

## **OFF TO THE RACES**

### **Breaking Down The Candidates**

**By Charlie Cook**  
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Spending some time with former Vermont Gov. Howard Dean (D) just over six months ago, it seemed hard to imagine how he -- or even his most optimistic backers -- could conjure up a scenario in which he became a major factor in the 2004 Democratic presidential nomination fight. It was not a setting in which it would have been appropriate to take notes, unfortunately, so I can't recall his specific scenario for winning the nomination. I only remember that he seemed highly intelligent, chock-full of ideas, feisty and ambitious.

Dean reminded me of so many other highly qualified presidential candidates I have met over the years who I similarly, and in those cases correctly, surmised not to have a chance. Whether Dean wins next year's Democratic nod, he has become a dominating force in this race and, by all accounts, has beaten the point spread by a mile.

For the rest of the field, the race for the Democratic nomination so far has been a combination of successes and disappointments.

Sen. John Kerry of Massachusetts began as and remains the nominal front-runner. Kerry has enjoyed exceedingly strong fund raising, a first-class campaign organization and the perception by most observers as having "the most presidential resume and stature." But he and/or his message have not yet come together to enjoy the same success as those other areas.

Far more troubling for Kerry is the simple fact that Dean is cutting deeply into the ideological and geographical support that Kerry had once understandably counted upon.

In New Hampshire, the back yard for both men, Dean is not just closing the gap but is now competing head to head with Kerry among younger, college educated Democrats.

In Iowa, while Rep. Richard Gephardt of Missouri may or may not remain in first place, to Kerry's chagrin, it has been the Vermonter who has tapped into that younger, better educated and more affluent base that Kerry had hoped to pick up in his attempt to compete with Gephardt.

The Missouri lawmaker's support draws more from working and lower middle class, among the blue-collar union members and from those over 65 years

of age. While some of Dean's support is coming from the fringe left, much more is coming from the heart of the group that Kerry had thought was his.

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For Gephardt, his effectiveness on the campaign trail has surpassed the expectations of even his most ardent and long-standing backers. His health plan by any measurement was the boldest and most innovative of all, a step toward putting aside concerns that he was passe. His campaign operation is top drawer, and everything seems to have worked out exceedingly well, except for money.

While many political insiders and journalists, and even some top Republican strategists, marvel at Gephardt's solid performance, noting that he has exceeded expectations and has as clear a road, politically speaking, to the nomination as any other candidate in the field, those views obviously have not been embraced by the Democratic donor community.

Gephardt has become the political equivalent of the highly promising but severely undercapitalized company who by all rights ought to do very well, if he had the money.

For Sen. John Edwards of North Carolina, the situation is almost the opposite of that of Gephardt.

Although his fund-raising pace slowed down a bit in the second quarter from its breakneck pace in the first three months of this year, Edwards has raised tons of money, and he is obviously going to have the money to compete effectively in the first round of primaries and in the next round, if he gets that far.

But politically speaking, there is little measurable progress, and he does not seem to have hit his stride on the campaign trail. There is no question that both the money and the raw talent are there, and there is plenty of time for him to capitalize on both, but there are no signs yet that he has.

Finally, there is Sen. Joseph Lieberman of Connecticut, who took the huge gamble of being unwaveringly supportive of going to war with Iraq while seeking the nomination of a party with strong pacifist tendencies.

Although the war was initially successful, the continued controversy swirling around Iraq means that Lieberman now faces the possibility of his support for going to war becoming a liability, certainly among Democratic voters. Lieberman also faces the reality of a scarcity of money that few anticipated.

While Lieberman did raise sufficient money in the second quarter to put off speculation that he would have to drop out of the race, his chances of winning the nomination, like those of Edwards, seem dependent upon both Gephardt and Kerry stumbling in Iowa and New Hampshire.

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