

Out of the gate — and onto the straightaway

By B.J. Thomsen
Of the Emerald

The 1988 presidential election seems a long way off, but already potential front-runners are becoming more clearly defined.

On Monday, U.S. Rep. Richard Gephardt, of Missouri, became the first Democrat to formally announce his candidacy. But New York Gov. Mario Cuomo's recent decision not to pursue the presidential nomination has changed the complexion of the race for the Democrats.

The recent Iran-Contra affair has made the race for nomination on the Republican side difficult to call as well.

Depending on what the Presidential Commission, headed by former Sen. John Tower, uncovers about the National Security Council and how much certain top officials including George Bush knew, the race for the Republican nomination may be a much more wide open race than expected.

This also will depend on whether the Iran-Contra issue remains salient long enough to be a factor in the 1988 presidential race, according to William Baugh, a University political science professor. He noted that issues can evaporate as quickly as they materialize and pointed to the bombing of the Marine barracks in Beirut in 1983 as a prime example.

The bombing, which occurred only about a year before the 1984 presidential election, was easily as bad a blotch as the Iran-Contra affair, Baugh said, but it didn't hurt Reagan's bid for re-election in the slightest.

The Republicans have a grip on the presidency, said James Klonoski, another University political science professor.

"They have control of the southern states, and the western states would seem to be anti-Democratic Party," he said. "And in that way, geographically, they seem to be in a position where they might win re-election."

"After all this fiasco though, and the revelation of what Reagan's really like, they (the Democrats) shouldn't lose in '88," he continued. "The Democrats will have to overcome the advantage of that Republican electoral base."

"The fact is that neither party now, I don't think, philosophically or ideologically has its game together well enough that they can put into any voter a feeling of confidence that this party really understands where the country's at and what's going to happen in the future."

"Anybody looking at the Democratic or Republican party today is not thinking, 'Hey, I want to go with you like I wanted to go to the New Deal in the 1930s or Reagan in 1980.' I don't think that either party can instill that feeling right now," Klonoski said.

"Bush, I suppose, is still out front, but I never

thought Bush would maintain the speed. I've always felt he'd lose out and... Iran will do him no good because he's certainly identified with Reagan, but he's still out in front, and (Robert) Dole will have to catch him," he said.

"I'll be very surprised if Bush gets the nomination," he added.

"How does he (Bush) position himself? Currently, he's much closer to the inside decision-making on Contra aid and the Iran deal than he'd like you to believe," Klonoski said. "He can't distance himself too far from Reagan."

U.S. Rep. Peter DeFazio, D-Ore., said of the situation, "I think the Republicans are standing in disarray, and I'm happy to see it. I think Bush looks pretty limp on his half-hearted excuses for why he did or didn't know about what was going on in Iran and the transfer of arms, and that's going to hurt him."

Greg Walden, district representative for Congressman Denny Smith, R-Ore., said at this point Bush looks like the front-runner with Dole in second. Smith could not be reached for comment.

"A lot is going to depend on what happens with the Iran-Contra deal," Walden said. "Dole has not been as closely associated with that as Bush, and also, with the Republicans in the minority, Dole will have more time to campaign. The Iowa caucuses will give Dole a push because he is a Midwest native son."

U.S. Sen. Jack Kemp, R-N.Y., and former Delaware Gov. Pete du Pont also may be factors, he said.

Floyd Beam, Lane County Republican Central Committee chairman, said the race for the Republican nomination is still "totally up in the air with the 'Irangate' deal going on. I think George Bush will come out of this thing pretty good. If we can believe what the president has said as far as his involvement is concerned, then I think George Bush will not be hurt."

Most political observers agree that Dole is running a close second to Bush, however.

"Bob Dole is satisfactory because he seems to be satisfying conservatives and liberals whereas Kemp would be too close to the religious right," Klonoski said. "Dole would seem to be a person that could satisfy both left and right. In the chaos of the moment and the impending chaos of tomorrow (referring to the Iran-Contra affair), the Republicans won't turn to a guy like (Howard) Baker, but Dole may be the person they feel can guide the country."

