

COMMUNITY VIEW

Can Democrats win 2004 poker match?

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After recently having breakfast with presidential frontrunner John Kerry, I came away with the feeling that the 2004 election would be more about the marriage of public relations and money.

Since 1998, the Democratic Party has suffered great losses, not only in congressional seats, gubernatorial races and the White House, but, even more damaging, in creating the public perception that they can't win the significant elections. Perception is the key point here because in politics, perception equates to money, which as we all know in the electronic age, is the lifeblood of all political campaigns.

To stand even a chad's hope in Florida, Democrats have to first excite and win over the media, then market the perception for a chance to win and, finally, convince those at the blood bank to authorize a financial transfusion.

In many ways, the 2004 election is turning into a match similar to the celebrity poker TV shows. In this sense, you have George W. Bush, with the most chips on the table. Across the table lie the Democrats hoping to stay in the game long enough for the right opportunity to go "all in" and change the entire demeanor of the game.

Over the last 16 years, the GOP has played the "liberal biased media" card like two aces in the hole. In this situation, when marketing politics, or products, through the media, you are dealing with two varying degrees of facts: the "fact facts" and the "perceived facts."

The "fact facts" are what the party candidate must say, while the "perceived facts" are what we the public believe. These perceived facts are the gray area, and that is where the game is played.

When the media was liberal, Democrats owned the gray area. A Republican could say, "I'll cut taxes," and by the time the public read it, the statement translated into, "Kill those damn spotted owls." Along the way, the message became perceived fact.

The GOP has marketed the liberal bias so well that a Democrat could say, "Hey, let's think about this situation before we go to war," and the perception would be, "Hey, let's open Osama bin Laden high schools across the country, where every student gets a condom, and Michael Jackson teaches hygiene."

If this is a card game of PR and finances, the one candidate they didn't want to see was John Kerry. Howard Dean was a different story. There is no way that Howard Dean had a chance against George W. Bush because he can't

muster the support through the media or the financial dollars. Dean was everything that the GOP public relations machine is set up to defeat. He was a pair of sevens against a pair of Republican jacks. His message was too Democratic, too peace-centric, and he was not the candidate that could break the trend that makes northern Democratic presidents about as rare as five aces.

I knew Kerry had a chance to win the 2004 election while listening to New York's most popular conservative radio personality, Sean Hannity, interview him about Iraq on WABC Radio. Kerry criticized the Bush administration; however, he didn't say that we shouldn't be in the war. He said that our problem was we didn't have enough troops over there to safeguard our young people risking their lives every day. Kerry wasn't trying to match a pair with a pair; he was drawing on the inside straight.

Kerry's positions are as tactically strong and media-friendly as those of the Republicans, which makes him a real threat. His tactics are strategically sound enough to take on George W. Bush. Kerry will secure exposure to his message and garner the capital to stay in the game. Most important, he will narrow the marketing difference by giving the

GOP little to use against him.

For Democrats who have been in hiding since the first mention of the blue dress, Kerry is the best, and only, hope for the 2004 election. The Republicans have a strong hand and a lot of chips, but Kerry will stay in the game and, sooner or later, one of these players will call "all in," leaving it up to the luck of the draw. Bush and Kerry, like marketing and poker, do make strange bedfellows.

The writer, a Larchmont resident and president of Jericho Communications, is the author of "Leadership Secrets of the World's Most Successful CEOs" and "PR For Dummies."