Charles E. Cook Jr.

Ladies and Gentlemen, Start Your Engines

Hardly a week goes by without an aspiring 2004 Democratic presidential contender either visiting Iowa or New Hampshire (the key early states) or heading out to money-rich California. Generally speaking, because of the magnitude of the undertaking and the enormous financial sum that must be raised to be a viable contender, those truly serious about taking the plunge must decide by the beginning of 2003. The final decisionmaking time is generally between the midterm election and Christmas. Between now and then, presidential wannabes test the waters, trying to ascertain the level of interest and enthusiasm among national, state, and county party leaders; large donors; and, in the key states, those activists with a track record of grassroots organizing skills.

First Things First: Will Gore Run?

The first big question that looms large over the 2004 field is whether the 2000 Democratic standard-bearer, former vice president Al Gore, will run. Some suggest that, given his relatively young age, his national popular-vote victory, and the narrowness of his loss in Florida, the nomination should be his for the asking. It also may be true that Gore was the biggest political loser from the September 11 tragedy.

Clearly, Gore desperately wants to run again to capture the job that eluded him by 537 votes in Florida or one vote on the U.S. Supreme Court, depending on your perspective. It is also true that a great many fundraisers

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and labor leaders in the Democratic Party establishment are convinced, rightly or wrongly, that the presidency in 2000 was Gore's to lose, and he did. Many would rather see him deported than seek the nomination again two years from now.

A slightly more nuanced view of Gore's performance is that his 2000 loss was partially of his own making and partially beyond his control. If Gore had been a dynamic and charismatic candidate, he almost certainly would have won the election, given Bush's scant margin of victory in Florida. On the other hand, Bush was not the most charismatic and dynamic opponent around; indeed, he seemed to be every high school English teacher's nightmare graduate. Had Gore not visibly and annoyingly sighed eight times during the first debate and exaggerated several times during that September, he probably would have won. At the same time, arguably the story of Bush's September 1976 arrest in Maine for driving under the influence (DUI) of alcohol that broke the weekend before the election was just as damaging.

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Gore trailed in most polls until the August Democratic convention in Los Angeles when he chose Senator Joseph Lieberman (D-Conn.) to be his running mate. Some maintain that the selection of the squeaky-clean Lieberman created a stark contrast from the continuous ethical problems of President Bill Clinton and his administration, portraying Gore in a new light. Up to that point, almost everything that Gore had done had been predictable—contributing to his caricature as a political automaton. Arguably, the choice of Lieberman helped sever the umbilical cord that tied Gore to Clinton and pulled him down among key swing voters who approved of the president's performance in office but deplored his personal behavior and tortured relationship with truthfulness. Others say that Gore finally emerged from Clinton's shadow at the convention and, to many voters' surprise, they actually liked what they saw.

For whatever reason, Gore not only emerged from the Los Angeles convention ahead of Bush in the polls but held the lead through Labor Day—the traditional beginning of the general election campaign—and into September. Not until after the first debate, when Gore was caught in some embarrassing exaggerations, did he stumble in the polls and continue to fall until the very end of the campaign. Interestingly, in almost every poll, Gore trailed by at least two or three points going into the weekend before the election, but ultimately won the popular vote by one percentage point. Ei-

ther every poll was wrong or something happened in the last 96 hours that changed the outcome of the popular vote. Many insiders believe the Bush DUI arrest either threw the Texan's campaign off its stride in the closing days of the campaign or tipped a number of swing voters toward Gore. Whatever the cause, Gore exceeded expectations. My conclusion: Although far from the perfect nominee, Gore's loss was not entirely his fault, with Clinton's personal problems limiting Gore's ability and willingness to attach himself to the Clinton record and the then-strong Clinton economy.

Gore will probably make his decision after this fall's midterm election. No doubt he will begin making phone calls and meeting with the 100 or so people who backed him last time and would need in his corner again in 2004. He will ask them point-blank for their support. With so many party leaders at least privately hostile to the notion of Gore running again, two important questions arise: what will they say, and what will Gore hear?

