

# One January in New Hampshire:

A Wannabe Insider and  
the Presidential Campaign of Howard Dean

By Nathan Blake

So this is politics?" I wondered as I waved a "Honk for Dean" sign at cars driving through a busy intersection in Concord, New Hampshire. The winter sun was setting, and it was, in a word, *cold*. A half-dozen college-aged guys surrounded me, whooping excitedly. I tried to decide whether this particular political action had even the efficacy of an evangelizing Rose Bowl float.



ILLUSTRATION BY MAX SEABAUGH



A solid twenty minutes of hopping and hollering went by before we dragged our numb bodies back to our cars. I learned an important lesson about political campaigning that night: avoid “visibility” assignments at all costs.

## How Would Jesus Vote?

I’ve engaged in different forms of what I consider Christian-based activism, from writing letters to dictators on behalf of political prisoners to frying up grilled cheese sandwiches for the homeless to bearing witness outside a prison as my government kills a man. However, the Dean for America (DFA) campaign was my first substantial foray into the rather messy arena of electoral politics, where idealism is often overwhelmed by compromise and money corrupts absolutely. It can be an odd and challenging place for an Adventist, but ultimately it provided me an opportunity to live my ethics and work for good.

A friend of mine at law school is a new convert. On November 2, 2004, he will cast his first vote for president as a Christian. We’ve discussed the upcoming decision and the role one’s faith plays in politics. He asked me if I took candidates’ professions of faith into account when I vote. I replied that their policies matter more.

Who cares where George W. Bush is on Sunday morning if come Monday he’s handing out tax cuts to the ultrawealthy and shortchanging the forty-five million citizens who lack health insurance? Who cares if he uses evangelical language in his State of the Union address if he’s also spinning elaborate lies about Iraq? I make my

mises. In fact, my only other Adventist-at-Yale-Law-School friend and fellow intern, Justin Kim, and I had both been on the Dean bandwagon for well over a year. We figured if he—a John McCain-voting moderate—and I—a proud, if quixotic, left-liberal—could agree on one candidate, this guy just might have a shot.

A straight-shooting, socially liberal, fiscally conservative governor! How could Dean lose?

## Not for Glamour

I did not sign up for a glamour position when I volunteered to work in the New Hampshire primary. I was not on my way to becoming a famous political operative like James Carville or George Stephanopoulos. I was not making policy decisions or communicating with the press. I was doing “field work.” So my “insider account” doesn’t describe how the wheels came off the Dean bus from the driver’s or even a passenger’s point of view. It’s more from the perspective of one of the loose nuts.

Our office was located just off Main Street in downtown Concord, New Hampshire, the state’s capital. Most of the other major campaigns had offices just around the corner and we ran into their staffers in the bagel shops and bars, where we eyed each other suspiciously. We were always on the lookout for faux Deaniacs, John Kerry volunteers masquerading as true believers in hopes of infiltrating.

The Dean campaign may have gone through \$40 million during the presidential primary, but it sure didn’t spend much outfitting this particular office. Right inside

Asked if I took candidates’ professions of faith into account when I vote,  
I replied that their policies matter more.

political decisions based on who will best heal the sick, feed the hungry, care for the needy, respect life, and keep us safe.

Governor Howard Dean appealed to me for those reasons. He had a practical commonsense plan to provide health care to almost everyone, as he had done as governor of Vermont. His environmental conscience was sound. Alone among the major Democratic candidates, he courageously opposed the invasion of Iraq because it was ill-conceived, unnecessary, and a major distraction from our struggle against the very real danger of Islamist terrorism.

