

12. TITANIC TUESDAY

There could be no better example than Titanic Tuesday, the first Tuesday in March, of the uncontrolled way that presidential primaries and caucuses are created.

No rational individual or organized group set out to create a single presidential primary day on which about twelve states would all vote at the same time. Titanic Tuesday emerged out of totally random forces. It was an accidental product, created by the uncoordinated actions of a wide variety of persons and organizations, most of whom paid no attention whatsoever to what the others were doing.

Titanic Tuesday also illustrated the rapidity with which the presidential nominating system changes and evolves in the United States.

Twelve years prior to the year 2000 presidential election, in 1988, no primaries or caucuses at all were held on the first Tuesday in March. Four years later, in 1992, four states scheduled primaries on that day. Four years after that, in 1996, eight states were holding primaries and caucuses.

Then, in 2000, the first Tuesday in March had suddenly become the biggest day of presidential primaries and caucuses on the entire presidential primary calendar. More than a dozen states were voting. Three of them - California, New York, and Ohio - were among the most populous states in the nation.

Titanic Tuesday mainly was created by the state of California and the national Democratic Party. In 1988, Democratic Party rules set the *second* Tuesday in March as the first presidential primary day, except for Iowa and New Hampshire. In 1992, California Democrats wanted to hold an early primary. The Golden Staters prevailed on the national Democratic Party to open up the first Tuesday in March, not just for California but for any state that wanted to hold a primary or caucuses on that day.

Ironically, in 1992 and 1996, California did not use this new presidential primary date

because of political problems with holding such an early election. But, for the year 2000, California scheduled its presidential primary on the day that had been opened for the Golden State eight years earlier. The state of New York already had scheduled its 2000 presidential primary on the first Tuesday in March, so that is how Titanic Tuesday was born.

TITANIC TUESDAY (MARCH 7, 2000) PRESIDENTIAL PRIMARIES

With Year Primary Date Was First Used

Georgia	1992
Maryland	1992
Connecticut	1996
Maine	1996
Massachusetts	1996
Rhode Island	1996
Vermont	1996
California	2000
Missouri	2000
New York	2000
Ohio	2000

Minnesota held Republican caucuses. Idaho, North Dakota, and Washington state held Democratic caucuses.

Everything changes when so many states are holding presidential primaries and caucuses on the same day. No longer is the campaign limited to one or two quirky states, sometimes with voting populations that are totally unrepresentative of the American people as a whole. Regional influences (New England liberalism versus Southern conservatism) are balanced out. Populous states (California, New York, Ohio) are holding primaries, but so are states with small populations (Rhode Island and Vermont). And almost every major part of the United States is participating - New England, East Coast, Midwest, South, and West Coast.

The sheer size of the enterprise is daunting to behold. The total population of the states

holding primaries and caucuses on March 7, 2000, topped 100 million. Thirteen of the nation's top 25 media markets were involved. Citizens were voting simultaneously in such giant metropolitan areas as Atlanta, Baltimore, Boston, Cleveland, Los Angeles, New York City, Saint Louis, and San Francisco.

Candidates have to turn to a completely different campaign style. Shaking hands at the factory gate and chatting in some grandmother's kitchen is done only briefly, if at all, for the daily photo-opportunity. The presidential primaries become more like the general election, with candidates jetting from state to state and doing campaign events in giant airport hangars and sports arenas. Appeals to giant masses of primary voters are delivered by television spot ads and direct mail.

The Bush campaign claimed to have telephoned more than two million voters, coast to coast, for Titanic Tuesday.¹

And one of the best things to have on the biggest of all mega-Tuesdays is local organization. The support of state and local party members who are prominent elected officials becomes critical. Visible and vocal endorsements from governors, U.S. Senators, mayors, and state legislators give the candidate solid publicity in the particular state at virtually no cost. Strangely, the bigger and more national the presidential primary day becomes, the more critical is state and local party organization support.

Also important is so-called "earned" media coverage. Getting a spot on a national television network news broadcast is particularly valuable because the candidate is gaining free TV exposure in every state that is holding a primary or caucus. In the more populous states, telephoning in to radio talk shows or doing satellite interviews with local television news anchors pays rich rewards. Equally desirable are write-ups and photo-essays in national magazines such as *Time* and *Newsweek*.

