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Signs of the Times

by Eric Pinder

I imagine my surprise when I pushed the playback button on my home answering machine and heard a familiar voice: “Hello, this is George W. Bush...”

Beep. That was the only message. Oddly, the President forgot to leave a number where I could call him back.

The President’s pre-recorded message told me to get out and vote--and, oh, and if it wasn’t too much trouble, would I mind voting for the Republican candidate for governor?

Half an hour later I received five other calls urging me to vote Democratic instead. Even James Earl Jones rang me up that night, though he was just trying to get me to switch my phone service to Verizon. With all the politicians trying to reach me, I’m surprised he was able to get through.

That’s the joy of living in New Hampshire, if you’re a political junkie. Three years out of four, New Hampshire is just another one of those small, rectangular, unimportant states east of New York. But every fourth year Washington, D.C. moves into town and starts fawning over you. Politicians of all stripes shower you with praise, promise to lower your taxes, pave your roads, finance your schools, and, if you’ll permit, kiss your babies. Suddenly you can’t turn around without bumping into someone who’s running for president. The only escape is to stay indoors and disconnect your phone.

Come January 2004, with a first-in-the-nation presidential primary at stake, I knew my phone would soon be ringing off the hook. I wasn't disappointed.

The phone bombardment started about two weeks before the primary. Most of the calls were from Joe. Senator Joe Lieberman, I mean. But he called to chat so often, I feel comfortable calling him Joe.

The polls weren't in Joe's favor, but a local family-owned movie two-screen theater took down its Now Playing and Coming Attraction signs and put up a big GO JOE GO, VOTE JOE LIEBERMAN sign. So that's at least one family's vote he was sure to get. I doubted that he would get many more, mainly because most people thought he had registered for the wrong party's primary.

Lacking money for slick TV ads, he was forced to spread his message to New Hampshire Democrats and Independents by hitting the phones. I hope he had a good long-distance calling plan. Half the time the phone rang that week, I'd glance at the caller ID screen and see JOE LIEBERMAN spelled out.

I suppose all politicians are, to a certain extent, actors on a stage. Joe Lieberman, alas, was "phoning in" his performance.

He needn't have bothered. According to the polls, the only contenders with a real shot at winning New Hampshire were John Kerry, Howard Dean, John Edwards, and Wesley Clark. Their voices sore from campaigning in Iowa, they arrived in New Hampshire warning of doom and disaster unless George Bush could be defeated in November. A joke making the rounds referred to them as "the four hoarse men of the apocalypse."

One week before the primary, the up-and-down swing of the official polls was interesting--if dizzying--to follow. I decided to conduct my own, private, unscientific poll. I started counting the number of posted campaign signs springing up in my neighbor's yards.

If the winner had been determined by who had the most signs, then John Edwards might actually have taken New Hampshire and perhaps propelled himself to a national face-off with George Bush. The morning before the vote, someone stuck at least 300 Edwards signs in the snow banks along the roads in my town, and they all were still up when the polls opened.

I suppose those signs didn't reflect the candidate's true level of support, since one dedicated person supplied with an arsenal of signs and a reliable vehicle could have put them all up in just a few hours. But the signs popping up in residential front yards did count. Dean and Kerry were neck-and-neck, with Clark "four-star" signs not far behind.

There's a strange fascination with watching these small, colorful rectangular signs spring up out of the January snow like dandelions in the newly thawed grass of May. A Kerry sign here, a Clark sign there, and, oh look, there's even an odd LaRouche sign.

Looking for campaign signs is, I imagine, much like the hobby of bird watching. One afternoon I spotted my first rare and elusive Kucinich sign. Then I saw the yellow-throated "Firefighters for Kerry" sign, also rare, mingling with the more common "Kerry blue."

The next morning I discovered and logged three whole species of Dean sign: the common yellow-on-blue Dean, whose habitat ranged from private yards to roadside snow banks; the extremely rare blue-on-yellow Dean; and finally the hybrid "Hope Not Fear" Dean.

On this latter sign, the word "fear" was printed directly above Dean's name. That was a bad design. Competing campaign signs often were clustered together, so portions of the signs were obscured. When the left side of this particular species of Dean sign was blocked, what a passerby first saw was "Fear Dean."

Fortunately for the Dean campaign, this species of sign only migrated into New Hampshire in the last few days before the primary, and didn't find many niches left to occupy.

A week before the primary, the once common Gephardt, much like the passenger pigeon, was thought extinct. Then I spotted a single Gephardt while driving through the tiny village of Cascade Flats. Since only one survived, the Gephardt signs could not reproduce, and probably went extinct the next time the snowplow went by.

Before I knew it, the primary was over. Almost all the signs vanished. Like migrating birds, they flew south for the winter--south to South Carolina, the next big primary on the election calendar. They won't be back for another four years.

New Hampshire sure seems quiet now. My phone hardly rings. I wonder what my buddy Joe is up to these days. For some reason, he never calls anymore.