"Dole's bailiwick is the Midwest and, specifically, the Iowa Caucus," he said. "I think Dole is behind, but the way things are shaping up he does have a lot going for him."

DeFazio's assessment of Dole differs somewhat from that of Klonoski.

"Dole is a reconstructed right-winger who has tried

to appear more moderate in recent years; he may make a decent candidate," DeFazio said.

The closing gap in the popularity polls between Bush and Dole is the most dramatic change that Priscilla Southwell, an assistant professor in the University political science department, has seen, she said.

"In some polls that I've read, he (Dole) is actually leading. That seems to have been a direct consequence of Bush's alleged involvement in or advanced knowledge of what was going on with the Iranian arms deal," she said. "I don't think the change is due to anything spectacular that Robert Dole has done; it's mainly been a falling of Bush in the popularity polls rather than a rise of Robert Dole," she continued. "He has certainly been a prime beneficiary of the situation. The only real viable alternative to Bush has been Dole. He's been in a position to capitalize on Bush's fall in the ratings."

In a poll released Saturday at the Conservative Political Action Conference, however, Bush was the favorite of 22 percent of conservatives polled. Kemp was second and Dole third, with 17.5 percent and 16.2 percent, respectively.

Pat Robertson, in the same poll, rose to 11.2 percent from 3.5 percent over the last year.

"Pat is going to cause some problems," Klonoski said. "He's appearing to be stronger in some states than people would have thought he was. Pat is going to take a lot of votes away from Kemp, and he's going to embarrass George Bush."

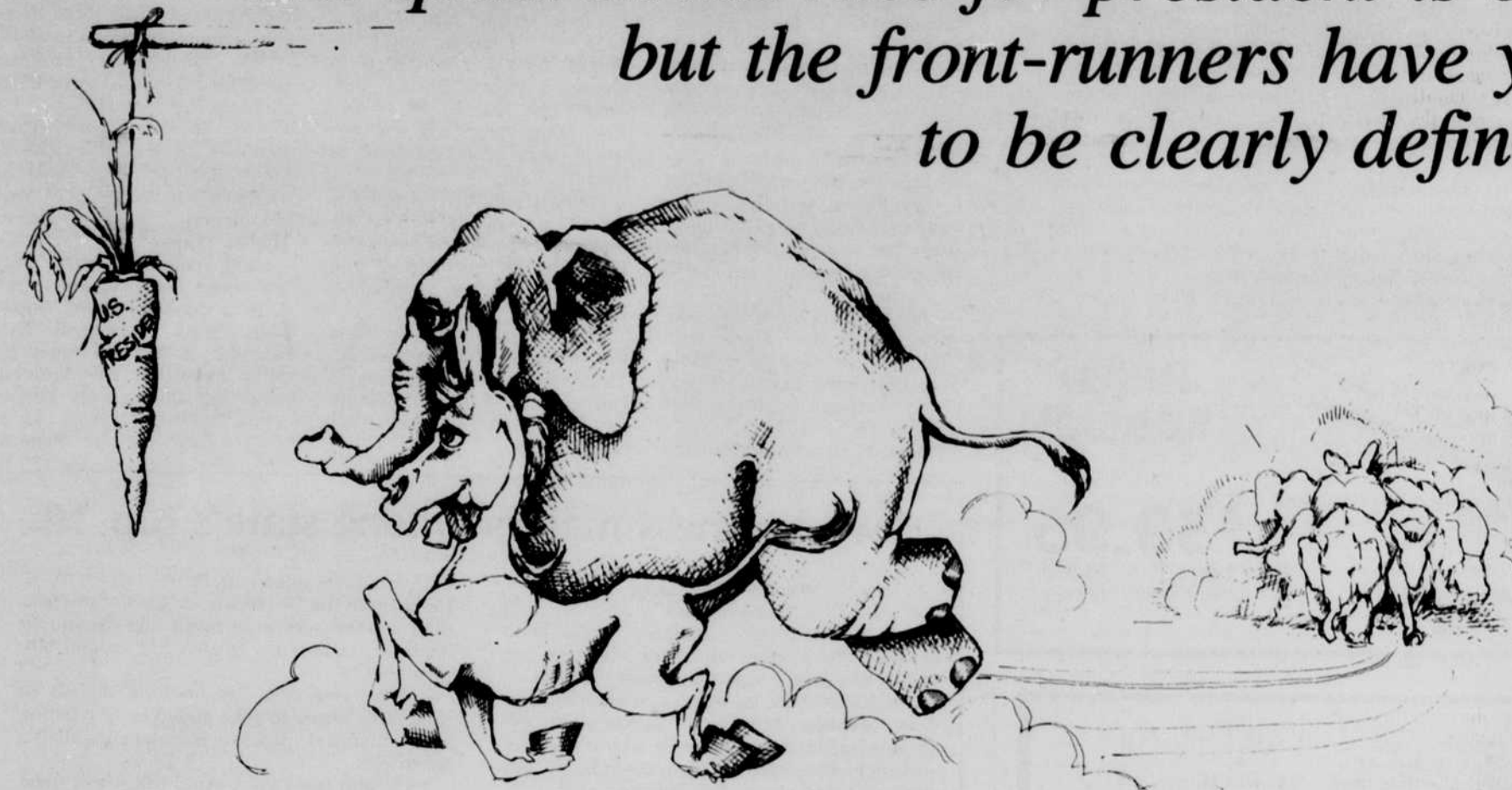
"I think it's wonderful," DeFazio said. "It will lead the Republicans to the fruits of their flirtations with the religious right. For the last six years they've been exploiting the religious right in order to enhance their electoral capability, and I think it's finally coming home to roost with Mr. Robertson running as a so-called credible candidate in the Republican party."

