

# Don't break my heart, Howard Dean

By **MARK W. ANDERSON**

Special to *Wicker Park Voice*

I don't know anything about Howard Dean.

OK, I know a few things: I know he's a doctor. I know he was governor of Vermont. I know he's fairly telegenic.

And I know he's not Dick Gephardt, Joe Lieberman or John Edwards. In fact, I know he's not even John Kerry.

And I know he's not George W. Bush, either. And perhaps, that's what scares me most of all. And, in the end, gives me the most hope.

## **I've been down this road before, you know.**

In 1984, after I managed to make it to legal voting age in a presidential election, I was rewarded with the chance to vote for Walter Mondale. I was a Democrat, after all, and in my first throes of loathing for Ronald Reagan. Nothing Reagan could do was ever gonna satisfy me, and, despite the historical revisionism undertaken in some quarters, I still believe I was right. But no matter the heights of my rhetorical fancy, no matter the fever pitch in which I anticipated the day I would help vote out of office one of the most ideological and un-compassionate people to ever hold the highest office in the land, no matter my ability to ignore the fact that Mondale was, in fact, about as exciting as cold toast, I, along with millions of other Democrats, got my hat handed to me that year. Reagan, after all, demonstrated his immense popularity with the American people by winning 49 of 50 states in that election. My boy Mondale? Well, he won his home state of Minnesota and nothing else.

And it hurt. It hurt like the moment your first girlfriend in grade school suddenly picks a different lunch table than the one you're sitting at without explanation. Hurt like the moment the folded up message saying you're through gets passed back to your desk in science class.

So I know what I'm talking about.

**Then there was Paul Simon in 1988.** I fell for Simon, hard. He was a plain spoken, bow tie-wearing Senator from Illinois — my home state! — who had a commanding voice and an honest face, looking more like a prairie school principal or turn of the century accountant. He said everything that needed to be said in those dark days when Reagan passed the torch to the first George Bush. A fiscal conservative with a liberal social platform and environmentally conscious, he was called an "old fashioned, old Democrat, warts, ideals and all." Exactly my kind of man. Of course, Simon dropped out of the primary battles after Illinois, unable to come in first any place else. I cried alone, back then, unable to admit to my friends I had ever really, truly believed.

**Then came Michael Dukakis.** Nobody wanted a short-looking Greek from a small Northeastern state, but I was ready to take what I could get. He had survived a field of six other candidates for the right to challenge Bush, the sitting vice president and inheritor of the "Reagan legacy," and that was a good enough reason for me. But then came the moment when he was photographed riding in that tank, looking for all the world like the geekiest kid trying to hang with the popular group, and my heart fell. Then, in a nationally televised debate, he was asked what he would do if a criminal raped his wife, and he gave a pat policy answer. Suddenly, I had to hide my head in shame, and George Bush — a man who had to fight off the common nickname of "wimp" — was going to the prom.

By now, I was resigned to the fact that maybe all I was ever going to get was the less-exciting, moderately attractive kind of candidate who had their hearts in the right places but didn't cause any one else's to flutter wildly. Maybe all I needed was a good, solid breadwinner, the kind of guy who will do the right thing when the time comes and not try to be any sexier or flashier than he needed to.

**So, in 1992, facing Bush again, I got in early on Paul Tsongas,** another boring Northeaster who looked like he would put a room full of sorority girls to sleep but would also be there to insure they had good jobs and health insurance when they woke up. He

## Your Voice



**We want another alpha male to go beat up the neighborhood bully. Howard Dean looks to be the kind of a guy who can do it.**

(Photo by Mark Harlan)

at night, you wonder where it all went and how things could have been different.

**But then, something changed: I came to respect Bill Clinton in a way I had never thought I could.** He was smart, charismatic, and, most of all, he could win. Seriously. More than once, too. So what if he got beat up behind the local bar for his weird ideas about health care? So what if he turned out to be the kind of a guy who made Air Force One wait while he got his hair cut? He was something I hadn't seen in a while: a winner. I tried to console myself that such a love had to be shared with others, and that I couldn't claim him as "mine." But I didn't care. All that mattered was that I was on the winning side for a change.

But of course, in the end, it couldn't last. Bill, it turned out, loved a few too many for me to be faithful. And in public, too — something I couldn't forgive. So, back to the land of pain and hurt it was for me.

