

# Talking American

The crucial first step in taking back the White House

BY DAVID KUSNET

NOW THAT DEMOCRATS DESPERATELY WANT A PRESIDENTIAL candidate who speaks passionately, speaks to the point, and speaks like a normal person and not a politician, one contender answers their prayers.

Too bad his target is his own party.

Former Gov. Howard Dean (D-Vt.) begins his speeches by asking, "What I want to know is why the Democratic leadership supported the president's unilateral attack on Iraq?" Continuing his "What I want to know" litany, Dean demands, "Why are the Democratic leaders supporting tax cuts?" and why are congressional Democrats "voting with the president 85 percent of the time?"

Now, if only Dean—or one of the eight other contenders—had a speech that makes the case against George W. Bush as effectively as he bashes his fellow Democrats.

Dean's emergence from Democratic dark horse to top-tier presidential contender shows the importance of a good stump speech—the basic remarks where candidates explain who they are, what they believe and what they would do as president.

A compelling stump speech is essential for winning the nomination because candidates have to appeal directly to major donors, delegates to state party conventions and union conferences, and activists in states such as Iowa and New Hampshire that hold the first caucuses and primaries. But a convincing stump speech is also important for winning the general election because it makes the basic arguments and contains the trademark turns of phrase—such as Bill Clinton's pledge to "end welfare as we know it"—that the entire electorate ends up hearing in TV spots and network news coverage.

The best stump speeches speak to the aspirations and anxieties of a historic moment. In 1960, while Dwight

Eisenhower presided over a lagging economy and a Soviet head start in space, John F. Kennedy promised to "get America moving again." In 1976, after Vietnam and Watergate, Jimmy Carter said, "I will never lie to you" and promised "a government as good as the American people." In 1992, when the nation had just won the Cold War and the Gulf War but seemed to be losing the global economic competition, Clinton offered a detailed but down-to-earth explanation of how we could "put people first" by investing in education, training and health care.

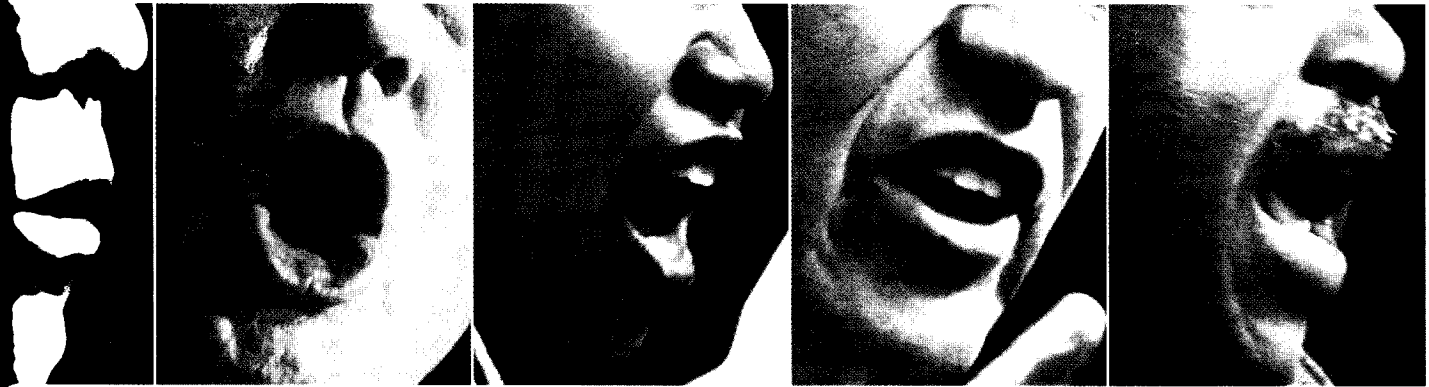
These speeches rallied the party activists the candidates needed to get nominated while reaching out to the swing voters they needed to get elected. Instead of throwing rhetorical red meat to their party's most intense supporters, winning candidates are conversant in what Clinton called "speaking American" (something he'd goad me about because he'd hired me as a speechwriter after reading a book I'd written by that name)—using everyday language that links national issues to people's daily lives and deepest values.

Compared with Clinton, Kennedy or even Carter, none of the current Democratic candidates is consistently speaking American to voters who are anxious about the future but not yet angry with the president. To beat Bush, the eventual nominee needs to start from the three events that define our times: the September 11 terrorist attacks, the corporate scandals, and the economy that's shedding jobs and shrinking incomes. Then offer alternatives to Bush's tax cuts for the wealthy and going it almost alone in the war on terrorism. And explain how Americans can shape a world where they'll have lives that are secure in every sense of that word.

