Special Report

New Hampshire makes a difference

Political careers have risen, fallen there

By Sean Scully
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

NASHUA, N.H. — Funny things happen when politicians go to New Hampshire — expectations and plans are upset, lives and even history are changed.

"A lot of people have gone to bed Monday [before the primary] thinking they were going to be president and they wake up Wednesday very disappointed," said Tom Rath, a Republican National Committee member from New Hampshire and a longtime party activist.

The first-in-the-nation primary is a quadrennial institution that has provoked a series of memorable, and history-defining, moments: Sen. Edmund S. Muskie crying in front of the Manchester Union Leader, Sen. Joseph R. Biden Jr. losing his temper over an innocent question by a local teacher, Ronald Reagan wrestling for the microphone at a candidates' forum, Michigan Gov. George Romney declaring he had been "brainwashed" into supporting the Vietnam War.

The New Hampshire primary has effectively ended a series of political careers. President Truman quietly backed out of the 1952 contest after losing to Estes Kefauver, an eccentric senator from Tennessee who was famous for campaigning in a coonskin cap and slogging through the brutal New Hampshire winters on a dog sled.

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Photo by Kenneth Lambert/The Washington Times

Final push: John McCain and wife Cindy answer questions after he spoke at the VFW post in Franklin, N.H., two days before the Republican primary in which he is battling Texas Gov. George W. Bush.

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President Johnson bailed out of the race in 1968 even after he won in New Hampshire, deciding his margin of victory was a warning from a war-weary electorate. Pat Buchanan's upset win in 1996 was the first concrete sign that Sen. Bob Dole was finished.

New Hampshirites react badly "when the press tries to shove a candidate down our throats," said Concord resident Charles Brereton, author of the 1987 book "First in the Nation."

The state's voters take a perverse delight in tripping the front-runner, he said. They see themselves as gatekeepers who prevent the slick professional media and political culture from preordaining a winner.

Sometimes, he said, all it takes is a tweak from New Hampshire to get voters in other states to rethink the conventional wisdom.

"We give the country an excuse to have its say," he said.

Arbiter of fates

In exactly that way, New Hampshire has made the careers of as many underdogs as it has destroyed front-runners.

Georgia Gov. Jimmy Carter vaulted from "Jimmy Who?" to the White House after a strong New Hampshire showing in 1976. Ronald Reagan's narrow loss in 1976 established him as the conservative standard-bearer in 1980, when he unseated Mr. Carter.

The primary dates from 1913, when New Hampshire abandoned the traditional caucus system. It claimed the first-in-the-nation title in 1920, when Indiana moved its primary from March to May and Minnesota stopped holding primaries.

But it was not until 1952 that the primary emerged as a defining force in politics. That year, New Hampshire allowed voters to cast a ballot directly for a candidate rather than for a slate of delegates who could vote for any candidate at the party conventions later in the year.

That simple change made the New Hampshire primary a more compelling story for the national media, since the primary for the first time had a clear-cut winner and loser.

Only Iowa has an earlier vote, but it uses a caucus system rather than a primary election. That means party activists and political organizations control the outcome of the vote, not the general electorate.

Since 1952, New Hampshirites are proud to point out, their voters have correctly picked the winning presidential candidate every time except one. In 1992, Massachusetts Sen. Paul Tsongas beat Arkansas Gov. Bill Clinton, who went on to win the party nomination and the presidency.

Defenders of the New Hampshire primary explain the lapse by pointing out that Mr. Tsongas was from a neighboring state and was well known in New Hampshire, a sort of honorary favorite son.

"We've done the job for the nation" by consistently picking the winner, joked former Gov. Hugh Gregg, a leading defender of the primary. "We don't need anybody else."

Altered state

Mr. Gregg zealously defends the primary from a small corner of the State Library, where he heads the newly established Library and Archive of New Hampshire Political Tradition. The alcove is crammed with primary memorabilia, including a set of candidate trading cards, designed by Mr. Gregg himself, that show the colorful history of the primary and highlight its importance.

But there are plenty of people who aren't so sure the power New Hampshire holds is a good thing. Every four years, newspapers in other states carry editorials complaining about the system.

The most consistent argument against New Hampshire's special status is the state's small size and unusual demographics.

The state has about 1.1 million people. Only 7,000 of those, or about half of 1 percent, are black. There are only about 15,000 minority residents of any other race, making up about 1.3 percent of the population.

The remaining 98.1 percent are white, about a third of French descent. They tend to be conservative and have a legendary distaste for taxes and government that makes them stand out in liberal-leaning New England.

But things are changing.