The gigantic size and scope of Titanic Tuesday actually had the effect of blunting the influence of money in trying to win so many presidential primary elections. There just were too

many media markets, even for candidates such as Al Gore and George W. Bush, both of whom possessed immense financial resources. A Republican media specialist noted: "In gross terms, the amounts of cash on hand sound big, but you need to spread it across so many media markets."²

Just how big is the change in scale from the New Hampshire primary to Titanic Tuesday. As a Californian pointed out, the population of San Jose, a second-tier city in the Golden State, is approximately equal to the population of the entire state of New Hampshire.

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Titanic Tuesday offered the news media the opportunity to cover the scenic grandeur of the United States. Press attention could have focused on politics and campaigning in a dozen or so states. Beautiful images might have been presented of candidates trolling for votes along the California beaches, eating bagels and cream cheese in downtown Manhattan in New York, or standing in corn fields talking to farmers in Ohio and Missouri.

The reporters and television camera operators did some of this scenic stuff, to be sure, but the pack journalists mainly spent the week before Titanic Tuesday writing about John McCain's attack on the religious right. The Arizona Senator's biting criticism of Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell the day before the Virginia and Washington primaries totally absorbed the columnists and pundits during the week-long run-up to the March 7, 2000, voting.

A number of prominent spokespersons for Christian groups in the United States criticized John McCain for turning his back on what everyone acknowledged was one of the key constituency groups within the Republican Party. Typical was Gary L. Bauer, a leading religious right thinker and writer, who was supporting John McCain for President. Bauer said he would continue to support McCain, but "there is no way that any candidate can get the presidential nomination if there is a perception that the candidate is hostile to voters concerned about the breakdown of values."³

All of sudden reporters were out on the street interviewing members of religious congregations on their changed attitudes toward John McCain. "I was really pulling for him," said

Bob Harrison, the choir leader at Mount Paran Church of God in Atlanta, Georgia. "He was the guy."

But Bob Harrison changed his point of view once he learned of McCain's assault on religious conservatism. "I think he was out of line," Harrison told the *New York Times*. "I don't agree with everything Robertson and Falwell say, but McCain was attacking the faithful.... I just haven't gotten over this, and I probably won't."

Bob Harrison's opinion was echoed by prominent religious leaders, particularly in the South. McCain's statements "are the remarks of a man who apparently does not want to be President of the United States," said Paige Patterson, president of the Southern Baptist Convention, the biggest Protestant denomination in the nation. "It's difficult for me to believe that a Republican can win the election while deliberately abusing a considerable segment of the Republican Party."⁴

Things got even worse for John McCain when reporters forced him to admit that, despite earlier denials, he had authorized telephone calls prior to the Michigan primary that implied that George W. Bush harbored "anti-Catholic bigotry." This confession on McCain's part was particularly damaging because, campaigning on his bus named the "Straight Talk Express," McCain had promised reporters he would answer all questions and answer them truthfully. Candidate credibility, one of the cornerstones of the McCain campaign for President, had been shattered.

And then the crowning blow to McCain on the religious issue. McCain had strongly criticized George W. Bush for speaking at Bob Jones University during the South Carolina primary campaign. But a spokeswoman in the Bob Jones University press office revealed that John McCain, similar to George W. Bush, had asked to give a speech at Bob Jones. The spokeswoman said the McCain appearance "fell through because of a schedule conflict" of Senator McCain's and not because of any action by the University.

When queried by reporters about his asking to speak at Bob Jones University, John McCain uncharacteristically fell silent and failed to deny the report that he had sought to arrange a visit to

Bob Jones.⁵

John McCain finally gave in to the loud criticism coming his way from the religious right and from the news media. The McCain campaign issued a press release in which the Arizona Senator apologized for his attacks on Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell, particularly his statement that the two men were "forces of evil." McCain announced that he continued to disagree "with the political message and tactics" of Robertson and Falwell, but "I do not consider them evil and I regret that my flip remark may have mistakenly created that impression."

A weak attempt was made by John McCain to pass off his remarks about "forces of evil" as something of a joke based on the popular "Star Wars" movies. "In my campaign," McCain wrote in his press release, "I often joke about Luke Skywalker, evil empires and death stars. It was in that vein that I used the phrase...."⁶

There were two reasons why McCain's charges against two prominent leaders of the religious right dominated the Republican primary campaign prior to Titanic Tuesday.

One reason was that, up to that point in the campaign, McCain had run a nearly flawless campaign. His wide-open press interviews on the Straight Talk Express had charmed the press and garnered McCain a flood of free publicity. But when he finally did make a mistake, McCain made a really big one, and the news media jumped all over him for it.