So far, none of the nine Democratic contenders is giving more than bits and pieces of a winning speech.

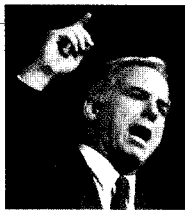
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### THE ATTACK DOC

Stoking and stroking audiences for whom Bush's badness is axiomatic, **Howard Dean** claims that only he opposes the president on everything: the Iraq War, the tax cuts and even the No Child Left Behind Act, which most national Democrats supported.



Before presenting himself as part of "the Democratic wing of the Democratic Party"—a phrase he borrowed from the late Sen. Paul Wellstone (D-Minn.)—Dean resembled the socially liberal but fiscally conservative Paul Tsongas, the former Massachusetts senator whom Clinton defeated for the party's nomination in 1992. When Dean talks, as he has in Iowa and New Hampshire, about his record in Vermont (where he built a budget surplus, cut debt and improved bond ratings), his crisp certainties sound like yet another New Englander: the party's 1988 nominee, Michael Dukakis.

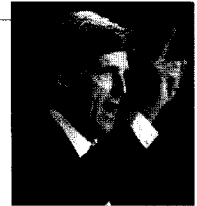
But Dean's formal announcement speech in June revealed that he doesn't want to join Tsongas and Dukakis—and Morris Udall, Eugene McCarthy and Adlai Stevenson before them—in the pantheon of beautiful losers who appealed to affluent liberals but not workaday voters. A physician by profession, Dean said that when he first started campaigning, he wanted to emphasize issues such as health care, early childhood development and "fiscal stability." But, he now says: "Something changed along the way as I listened to Americans around this country. For me, the long journey of a presidential campaign has begun with the people I have met affecting me far more than any effect I may have had on them." Dean said he was moved by Americans' sense that they have lost control of their country's destiny, from the decision to wage war in Iraq to the dominance of special-interest lobbyists. Instead of "What I want to know," Dean offered a new litany, telling listeners, "You have the power" to change the Democratic Party, the presidency and America.

Dean's new speech is in the oldest populist tradition, warning that self-government is threatened by the melding of economic and political power. He's also added new populist points, attacking companies that send American jobs offshore and warning that corporations not offering employees health insurance will lose federal contracts and tax breaks. But how will disadvantaged Democrats respond to Dean's

call for "a great American restoration"—a slogan that presupposes a longing for a past when many suffered discrimination and exploitation?

### THE COUNTERPUNCHER

Sen. **John Kerry** (D-Mass.) is groping toward a theme that could carry a Democrat through the general election: In a time of crisis, all Americans—especially the most fortunate—should contribute to their country. Kerry explored this idea even before the September 11 attacks, drawing on his own military service in asking Americans to answer the nation's challenges as "citizen soldiers." Using martial metaphors, he found a fresh way to make traditional Democratic values of sharing and caring sound tough-minded as well as tenderhearted. "The Army says they never leave their wounded," Kerry has said. "The Marines say they never leave their dead. It's time we all joined together—all of us as citizen-soldiers—committed to a cause greater than ourselves to ensure that no American is left behind."

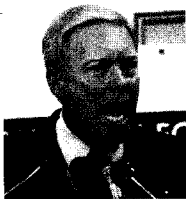


Kerry has further developed this theme to propound a populism based on patriotic values of service and sacrifice. Using the sense of national emergency that Bush has encouraged as ammunition against the president's economic policies, Kerry declares, "For the first time in this nation's history, the most privileged among us get enormous tax breaks in time of war."

Countering the stereotype that liberals are soft, Kerry conveys his toughness by referring to his work as a prosecutor and his experience dealing with the problems of crime, terrorism and drug trafficking. He also draws upon his military service to bond with audiences with whom he would otherwise have little in common. Addressing the National Hispanic Leadership Agenda, he recalled, "The draft discriminatorily, without regard for the fairness we talk about in America, grabbed the kids out of the barrios and rural and urban centers of America and put them in uniform." His best line is what he hints he would say if the Republicans were ever to question his patriotism. As he told the Building Trades Department of the AFL-CIO: "I fought for and bled for and earned the right to express my views in this country. If they want to pick a fight, they've picked a fight with the wrong guy."

## THE IN-TOUCH INSIDER

Seeking the presidential nomination in 1988, Rep. **Dick Gephardt** (D-Mo.) attacked wage-cutting companies, merger-maniac investment bankers, job-destroying trade deals and trickle-down economic policies. As he recited each abuse, he shouted, "Enough is enough!" At the end of the speech, he declared, "It's your fight, too."