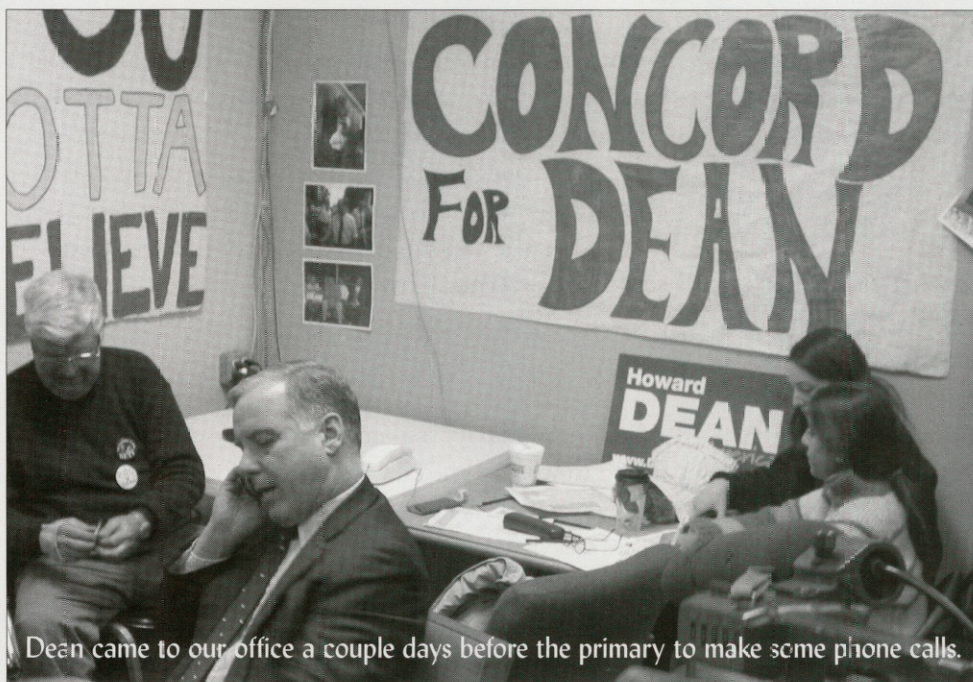
In addition, Dean had a long history of governing as a moderate, balancing budgets and forging compro-

the front door was a living-room-sized workspace with three long tables and four desks jammed against the walls.

In the back were two small offices: one housed three staffers, the other had two staffers and served as the electronic heart of DFA Concord. Living up to the stereotype of an Internet-driven campaign, even our phones depended on the computer network. As our tech guy remarked, “You could shut down the campaign with a few solid swings of a bat.” At our level, it







Dean came to our office a couple days before the primary to make some phone calls.

strongly supported another candidate (5). We marked 3 for true undecideds, 2 for Dean-leaners, and 1 for those who had seen the light (strong Dean backers).

## Exciting Monotony

Our schedule was somewhat predictable. Every night we would send out groups to “phone bank” (call long lists of voters). My first night I was sent out with two Brown University students to the law office of one of Dean’s college buddies. Essentially, we were political telemar-

was a rookie campaign flying by the seat of its pants.

Six or seven permanent staffers had worked in our office for months. Then, in a matter of a couple weeks, an extra twenty-five interns showed up to work the month of January. In an office built for probably three or four people, it felt crowded. So we expanded our workspace into the rather chilly basement, which could be considered “finished” only in the sense that it had cement on the ground instead of dirt floors.

We stuck a couple tables down there and some computers for data entry. Our “intercom” consisted of a hole in the ceiling, where we had stuffed a hose through to talk with the upstairs staff. One valiant bathroom served all.

## Searching for Supporters

The campaign maintained a giant, detailed database with an almost-disturbing amount of information about area voters. Every time we talked with a voter we recorded the conversation in the database. We obviously knew their phone number and postal and e-mail addresses, but we also knew who lived with whom, often what issues concerned them most, any political events they may have attended, and—most importantly—how they planned to vote.

This is a pretty standard campaign scheme: Voters are ranked on a scale of 1 to 6. A 6 means that the person is ineligible to vote in the primary (they’re Republican) or that they are a “lost” Bush supporter. We gave scores of 4 or 5 to people who either leaned toward voting for another Democratic candidate (4) or

strongly supported another candidate (5). Predictably, people hung up on us a lot, which is not the most pleasant way to spend an evening. On the initial calls we just tried to identify voters to figure out who they favored. As we got closer to the primary, the calls took on a more persuasive angle.

But, really, every day was different. When I arrived at the beginning of January, the on-the-ground campaign had had the same focus for months. We prized house meetings, where people opened their homes to neighbors and talked about Dean as if hawking Amway products.

The campaign made a big deal about empowering common people. Governor Dean always chanted, “You have the power,” and we focused on personal interaction. But almost immediately after I got to New Hampshire, the methods shifted. We upped the mass phone calling and started preparing get-out-the-vote (GOTV) tactics in earnest. We started sending people out to do “visibility” a.k.a. “viz.” We tried to maximize our exposure and our audience.

## Moving Up

After a few days fighting with underlings for computer seats in the basement, I got called upstairs to help the two volunteer coordinators. My new responsibilities included answering phones, handing out yard signs and bumper stickers, and supervising the volunteers who came to phone bank every day. More importantly, I had my own desk space (shared with only one other intern), and I almost always had a valid excuse to get out of viz.



