Smoke And Mirrors
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The smoke filled room image personifies politics for many--filling the imagination with vivid caricatures of corrupt bosses and cynical backroom deals. Alas, in our PC modern world, political bosses have been replaced by political consultants; now, political deals are more common on the golf course or the gym, and smoke filled rooms are more likely to be labeled smoke free zones.

But, while the smoke filled room metaphor no longer depicts reality; there is another smoke metaphor that does fit contemporary politics very well--smoke and mirrors.

The smoke and mirrors metaphor originally alluded to the handiwork of magicians, practitioners of the magic arts, and slight of hand. And much of politics today often seems to have an illusionist aspect about it--with the emphasis on image, staying on "message," and a now you see it, now you don't quality.

No better recent example of political smoke and mirrors is the 2004 political phenomenon de jour--the Deaniacs, Howard Dean's eponymous grass root supporters, supposedly materialized out of the political ether, an eclectic group of youthful believers that flocked to his campaign and made his candidacy viable.

Now with Dean out of the race we are asked what will become of the young Deaniacs. Will they hang in with Dean in his quest to both change the nature and the direction of politics? Or will they slip back into political apathy and lassitude?

We are told the future of the Democratic Party, and perhaps the nation itself, may depend on the answer to this question. Only the youth, idealism, and energy of the Deaniacs can revive the Democratic Party and save the nation.

Well, maybe! But before too much angst about where the Deaniacs go from here, we need to know: if they are more than a figment of the imagination, conjured up by an inventive press, and a complicit campaign? We need to know if the Deaniacs are real or just political smoke and mirrors.

We know about the core ideas that bond them together--disenchantment with the results of the 2000 election, the Iraq war, and the populist lambasting of Washington insiders--and to a lesser extent an anti party animus.

We also know that their support, personal and financial, drove the Dean campaign to the heights it reached in the pre-Iowa caucus voting. Throughout the campaign, they were a palpable physical presence, organizing and fundraising on the Internet, manning phone banks, staffing offices, and canvassing voters. It is impossible to imagine the Dean campaign without them.

But saying they mattered within the Dean campaign is very different from concluding they are a force to be reckoned with beyond the Dean campaign.
First, the obvious--Dean lost. He did not win a single caucus or primary. He was zero for seventeen before withdrawing after a third place showing in Wisconsin, a state that in the past has given solace and comfort to candidates similar to Dean. Overall he amassed only 182 delegate votes, abysmally poor for expenditures of more than 40 million dollars.

But even if Dean had won, there would still be reason to doubt the Deaniacs are representative of their generation, especially the much touted college students who were part of the campaign. Nor did college students in appreciable numbers respond to the Dean campaign.

Moreover, there is no evidence that the Deaniacs are representative of the ideological predilections of the nation's youth. Indeed, the available evidence suggests they are atypical of their college age peers.

Probably the best information available about the political attitudes of college students remains UCLA's survey of freshman. And the UCLA data suggest that Deaniacs and their college peers live in very different political worlds.

A few examples suffice: in the UCLA poll, new college students show only a slight increase in their interest in politics this year when compared to three years ago. About 34-percent say keeping up-to-date with political affairs is very important to them compared to 28-percent in 2000.

And for the third straight year, student policy views shifted to the right. They continue to be fairly conservative on many issues in the public debate today. They believe in the death penalty, think the courts provide too much protection to the rights of criminals, and oppose the legalization of marijuana.

Ideologically, moderation is typical. There are fewer self described liberals, and slightly more conservatives. Far more students (50%) say they are middle of the road.

Describing the UCLA results in the Chronicle of Education, the director of the survey drew an important conclusion: "over time we've seen a general decline in the liberal label, and it's been typically replaced by middle-of-the-road attitudes." Not exactly the stuff of revolutions.

None of this is hardly shocking. It's consistent with what we know about the long-term social and political forces that shape attitudes and values among young people.

Unless given some profound shock in their lives, for example, being drafted into a controversial war or the repercussions of a depression, young people are mostly concerned with getting a college degree—not with changing America much less the world.

They want a decent job, to get married, and to make a comfortable life for themselves. No "lost Generation" syndrome here.

And there are few Deaniacs here, either. Today's students are just not that politically involved or aware. They care, but at the margins, and other things matter to them more than politics.
None of these arguments are likely to inhibit those who continue to pontificate about the Deaniacs movement and its political significance. The desire to "discover" political movements is never stronger than in a presidential election year.

But the clear evidence is that the Deaniacs as a group are small and unrepresentative. They made great political theater, and were pretty good in launching a political campaign that went no where fast--but in the end they will have no enduring impact--and be regarded as mostly just political smoke and mirrors.

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