DOUBLE-TALK COULD DERAIL DEAN MACHINE

By DEBORAH ORIN

September 11, 2003 -- DEMOCRATIC 2004 front-runner Howard Dean is starting to get a reputation for talking out of both sides of his mouth - and not just on Israel. That could become a big problem for a guy who's running on a "tell it like it is" platform - it may be the first hint of an Achilles heel that might slow Dean's surge to the Democratic nomination.

For instance, Dean called for raising the Social Security retirement age, then denied it, then belatedly admitted it - but said he wasn't for it any more. Last week, he said U.S. troops "need to come home" from Iraq - now he says we shouldn't pull out.

He demanded that all U.S. trading partners meet U.S. labor and environmental standards - when reminded that would halt trade with countries like Mexico, Dean said he only meant the far lower international standards.

But that's not what Dean told the Washington Post or the online magazine Slate, which wrote that Dean emphatically took the "exact opposite" position this summer.

Dean said "it's not our place to take sides" in the Mideast - but then took sides on settlements, saying Israel must give up an "enormous number." Under fire, Dean now insists he takes sides in favor of a "special relationship" with Israel.

In most campaigns, doublespeak hurts big time - just look at how Dean has zapped Sen. John Kerry (Mass.) for his Iraq doublespeak since Kerry voted yes on the war and now blasts it. But some say double talk won't bother Dean's true believers.

"Dean isn't running a traditional campaign. It's a cross between a populist campaign and a movement," says Democratic strategist Donna Brazile, who managed Al Gore's 2000 race.

"It may not matter to the Dean constituency because it's not a traditional constituency. You may be playing into his hands by saying he's flip-flopping," Brazile adds - meaning criticism just makes Dean fans more intense.

True enough. Dean fans sent more money - not less - when he had a disastrous time on NBC's "Meet the Press." But the question now is whether doublespeak stops Dean from lining up new recruits. That would be big trouble.

Meanwhile, both the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations and the Anti-Defamation League have said Dean's remarks on Israel are "troubling" and a break with U.S. policy.

The ADL faxed him a request for clarification, saying: "To dictate to Israel the terms of concessions on any issue [like settlements] is inappropriate." So far, no response from Dean-land.

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