

# Kerry forges turnaround in nomination race

The senator has secured 14 of 16 state party nominations for the 2004 democratic nomination

By James Kuhnhehn  
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MADISON, Wis. — Last summer, John Kerry assembled his top advisors at his vacation home in Nantucket to hear their grievances. As his aides and counselors vented, Kerry sat anxiously, his right hand pulling at his left fingers, wringing his hands.

He hated refereeing these disputes, he told one participant. They were keeping him from being an effective campaigner. Even then, six months before the first voting, Kerry knew his candidacy was in trouble.

Over the next three months, Kerry's campaign went into a tailspin. Former Vermont Gov. Howard Dean rose in the polls, raked in money and captured media attention. Kerry couldn't understand how the former governor of a small state was outdoing him and his three decades of public service. But Kerry couldn't articulate his message, and the infighting in his camp continued to mount.

Now, with 14 wins out of 16 state nominating contests, the Massachusetts senator is on the verge of winning his party's nomination, and the revival of his candidacy is one of the more remarkable resurrections in American politics. Kerry bet his political reputation, his campaign and \$6.4 million that he borrowed against his house in Boston on his pollster's advice to concentrate his entire effort on Iowa.

"In part," said a strategist close to the campaign, "it was a strategy born out of desperation."

Like other sources for this story, the operative spoke only on the

condition of anonymity because it's a cardinal sin in politics to upstage the candidate.

The low point of the campaign came on Nov. 10, a cold, rainy Monday in Iowa. The night before, Kerry had fired his campaign manager, Jim Jordan, in a staff shakeup that only reinforced the notion that the wheels were coming off his campaign.

Kerry planned a tour of Iowa with veterans to tout his decorated service in Vietnam and his national security credentials. But no one paid attention to the busload of veterans Kerry had in tow. Jordan's dismissal was the news.

At the end of the day, prompted by the vets to recite a poem, Kerry offered a near perfect rendition of Rudyard Kipling's "Gunga Din," the story of an Indian water boy who died defending British soldiers.

"Din! Din! Din!" Kerry intoned the last stanza as his bus pulled into Cedar Rapids.

"You Lazarushian-leather Gunga Din!

"Tho' I've belted you an' flayed you,  
"By the livin' Gawd that made you,  
"You're a better man than I am,  
Gunga Din."

To some of those listening, "Din" was "Dean," and the last line was an acknowledgement of a bitter political truth.

To replace Jordan, Kerry hired Mary Beth Cahill, a former chief of staff to fellow Massachusetts Sen. Edward Kennedy. He also hired Stephanie Cutter, a Kennedy spokeswoman, and David Morehouse, an old campaign hand for Vice President Al Gore, to run the campaign's communications.

"Mary Beth came in and put order in a place that was complete disorder," a top Kerry aide said.

By the end of the week, a new Kerry began to emerge. First, he announced

that he was going to join Dean and Bush in forgoing federal campaign funds and the spending limits that come with them. Second, the campaign decided to show some muscle at the Iowa Democrats' annual Jackson-Jefferson dinner on Nov. 15.

Kerry dusted off an old speech line that had been overruled when Jordan had pushed it during the earlier campaign quarrels. If Bush wanted to make the election about national security, Kerry boomed: "Bring It On!"

In New Hampshire, though, the polls showed Kerry still trailing Dean by more than 25 percentage points. Some staffers were uncertain that an Iowa-only campaign would turn his fortunes around, and fund-raisers were anxious. Cahill called a meeting on Dec. 10, and pollster Mark Mellman laid out his case.

Mellman had studied past campaigns, and he knew that 80 percent of the voters in New Hampshire primaries made their decisions after Jan. 1, many of them in the final days of the campaign. Iowa's caucuses were on Jan. 19; the New Hampshire primary was Jan. 27. Mellman's polls in Iowa showed Kerry rising, tying Missouri Rep. Dick Gephardt for second place and closing in on Dean.

"The fire lit by (Iowa's) caucuses will have huge repercussions for our campaign," he wrote in a memo for the meeting.

Dean had been endorsed by former Vice President Al Gore, but he was getting greater scrutiny as the front-runner. Kerry attacked Dean for saying that Americans were no safer from terrorist threats after Saddam Hussein's capture than they had been before. The campaign kept up a steady drumbeat about Dean's lack of foreign policy experience.

"This is not the time for untested leadership to step into the shoes of

the leader of the free world and presidency of the United States of America," Kerry said.

Then came The Ad. It was one thing to surround Kerry with fellow veterans; it was another to showcase his stint as the decorated skipper of a Navy patrol boat in Vietnam's dangerous Mekong Delta.

Kerry, however, "was uncomfortable with talking about himself," said a senior aide. So the campaign clipped some footage of his crewmen reminiscing about their skipper. They chose Del Sandusky, the pilot of Kerry's boat and a down-to-earth Kerry supporter. Sandusky's ad and the entourage of veterans that followed helped connect Kerry, a man of privilege and wealth, to average voters.

"They softened his elitist roots," said the strategist close to the campaign.

Undecided voters began to give Kerry another look. Questions about his vote in favor of using force in Iraq subsided. Passionate antiwar Democrats were backing Dean, anyway.

The rest of the registered Democrats seemed simply to want a way out of the war. Kerry's foreign policy experience appeared to reassure them.

Linda Snyder, a 54-year-old family counselor from Council Bluffs, Iowa, offered a typical assessment. Dean, she said, was a "loose cannon." Of Sen. John Edwards of North Carolina, she said she had "a concern about his grasp of foreign affairs." But of Kerry, she said, "I trust his record. I trust the

things he's done."

Kerry shortened his stump speech to a tight 10 to 15 minutes and, at every stop, he opened the floor to questions and urged voters to "grill" him. The sessions ran long as he tried to accommodate every query. It wrecked his schedule. Time and again he was forced to apologize for a late arrival. Then he'd stay and answer every question again.

By the time Iowa caucus day arrived on Jan. 19, Kerry was atop the polls by a slim margin. When the caucuses ended that night, he'd swept the state. Edwards was in second place, Dean was far back in third, and Gephardt, in fourth, was forced to abandon the race.

As Mellman had predicted, the avalanche followed. Within days, Kerry had closed a double-digit gap with Dean in New Hampshire, and on primary night, he won by 12 points. From there on, states began falling like dominoes, with only Oklahoma, which went to retired Army Gen. Wesley Clark, and South Carolina, which Edwards won, bucking the tide.

The swiftness of Kerry's turnaround was stunning. "Everything that happened, happened really fast and really late," one strategist said.

"Sure it was a risk," Kerry said last week, reflecting on the Iowa strategy. But in a bit of post-election bravado, he added: "I never worried."

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## CORRECTION

"University postpones arena plans indefinitely" (ODE, Feb. 12) incorrectly stated that University President Dave Frohnmayer made the announcement on Monday to postpone plans for the arena. The announcement was actually made on Wednesday.

The Emerald regrets the error.

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