

By MICHAEL KRAMER

"YOU BELIEVE THIS?" Bob Dole said in Dover, New Hampshire, recently. "You ever seen anything like this?" Dole's incredulity was due in equal measure

to the huge size of the crowd and the rapt, respectful attention he was receiving. "The rest of the country may think it's early," Dole said. "Up here they know better. This deal's gonna be over in a year."

Dole is not yet the Republican nominee, but he's got the timing right. The schedule of primaries and caucuses has never been so compressed. In just 44 days between Iowa's 1996 caucus on Feb. 12 and California's primary on March 26, about 70% of the Republican delegates will be chosen. During that burst of contests, everything will happen so fast that candidates will have little time for mid-course corrections. Like it or not, that means the real primary season is starting right now.

The field of contenders isn't complete. Possible candidates still wait on the sidelines, and also-rans like Ed Muskie will affirm that being a front runner this far out guarantees exactly nothing. The issues (both real and perceived) are only now emerging. But the candidates' strategies are coalescing, and much is already known about the landscape on which the campaign will unfold. This second presidential battle of the post-cold war era will continue the debates begun in 1992, which were exacerbated but not settled in 1994. At home, with the gap between rich and poor widening, the seemingly ingrained American notions of compassion codified during the New Deal are colliding with the fears of those who feel financially strapped—a tension aggravated by the House Republicans' assault on the social safety net. Abroad there is not yet a consensus regarding America's role in a world safer from annihilation but still convulsed by conflicts that threaten the global economy.

These questions will be even harder to resolve because faith in government—already shaken by scandal, gridlock and failed presidencies—is at an all-time low. And harder still because civil discourse has become a quaint affectation for a public too willing to tolerate the same screeching hyperbole in its politics that it relishes on its airwaves.

"IF HE KNEW WHAT IT ENTAILS," HARRY TRUMAN said in 1947, "no man in his right mind would ever want to be President." And then Truman began the climb to his upset election victory in 1948, the



redeemed, born-again, comeback model. Bill Clinton hopes to emulate next year. But why did Truman run? Nelson Rockefeller explained the itch this way: "We're politicians, and like in any profession, we want to reach the top, which in America means only one thing."

Sometimes political challengers who are self-aware—a few of them exist—know they're only going through the motions. In 1964, for example, even Barry Goldwater's fabulists knew they were fighting the good fight and little more. In years like this, the scent of triumph is palpable. Following their 1994 midterm sweep, the Republicans are salivating. They believe their prescriptions command wide appeal: smaller government, lower taxes and fewer, less costly social programs. They're confident

EARLY BIRDS

A noisy crowd greeted Phil Gramm in Des Moines last month when he announced his candidacy with a whirlwind tour of the U.S.

as desperate me-too-ism. Republican analysts believe that large numbers of voters have already written off the Democratic Party. White working males strayed Republican in record numbers last year; only 38% voted for Democratic candidates. The President himself, say the Republicans, is equally at risk. G.O.P. focus groups report that even many Democrats are still upset by two indicators of the President's liberal leanings: his early push to have the military accept gay soldiers, and his support for a health-care-reform program widely viewed as seeking to burden middle-class

citizens in order to cover the uninsured. Beyond that, Republican research shows voters to be bothered by Clinton's character—and that they draw some sort of connection between his perceived failings and a society-wide lack of civility and responsible citizenship.

"Our democracy is fraying," explains a Democrat, New York Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan. "The populace as a whole is less ordered, less restrained, less measured in its judgments." Voters expect their President to stand against such unravelings, and Clinton, the G.O.P. contends, is especially ill suited to the task because of the per-



ception that he is or has been self-indulgent. It's not just the President's past personal life, say Republicans; it is more the perception that Clinton is unfocused, an issue surfer who grabs at whatever the polls reveal as fashionable at the moment.

"When the President stands tall against a middle-class tax cut and in favor of deficit reduction in 1993 and then supports the opposite in 1994, that's not good," says a Clinton adviser. "In a job that demands an adult, the President is viewed as an adolescent." Few doubt Clinton's raw intelligence, but intellect lags behind fortitude when

EARLY RETURNS
A special TIME/CNN political poll of key primary states

Table with 4 columns: Overall U.S., New Hampshire, Florida, California. Rows include: If asked to vote for a Republican nominee for President today, for whom would you vote? (Robert Dole, Phil Gramm, Pat Buchanan, Pete Wilson, Lamar Alexander, Richard Lugar, Arlen Specter, Robert Dorman, Alan Keyes, Lynn Martin); If Colin Powell were to run in the Republican primaries, might you vote for him?; If Ross Perot were to run in the Republican primaries, might you vote for him?.