**And now, for what feels like years, I can't get a date again.** No one to call, no one to swoon over, no one to care about. The bully down the street is in office these days, a guy who delights in tormenting me and millions of others with his frat-boy sneer and cock-of-the-walk policies. Oh, sure, I go looking for potential fish. I troll the lefty blogs, read the progressive magazines, check out the national newspapers. But things, as they say, get a bit more difficult when you get older. You don't go for the same things you did before. Suddenly, it seems like maybe you'll never fall in love again, you'll never see your boy elected, you'll always be in the cold embrace of the one you despise.

The pickings, this time around, seem few: Sharpton, Moseley Braun, Bob Graham? Also-rans, the kind of guys (and girls) who hang around the basketball court without ever really getting into the game. Kucinich? Says the right things, but couldn't get a date if he wore \$20 bills stapled to his chest. Edwards? He looks a little bit too much like the kind of a guy who can't balance his checkbook because he spends too much time getting by on his boyish looks. Lieberman? Voted for the war in Iraq just to be a part of the ruling clique. Even Dick Gephardt, a man who should be making my labor-union-loving heart palpitate, looks a little too old-school, even for my decidedly patrician tastes.

**So that brings me to John Kerry and Howard Dean.** At first glance it seems I could curl up with either one. Kerry, for his part, served in Vietnam, and guys who served and who still end up wanting to be president seem few and far between — John McCain notwithstanding. Kerry doesn't mind taking on a fight, either — a good quality, I say, for getting the heart beating again. He's got a good background, he's pretty photogenic, and has enough money to potentially show me a good time. But there's something missing about him, and I don't know what it is: maybe he's too good-looking for me. Maybe he's a little too "inside," a little too smooth. Maybe I don't think he can go the distance. Maybe, after all, it doesn't feel like enough like he's a winner.

**Which leaves me with Howard Dean.** And an apparently quickening heartbeat. Dean's good-looking in almost the exactly needed presidential kind of way: just old enough to be experienced but young enough to have new ideas. Shirt sleeves rolled up, it seems he's always out on the campaign trail, trying to win my love. He's a doctor married to a doctor, so he knows something about one of my favorite issues, health care. He didn't vote for the war in Iraq (I know, I know, he wasn't in a position to, but look at all of the Democrats who were). He's for labor rights, he wants to repeal the Bush tax cuts. He wants to balance the budget. Even on gun control, normally the deal-breaker for me on most candidates, he's ready to close loopholes and turn the matter over to the states, where we've got a better chance of affecting change. All good things, I say.

## **But perhaps most of all, he's ready for a fight.**

And God knows, we need one now. Seeing someone go after George Bush is like seeing the quiet kid in the back of the class get tired of hearing the bully's taunts one day before taking him out to teach him a lesson. That's what we all want as Democrats, isn't it? Beyond all the squabbles about "electability," when we get down to it, we want another alpha male (or at least who has the ability to switch on his "alphaness" when needed) to go beat up the neighborhood bully. Howard Dean looks to be the kind of a guy who can do it — and right at the heart of President Bush's greatest strength. "The country is facing a serious crisis," Dean told a recent crowd. "Our people are dying in Iraq at the rate of nine a week and the American people may not have had the full information about why we went there." Can't be much more plain-spoken than that. Or, how about on sensitive matters such as race: "Let's start calling racial profiling what it is: discrimination based upon race," he said another time. Or about the power grab among media companies: "Americans cherish the freedom of the press — and the diversity of the press that ensures they can get access to the truth and to the information they need. The Bush administration may not appreciate that freedom and diversity, but they should not tamper with it."

But I'm not sure of much else — after all, I only met the man. And everything at this point is all feelings — impressions, hunches, secret thoughts. I'm used to finding someone early and then ending up broken-hearted, so I'm not ready to jump in with both feet yet.

**But I do need someone, and soon.** Time's a-wasting, as they say, and I'm not getting any younger. And neither is George Bush, either, or any more humble, or thoughtful, or good for the American people. I don't want to have to miss the dance again on Election Night, or show up without enthusiasm, like I did last time when I was stuck with the leftovers of what seems now in retrospect to be one hell of a party — Al Gore. I want someone I can be proud of voting for, and someone who I know will beat George Bush. Not just someone who I hope won't be beaten too badly in return.

Right now, it seems like I want Howard Dean. But maybe it's too soon to tell.

Come on, Howie — don't break my heart. Don't you want to show me a good time?

I promise to still respect you in the morning.

Mark W. Anderson is an independent writer based in Chicago. He can be visited on the Web at [www.thesentimentalist.com](http://www.thesentimentalist.com).

Submit Your Voice columns to *Wicker Park Voice*, 819 N. Ashland Ave., Chicago 60622