In other words, the press giveth (a long run of favorable news stories) and the press taketh away (a spate of negative comments on a candidate gaffe).

The second reason the press unloaded on McCain so heavily was the fact that McCain had lost the Virginia and Washington state primaries and the North Dakota caucuses. The news media, similar to voters, seek to support winners rather than losers. Once McCain was defeated in Virginia and Washington state, his chances to win the Republican nomination, in the eyes of the working reporters and commentators, were nil. That meant it was safe for the news media to give lots of publicity to McCain's big mistake without the fear that it might eventually cost McCain the

nomination, which was long gone already.

There was great irony in the McCain campaign foundering at the end over his Virginia Beach speech attacking leaders of the religious right. No candidate for President ever shot off his mouth as freely and extemporaneously as John McCain did in the year 2000 presidential primaries. Many reporters and analysts were just waiting for McCain to get careless, say the wrong thing, and get into a heap of trouble by offending this interest group or that racial or ethnic group.

When McCain finally did do that, it was not while chatting absent-mindedly on the Straight Talk Express. McCain's giant stumble came in a carefully prepared speech, made as a result of a conscious strategic decision, with printed copies distributed to the news media ahead of time.

There was reason to believe that, in future years, John McCain's attack on the religious right would come to be regarded as one of the most significant campaign gaffes in presidential primary history.

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When the Titanic Tuesday voting results were reported, it was clear that a strong national tide was running in both major political parties.

Albert Gore, Jr., totally vanquished Bill Bradley on the Democratic side of the fence. Gore won all 14 Democratic primaries and caucuses being held on this first almost-a-national-primary day. In two key states - California and Georgia - Gore polled more than 80 percent of the vote to less than 20 percent for Bradley. Even in New York, the state where Bill Bradley had been such an outstanding basketball player for the New York Knicks, Gore slam-dunked Bradley by 65 percent to 34 percent.

Things were a little closer on the Republican side, but not by much. George W. Bush defeated John McCain in 8 of the 12 states holding Republican primaries and caucuses. Most importantly, Bush trounced McCain in the three most populous states that were voting - California, New York, and Ohio. McCain's four lone victories came in the New England states of Connecticut,

Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and Vermont.

As would be expected, given the important role of the South in the Republican nomination process, George W. Bush's best state was Georgia. Bush defeated McCain in the Peach State by 67 percent to 28 percent. McCain's strongest showing outside of New England was in the liberal state of New York, but Bush still won there by 50 percent to 44 percent.⁷

Just as all the political analysts and pundits had predicted, the year 2000 presidential nomination races in both political parties were decided once and for all on Titanic Tuesday, March 7, 2000.

Just two days later, Bill Bradley scheduled a press conference in West Orange, New Jersey, to announce the official end of his quest for the presidency. The Bradley campaign had started off optimistically, with a number of polls in late 1999 showing Bradley running close to Al Gore in some key primary states. But once the actual voting began, in Iowa and New Hampshire, Gore jumped out to a quick lead and Bradley did not win even one primary or caucuses.⁸

That same day, more than 2,000 miles to the west of West Orange, New Jersey, John McCain mounted a podium in Sedona, Arizona. He announced that his all-out drive for the White House had come to the end of the road. Standing outdoors under a sunny blue sky filled with fluffy white clouds, McCain noted that he had succeeded in attracting crossover voters to his cause but was not the choice of the Republican Party.

With some picturesque Arizona mountains and a desert valley for his backdrop, John McCain acknowledged it was the voters who were pushing him out of the race. "Last Tuesday," McCain said, "a majority of Republican voters made clear their preference for Governor Bush. I respect their decision."⁹

Then, in sharp contrast to the way he conducted his open and accessible campaign, John McCain departed the press conference without answering any questions.

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Was it Titanic Tuesday or Ho Hum Tuesday? The twin triumphs of Albert Gore, Jr., and George W. Bush in the March 7, 2000, presidential primaries were exciting and decisive. But, several days prior to the actual voting, everyone who was well-informed on national politics knew that Gore and Bush both were going to win big on Titanic Tuesday. The outcome for the Democrats had been decided in Washington state. Bush scored his decisive win over McCain in Virginia and Washington state.