Gore was the biggest 9/11 political loser because, prior to that tragic day, he was running dead even with Bush in some national polls while trailing the incumbent by only a few points in others. No other Democrat ran remotely as close. Today, with Gore and all other Democrats running 30 or more points behind Bush, Gore has lost the political high ground. Although at this point, Gore appears to have every intention of wanting to run, it is a decent bet that in the end he will opt to sit out. If Gore does run, he obviously would have certain advantages, including name recognition, workers and donors from his 2000 and 1988 campaigns, as well as eight years as vice president; but at most he would be a nominal favorite for the nomination.

The Rat Pack

If Gore does not run, the door opens for Lieberman, who has made it very clear that he owes his prominence on the national stage to the former vice president and would not run if Gore chooses to do so. This position demonstrates to Democrats that Lieberman's personal values are on a higher plane than most other politicians. Polls show that Lieberman came out of the 2000 campaign with very high "favorable" ratings and remarkably low "unfavorable" ratings. He is also positioned as a moderate. Lieberman is often not as exciting or charismatic as some of the other candidates, but he is broadly acceptable to most elements of the party and perhaps has the fewest liabilities of potential contenders. Interestingly, Lieberman might be the least liberal candidate in the field and might have the best chance of garnering votes in the South to add to his strong political and financial base in the Jewish community. For the time being, Lieberman's biggest disadvantage is that his deference to Gore renders him unable to ask potential fundraisers, organizers,

and other supporters for commitments and risks losing some of these people to other potential candidates who are less constrained.

A far more probable candidate is House Minority Leader Richard Gephardt (Mo.). Gephardt, who mounted a strong campaign for the Democratic nomination in 1988, ascended to the party's top post in the House in 1995. He is widely perceived to be leaning heavily toward running, particularly if Democrats still did not have a majority in the House. In fact, that may be the only scenario in which he would not run because he would then be Speaker. Others say that, even with control, he might take a shot at the White House. Gephardt would likely have strong, though probably not universal, support among organized labor. He has built a mountain of IOUs around the country both with House members and the candidates for whom he has campaigned. Because he is in charge of the party's fight for control of the House, he too cannot be exceedingly direct about his presidential aspirations and, somewhat like Lieberman, is unable to ask people for commitments. Some who might have worked for Gephardt, had he asked them, have already signed up with his rivals. "Edwards asked, Gephardt didn't," said one Democratic operative who campaigned for Gephardt in the 1988 Iowa caucus and is now working for North Carolina senator John Edwards.

The one common denominator that Gore, Lieberman, and Gephardt share is that they have all run for president, served as a running mate, or, in Gore's case, both. With that comes a level of experience—as well as the benefit of having been tested and vetted—that cannot be duplicated any other way.

The most speculation in recent months has been about whether Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle (S.D.) will run. Although Daschle would be a strong contender, his intentions are anything but clear. His standard response to any question of this kind is that he will have three options in 2004: to seek reelection, to run for president, or to retire from politics. When asked which of the three options is he least likely to choose, some close to Daschle interestingly pick running for reelection. They note that Daschle in 2004 will have been the Senate Democratic leader for 10 years, an unusually long period in such a demanding and, in many ways, unrewarding job. Daschle's relationship with labor is not as good as Gephardt's because, as majority leader, he has had to say "no" to labor on any number of issues, while Gephardt has had the luxury of not having to deliver on requests because his party is in the minority in the House. As one longtime Democratic operative put it, "With the constituency groups, you never can do enough to satisfy them, making the majority leader job particularly thankless." By any measure, if Daschle chooses to run he would be a very strong contender, along with Gephardt, in the key state of Iowa, with both congressional leaders hailing from adjacent states. Relative to other Democrats in the field, Republicans seem to fear Daschle the most.

Probably the most certain Democrat to seek the nomination is Senator John Kerry (Mass.). Kerry gets high marks for being intelligent, attractive, articulate, and, above all, ambitious. Also, being the most liberal major candidate in the field has advantages in a Democratic primary. Of course, this can become a liability as the field narrows and the general election pushes candidates toward the middle, as the late Representative Morris Udall (Ariz.) discovered in 1976. Udall did well early and then faded, only to mount a comeback after former Georgia governor Jimmy Carter had already solidified the nomination.