"Voters will desert the party in droves if he's the candidate," he added. "I don't believe the people are ready to put a religious zealot in the presidency."

"I don't think at this point you can dismiss any candidate within either party," Southwell said. "If you look at 1984, people wrote off Gary Hart very early in the campaign, and they were certainly surprised — and I think the same thing happened with Jesse Jackson. My guess is that Robertson will not be a viable candidate, but that he may have some influence on platforms, particularly in the Republican party, maybe even the Democratic party. He's certainly going to make religion an issue in the campaign."

Southwell noted, however, that Robertson will not have a large effect on voting in the primaries. "A very small percentage of people registered to vote in the primaries — about 20 to 30 percent in the typical primary — are usually the most informed and educated voters,

The quadrennial race for president is on, but the front-runners have yet to be clearly defined



Graphic by Lorraine Rath

and I don't think that they would be swayed by a candidate such as Robertson."

Beam, however, believes Robertson will make a better showing than people might think.

"I think, frankly, Bush and Robertson are going to be your two front-runners. Roberts will do a lot better than the polls show," he said. "The Christian people will vote for him — there are more of those people around than the polls will show."

Beam admitted, though, that Robertson has only a slim chance of getting the nomination.

Since Cuomo's announcement last Thursday of his decision not to run for the presidency no one is certain who is directly behind Hart.

"On the Democratic side there's a virtual army of people lining up," DeFazio said. According to the polls, Hart's a front-runner. "Whether that will last, I don't know," he said.

Today the front-runner will be Gephardt because Monday he declared his candidacy, and people will remember his name, DeFazio said.

"Hart still remains the front-runner, but I can't

predict who will benefit (from Cuomo's decision), whether it be Dukakis, Biden, Gephardt or Bumpers," he added. "I don't think it will in any way help Hart."

The 19 percent or 20 percent of the voters who preferred Cuomo will not go to Hart but will look to the other candidates, he said.

"Cuomo's decision not to run makes Hart the Mondale of '88," Klonoski said. "Hart is the rabbit in the chase because now he's out front early. Cuomo was philosophically and ideologically the Democrats' best bet."

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