The populous southeastern corner of the state has become a haven for high-tech refugees from the sprawl of Boston. That has meant the bucolic, rural stereotype of New Hampshire is under pressure. Cities such as Nashua and Manchester have suddenly come face-to-face with explosive growth, suburban sprawl, franchise stores and traffic congestion.

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These changes may also erode the character of the New Hampshire primary.

"We have got a new type of person coming into New Hampshire," Mr. Gregg said. "They don't have the New Hampshire ethos for politics."

Included in the influx are people from the more liberal states of New England, particularly Massachusetts. Old-timers in this state say the immigrants from Massachusetts are importing a bit of the big-government style that they learned in their native state.

They have also brought Democratic politics to a rock-ribbed Republican state. After years of Republican domination, for example, Democrats managed in 1996 to elect a Democratic governor, Jeanne Shaheen, who won a second term two years later.

While the newcomers may change the feel of New Hampshire politics, Mr. Gregg said, they will probably never change one key feature: the desire to vote first. If for no other reason, the early vote is good business, pumping tens of millions of dollars into the economy and giving local companies free exposure as candidates stop by to campaign.

"These people we're talking about understand the first-in-the-nation thing," he said. "They enjoy it."

Unfair advantage?

"If the purpose of an early nominating contest is to force the candidates to play on a field that serves as a microcosm of the entire national electorate, there are few states that would serve as a poorer battleground than the Granite State," wrote Bill Pascoe, political director of the American Conservative Union, in this newspaper in 1995.

"I think its a beautiful thing that New Hampshire holds the nation's first primary, with all those fiercely 'independent-minded' Granite Staters dashing through the snows of February to cast their ballots for the candidate of their choice," San Diego Union-Tribune columnist Joseph Perkins said in December. "But just don't tell voters in the other 49 states that New Hampshire is somehow a bellwether for the entire country."

New Hampshirites shrug off such criticism.

"Who would they rather have pick the president," asked Sen. Judd Gregg, son of Hugh Gregg and himself a former governor. "Some pollster in Washington telling them what to think? Some media guru in Washington who has a talk show? Or some monied interest?"

Defenders say the New Hampshire primary forces candidates out of their self-imposed isolation, in which they are surrounded only by handlers and consultants. It forces them to hit the ground and face voters eye-to-eye.

"The primary is a classic example of American politics at its best, in my opinion," Sen. Gregg said. "People get involved; that was the tradition of American politics up until TV took over."

Mr. Rath agrees, and says New Hampshire has earned its right to influence the process by upholding the old-fashioned tradition of electing presidents. Voters in New Hampshire, he said, go to amazing lengths to meet candidates and turn out for meetings and speeches years ahead of the election.

Former Tennessee Gov. Lamar Alexander, who was running for the 2000 Republican presidential nomination until August, managed to draw 3,000 people to a dinner two years before the election, said Mr. Rath, an adviser to Mr. Alexander's short-lived campaign.

In 1998 and 1999, leaders in New Hampshire, including Mrs. Shaheen and Hugh Gregg, banded together to save the primary from larger states, which were eyeing ways to end the lock-hold of New Hampshire.

"We are a small state with very few delegates to offer," they wrote in a joint letter to the Manchester Union Leader. "What makes New Hampshire so important to presidential contenders is not our delegates, but the momentum we deliver to those who distinguish themselves in this first, grueling, grass-roots campaign."

The activists of both parties, along with allies in Iowa, successfully pressured presidential hopefuls to pledge not to participate in any primaries or caucuses that threatened the traditional position of New Hampshire and Iowa as the first tests.

So successful was the effort that none of the major contenders signed up for a planned caucus this month in Louisiana. Louisiana officials eventually admitted defeat and called off the caucus.

Going door-to-door

Candidates are quick to declare their loyalty to the primary, lest New Hampshire voters punish them. In his Concord headquarters, just two blocks from Hugh Gregg's primary fortress, for example, Texas Gov. George W. Bush has prominently posted a copy of his letter to state officials swearing allegiance to the first-in-the-nation contest.

Other candidates as well brush off the relentless criticism from other states.

"Some people fail to understand the importance of New Hampshire and Iowa," Mr. Dole told New Hampshire voters in 1996. Iowa's caucus is held eight days before the New Hampshire election.

"Whether you like it or not — and you probably like it — Iowa is the first caucus and New Hampshire is the first primary. When you select someone in New Hampshire ... it's going to have an impact all across America," he said.

Mr. Alexander, who waged an aggressive but unsuccessful campaign in New Hampshire for the 1996 nomination, said he found the process useful and interesting.

