

## 6. DELAWARE

Words such as "little" and "infinitesimal" are often used to describe the state of Delaware politically. With only a few more than 700,000 citizens, this Eastern Seaboard state is tucked quietly away between Pennsylvania, Maryland, and New Jersey.

Delaware has only three counties. Most people just speed through the state as quickly as possible when driving or taking the train between New York and Washington.

Up until 1996, Delaware accepted the customary political fate of a state with a small population. It held its presidential caucuses in March and April, much too late in the presidential primary calendar for a small state to have any effect whatsoever.

But in 1996 little Delaware decided to try to change things. A Republican presidential primary was scheduled for Saturday, February 24. That would give Delaware the first presidential primary after New Hampshire, which scheduled its primary four days earlier on February 20. This shift to the number two spot in the presidential primary sweepstakes should have made Delaware very important indeed.

Except for one thing. The 1996 Delaware primary was scheduled within four days of the New Hampshire primary, a major transgression in the eyes of New Hampshire political leaders. That famous New Hampshire law provided that the Granite State primary had to be held one week - seven days - before any other state. Audacious Delaware was actually challenging New Hampshire's *assumed privilege* of holding the first presidential primary a full seven-day week before any other state.

Delaware Republicans had the temerity to suggest that they had just as much right to hold an early presidential primary as New Hampshire did. "Delaware has voted for the winning presidential candidate since 1948," pointed out Basil Battaglia of the Delaware GOP. "It's a bellwether state."<sup>1</sup>

New Hampshire political leaders moved quickly to protect their "First In The Nation" presidential primary turf. With Governor Steve Merrill leading the fight, the New Hampshire

Republican Party announced that 1996 Republican presidential candidates would receive no GOP "support" in the Granite State if they did not sign a "pledge" to *not campaign* in Delaware. This pledge put Republican White House hopefuls in the difficult position of having to choose between New Hampshire, with its established reputation as a critically important state, and Delaware, with no reputation whatsoever.

Not since the Civil War, it seemed, had two states been so angry with each other. The New Hampshire Secretary of State, William Gardner, deprecated the new 1996 Delaware primary as "some depraved version of a kangaroo straw poll."<sup>2</sup> Basil Battaglia of the Delaware GOP answered back that New Hampshire's traditional importance in the presidential selection process was beginning to diminish. "I think attaching a lot to what happens in New Hampshire is a thing of the past," Battaglia said.<sup>3</sup>

Although New Hampshire had no legal right to scuttle the 1996 Delaware primary, the ploy of exacting a pledge from Republican candidates not to campaign in Delaware worked. U.S. Senator Robert Dole, the leading contender for the GOP nomination, took the pledge never to shake a hand or run a political advertisement in Delaware. The press quickly lost interest in Delaware.

But those wily New Hampshirites were not as effective as they first thought. One of the 1996 Republican candidates for President, Malcolm S. "Steve" Forbes, Jr., refused to take the New Hampshire pledge. He began putting considerable time and money into campaigning in Delaware. He ran a barrage of advertising in the state. As a resident of New Jersey and the publisher of *Forbes* magazine, Steve Forbes was well-known to a lot of Delawareans, particularly the upscale business and legal types that lived around Wilmington, Delaware's principal city.

Despite Forbes's efforts, the political pundits predicted that Bob Dole would win Delaware in 1996 without ever setting foot in the state. Imagine the pundits' consternation when Steve Forbes easily won the Delaware presidential primary, defeating Bob Dole by 33 percent to 27 percent. It was a major blow to Senator Dole, who four days earlier had lost the New Hampshire primary to

conservative political columnist Patrick Buchanan. And the Forbes victory in Delaware briefly made Steve Forbes a real contender for the 1996 Republican presidential nomination.

The really significant result was that little Delaware had successfully challenged New Hampshire's claim to absolute primacy on the presidential primary calendar. There had been a significant contest in Delaware after all. And the Delaware results effected the GOP nomination fight, boosting Forbes and weakening Bob Dole.

"I think next time," said Basil Battaglia of the Delaware Republican Party, "all the candidates will come."<sup>4</sup>

Next time was the year 2000 presidential primaries, and once again Delaware Republicans maneuvered to be in the number two spot after New Hampshire. Chastised by its experience with New Hampshire in 1996, the Delaware GOP scheduled its year 2000 Republican primary a full seven days after New Hampshire, on Tuesday, February 8. There would be no schedule conflicts, and no bitter words, between Delaware and New Hampshire this time out.

But once again, things did not quite go Delaware's way. John McCain, who had emerged from the New Hampshire primary as the major challenger to George W. Bush, decided not to campaign in Delaware. With limited time and financial resources, McCain decided to bypass Delaware and concentrate all his efforts on the South Carolina primary, scheduled eleven days later on February 19. Similar to 1996, it looked as though Delaware Republicans in 2000 were going to hold a primary that no one was going to notice.

George W. Bush, who had pledged to conduct his nomination campaign in all 50 states, used the Delaware primary to criticize John McCain for skipping those states where McCain thought he would not win. On his third visit to Delaware, Bush threw an indirect punch at McCain by saying: "Anybody campaigning for President ought to run in every state."<sup>5</sup>

Bush also skillfully used Delaware as a forum for setting a new, post-New Hampshire theme for his campaign. Because the news media were all describing John McCain as a "reformer," Bush

decided to attack that idea by suggesting that John McCain talked a lot but had achieved very little. At a speech in Dover, the Delaware state capital, Bush appeared in front of a large blue and white sign that read: "A Reformer With Results."

