

10. VIRGINIA, WASHINGTON STATE, AND NORTH DAKOTA

February 29, 2000, was Leap Year Day. It also was the first *mega-Tuesday* of the year 2000 Republican presidential nomination campaign.

Three states - Virginia, Washington state, and North Dakota - held Republican presidential primaries that day. Mega-tuesdays tend to favor candidates such as George W. Bush, who have vast organizational and financial resources and can campaign successfully in several states at once. Mega-Tuesdays often prove difficult for upstart candidates, such as John McCain, who usually pick one of the states up for grabs and make an all-out effort to keep their campaign alive by winning there.

It could be argued that the previous Republican presidential primary day, February 22, 2000, had been a mega-Tuesday. After all, both Michigan and Arizona, two major states, had voted on the same day. But Arizona was John McCain's home state. As primary election day neared, the Arizona U.S. Senator appeared certain to win. Michigan became the only contest that the press, and thus the public, was interested in.

John McCain's campaign had been solidly rejuvenated by his big victory in Michigan on February 22, 2000. And there was a full seven days to campaign before the voting in Virginia, Washington state, and North Dakota on February 29, 2000. It did seem possible that McCain could pick one of the three states, pour in all his time, add in his major resource of widespread attention from the news media, and eke out a victory.

But there were problems for McCain with picking the best state. Virginia allowed independents and Democrats to vote in its presidential primary (good for John McCain) but was a southern state and very conservative (good for George W. Bush). Washington state was more liberal and progressive than Virginia (good for McCain) but required voters to choose between voting in the Republican or the Democratic presidential primary (good for Bush, since only self-styled Republicans would vote in the Republican primary). As for North Dakota, it was a conservative

High Plains state holding caucuses rather than a primary. George W. Bush, with his solid support from the sort of committed Republicans who vote in party caucuses, had North Dakota locked up.

In retrospect, it appears that John McCain tried to finesse the Leap Year Day voting in the year 2000 Republican presidential race. He spent time campaigning in California and a number of the other states that would be voting one week later on March 7, 2000, the blockbuster mega-Tuesday that would probably determine the nomination winner.

But the news media did not let McCain get away with such a strategy, if he originally had one. Extensive press and television coverage of the upcoming contest in Virginia suddenly made that state a crucial battleground in which John McCain had to at least do well, if not win.

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Over the years, Virginia had not been a player in the presidential nominating process in the United States. Only once, in 1988, had Virginia held a presidential primary. That year, Virginia's efforts had been buried in a flood of results from 14 southern states that had decided to all vote on the same day. In fact, that big day of southern presidential primaries in 1988 was the original Super Tuesday.

Virginia, along with every other southern state, chose George Bush the elder over Kansas Senator Robert Dole in that 1988 Republican primary. It was that day of big victories, mainly in the South, that cinched the 1988 nomination for George Bush the elder and eventually sent him to the White House.

In 1992 and 1996 Virginia went back to picking its national convention delegates in party caucuses that attracted no national attention whatsoever. But in the year 2000, the Republican leadership in Virginia decided to hold a presidential primary and scheduled it for February 29, 2000. The Democrats in Virginia in 2000 stuck with the party caucuses and held them at a later date.

So, coming from seemingly out of nowhere, Virginia suddenly was a major player in the Republican presidential nominating process in the year 2000. But the most important characteristic

of Virginia's new Republican primary was that Democrats and independents were invited to vote in it. The press quickly spotted this as the sort of open voting format that had paid off so handsomely for John McCain in New Hampshire and Michigan.

But George W. Bush had two big assets in Virginia. The first was the support of Republican Governor James S. Gilmore III, whose powerful statewide GOP organization had put him in the Governor's chair. Simultaneously, the Gilmore machine had enabled the Republicans to take control of both houses of the Virginia legislature for the first time in over a century. Virginia Republicans were at an historic peak of political power, and all of that party power was backing Texas Governor George W. Bush in the Virginia Republican primary.

Bush's other asset in Virginia was the state's popular U.S. Senator, John W. Warner. Although known to most Americans as one of the many husbands of film goddess Elizabeth Taylor, John Warner had proven to be one of the state's leading vote getters. With both Governor Gilmore and Senator Warner on his side, George W. Bush clearly was coming into Virginia with superior organizational strength over John McCain.

"I would like Virginia to clinch it [for Bush]," Governor Gilmore told the *New York Times*. "I would like Virginia to deliver strong enough for him that the people of the United States will feel that, when a state of this size and diversity goes for him, that is a bellwether for the country."

"I do believe its possible for us to set the stage for...New York and California [one week later]," Gilmore continued. "We have a great number of people primed, [and] we don't believe there's a depth of activity on behalf of Senator McCain."¹

Governor Gilmore appeared to be more than correct about the lack of organizational activity in Virginia for John McCain. The Bush campaign had seven paid political workers in the Old Dominion state whereas McCain had only one. The Bush forces were staging a door-to-door get-out-the-vote campaign and were running television ads. The ads were the same ones used in other states to criticize John McCain for comparing George W. Bush to President Bill Clinton on the issue

of untrustworthiness. McCain had tried to repudiate that position on his part, but the Bush forces were doing all they could to remind Virginians that McCain briefly had supported it.

