

commentary

from other pens...

Hopefuls scramble; Gore ponders future

Democratic presidential hopefuls have spent the year aggressively courting party activists in states central to the 2004 presidential competition, but not the Democrat who is the likely front-runner if he joins the race.

Al Gore, the 2000 Democratic nominee, has been missing from the stream of politicians visiting Iowa, New Hampshire and South Carolina.

Gore has a big advantage in political contacts and name recognition in those states. He spoke to key Democratic gatherings in both Iowa and New Hampshire last fall and plans trips to both states later this year.

Most activists in those states are more focused on 2002 elections right now than on which presidential hopeful they will back, say party veterans.

Potential candidates like Vermont Gov. Howard Dean and Sens. John Kerry of Massachusetts, John Edwards of North Carolina and Joseph Lieberman of Connecticut have been very busy in the early states — including some who made trips to other states like Arizona and Michigan.

House Democratic leader Dick Gephardt of Missouri has also visited the states frequently, usually while campaigning for House candidates.

"The people in South Carolina are focusing on the race for the United States Senate and governor," said Don Fowler, a former national party chairman from Columbia, S.C. "The trips these candidates have made, particularly if they're brand new candidates, have been useful and productive for them. But it determines nothing for them as far as the 2004 primary."

Lieberman, who was Gore's running mate in 2000, has been campaigning for Democrats around the country, including frequent visits to the early states. He's considering a run if Gore does not.

"This has been a chance to thank people for their support and also for the senator to meet people, and introduce himself," said Joe Eyer, Lieberman's political director. "We're taking a serious look at this. It's important to do the living rooms and the backyards in these early states."

Kerry and Edwards have combined campaign appearances and financial donations with some offbeat steps to raise their profiles in early states.

Kerry has placed staffers trained by his political action committee with state parties in Iowa, New Hampshire, South Carolina, Arizona and Michigan. Edwards has donated computers to state parties in Iowa, New Hampshire and South Carolina, sponsored a race car in Iowa and hired a bluegrass band to play at some of his campaign events.

Gephardt has been traveling around the country campaigning for House candidates and those visits have included Iowa and New Hampshire, which have competitive House races, as well as South Carolina.

Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle has raised money for Senate candidates in all three states. He was in South Carolina in December at an event to benefit Senate candidate Alex Sanders.

Daschle has been to Iowa twice this election cycle, in May 2001 to help incumbent Sen. Tom Harkin, and this June when he attended the picnic held by Democratic Gov. Tom Vilsack and campaigned with Harkin.

"The focus in Iowa now is on the governor's and Harkins' race," said Rob Tully, vice chair of the Iowa party and a member of the Democratic National Committee. "Any efforts to assist them will help people all the way down the ticket."

A candidate's longshot status tends to drive up the number of visits. For example, Dean has been to Iowa seven times this year, New Hampshire nine times, South Carolina three times and Michigan twice.

Edwards has tried some of the more unorthodox methods to gain attention, such as the race car sponsorship, the bluegrass band and the gift computers. Kerry's placement of staffers with the state parties could give him added insight in state political operations in a primary season.

The early activity may not decide results of a primary, it builds good will.

"It's important ... because it allows them to establish a rapport they're going to need with Democrats in the state," said Dick Harpootlian, chairman of the South Carolina Democratic Party. "And it's important to the party because their celebrity status and their contributions help us dramatically in organizing and campaigning this fall."

EDITOR'S NOTE — Will Lester covers politics and polling for The Associated Press.



Cabinet falls like we had had an earthquake

We had an earthquake in my house a while back. At least it seemed like an earthquake. I was walking out of the bedroom getting ready to go to work, when the walls starting shaking, dishes started falling and it sounded like the roof was going to fall in on us.



doug stephens

• wisdom from babes

I braced myself in the bedroom's doorway, which made me feel pretty silly when I realized what had happened. A cabinet over the kitchen sink fell off the wall.

Just fell off. I've never heard of that happening, but there it was, on the floor, along with most of our dishes.

It woke the house up. My 2-year-old daughter took it better than I did. While I stomped across the floor, cursing the builders of the house, my landlords, the cabinet makers, fate, Kansas weather and the price of gasoline, Sunnie stood wide-eyed, observing the scene. I don't know what was more interesting to her, the broken dishes, or Daddy tearing his hair out.