"New Hampshire and Iowa were an experience for me. ... They are a chance for a candidate to actually learn from the people he hopes to represent," Mr. Alexander told The Washington Times.

In large states, Mr. Alexander says, there is little time for anything other than fund-raisers, canned media events, and large impersonal speeches.

The endless, street-level campaigning in New Hampshire is actually fun, he said.

"Getting up early, going to bed late is the most exhilarating part of the campaign," he said, "so it's really not that hard."

That is not to say candidates don't complain. The weather in New Hampshire in January and February is famously brutal. As the East Coast was gripped with its first arctic cold snap this month, New Hampshire saw wind-chills of minus-40 degrees.

Even before the cold snap, New Hampshire was "so cold my teeth hurt," Republican candidate John McCain told voters in South Carolina.

New Hampshire "is a lovely state, a wonderful place to be," he said on a warm day in Sumter, S.C., "but it certainly does challenge you."

Under the microscope

But the weather is the least of the candidates' concerns. The intense media scrutiny and the unpredictable interaction with voters creates a volatile atmosphere where a tiny slip can spell disaster.

The most famous case was probably Mr. Muskie, who appeared to be barreling toward the Democratic nomination in 1972. After the powerful Manchester Union Leader printed an article critical of his wife, the Maine senator called a press conference in front of the newspaper offices.

Washington Post reporter David Broder wrote an account of Mr. Muskie's emotional speech that changed the course of the campaign by defining him as weak and emotionally unstable.

"With tears streaming down his face and his voice choked with emotion" Mr. Muskie denounced the Union Leader and "broke down three times in as many minutes," Mr. Broder wrote.

Press accounts of the speech vary widely — many did not mention the tears, and Mr. Muskie always denied that he cried — but The Post account stuck in the public mind and helped propel South Dakota Sen. George McGovern to the nomination.

Likewise, Delaware Sen. Joseph R. Biden Jr. saw his campaign hopes end with an ill-timed emotional outburst before news cameras.

Mr. Biden was already reeling from charges that he had lifted parts of a speech from a British politician when he sat down for a meeting over coffee with some New Hampshire voters in 1987.

At the end of the meeting, taped by C-SPAN, a local teacher asked Mr. Biden which law school he had attended and what rank he held in the graduating class.

"I think I probably have a much higher IQ than you do, I suspect. ... I'd be delighted to sit back and compare my IQ with yours, if you'd like," an angry Mr. Biden responded to the surprised teacher.

Mr. Biden went on to give an account of his law school career that turned out to be exaggerated. The angry outburst and the misstated record were another blow to his sagging hopes in the state.

"A candidate has to be on his or her toes every minute of every day," said Peter Hannaford, an aide to Ronald Reagan in the 1976 and 1980 campaigns. [The New Hampshire] method of campaigning is a very good test of a candidate's ability to stay on his toes and defend his message."

A shot in the arm

Mr. Reagan's 1980 campaign showed that performing well in New Hampshire can provide a boost just as surely as performing poorly can kill a campaign.

Mr. Reagan gained national attention and solidified his image as a blunt-spoken hero when he quarreled with rival George Bush over allowing long-shot Republican contenders into a debate. Mr. Reagan, who supported letting the upstarts into the debate, grabbed the microphone and took command of the event, declaring, "I paid for this microphone."

The state is also known to revive sagging candidates in unlikely ways.

The best example is Richard Nixon, the man who won more New Hampshire primaries than any other. New Hampshire probably saved his political career before he ever ran for president, when he was serving as Dwight D. Eisenhower's vice president.

During his re-election bid in 1956, Mr. Eisenhower made clear his distaste for Mr. Nixon, and there was open talk in Republican circles that Mr. Eisenhower would dump the former senator.

A group of Republican senators, led by Sen. Styles Bridges of New Hampshire, organized a write-in campaign in the New Hampshire primary, the only contest in the nation where voters pick a vice president separately.

Mr. Nixon drew a solid 22,936 votes. Mr. Bridges and his supporters credited their efforts with forcing the president to relent and accept Mr. Nixon as his running mate.

Ironically, Mr. Nixon was treated to the same lesson by New Hampshire voters in 1972. Mr. Nixon considered dumping Vice President Spiro Agnew that year, but a vice presidential write-in effort gave Mr. Agnew 45,524 votes and forced Mr. Nixon to reconsider.

New Hampshire voters, Mr. Hannaford said, tend to reward candidates whom they see as persecuted or ignored by others.

"They kind of like outsiders," he said, "underdogs, the non-establishment candidate."