McCain's campaign manager in Virginia was his brother, Joe McCain, a state resident who cheerfully acknowledged that the McCain camp would have to come from behind to win. This "is not an organizational campaign," Joe McCain commented, "but Bush is a business and McCain is a passion in Virginia."²

As in other states, McCain's distinguished military record was proving to be his best asset. Paul Galanti, a prisoner-of-war hero from Virginia, used his home computer to access lists of state veterans and urge them to vote for McCain.

As primary election day neared, John McCain made some appearances in Virginia and began running television advertisements in the Northern Virginia suburbs of Washington, D.C. Northern Virginia is the state's most expensive television market, but it was said to be filled with the kind of upscale, independent, moderate, and reformist voters who had supported McCain so strongly in his big wins in New Hampshire and Michigan.

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As the McCain campaign began to falter in Virginia, John McCain met in Arizona with his senior campaign advisers. Something had to be done to re-ignite the McCain effort and weaken Bush. It was a moment that called for desperate tactics, and McCain's advisers had just such a risky maneuver in mind.

The advisers wanted to remind the press and public of the bad publicity which George W. Bush had received by speaking at Bob Jones University in South Carolina. The advisers recommended that John McCain attack the leadership of the religious right, the morally conservative Christian groups that strongly opposed abortion and supported a number of other right-wing causes. By attacking the leaders of the religious right, the advisers argued, McCain would clearly identify himself as the more moderate and progressive candidate in the race.³

McCain decided to take his advisers' recommendation. The occasion selected was a speech in Virginia Beach on the day before primary election day in Virginia. John McCain played down his customary stand-up comedy routine with all the snappy one-liners. The mood was serious and somber as McCain, speaking in a high school gymnasium packed with some 4,000 people, launched a major verbal assault on religious conservatism.

The immediate targets of McCain's attack were Pat Robertson, the founder of the Christian Coalition, and the Reverend Jerry Falwell, the founder of the Moral Majority. These two political interest groups had a long record of pushing conservative social causes and expressing that support in religious terms. John McCain called Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell "self-appointed leaders" and intolerant empire builders who "have turned good causes into businesses" while trying to push everyone but "card-carrying Republicans" out of the Republican Party.

McCain accused Robertson and Falwell of intentionally dividing the conservatives from the moderates in the GOP. "The politics of division are not our values," McCain said emotionally. "They are corrupting influences on religion and politics and those who practice them in the name of religion or in the name of the Republican Party or in the name of America shame our faith, our party and our country."⁴

As McCain's political advisers knew it would, McCain's speech in Virginia Beach ignited a major round of commentary in the press. But, to the McCain forces shock and surprise, most of the commentators and pundits found McCain's charges to be wild and intemperate.

U.S. News said flatly that the McCain attacks "seem to have backfired profoundly."⁵ Following the speech, political commentator Gloria Borger sarcastically used phrases such as "divisive liberal wacko," "secretly out to destroy the GOP," and "hothead" in reference to McCain.⁶ *Washington Post* columnist David Broder, quoting a Republican political consultant, noted that all the uproar over the Virginia Beach speech had given McCain the "worst days of his campaign."⁷

George W. Bush sought to exploit the negative political reaction to John McCain's all-out

attack on the religious right. The same day McCain made his charges, Bush said: "This is a political game that Senator McCain is trying to play by pitting one group of people against another."⁸

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When Leap Year Day, February 29, 2002, finally arrived, Virginia voters held the first significant presidential primary in the state's history. George W. Bush handily defeated John McCain and won all 56 of Virginia's delegates to the Republican National Convention. Garnering strong support from loyal Republican party members as well as the religious right, Bush polled 53 percent of the vote compared to just 44 percent for McCain.

As in New Hampshire and Michigan, Senator McCain did well with independents and Democratic voters. But, as in South Carolina, there simply were not enough independent and Democratic voters in Virginia to propel McCain to victory over Bush's solid majorities among Republicans. The results in South Carolina and Virginia, taken together, suggested to astute politics watchers that Bush would eventually carry the entire American South, with its giant potful of convention delegates, over John McCain.