Table with 4 columns: Overall U.S., New Hampshire, Florida, California. Row: If the Democratic primary were held today, would you vote for Bill Clinton or someone else? (Clinton, Someone else).

From telephone polls taken for TIME/CNN between Feb. 23 and Mar. 1 by Telestrat Partners Inc. of 500 registered Republicans in each state. California, Florida and New Hampshire with sampling errors of ±4.4%. Poll 558 registered Democrats in California, sampling error ±4.8%. 356 in Florida, ±4.4%, and 318 in New Hampshire, ±5. Also used a nationwide survey of 426 registered Republicans and 226 registered Democrats with sampling errors of ±4.8% and ±5.5% respectively.



BUNTING SEASON

Their hopes building, workers prepared a stage in Tennessee last week for Lamar Alexander's announcement

nation's new system of governance assured that choosing a President would rest on the candidates' "requisite qualifications" rather than on their "talents for low intrigue and the little arts of popularity." Beyond the gimmickery that today's politicians can practice in their sleep, there are three crucial factors having little to do with qualifications that will greatly affect the outcome—and each is magnified by the coming season's tightened schedule: money, organization and expectations.

"WHAT MONEY CAN BUY:" I have the most reliable friend in politics," Texas Senator Phil Gramm crowed before officially announcing his candidacy last week. "Ready money." However much it will actually take to contest the 1996 G.O.P. nomination, the role of money is greater than ever, and most of it must be available before the first ballots are cast. With almost \$10 million on hand, Gramm has already scored an astounding victory. He has helped scare off competition from a roster of Republican big shots: Bill Bennett, Jack Kemp, Dick Cheney, Dan Quayle and Bill Weld. "In the past," says former Republican Party chairman Rich Bond, "it was possible to surprise in some early contests, gather momentum and quickly raise the money required to go on. Now there just isn't enough time between the primaries to do serious fund raising." Along with Gramm, Dole and former Tennessee Governor Lamar Alexander will probably have the dough it takes, and so may California Governor Pete Wilson if he joins the fray.

The others currently running—Pennsylvania Senator Arlen Specter, Indiana Senator Richard Lugar, television commentator Pat Buchanan and peripheral wannabes like former Labor Secretary Lynn Martin—will have to play with smaller stakes.

"IT'S WHOM YOU HIRE: Political campaigning, like any endeavor, has its professionals, and some are better than others. The competition for the best is an invisible primary all its own. Each of the three leading contenders at this point (Dole, Gramm and Alexander) has signed first-rate operatives. The rest are scurrying to secure the political equivalent of replacement players. The need for good help is especially significant in Iowa and New Hampshire. In these first two shaping contests, which set the psychology of the race, retail politics is at a premium. Television spots take on their greatest importance later, when multiple elections occur simultaneously. Since the New Hampshire primary comes only a week after Iowa's caucuses this time, its battle will be particularly critical, and Dole appears to have enlisted the cream of Republican activists there.

"HOW VICTORY IS DEFINED: The media love a horse race and winnow the field long before most people vote. "The press needs a front runner and an up-and-coming bandwagon to make it interesting," says G.O.P. consultant Roger Stone, who's currently chairing Specter's bid. "The press sets expectations, and we all try for the lowest bar. If we exceed it, we're said to have 'won' even if we've lost. If we don't, we're seen as

faltering, and the media anoint someone else to fill the vacuum." Playing to expectations is essentially a straggle's game, and all the campaigns are expert at spinning scenarios for every possible electoral outcome. The permutations are virtually endless, but, as Stone says, the telescoped schedule means "it's score early or die."

LOTS OF MONEY, GOOD ORGANIZATION AND satisfied expectations aren't quite enough. Credibility and, yes, even issues matter in the modern game. On the credibility front, Dole is clearly benefiting from familiarity. After two previous tries for the prize, Republicans across the country say Dole is leading because voters see him as having earned "his turn." There's "a royalist mentality to the party," says Stone. "A natural line of succession exists. Republicans have nominated the front runner since serious primaries began in 1952."