Every time Bush referred to himself as a reformer, he made it a point to always add the words "with results." Bush then sharpened his attack on John McCain's reputation as a reformer. "If you're tired of no results and simple, empty rhetoric," Bush said, "if you're tired of people who say one thing and do another, come join our team."<sup>6</sup>

As in 1996, the excitement in Delaware in 2000 was provided by Steve Forbes. The wealthy magazine publisher made an extensive bus-tour of the state and ran ads targeted at Delaware on radio and cable TV. "The elites are not picking the nominee," Forbes said.<sup>7</sup> He was referring to the fact that, despite the widespread support of Republican party leaders for George W. Bush, an outsider named John McCain had won in New Hampshire. This suggested another outsider, Steve Forbes, could win Delaware.

Political pundits were quick to point out that the year 2000 Delaware primary created a no-win situation for George W. Bush. If Bush won Delaware, the results would be ignored because McCain did not compete there. But if Bush lost Delaware to Steve Forbes, it would do great damage to the momentum of Bush's campaign.

On presidential primary day in Delaware, George W. Bush won the state easily with 51 percent of the vote. John McCain finished a dismal second with just 25 percent of the vote. And Steve Forbes came in third with 20 percent of the vote and promptly withdrew from the race.<sup>8</sup>

The year 2000 Delaware primary revealed the great extent to which presidential primary results are subject to liberal interpretation by the press. Bush defeated McCain by 51 percent to 25 percent, a two-to-one blowout. Using the "special math" reserved by the press for presidential primaries, the *New York Times* described McCain's distant second place finish as "surprising."<sup>9</sup> A *Denver Post* headline trumpeted: "McCain Does Well Without Campaigning."<sup>10</sup>

John McCain worked hard at spinning that idea as far as it would go. "It's astonishing because, as you know, we didn't spend one minute there....," McCain told reporters. "I'm extremely surprised and pleased that we'd get that kind of vote in a state we never visited." Many of the reporters printed McCain's quote.

George W. Bush was well aware that, because he was the front-running candidate, the press would play down his victory in Delaware. Demonstrating the sly wit for which he was becoming famous, Bush noted the storm of publicity that accompanied John McCain's win in New Hampshire and said: "I'm confident that the news media will put me on the cover of every one of the major news magazines."<sup>11</sup> The news media, of course, did not.

The Delaware exit polls demonstrated the great effect that the New Hampshire "First In The Nation" primary has on voters in other states. Almost 50 percent of McCain's support in Delaware came from voters who said they decided to vote for McCain during the week following the New Hampshire primary.<sup>12</sup>

Thus it was that, in the end, little Delaware's year 2000 Republican presidential primary made a difference. It gave political reporters and commentators an opportunity to boost John McCain by portraying his two-to-one loss in the state as a qualified victory. And, perhaps most important, Delaware eliminated Steve Forbes as a year 2000 Republican candidate for President. That meant that the next presidential primary on the Republican schedule, South Carolina, was going to be a no-holds-barred, duel-to-the-death, one-on-one contest between George W. Bush and John McCain.

#### ENDNOTES - CHAPTER 6:

1. "Primary And Secondary; Anywhere But Delaware," *Economist*, February 24, 1996, p. 29.
2. Bill McAllister, "Candidates Show Up Short And Late For Delaware's First Presidential Primary," *Washington Post*, February 24, 1996, p. A10.
3. Elizabeth Kolbert, "TV Is Changing The Script For Early Political Races," *New York Times*,

February 11, 1996, p. 1.

4. R. W. Apple, Jr., "Delaware Backs Him Because He Was There," *New York Times*, February 26, 1996, p. C11. For a lengthy description of the 1996 Delaware Republican presidential primary, see Loevy, *The Manipulated Path To The White House*, pp. 121-130.

5. David E. Rosenbaum, "Two Would-Be Washingtons Cross Into Little Delaware; One Doesn't," *New York Times*, February 8, 2000.

6. Jim Yardley and Frank Bruni, "Bush Takes Tougher Line And Emphasizes Reform," *New York Times*, February 8, 2000.

7. David E. Rosenbaum, "Two Would-Be Washingtons Cross Into Little Delaware; One Doesn't," *New York Times*, February 8, 2000.

8. Leslie Wayne, "Publisher Steve Forbes Drops GOP Bid," *New York Times*, February 9, 2000.

9. David E. Rosenbaum, "Bush Easily Defeats Three Foes In The Delaware Primary," *New York Times*, February 9, 2000.

10. Ron Fournier, "Bush Wins Delaware Primary; McCain Does Well Without Campaigning," *Denver Post*, February 9, 2000, p. 3A.

11. David E. Rosenbaum, "Bush Easily Defeats Three Foes In The Delaware Primary," *New York Times*, February 9, 2000.

12. Ron Fournier, "Bush Wins Delaware Primary; McCain Does Well Without Campaigning," *Denver Post*, February 9, 2000, p. 3A.