Since resigning last year as House Democratic leader, Gephardt has reintroduced himself as a pragmatic populist. More than any other contender, he offers an array of progressive programs: portable pensions, incentives for new teachers, an international minimum wage and the centerpiece of his candidacy, universal health care financed by repealing Bush's tax cuts. He explains his initiatives in terms of his own family's struggles: His father earned a decent paycheck as a Teamster. His mother worked too many jobs to accumulate pension credits. His son survived cancer because the Gephardts had health coverage. And his daughter is struggling to survive on a teacher's salary. Explaining that even hardworking families like his can't always make it on their own, he concludes by quoting the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., who said, "We are all tied together in a single garment of destiny"—a rare instance of a white politician quoting a black leader in a nonracial context before multiracial audiences.

Like Clinton, Gephardt presents a comprehensive program to help people make their way in the churning global economy. Unlike Clinton, however, he does not present his program in the larger context of how it would benefit the entire economy as well as individual households. By midsummer, Gephardt had not delivered a major speech describing his proposal for an international minimum wage and defending his opposition to trade agreements without labor and environmental standards.

## THE PEOPLE'S LAWYER

A former trial lawyer, freshman Sen. **John Edwards** (D-N.C.) speaks populist better than anyone in the field. He presents himself as a working-class hero who worked his way through law school to defend "the people I grew up with" against corporate wrongdoers. His invocation of "regular people" sounds less patronizing than the more familiar phrases "ordinary people" or "average people."



While Edwards' campaign is less substantive than most of his rivals', he has a knack for translating policy into populism. In a speech about higher education, he attacked early-admissions policies as well as "legacy" preferences for favoring youngsters from wealthy families. Most speeches about education mix proposals with platitudes, but Edwards offered a populist insight: When the privileged enjoy opportunities they don't deserve, most Americans lose out on opportunities they do deserve.

Edwards is appealing to swing voters with conservative as well as populist impulses. Unlike any contender except Kerry, he adopts Clinton's approach that those who benefit from public programs should shoulder new responsibilities in return. Edwards' higher-education speech took the unorthodox tack of admitting that it's good for college students to

work at regular jobs during the school year, as he himself did, because it makes them take their studies more seriously.

Lately, Edwards has been making a more pointed case than his rivals against Bush's economic policies. Criticizing the cuts in taxes on dividend income, large inheritances and the highest income brackets, Edwards explained, "This crowd wants a world where the only people who have to pay taxes are the ones who do the work." Using similar rhetoric, Edwards has attacked "the cult of the CEO," with its exorbitant executive salaries and stock options.

Beginning with either his own biography or a set of bromides ("America is not a nation of kings and commoners, masters and servants"), Edwards' speeches suffer from not being situated in any current context. (Imagine how effective his speeches would have been last year if he had begun by saying that he was running for president to protect "regular people" against corporate criminals like Enron.) Yet, while Edwards is unlikely to be nominated, the eventual nominee would do well to study how he presents issues in plain-spoken parables.

## THE MORALISTIC MODERATE

Former vice-presidential nominee and current Sen. **Joe Lieberman** (D-Conn.) is also addressing general-election voters. But he uses moderation and moralism, rather than populism. Declaring, "We must rise above partisan politics" and promising to "tell my friends when they're wrong," he presents himself as a figure above both parties.



Although he uses the word "values" as often as Kerry repeats "Vietnam," Lieberman often does little more than moralize. In a remarkably restrained speech last year about "business ethics in the post-Enron era," he substituted preaching for policy, declaring, "We cannot put the business-ethics police on every corner that might be cut" and expressing the hope that "many business leaders have been moved to ask what the right balance is between shareholder value and moral values."

## RÉSUMÉS WITHOUT RATIONALES

Bring up the rear, Sen. and former Gov. **Bob Graham** (D-Fla.) offers an impressive résumé but no rationale for his candidacy other than the hint that, as former chairman of the Senate Committee on Intelligence, he's onto something about September 11 that the other Democrats don't know and that Bush won't admit. Former Sen. **Carol Moseley Braun** (D-Ill.) also has considerable experience but is campaigning mostly on her gender. And Rep. **Dennis Kucinich** (R-Ohio), a former Cleveland mayor, has had a hard time making himself heard.

Meanwhile, the Rev. **Al Sharpton** has avoided the demagoguery that characterized his career in New York and has contributed one of the best arguments for the general election, telling a forum in Iowa sponsored by the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees that Bush isn't cutting taxes but rather is shifting them to the state and local levels.

## PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

To beat and not just bash Bush, Democrats need to explain the American condition, discredit Bush's policies, present answers of their own and say it all in everyday language.

that begins with culling the best of what they've already said.