I helped get the mess cleaned up and showed up late to work. I let Amanda deal with the landlords. After a couple discussions about who's responsible for broken water lines and the benefits of paying rent on time (you don't get served by the sheriff's office) neither one of us enjoys talking to them.

They wanted to know what we had done to the

cabinet. Our dishes are broken, our food is stuffed in every spare cubby we can find, I was late to work, my kids were scared, and they want to know what we did to break the cabinet.

Amanda had a better response to the question than I would have. If I had talked to those guys, we'd probably be looking for somewhere else to live.

After a week or so someone finally came over to put up new cabinets. He was a real nice guy, and worked pretty fast, but his timing was terrible.

Since our kitchen table had been converted to a food storage unit, we'd been forced to eat our dinners in the living room. Amanda has an addiction to a television show I'm embarrassed to name, and of course, we were eating dinner and watching the show when the contractor showed up.

It is nice to have new cabinets, though. I hope they last this time.

Looking to retire

It looks like I'm going to retire soon. That's what all my e-mails at the office say lately.

Every morning for the past eight days there is a message or two from gentlemen at different banks. Sometimes they are from South Africa, and sometimes from France or some Caribbean islands.

These guys tell me I have been chosen because I'm such a trustworthy guy. They tell me there are accounts in these banks which no one has a claim to. The owners died or vanished and there are no living heirs.

They want me to set up a bank account and that they can transfer the money to. I get to keep 30 percent. Each one of these accounts is worth about \$10 million, I'm told, so if I do it a few times, I'll have enough money for my kids to retire.

I'm not sure where the scam is. It could be that the spammers just want me to reply to the letters so they'll know I actually exist.

I like to imagine it's a real offer, though, and I could end up with \$10 million or so in cash. Tax free. What would I do with that much money?

My wife said I'd just sit around the house and read all day. Sounds like plan to me, but unless the Phoenix Suns see the error of their ways and offer me a point guard position, I doubt if I'll see that much money any time soon.

Still, it's fun to dream.

No need to panic about drivers on the phone

Worried about the supposed epidemic of bad driving spawned by cellular phones?

Don't be. There's probably more chance of being hit by a meteor where you're standing right now than a driver on a cell phone running you down.

Despite the hysteria pumped up by do-gooders bent on regulating our phones, the figures don't show much of a problem.

A recent Associated Press story makes much of the hysteria, but when you examine the figures, they don't wash. It's just a reporter trying to pump up a fading trial balloon.

The fact is, cell phones apparently aren't one tenth the problems the do-gooders of the world want them to be.

The story begins in dramatic fashion:

"Gone are the good old days of distracted driving when motorists merely juggled coffee, shaved, read a map, drove with a pet in the lap and lit cigarettes.

"Millions of Americans are taking traditional driver absent mindedness to new heights.

"They're talking on cell phones, sending and receiving pages, checking sports scores and even

sneaking a glance or two at television. The much-maligned cell phone, experts say, is just the tip of the iceberg."

The story says that cell phones, in-car electronics and radio-CD systems represent "the leading cause of inattention in crashes that the story says killed 6,516 Californians and injured 413,913 last year."

And that might be true. Maybe 6,516 people were killed in all traffic accidents in California last year.

The accuracy of the figures is in doubt, though, because Caltrans reported only about 3,700 total traffic fatalities in 2000, and that figure was down about 20 percent over 10 years. Where the 6,516 figure comes from the story never says.

An accompanying chart purports to show the number of deaths blamed on cell phones: it is three.



steve haynes

• along the sappa

Three?

That's less than one tenth of 1 percent.

Hardly a major problem.

Heck, children were blamed for two cases of fatal distraction, and no one is talking about banning them.

The story does point out industry testimony that cell phone use has gone from 10 million in 1988 to 120 million today without any similar increase in traffic fatalities.

But cell phones make an inviting target. People think they must be distracting. They apparently were dangerous to those three people in California.

Once an idea like that gets in people's heads, especially liberal do-gooders, it's hard to shake. Truth and logic have little effect.

But that is often the case in public policy decisions in this country. We vote and decide based on what we believe, what we perceive, not what is.

The reporter backs up his beliefs with a bunch of anecdotes, but the statistics don't show much of a problem.

So, let's ban cell phones, shall we? And maybe driving with kids, too.

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