
READY, AMES, FIRE

by Mike Murphy

Ames, Iowa

THE AMES STRAW POLL may have looked like a huckster's carnival, but under the bigtop lurked the first killing field of the GOP race. The "invisible primary" of early money and endorsements is now over and the real race has begun. Where does it go from here?

Ames was the first demonstration of the inescapable gravity of the nominating process, in which tiny numbers of votes in early states are fantastically multiplied by perceived expectations to either crush campaigns or catapult them mightily ahead.

The first victims were Lamar Alexander, Pat Buchanan, and Dan Quayle. Alexander's weak showing choked off his fund-raising and ended his campaign. Quayle's even weaker showing marginalized him and put his campaign into the purgatory of the cash-poor: no money for TV, field staff, or a multi-state organization. In other words, no campaign. Buchanan saw himself deposed as king of Iowa's religious Right by Gary Bauer. Unfortunately for the eventual Republican nominee, Pat's hot tamale applause lines may be headed for the top of the Reform party ticket.

No doubt about it, George W. Bush was the biggest winner at Ames. He said he'd win and he did. He's still front-runner by a mile. But Bush, Inc., wanted to clean clocks in Ames and that didn't happen. In the barroom primary held the night before the straw poll, in which reporters and campaign henchmen, led by Bush spinners, handicap the likely result, the official off-the-record unofficial Bush win was Texas-sized, anywhere from 50 percent (the favorite figure a few weeks ago) to 37 percent (the lowball estimate of the day before Ames). The implied Bush message: "We're gonna mow through these second-tier losers like extras in a Jackie Chan movie. Watch." But with just 31 percent of the total vote, Bush won small. Small enough to leave a tiny drop of blood in the water.

Here's why 31 percent is a sign of potential trouble in Iowa for Bush. This straw poll was big—almost one quarter the size of the likely Iowa caucus vote—so the 69 percent who voted for someone other than Bush cannot be dismissed with the usual patter about straw polls: a motley collection of high-turnout malcontents with nothing better to do than show up, wear funny hats, and howl encouragement at Alan Keyes.

If on that cold Iowa night next January, Bush "wins" the Iowa caucus with a number like 31 percent, the media will gleefully devour him. Remember poor old Walter Mondale. He beat Gary Hart 49 percent to

16.5 percent in Iowa. That win was widely reported as a loss. And Hart was flung into New Hampshire on the magic carpet of "momentum." It's the front-runner's nightmare, and to avoid it next January, Bush is going to have to do better. Iowa will now be a race between Bush, Forbes, Dole, and Bauer. Paid television ads will pop up soon. Despite the silly myths about retail campaigning, in Iowa as in all the early states, paid advertising is the big campaign driver.

By placing a respectable third in the straw poll, Elizabeth Dole got back in the race. Her problem? Success demands more success. That means move polls, raise money, answer questions. Dole has cooked up her own new adjective ideology—"courageous conservatism" (get it?). Look for that slogan and more on Iowa and New Hampshire television as soon as Dole tries to take voter share away from Bush and move media polls. To gain traction, Dole is going to have to ratchet up her performance beyond her feel-good stump speech. Her dodgy performance with the national media on whether Medicaid should fund abortions last week was not a good sign. Still, Dole is now Bush's main competitor for the regular Republican vote in Iowa.

Gary Bauer also needs to get on the air and start solidifying his support from religious conservatives. Bauer has an opportunity to surprise a lot of people. Nearly a third of the voters in the typical Iowa caucus are religious conservatives, so if Bauer can unite that vote behind his candidacy—as Pat Robertson did in 1988—he'll finish second, or even first. Bauer has some cutting issues—abortion, China—that count with a big chunk of the caucus electorate; he needs to put them in play on television.

Forbes has the toughest job. Nobody in the national press thinks he can be nominated, and they're right. The Forbes Ames spin was to cite his decent second-place result and declare it a two-man race. The media agreed up to a point: Okay, it's a two-man race between Gov. Bush and an unelectable oddity, so it's over, Bush wins. Forbes will dust off his trusty video blowtorch soon and start trying to tune up George W. with attack ads. It's a zero-sum theory: Drive Bush and Dole's negatives so high that there is nobody left to support but Forbes. That strategy didn't work last time because Forbes is, well, Forbes, and even Republican primary voters don't seem to want to vote for him. It'll fail again. Nonetheless, Forbes's money makes him a powerful catalytic factor in the race. He could make the next six months very expensive in cash and headaches for the other candidates, particularly Bush.

The Bush campaign needs to reduce expectations

and buy some insurance for the Iowa caucus by persuading reporters that his huge money and endorsement advantages mean a firewall of support in the states beyond Iowa. Look for Bush to make that strategy believable with early television ads in later states, perhaps even California. Meanwhile, back in Iowa he'll have to fend off the Forbes/Bauer attack from the right and deal with Elizabeth Dole's attempt to break through as the regular Republican alternative.

Bush can handle a fight. His treasury is the strongest in GOP primary history, emitting a force field of inevitability that makes it brutally difficult for his opponents to raise money. He can set the agenda and make news. Most GOP primary voters are for him, albeit with soft support. There are few natural opportunities in the process for the Bush campaign to hit the rocks between now and the Iowa caucus; so Bush will control his destiny with his own performance over the next five months. The smartest move for the Bush campaign is to prepare for some bumps and *use them* to let expectations slacken a bit. Then harness his campaign's tremendous muscle at the right time to fuel the "great comeback" and make his near-certain Iowa win in January *mean something*. The "is it bigger than a breadbox?" controversy swirling around rumors of cocaine use by Bush is just such a bump in the road and offers a corresponding opportunity to reduce expectations preparatory to the roaring comeback. The caucus and the 36-day Iowa-to-California nominating process is five long months away; how well Austin

handles the rhythm of this period will be the real strategic test of the Bush campaign.

Senator John McCain has the best chance of upsetting Bush, but the fewest choices of how to do it. McCain's shot is to let Iowa change the race—Bush wins below expectations, Bauer second, Forbes or Dole a weak third—and be craftily prepared in New Hampshire and South Carolina to deliver two stinging defeats to Bush. I think Bradley will be powerfully upsetting Gore in New Hampshire at the time, and McCain will benefit if an upset virus is in the New England air. It's a tall order, but McCain is wise to marshal his resources and create a formidable campaign in New Hampshire, still the linchpin of the nomination process and still the iceberg that can puncture the hull of any front-runner. McCain will feel the pain of being partially ignored by the media if he stays out of Iowa's headlines, but as the leader of the anti-ethanol forces in the Senate, he can't get a good story out of Iowa. Timing is the key to the underdog's campaign, and since everything that happens in Iowa will happen again and with far greater impact in New Hampshire, McCain has picked the right place to plot his ambush.

Cruel gravity has begun to winnow the field in the presidential race. It's down to five, and it ain't over yet.

Mike Murphy has run 16 successful Republican senatorial and gubernatorial campaigns. He's given free advice this year to Sen. John McCain.



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