Dean lacks Gene McCarthy’s cerebral style, George McGovern’s decency and Jimmy Carter’s spirituality. He is a doctor but he is no healer. His candidacy is based on his early opposition to the war on Iraq. No one—including the candidate himself—knows what he stands for.