Kerry can also exploit two natural constituency groups: environmentalists and veterans. Nobody in this field can go to Kerry's left on the environment, which is likely to earn him support from a cadre of skilled organizers in key primary and caucus states, but his environmental positions may also cause him some problems among farmers and autoworkers. On the veteran front, the highly decorated Vietnam veteran (Navy patrol-boat skipper) makes a point when he travels of meeting with Vietnam veterans—a surprisingly close-knit group that had not organized on their issues until recently. Kerry also has a natural advantage of hailing from the state next door to New Hampshire and is the logical heir to Bill Bradley's voters—not an insubstantial bloc in New Hampshire.

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Despite these advantages, Kerry will find it difficult to escape the "Massachusetts liberal" label that dogged Michael Dukakis, the last candidate from that state to get a presidential nomination. Although Kerry will have had 22 years of experience in elected office—two years as lieutenant governor and two decades in the Senate—Massachusetts is hardly a cross section of either Democratic or U.S. swing voters. Another potential liability for Kerry is that his past campaigns have tended to be operations with very high overhead and unusually large fundraising and administrative costs, in part because of his reliance on direct-mail fundraising (he has not accepted PAC contributions in these races). This structure could be a disadvantage in a presidential race with strict spending limitations. Although some have suggested that Kerry may be able to tap into the wealth of his wife, Teresa Heinz, the widow of the late Senator John Heinz (Pa.), the money would have to be in his name and not in hers. In addition, use of personal funds would mean opting out of the matching funds system and is considered suicidal in a Democratic presidential primary fight where candidates are vying for the vote of the working man and not the affluent.

Potentially, the newest and freshest face in the Democratic field for 2004 will be Edwards. Handsome, intelligent, and articulate, many say that Edwards

has more raw talent than any other Democrat in the field. Having said that, he will have had only six years as an elected official and one campaign under his belt if he runs in 2004, increasing his likelihood for rookie mistakes. Edwards, a former trial lawyer who specialized in suing on behalf of injured children, can expect to raise enormous amounts of money from trial lawyers around the country and among party activists seeking a younger and fresher face compared to the balance of the field. The key question is whether he is ready for the big stage.

Getting considerably less attention but apparently very interested in running is Senator Joseph Biden (Del.). In 1987, Biden had raised a very significant amount of money and had put together one of the most skillful presidential operations in modern years. Allegations that he had borrowed portions of a speech by British Labour Party leader Neil Kinnock effectively knocked him out of the race. In 1988, Biden represented the young, brash, fresh-face candidate, much like Edwards this year. This time, he would obviously have to position himself very differently, citing experience rather than new blood.

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One of the more ambitious travel schedules of 2004 Democratic presidential contenders is that of the least known of the pack, Vermont governor Howard Dean. Dean, a physician, began his quest as chairman of the Democratic Governors Association. He is aggressively hitting the dinner circuit but so far is garnering little attention. Although the key state of New Hampshire is next door to his native Vermont, Granite State voters have a greater affinity for the much more populous Massachusetts on their southern border than for the smaller state next door.

Another name mentioned is the senior senator from Connecticut, Chris Dodd. Although Dodd is doing little to promote talk of a presidential bid, he has done nothing to squelch it. Dodd's fit in this race is not clear, nor for that matter is whether a small state such as Connecticut can provide the financial base for two candidates—Dodd and Lieberman—seeking the same nomination.

If California governor Gray Davis succeeds in his bid for reelection this year, he too could jump into the fray, though his star will be less bright as a result of his clumsy handling of the state's energy crisis in the spring of 2001. Regardless of how one might rate Davis's tenure as governor, he does two things exceedingly well: raise money and win elections. These two attributes combined with California's electoral size mean that Davis cannot yet be ruled out as a factor in the nomination fight.

What to Watch in 2003

Some argue that the truncated, front-loaded Democratic nomination calendar gives a huge advantage to an established, well-known frontrunner such as Gore. The retort is that it provides the advantage to the candidate who wins Iowa or New Hampshire. In either case, whether Gore runs will fundamentally affect the shape and nature of the fight, and that decision depends on the success of his effort to rehabilitate himself with the party elites during the next six or seven months. In the end, Gore may well not run, leaving the top tier of the field to Gephardt, Edwards, Kerry, Lieberman, and possibly Daschle, with two or three others trying to break through.

Watch for these men to make up their minds in the period between the November 5 midterm election and the beginning of the New Year.