

Caucus-goers 'Big Mo' gave Bush

Small number of Iowans altered course of history

By KEN QUINN

IOWA VIEW

Struggling through the cold and over snow-covered roads to get to the Register's Democratic candidates debate in Johnston on Jan. 4, I thought back to the 1980 Iowa caucuses. On an even more frigid night slightly more than 1,000 caucus-goers set in motion events that continue to have a profound impact the world in 2004.



The 1980 caucuses had contested races in both parties.

On the Democratic side, President Jimmy Carter was challenged by Senator Ted Kennedy and California Gov. Jerry Brown.

On the Republican side, conventional wisdom and polls had former California Gov. Ronald Reagan seemingly far out in front, but with other prominent party leaders in pursuit.

In this group were Senators Bob Dole and Howard Baker; former Texas Gov. and Secretary of the Treasury John Connally; Illinois Congressmen Phil Crane and John Anderson and former CIA director and U.N. Ambassador George H.W. Bush. Endorsements by Iowa political figures were split. As memory serves me, only Congressman Jim Leach was backing Bush, who had not stood out from the pack nor garnered much press attention when he first arrived in Iowa in 1979.

But he was indefatigable — constantly knocking on doors and meeting with small groups in living rooms all over the state. In our neighborhood on Des Moines' west side, he was at events on our street on three occasions. One

press account said he had shaken more than 10,000 hands in Iowa during the campaign. This "retail politics" approach gave Bush a significant lift, especially after Reagan chose to not participate in the Register's Republican candidate forum. That decision caused a precipitous drop in the polls for Reagan and ultimately cost John Sears, his campaign manager, his job.

In the last two weeks before the Jan. 21 caucus, Bush's energy and organization combined to press for a large turnout. In 1976, only about 650 people had participated statewide in the Republican straw poll at the caucuses, according to stories in the Register. Four years later, more than 100,000 turned out to vote their preferences.

On the evening of Jan. 21, he went from one Des Moines caucus to the next asking for support. I recall the great surprise when he ran onto the stage at Merrill Middle School asking residents of our neighborhood to support his candidacy.

All this work paid off in a dramatic fashion. In a stunning upset, Bush finished first with 31.5 percent of the vote, barely edging out Reagan. About 1,400 votes gave Bush his margin of victory.

Bush's "Big Mo" propelled him to being Reagan's chief rival for the nomination. Reagan defeated Bush in the New Hampshire primary and several other races, but offered him the vice-presidential slot to unite the party in the November election.

Just consider the likely implications if those 1,400 Iowa voters had stayed home on caucus night.

If Bush had not finished first here, it's much less likely he



George H.W. Bush shakes hands with Iowa Gov. Robert Ray, right, as Bush toured precinct caucuses in the 1980 campaign.

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would have had the vice-presidential nomination.

And without eight years as vice president, it is reasonable to assume that Bush would not have been the Republican candidate for president in 1988 and elected to our highest office for one term.

And without those 12 years when Bush was vice president

and president, it may not be unreasonable to ask whether his son, George W. Bush, would have been well enough positioned politically to be elected governor of Texas.

And with all deference and respect to our current president's very considerable political skills, it might have been much more difficult for George W. Bush to

secure the Republican presidential nomination in 2000 if he were not serving as Texas governor.

Whether you are a supporter or a critic of President George W. Bush, the world of 2004 would be quite different if he were not president.

It is intriguing to contemplate the linkage between where America is in the world today and

that handful of Iowa voters who bundled up and went out to vote for George Herbert Walker Bush on Jan. 21, 1980.

While they did not realize it then, that small number of Iowans could and did alter the course of history.

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