George W. Bush was quick to use his victory in Virginia to further discredit John McCain's pre-election day attack on the religious right. "We are one step closer to having a united party," Bush said. "I've proven I can bring Republicans out in big numbers.... We are expanding our base without destroying our foundations.... The voters of Virginia rejected the politics of pitting one religion against another."⁹

Political analysts saw George W. Bush's commanding triumph in Virginia as the result of superior political organization and the popularity of Virginia's top Republican office holders. John McCain predicted he would beat the political "machine" of Governor Gilmore and Senator Warner, both of whom strongly backed Bush. "McCain just played it wrong in attacking the Gilmore-Warner machine," said Mark J. Rozell, a political scientist at Catholic University in Washington, D.C. "He named probably the two most- popular figures in Virginia politics. And by making

several campaign stops in Virginia, McCain raised the expectations for his candidacy and failed badly."¹⁰

As predicted, the only geographical part of Virginia that strongly supported McCain was the upscale Washington, D.C., suburbs in Northern Virginia. But George W. Bush made a play for that vote by pointing out that Senator McCain had supported adding 48 additional flights into Reagan National Airport. Noisy jet flights in and out of the airport, which is located in Virginia across the Potomac River from Washington, D.C., are a major political issue in Northern Virginia.

But the seal of doom for the McCain campaign came when primary election results were reported from Washington state. Bush won over McCain by an even larger margin, 58 percent to 38 percent, than Bush won in Virginia. These results were particularly frustrating to the McCain forces. Dan Evans, the popular former Republican Governor in Washington state, switched his support from Bush to McCain. Furthermore, Washington state is viewed as being much more liberal and progressive than Virginia and thus should have been prime McCain territory.

But, despite the fact that McCain campaigned in Washington state and ran television ads there, no ground swell of support for McCain ever developed. Tim Hibbitts, a non-partisan West Coast political operative, pointed out that "a lot of steam" went out of the McCain effort in Washington state when McCain lost South Carolina.¹¹ Apparently even McCain's big victory in Michigan could not reinvigorate enthusiasm for McCain along Puget Sound and around the slopes of Mount Rainier.

And things just got worse for John McCain in the North Dakota Republican caucuses. Bush copped 76 percent of the vote compared to just 19 percent for McCain.

R. W. Apple, Jr., a leading political analyst for the *New York Times*, surveyed the February 29, 2000, voting results for the Republicans and flatly declared: "But in fact Mr. McCain was comprehensively beaten on Tuesday: in a big southern state with one foot in the Mid-Atlantic region, Virginia; in a small, isolated Midwestern state whose economy is based on agriculture, North

Dakota; and in a Northwestern state with a progressive tradition, Washington."¹²

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George W. Bush's three-state sweep on Leap Year Day essentially gave Bush the year 2000 Republican nomination for President. It meant that, going into the multi-state super primary one week later, George W. Bush would have all the momentum. And the two most populous states voting in that March 7 super primary, New York and California, only allowed registered Republicans to vote in the Republican presidential primary for convention delegates. In those two key states, the independent and Democratic voters that John McCain so badly needed would be excluded from any meaningful participation.

In the end, John McCain was the victim of the Republican presidential primary calendar. Instead of Virginia and Washington state voting on Leap Year Day, McCain needed a more liberal state to be voting that simultaneously allowed independents and Democrats to vote in the Republican primary. When no such primary was scheduled, the press turned its attention mainly toward Virginia and secondarily to Washington state, despite McCain's efforts to play down the significance of those two contests.

There is a lesson here. The news media, and not the candidates, have the upper hand in deciding which presidential primaries are important or unimportant. McCain tried to bypass Virginia and Washington state. When the press would not allow him to do so, McCain had to campaign in those two states, albeit reluctantly. When McCain lost Virginia and Washington state on the same day, with the big defeat in the North Dakota caucuses thrown in for good measure, John McCain's quest for the presidency was all but officially at an end.

ENDNOTES - CHAPTER 10:

1. Francis X. Clines, "Powerful Virginia Machine Digs In To Tackle McCain," *New York Times*, February 25, 2000, p. A14.

2. Francis X. Clines, "Powerful Virginia Machine Digs In To Tackle McCain," *New York Times*, February 25, 2000, p. A14.
3. Kenneth T. Walsh, "A Bloody Battle," *U.S. News & World Report*, March 13, 2000, p. 16.
4. David Barstow, "McCain Rips Falwell, Robertson," *Denver Post*, February 29, 2000, p. A1.
5. Kenneth T. Walsh, "A Bloody Battle," *U.S. News & World Report*, March 13, 2000, p. 16.
6. Gloria Borger, "The Primary Problem," *U.S. News & World Report*, March 13, 2000, p. 31.
7. David Broder, "Religion Re-enters Politics," *Denver Post*, March 7, 2000, p. 11B.
8. David Barstow, "McCain Rips Falwell, Robertson," *Denver Post*, February 29, 2000, p. A1.
9. Ron Fournier, "Bush Carries Virginia," *Denver Post*, March 1, 2000, p. 1A.
10. Richard L. Berke, "Bush Takes Virginia In A 3-State Sweep," *New York Times*, March 1, 2000.
11. David Rogers, Greg Hitt, and Dennis Farney, "McCain Seeks To Rally Michigan After Weekend Loss," *Wall Street Journal*, February 22, 2000, p. A42.
12. R. W. Apple, Jr., "By Most Any Measure, McCain's Black Tuesday," *New York Times*, March 2, 2000.