Start with rhetorical jujitsu. Use Bush's claims of national emergency against his complacent domestic policies. If America really is in a new Cold War against terrorist groups and rogue nations, every American needs to contribute, starting with the most fortunate companies and individuals.

If America is vulnerable to attack, Democrats should keep calling for strengthening our first lines of defense. Identify firefighters, police officers and health-care workers as America's frontline defenders. Ask why Bush's recession and federal budget cuts, fueled by the top-bracket tax cuts, are forcing the layoffs of so many firefighters, police officers and health-care workers. And ask why (and here's a "What I want to know" for physician Dean) America's defense against bioterrorism—our public-health system—has been allowed to decay.

Then turn to the continuing recession and the corporate crime wave that are costing millions of Americans their jobs, their incomes, their health coverage and their retirement savings. Let Bush administration officials try to explain that the recession is over, that corporate wrongdoing is a thing of the past and that the best answer is cutting taxes on corporate dividends, huge inheritances and high tax brackets.

Bush will try to define the debate as a choice between those who want to cut taxes and those who want to raise them. Democrats need to present moral and practical arguments and avoid being mired in complexity.

Edwards draws the distinction between taxes on most people's earnings that amount to "taxes of work" and taxes on large inheritances, large corporate dividend earnings and the highest incomes, which amount to "taxes of wealth." Democrats should attack Bush for wanting to tax wealth at lower rates than he taxes work. Together with calls for all Americans to contribute in a time of crisis, this populism has a moral dimension and cannot easily be dismissed as class warfare or tax-and-spend liberalism.

Similarly, Democrats should further explore the argument that Bush isn't cutting taxes, just shifting them. As the federal government—burdened by tax cuts, budget cuts and growing deficits—dumps new responsibilities on state and local governments, middle- and low-income Americans are being hit by higher state and local income, sales and property taxes, as well as cuts in their public schools, state universities, public health care, and police and fire protection.

Turning to national security—supposedly Bush's strong suit—Democrats needn't tear one another apart over whether members of the House and Senate should have voted to authorize the president to take military action against Iraq. A debate where Dean attacks his rivals as spineless supporters of a senseless war and Lieberman attacks the other candidates as soft on national security is one whose only winner will be Bush. Instead, Democrats should join together to criticize the thinking behind the heavy-handed ways in which Bush has treated the world community. And, even more important, they can explain the ways in which Bush's shoot-

first, go-it-alone mentality is distorting the administration's current and future actions in Iraq and elsewhere.

Kerry and Edwards have offered some of the best arguments against offending allies, acting unilaterally and waging preventive wars. America is stronger and safer, not weaker and more vulnerable, when we act together with our allies and lead, not leave, international institutions. When we really face imminent threats, we do have the right to act immediately to defend ourselves, but this hardly requires fancy words and frightening doctrines, such as preventive or preemptive wars.

Now that America is occupying Iraq and our soldiers are dying by the day, we should do what we should have done from the first: Share the burdens and the decisions with as many allies as possible. Here, too, some rhetorical jujitsu is in order: comparing the Iraq War as waged by the younger Bush with the Gulf War—where we acted with allies and paid only 15 percent of the cost—waged by the elder Bush.

Finally, Democrats need to recall not only the prosperous economy and solvent government that Clinton bequeathed

Bush but also the vision that Clinton presented of an America prepared for the global economy. Long before terrorism topped our anxieties, we were fearful, with good reason, of being plunged into a new worldwide economy that was sweeping away secure jobs with rising incomes and stable benefits.

While he couldn't or wouldn't fulfill his entire vision, Clinton did present a program to prepare Americans for international competition through public investments in education, training and technology. Clinton's critics on the Democratic left, including Gephardt, also called for America to take the

lead in making new rules to govern that economy for the benefit of working people as well as investors. Otherwise, they warned, international competition would become "a race to the bottom" (a phrase Gephardt repeated this summer in Iowa).

As only Gephardt among the major contenders has done, Democrats should present programs—such as universal health coverage, portable pensions, and job training and retraining—that ease Americans' transitions at a time of wrenching economic changes.

Democrats should also make clear that the only way to maintain and expand such social insurance programs is to make and enforce rules for the national and global economies, not to take the cops off the corporate crime beat here at home and go it alone in the world arena.

"To have the kind of America we want, we need the kind of world we want," Gephardt declared six years ago in a speech criticizing Clinton for failing to carry forward an economic policy that would "put people first." It's more important than ever to make that point—that American leadership can help people improve their lives at home and abroad—now that we're facing a president who puts everyday people last. ■

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