As one reporter summed it up: "History has a way of losing the nuance of events, so maybe years from now political scientists will look back on March 7, 2000, as the dullest of foreordained inevitabilities."¹⁰

If Titanic Tuesday was deemed not too exciting, at least the press and the pundits were very pleased with the year 2000 presidential primary elections as a whole. A *Washington Post* sub-headline described them as "the best political soap opera in years."¹¹ *Time* magazine labeled them "Those Wonderful Primaries."¹²

On the Republican side of things, an outsider candidate, John McCain, was able to win the New Hampshire primary and, for a while, threaten to upset the well-financed front-runner, George W. Bush. And a number of states in different parts of the nation, such as South Carolina, Michigan, Virginia, and Washington state, got to participate in these early electoral shenanigans. Then, at the very end, the populous states of California, New York, and Ohio confirmed George W. Bush as the final winner.

The Democratic race was less exciting, but that was mainly because national Democratic Party rules prevented there being any significant presidential primaries between the New Hampshire primary and Titanic Tuesday. Bill Bradley might have won one or two of those primaries that were never scheduled and thus made the Democratic contest more exciting.

Clearly John McCain was the bright star of the year 2000 presidential primary season. His maverick style and high accessibility to the press enabled him to reach a broad cross-section of

voters in the early GOP primaries. And McCain's meteoric rise to prominence in the New Hampshire primary shaped the Democratic sweepstakes as well as the Republican. The fact that John McCain stole independent voters from Bill Bradley was one of the most surprising, and unanticipated, developments in the year 2000 Republican and Democratic contests.

"The story of this primary season was John McCain," said Curtis Gans, a well-known voting analyst. Gans pointed out that the turnout for Republican primaries in the year 2000 hit record highs, whereas the Democratic turnout was the second-lowest in 40 years. The record GOP turnout was partly the result of independents and Democrats crossing over to vote in Republican primaries for John McCain. But McCain also spawned a counter-revolution among religious conservatives who, reacting to McCain's attacks on the religious right, flocked to the polls to vote for George W. Bush.

Curtis Gans criticized the extended lull in Democratic primaries which lasted for five crucial weeks from the New Hampshire primary to Titanic Tuesday. That lull greatly aided the two Republican candidates, McCain and Bush, in dominating the political news and generating almost all the year 2000 presidential primary excitement.¹³

So it was the unusual calendar of primaries in 2000 that controlled much of what was going on in both political parties. As E. J. Dionne of the *Washington Post* put it: "The political calendar ground Bradley's chances to dust. Foolishly, the Democrats scheduled no more primaries until [Titanic Tuesday], and the whole country turned Republican for a month. With no one of their own to vote for, reform-minded Democrats climbed aboard the Straight Talk Express."¹⁴

ENDNOTES - CHAPTER 12:

1. Roger Simon, "The Primary Lessons," *U.S. News & World Report*, March 20, 2000, p. 22.
2. Peter Marks, "Super Tuesday Forces Adjustments," *New York Times*, February 28, 2000.

3. Frank Bruni and Allison Mitchell, "McCain Apologizes For Characterizing Falwell And Robertson As Forces Of Evil," *New York Times*, March 2, 2000, p. A21.
4. Kevin Sack, "McCain Is Hit By A Backlash Over Remarks," *New York Times*, March 3, 2000, p. A1.
5. Sean Scully and Ralph Z. Hallow, "McCain Admits His Own Remarks Hurt Campaign," *Washington Times*, March 3, 2000.
6. Frank Bruni and Alison Mitchell, "McCain Apologizes For Characterizing Falwell And Robertson As Forces Of Evil," *New York Times*, March 2, 2000, p. A21.
7. "In Tuesday's Wake," *New York Times*, March 9, 2000, p. A23.
8. James Dao and Nicholas D. Kristof, "His Early Promise Vanished, Bradley Plans To Quit Today," *New York Times*, March 9, 2000, p. A1.
9. Alison Mitchell, "McCain Quits Race But Stops Short of Endorsing Bush," *New York Times*, March 10, 2000, p. A1.
10. David Von Drehle, "Unexpected Detours But A Predictable Finish," *Washington Post National Weekly Edition*, March 13, 2000, p. 13.
11. David Broder, "Now Playing: McCain's Last Stand?", *Washington Post National Weekly Edition*, March 6, 2000, p. 9.
12. Jeff Greenfield, "Those Wonderful Primaries," *Time*, March 13, 2000.
13. Robin Toner, "Run By McCain Swelled GOP Primary Turnout," *New York Times*, March 10, 2000, p. A16.
14. E. J. Dionne, "A Visit To The Peaceable Kingdom," *Denver Post*, March 5, 2000, p. 3G.