In theory, issues can be trump cards, but Ambrose Bierce's definition of politics as "a strife of interests masquerading as a contest of principles" is as apt as ever for the current crop of Republican contenders. There simply is not very much of all claim that divides the candidates. All stand they are are fiscal conservatives, big-time deregulators and 10th Amendment Republicans, which means they want to send power back to the states. And all are jumping aboard the drive to roll back affirma-

tive action—perhaps the single issue destined to play a major role in the general-election campaign, despite Clinton's promise to revisit the existing scheme. This is not to say there aren't differences in temperament, personality and stance that could affect voter perceptions. Gramm, for instance, portrays himself as more conservative than the pragmatic Dole but may come across as too strident and macho—a latter day John Connally, whose tough-guy posturing and punchy one-liners turned Republicans off rather than on. And Dole's past propensity to lash out when cornered could trip him again.

Precisely because there is so much congruity among the candidates' substantive positions, hot-button topics like abortion may prove divisive. Specter, as the only pro-choice candidate thus far (Wilson would be the next), hopes for the votes of those favoring abortion rights. The other major candidates describe themselves as pro-life, but are hedging their positions. All except Buchanan, for example, have

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refused to pledge that they would insist on a running mate who shares their view. Still, G.O.P. history suggests there will be a dust-up over abortion at some point.

What else can separate candidates from the herd? The debates will roil things—they always do—and no one will be surprised if the scrutiny machine embarrasses at least one of the contenders. Perhaps the most entertaining spectacle, though, could be labeled "Find the Phony." Anyone with a record in public life is vulnerable to charges of inconsistency. Gramm's attempt to position himself as the true conservative will be set against his many draft deferments. Specter's pro-choice gambit may be less appealing when women are reminded of his role as Anita Hill's grand inquisitor during the Clarence Thomas hearings. Above all, the claim to fiscal tightfistedness will undergo excruciating examination. The tax-raising records of Alexander and Wilson will be exploited by their opponents ad nauseam, and by the time the nomination is decided, Dole's challenge will ensure that every voter can quote by heart Newt Gingrich's old slam at the majority leader as "the tax collector for the welfare state."

STRONGER PRESIDENTS THAN Clinton have retired after prospective challengers scored well in New Hampshire: Truman bowed to Estes Kefauver in 1952; Lyndon Johnson packed it in after Eugene McCarthy almost won in 1968. A similar stunner seems unlikely this time, but another third-party candidacy is possible, with Ross Perot or Colin Powell or Jesse Jackson as potential standard-bearers. If Clinton is the Democrat, the typical pattern will invariably hold: when incumbents run again, elections become retrospective judgments. With voters inured to sweet-sounding promises, they generally find it best to render a verdict on what they've already seen.

Unless the President succeeds in his attempt to co-opt parts of the Republican agenda, he will be left with merely peace and prosperity. The first seems almost irrelevant. Foreign policy probably won't be high on the electorate's radar unless something catastrophic happens, in which case the G.O.P. is likely to benefit more than Clinton. As an issue, the economy is harder to read. The performance numbers will probably roar along, but stagnating incomes will probably continue as well. If so, voters may turn against Clinton because, as he said in 1992, Amer-

icans are still "working harder for less." The disappointment many felt about Jimmy Carter can be heard when voters speak about Clinton. And the words they use are the same Gerald Ford heard about himself in the job: "Not decisive; doesn't seem to have a clear view of where he is going; can't conceive of him as President even though he already is." But unlike Carter and Ford, Clinton is a phenomenal campaigner, one of the best ever. So the President's shrewdest move may be to play as if he were in the National Basketball Association. N.B.A. teams routinely seem to dog it until the end of a close game—and then suddenly demon-

strate a level of brilliance barely glimpsed before.

Such a scenario seems more realistic than the Truman model that so tantalizes the White House. The Clintonites recall how underestimated Truman was before his 1948 victory—and indeed one report shortly before that vote succinctly captured the conventional wisdom. Truman, it said, was "a woefully weak little man, a nice enough fellow, but wholly inept." Could Clinton ever become "Give 'Em Hell" Bill? Well, says Truman's biographer, David McCullough, "when Harry took a sip of bourbon, you knew he swallowed."

THE PRIMARY TRAIL 1996

These are the key dates in the process of selecting delegates to the Democratic and Republican national conventions

Delegates to be selected and whether primary or caucus

Table with columns: REPUBLICANS, DEMOCRATS, and dates. Rows list states and dates for both parties, including Super Tuesday and dates not yet determined.