About a week later, I got “promoted” again. One of our area organizers was a little overwhelmed with the seventeen towns he was expected to manage for our GOTV effort. So I got the opportunity to help him in eight. I was responsible for getting every one of our known supporters to the polls on January 27. This meant setting up a structure in each town that plugged in volunteers to call people four or more times over the course of the day until our “poll monitors” witnessed our supporters actually casting their votes.

## The Iowa Primary: Black Monday

We still had high hopes for Iowa on Black Monday. Our office had no television, so as the Iowa counties began to post results, our staff crowded around computer screens. I kept refreshing [www.desmoinesregister.com](http://www.desmoinesregister.com). The first numbers came in and were awful. Unfortunately, they didn't change. Dean came in a distant third to a surging John Kerry. Even John Edwards beat us, though we handily beat Dick Gephardt, as planned.

The office was quieter than usual as we had our nightly wrap-up meeting. Our district organizer gave us a little pep talk and then told us that Dean was flying into Portsmouth, New Hampshire, at 3 a.m. that very night. Portsmouth was just over an hour away! Yay! Everyone got fired up and we decided we should welcome our man back with a bang. So a little after 1 a.m. we reconvened at the office, piled into five vans, and headed out to an airplane hangar.

It was a crazy scene. Hundreds of people clapped thundersticks and chanted for Dean. Rep. Sheila Jackson Lee introduced the governor to raucous applause and he gave an extremely enthusiastic speech. Everyone got pumped up, drove back, slept for two or three hours, then went back to work.

## Nail, Meet Coffin

The week that followed was a blur. I held house meetings in most of my towns preparing for election day. They felt like Alcoholics Anonymous meetings. A small group would gather together, I would show a short introductory video, we would talk about why we each liked Dean, and then we would nail down our plans for January 27.

The campaign rented out another building for the last five days to coordinate the scores of volunteers who poured into Concord. We sent them out to canvass, do viz,

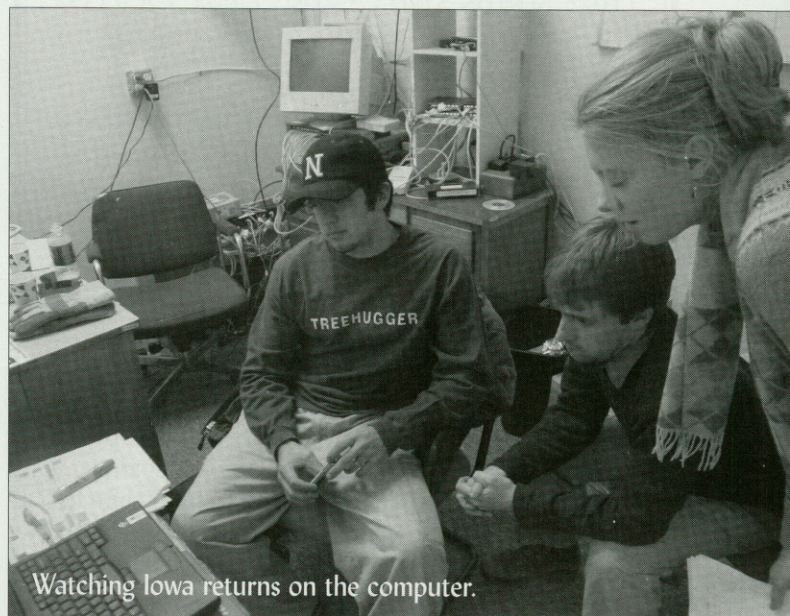
run “lit drops” (leave appealing pro-Dean pamphlets on doorsteps), and make phone calls in the evenings.

Finally the big day arrived. I felt a little guilty because my job was to act as a go-between for all my towns and the district organizer. My contacts in each town called me every few hours to let me know how many of our supporters had gone to the polls, then I entered the numbers into my computer. Everybody around the state was doing it so we could monitor turnout throughout the day.

My partner and I basically sat around our house all day talking on the phone and watching TV while most other volunteers were out in the cold. The midday polls showed a close race. As the time crept closer to 7 p.m. (when the polls closed), the staff got crazier. With about an hour to go, people went totally insane. We were given instructions to go out and “blind pull” people, meaning drive up to random houses, see if the residents had voted, and, if not, determine whether they would vote for Dean.

There were even some sketchy suggestions that interns like me—a one-month resident of New Hampshire—should try to grab a ballot and vote. I demurred. The word from above was that the race was supertight and any little effort could swing it.

