The Bike-Path Left
Saddam? Osama? Whatever, dude!

BY MARK STEYN
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Like Susan Lucci at the Emmys, Howard Dean is getting better at putting a brave face on things. When Saddam Hussein fell from power, the Vermonter said churlishly, "I suppose that's a good thing." When Uday and Qusay bit the dust, the governor announced that "the ends do not justify the means." But on Sunday, Dr. Dean was doing his best to be fulsome, if you can be fulsome with clenched teeth. Nonetheless, he congratulated "our extraordinary military on an extraordinary victory and an extraordinary success." They gave Miss Lucci the Emmy eventually, and maybe by Labor Day next year, when the good doctor is thanking Don Rumsfeld for the souvenir vial of Osama's DNA he FedExed over, the voters will be feeling sorry enough to give Howard the prize, too. But this weekend that pileup of "extraordinaries" made the governor seem, well, ordinary.

It's odd that when something big happens, as on Sunday, the Democratic candidates seem irrelevant to the story, like asking a lacrosse expert what he thinks of the Super Bowl. They get interviewed and they trot out their lame clichés, about the need to "internationalize" Iraq, by which they mean not Tony Blair, John Howard, the Poles and Italians, but Kofi Annan, The Hague, the French, the Guinean foreign minister, all the folks who proved unwilling and unable to deal with Iraq before the liberation and who have given no indication of being likely to do any better after. The Democrats' indestructible retreat to this dreary line gives them the air of a gormless twit in a drawing-room comedy coming in through the French windows every 10 minutes and saying, "Anyone for tennis?" You can't help feeling that, on the big questions roiling around America's national security, the Dems don't really have speaking parts: if this was Broadway, they'd have been written out in New Haven.

There was a revealing moment on MSNBC the other night. Chris Matthews asked Dr. Dean whether Osama bin Laden should be tried in an American court or at The Hague. "I don't think it makes a lot of difference," said the governor airily. Mr. Matthews pressed once more. "It doesn't make a lot of difference to me," he said again. Some of us think what's left of Osama is already hard enough to scrape off the cave floor and put in a matchbox, never mind fly to the Netherlands. But, just for the sake of argument, his bloodiest crime was committed on American soil; American courts, unlike the international ones, would have the option of the death penalty. But Gov. Dean couldn't have been less interested. So how about Saddam? The Hague "suits me fine," he said, the very model of ennui. Saddam? Osama? Whatever, dude.

So what does get the Dean juices going? A few days later, the governor was on CNN and Judy Woodruff asked him about his admission that he'd left the Episcopal Church and become a Congregationalist because "I had a big fight with a local Episcopal church over the bike path." I hasten to add that, in contrast to current Anglican controversies over gay marriage in British Columbia and gay bishops in New Hampshire, this does not appear to have been a gay bike path: its orientation was not an issue; it would seem to be a rare example of a non-gay controversy in the Anglican Communion. But nevertheless it provoked Howard into "a big fight." "I was fighting to have public access to the waterfront, and we were fighting very hard in the citizens group," he told Judy Woodruff. Fighting, fighting, fighting.

And that's our pugnacious little Democrat. On Osama bin Laden, he's Mister Insouciant. But he gets mad about bike paths. Destroy the World Trade Center and he's languid and laconic and blasé. Obstruct plans to convert the ravaged site into a memorial bike path and he'll hunt you down wherever you are.

Howard Dean catapulted himself from Vermont obscurity to national fame very ingeniously. His campaign was tonally brilliant. He was an angry peacenik, an aggressive defeatist, he got in-your-face about getting out of Iraq. The problem with pacifism as a political position is that it's too easy to seem wimpy, wussy, nancy-boyish,
pantywaisty, milksopping, etc. In that sense, his fellow Democrat, Dennis Kucinich, has a pacifist mien: I'm not saying he's a pantywaist or milksop, but he comes over as a goofy nebbish, as the Zionist neocons would say. The main impact he's made on the Granite State electorate seems to be his lack of a girlfriend, which has prompted a New Hampshire Web site to try and find a date for him. Somehow one is not surprised to hear this.

By contrast, when Howard Dean, shortish and stocky, comes out in his rolled-up shirtsleeves, he looks like Bruce Banner just before he turns into the Incredible Hulk, as if his head's about to explode out of his shirt collar. Republicans are from Mars, Democrats are from Venus, but Dr. Dean is Venusian in a very Martian way. He's full of anger.

But only for peripheral issues. Ask him serious questions about the president's key responsibilities--national security and foreign policy--and the passion drains away as it did with Chris Matthews. David Brooks, visiting Burlington in 1997 in search of what eventually became his thesis "Bobos in Paradise," concluded that the quintessential latté burg was "relatively apolitical." He's a smart guy but he was wrong. All the stuff he took as evidence of the lack of politics--pedestrianization, independent bookstores--is the politics. Because all the big ideas failed, culminating in 1989 in Eastern Europe with the comprehensive failure of the biggest idea of all, the left retreated to all the small ideas: in a phrase, bike paths. That's what Bill Clinton meant when he said the era of big government was over; instead, he'd be ushering in the era of lots and lots of itsy bits of small government that, when you tote 'em up, works out even more expensive than the era of big government. That's what Howard Dean represents--the passion of the Bike-Path Left.

Vermonters marked the end of the Dean era by electing a Republican governor and a Republican House. Even Vermont isn't as liberal as liberals assume. What's liberal is the idea of Vermont as it's understood across America: a bucolic playground of quaint dairy farms punctuated by the occasional boutique business that's managed to wiggle through the Dean approval process. A lot of those dairy barns are empty and belong to weekending flatlanders, the rest are adorned with angry "Take Back Vermont" signs, and the quintessential Green Mountain boutique business, Ben and Jerry's, wound up selling out to the European multinational Unilever. But these dreary details are irrelevant. To Democratic primary voters across the land, Vermont is a shining, rigorously zoned, mandatory-recycling city on a hill. And the only way up the hill is by the bike path.

Unlike Howlin' Howard and the Burlington Episcopalians, I'm agnostic on the merits of bike paths. But earlier this year, when the antiwar types held "Bridges to Peace" demonstrations on the spans across the Connecticut River between New Hampshire and Vermont, I couldn't help noticing they were very much a bike-path crowd. It was February and 20 below, so they didn't have their bikes with them, but they did have snowshoes and cross-country skis, for the activities that would occupy the rest of their weekends once they'd get a little light demonstrating out of the way. But, under their snowsuits, they were, metaphorically, wearing cycling shorts. They loved the '90s because you never heard a thing about macho stuff like war: it was all micro-politics, new regulations for this, new entitlements for that--education, environment, "social justice." For hard-core Democrats, the whole war thing is an unwelcome intrusion on what large numbers of people had assumed to be a permanent post-Martian politics. When you're at a Dean get-together, you realize they're not angry about the war, so much as having to talk about the war.

A little over an hour north of that Burlington bike path is Montreal, the visits to which (for kids' hockey fixtures and his appearances on a Canadian TV show) Dr. Dean cites, seriously, as his main foreign-policy experience. Montreal is home to North America's largest Iraqi émigré community and on Sunday night the streets were full of honking horns celebrating Saddam's downfall. You don't have to go far to see the world beyond the good doctor's bike-path parochialism, but it's farther than most Dems are willing to go.

Last weekend was confirmation, if you needed it, that this is not a time for micro-politics. Many independents and a critical sliver of Democrats understand that, and, in a time of war, they're not prepared to stick with the bike-path left. When you put the pedal to the full metal jacket, it's no contest.