

COMMENT: The angry state of the Democrats

By Gerard Baker

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With due deference to President George W. Bush, the most consequential speech this week was not the one he gave to the US people on Tuesday night but the one Howard Dean gave to his supporters after a dismal third-place finish in the Iowa caucuses.

The State of the Union may or may not be strong, as Mr Bush customarily observed. But we now know for certain that there is something very, very rotten in the state of the union between Mr Dean's brain and his lips.

For those who missed the best piece of reality TV since the first series of *Big Brother*, let me recount it briefly: At his "victory party" on Monday night, Mr Dean, the erstwhile frontrunner in the race for the Democratic nomination, eschewed the normal rules - the politely defiant concession speech, the promise to redouble his efforts for the next contests - and tried instead to project energy. He bounded on to the stage, took off his jacket, rolled up his sleeves, grabbed the microphone, clenched his jaw, bulged his eyes and let rip.

It started off all right, with a pledge to take the fight to the next primary state, but then something somewhere in Mr Dean's synapses snapped.

"We're not only going to go to New Hampshire," he said, his voice rising to a scream. "We're going to go to North Carolina; we're going to go to Arizona, we're going to go to New Mexico; we're going to go to Oklahoma!" And on and on it went, a demented verbal road trip across America: through the north east and the Midwest and the west, the tone modulating between a shriek and a roar. "Run. Run for your lives," it seemed to say. "We're coming to get you!"

It reminded me of the brilliant cameo of Al Capone by Robert de Niro in Brian de Palma's 1987 film *The Untouchables*. When Capone discovers that his nemesis, Eliot Ness, has cornered him with some incriminating documents, he summons his courtiers and explodes: "I want you to find this nancy boy Eliot Ness, I want him DEAD! I want his family DEAD! I want his house burnt to the ground! I want to go in the middle of the night and piss on his ashes!"

For a brief, unnerving moment Mr Dean looked as though he might seize a baseball bat and beat the brains out of his campaign manager

right there on the spot.

It is a rare and extremely gratifying moment in a democracy when voters get to see their judgments validated within minutes of the polls closing. That is what happened on Monday.

In the final days of the campaign, it was clear to those of us frantically following the Democrats around Iowa that Mr Dean was turning voters off. Tens of thousands of party activists and registered voters went to their caucuses on Monday night and decided that, for their taste, the firebrand former governor of Vermont was just too much of a risk: too volatile, too angry, too unpresidential.

Then, behold! No sooner had they got back home to watch the results over a mug of hot cocoa and a sandwich than there he was, leaping from their television sets. Volatile. Angry. Unpresidential. Yee-haw!

But let me explain my admittedly bold claim that it was the world's most consequential speech this week.

Monday night's events have transformed the dynamic of the 2004 presidential election.

For months, the prevailing view in Washington was that the US was so polarised that the key to this election would be energising both party's bases. Since there was so little middle ground in American politics, why waste time digging for votes there? For the Democrats, the implication was that the candidate who could best tap into virulent anti-Bush sentiment would be best placed to win. That more or less described the Howard Dean phenomenon.

But Mr Bush's State of the Union address suggested the Republicans would be fighting differently. The address staked out in clear and forceful terms the territory on which he will seek re-election.

The war in Iraq continues to enjoy broad support, especially since Saddam Hussein's capture; Mr Bush's forays into Democratic territory on health, education and immigration, and his evident profligacy with the public finances, show his willingness to venture well beyond his Republican base. Against that, the Dean alternative looks small, partisan, exclusive and out of the mainstream.

The lesson of Iowa is that the country is indeed sharply divided, and the Democratic side is angry. But there are also enough Democrats determined to mount the most credible challenge they can to Mr Bush, to pick someone who can reach well beyond the ground of its own

disaffected voters.

And so the Democratic primary now takes on a very different look: a contest between the angry realists and the angry no-compromisers.

On the realist side are John Kerry and John Edwards, who were the big winners in Iowa. They supported the war in Iraq, giving them credibility with most voters, even though they are highly critical of Mr Bush's conduct of the war and foreign policy in general. They both offer plausible alternatives as president to a broad range of voters.

Against them are Mr Dean and, perhaps surprisingly, Wesley Clark, the former general, who despite his claim to electoral credibility looks increasingly, with his anti-war, more-liberal-than-thou rhetoric, like simply a slightly less angry, even more arrogant version of Mr Dean.

Iowa has shown the way; will the rest of the country follow?

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