Unfortunately, that was not true. Kerry had garnered 38.4 percent and we had only 26.5. Our supporters had turned out, but our campaign had underestimated the turnout (which was very high) and the undecideds had





*"My reason nourishes my faith and my faith my reason."  
—Norman Cousins*

## FAITH, REASON AND COMMUNITY FORUM

LOMA LINDA, CA

*Does God welcome your questions? Do you seek God with all your heart, soul, mind? Join us on the first Sabbath of each month at 5:00 p.m. You will enjoy challenging presentations, superb music, and stimulating discussions. Grow your faith, stretch your mind and enhance your life.*

### Fall 2004:

DECEMBER 4, Charles Teel, Ph.D., La Sierra University:  
*"A Simple Catechism: 'Be abstemious, learn to read, and bathe yourselves'"*

### Coming in 2005:

JANUARY 8, Siroj Sorajjakool, Ph.D., Loma Linda University  
FEBRUARY 5, David L. Taylor, D.Min., Loma Linda University  
MARCH 5, Bernard Taylor, Ph.D., Loma Linda University  
APRIL 2, Johnny Ramirez, Ed.D., M.A., Loma Linda University  
MAY 7, June E. O'Connor, Ph.D., University of California, Riverside

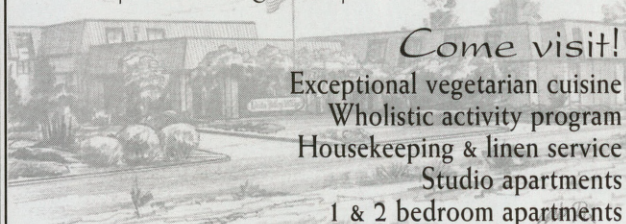
**For more information visit: [FRCForum.org](http://FRCForum.org) • Or call 800-617-3713**

**We meet at: Worship Company Christian Fellowship  
24769 Redlands Blvd., Ste. A, Loma Linda, CA 92354**

## Linda Valley Villa RETIREMENT CENTER

11075 BENTON STREET • LOMA LINDA, CA 92354  
(909) 796-7501

*Remember Camp Meeting...  
Where every day you were blessed  
by family, friends, spiritual programs,  
and of course good food?*



### Come visit!

Exceptional vegetarian cuisine  
Wholistic activity program  
Housekeeping & linen service  
Studio apartments  
1 & 2 bedroom apartments  
Transportation to local churches  
Scheduled transportation for shopping  
& medical appointments  
Weekly bus tours of Southern California  
Skilled nursing center on campus

*There is a place waiting for you!*

broken toward Kerry. Of my eight towns, Danbury, Warner, and Bradford voted for Dean and the rest went for Kerry.

We packed up and headed down to an auditorium in Manchester, New Hampshire, for an event planned to be a victory rally. Dean gave a good speech, a hopeful speech, but we all knew it was over. The crowd was lively in a "thanks for everything" kind of way. The band we loved was breaking up. And that was the last time I saw Howard Dean speak in person.

Afterward, Dean's Concord staff went outside and couldn't really agree on what to do to memorialize the occasion, so Justin and I just drove back to New Haven and our law school lives.

## Making Sense

Looking back on the campaign, I can see that a lot of things went wrong—almost all of them in Iowa. But even in New Hampshire, we had our share of problems. One of my friends in Concord had a bad habit of over-analogizing everything, but he came up with a good metaphor for our efforts in New Hampshire.

Basically, for months we had been working very hard to collect drops of water and keep these drops securely in our cup. Then Iowa had happened and it was like someone had dumped a big pitcher of water all over us. The Dean campaign always thought that it would win Iowa and then sweep all the way through the rest of the primaries. That's exactly what happened, just not to our candidate.

When you think about it, it's truly phenomenal how a few thousand Iowans can shift the shape of the country so immensely. It's also disillusioning how much impact the media has on New Hampshire currently, a place where retail politics used to reign. Our ground operation was solid, but it couldn't compare to the twenty-four-hour cable news and shallow horse-race reporting.

I'm still convinced that Governor Dean was the best candidate in 2004 and I have no regrets spending that time in New Hampshire. My experience was fantastic. And there's value in working for a loser, right? When the United States is at such a precipitous juncture, it's imperative that Christians get involved.

For people walking humbly with our Lord, electoral politics provides myriad opportunities to do justice and love mercy.

---

Nathan Blake is a second-year law student at Yale University.