

Dean Hammers Bush On War, Immigration; DNC Chief Gives Preview of '06 Race

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Body

Democratic Party Chairman Howard Dean offered a preview of the 2006 elections here Saturday with a blistering critique of President Bush's policies on Iraq and immigration and the Republicans' ethics scandals. But he warned Democrats they cannot expect to win next year without offering an agenda of their own.

Speaking at the fall meeting of the Democratic National Committee, Dean pledged that Democrats would offer tax policies aimed at middle-class voters, a plan to provide health insurance to all Americans, immigration proposals that offer a path to legalization for illegal immigrants, and defense policies that would protect the nation and expose the "hollow promises" of the Bush administration.

Dean warmly praised Rep. John P. Murtha (D-Pa.) for "standing up and telling the truth" about Bush's policies in Iraq, and suggested that the Pennsylvanian had offered a vision around which Democrats could rally. But Dean stopped well short of embracing Murtha's call for a withdrawal plan that would redeploy all U.S. troops within about six months. Instead Dean called on Democrats to coalesce around a proposal that would keep some U.S. forces in Iraq for two more years.

The former Vermont governor's remarks underscored the party's continuing debate over Iraq and the reluctance of many party leaders to support Murtha's call for a speedy withdrawal strategy. House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi (Calif.) announced her support for Murtha's plan last week, but others in the party leadership have declined to do so, in part out of fears that a swift withdrawal could leave Iraq worse off than it is today and hand the GOP a political weapon.

Dean came to national prominence in 2003 by opposing Bush's decision to invade Iraq and has spoken for the party's antiwar grass-roots activists. But in his speech he blended strong criticism of the president for going to war under false pretenses with a more measured endorsement of a plan promoted by the Center for American Progress, a liberal think tank, which would redeploy about 80,000 U.S. troops from Iraq in 2006 and the remainder by the end of 2007.

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Displaying the fiery style that excited many Democrats during his unsuccessful presidential campaign, Dean attacked "political hacks and cronies" of the president for eroding civil rights and voting rights protections, and said of Republicans: "Theirs is a party of self-absorption and selfishness."

Saying Bush had used race and gay rights to divide the electorate, Dean said, "In 2006, it's going to be immigration; that's who he's going to scapegoat next." He said Democrats must favor tougher enforcement of existing immigration laws and provide tighter border security, but said a balanced immigration policy would provide a way to give many of the 11 million illegal immigrants a path to legal status.

The Democratic meeting came at a time of growing confidence within the party that 2006 could bring significant gains in Congress and the statehouses because of Bush's low approval ratings and public anxiety about Iraq. But Dean said those conditions alone are not sufficient to produce Democratic victories. "We're doing the things that need to be done, but we have a long way to go," he said. "The collapse of confidence in the Republican leadership is not enough to elect Democratic leadership. We have to stand up for what we believe."

Dean has faced criticism within some parts of the party for his stewardship at the DNC, particularly the pace at which the national party has been spending money -- something that has alarmed many Democratic strategists who fear Republicans will have a huge financial advantage next year.

But he won near-universal praise among the DNC and state party leaders who gathered here this weekend, saying his emphasis on grass-roots organization was a welcome change from the past. Dean built his campaign for chairman by courting state party leaders, and many said this weekend that he had delivered on his promise to shift money and resources into their states. They defended the money he has spent by saying it represents an investment in party-building in places long ignored by the national party.

Keelan Sanders, executive director of the Mississippi Democratic Party said that with Dean's support, the state party staff had grown from one full-time person to four. Others cited examples of additional staff and help with technical problems. Bobby Kahn, the Georgia Democratic chairman, said the relationship between the national and state parties is the best he has seen in almost two decades.

The weekend meeting offered the first tentative signs of the party's determination to address military and religious matters that have often cost them in elections. "We will not run from the debate on moral values," Dean said. "We will embrace it."

To that end, Democrats held two organizing sessions for new bodies within the DNC, one called the "people of faith" group and the other open to veterans and military families. But apparently fearing potential divisions at the preliminary discussions, DNC officials closed both meetings to reporters, angering some DNC members.

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