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HEADLINE: Can Dr. Dean Be Cured?  
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It seems that Howard Dean, who based his campaign on the Internet, is just like one of those Internet stocks. He went up like a rocket, and then crashed when the tech bubble burst. Today, he looks like one of those exotic tech stocks that sleazy Merrill analyst Henry Blodgett touted to innocents.

The defining moment was his imitation of either John Belushi or Bobby Knight during his manic concession speech in Iowa. He gave the whole country the same thought at once: Do I want this guy's finger on the nuclear button? Is this guy stable enough to handle the roller-coaster pressures of the job? Last Thursday, Dr. Dean tried to reboot his candidacy with a toned-down debating style and a cozy, joint interview with his doctor wife on ABC's "Primetime" with Diane Sawyer.

The interview was nice, but probably too late. These crisis interviews are now pop-culture ritual. After watching Kobe Bryant, Pete Rose, Martha Stewart, and, 12 years ago, the Clintons, this semi-confessional sit-down seemed a little contrived. But it stopped the bleeding and gave Dr. Dean a chance at second place in New Hampshire.

One reason Dr. Dean's candidacy sank so swiftly is that we were never sure who he was. General Wesley Clark's weaseling in the debate was just as disturbing as Dr. Dean's ranting. General Clark's inability to forthrightly repudiate Michael Moore's calling the president "a deserter," combined with General Clark's dizzying gyrations on the Iraq war, make his core identity even more of a mystery than Dr. Dean's.

Politics is essentially a game of musical chairs. When the music stops, candidates sit in whatever chair is vacant and then become actors. Dr. Dean, after being a centrist budget-cutting, pro-death-penalty governor of Vermont, sat in the anti-war chair a year ago because it was available; his main rivals had all voted for the Iraq war resolution.

Dr. Dean was able to ride the rebel, anti-war chair into first place in the polls and in fund-raising. But being the early front-runner attracts negative research and high expectations. He peaked too soon.

Running for president is a test of character. The scrutiny of Dr. Dean revealed too many character contradictions and too much attitude. He acknowledged he had no serious engagement with religion, and then started quoting Scripture and going to church with President Carter. He hammered everyone else, and then asked party head Terry McAuliffe to stop his targets from hitting him back. He ridiculed the Iowa caucus system, apologized, and then attacked again after he lost.

Dr. Dean started out defining himself as the outsider running against the insider Democrats in Washington. But then insiders Al Gore, Bill Bradley, and Tom Harkin endorsed him.

Dr. Dean's third-place finish in Iowa, combined with his screaming fit, transformed him from the likely nominee into flake fodder for late-night TV comics. He may come back, but it is hard to see where if he can't do it in the state adjacent to Vermont.

The other loser in Iowa was President Bush. He was eager to have Dr. Dean as his November opponent. The president was certain he would win 44 or 45 states against Dr. Dean. It would have been a cakewalk in a flight suit for Mr. Bush.

Now Mr. Bush will most likely have to run against the Vietnam War hero and national security expert, Senator Kerry, or the Southern populist who feels domestic issues in his gut, Senator Edwards. Or perhaps a North-South ticket composed of both of them, as many Democrats seem to desire and the White House seems to fear.

I have another basic theory of politics that I learned from the late Tip O'Neill. It argues that the candidate with the "sunniest disposition" - even if it is fake - will win nine elections out of 10. People want hope and optimism.

This theory that the positive temperament usually wins was vindicated when Clinton beat Dole and Bush, Reagan unseated Carter and beat Mondale, JFK edged Nixon, and Truman upset Dewey. The only modern exception to this was when Nixon edged the exuberant Humphrey, but 1968 was a year with deeper historical tides at work.

Messrs. Kerry and Edwards stuck to positive messages in New Hampshire and Iowa. While Dr. Dean was running on shirt-sleeve anger in Iowa, Mr. Kerry was being embraced by the former Green Beret, cop, and Republican whose life he had saved during the chaos of combat in Vietnam.

In New Hampshire, General Clark damaged himself by his classless jab at the wounded Mr. Kerry as just a lieutenant, while he was a general. And instead of surrounding himself with his old comrades in combat, General Clark imported the relentlessly negative Mr. Moore to absurdly accuse the president of being a deserter.

What is also working against Dr. Dean, and for Messrs. Kerry and Edwards, is that Democratic primary voters are focused on electability. This sober national calculation will probably grow now that this week's Newsweek poll shows Mr. Kerry ahead of Mr. Bush 49% to 46%, and David Kay has declared there were no WMDs in Iraq just before the war.

The polls suggest Mr. Kerry will win in New Hampshire tonight, though next Tuesday's primaries in South Carolina, delegate-rich Missouri, and Arizona seem unknowable.

I know one cautionary thing from history. Over the last 40 years, only three Democrats have been elected president - LBJ, Carter, and Clinton. All were all Southerners.

So is Al Gore, who won the popular vote by 500,000.

The last Northern Democrat to be elected was JFK - and he had a Southern vice president who delivered Texas.