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## Aboard Reich's Reform Express

by JOHN NICHOLS

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Boston

The "Reich Reform Express," mothership of what local observers refer to as Robert Reich's "we try harder" campaign for governor, is on a rocky maiden voyage into the backwaters of Massachusetts. The Argosy motor home looks great with its new blue paint job and "Here Comes Bob" logo. But inside the rolling tin can, all is not well. Halfway to Haverhill on a 96-degree day, the air-conditioning system shorts out. Frantic aides make urgent cell phone calls for technical assistance as pieces of the vehicle itself--removed in vain hopes of finding a fuse box--pile up in the sink. The temperature, and tensions, are rising. Except in the swivel chair where the former US Labor Secretary is seated. The small mobile policy unit of American politics is more interested in repairing civil society than his campaign's aging motor home.

"We have to find a new, positive nationalism, which entails offering citizens a wider circle of opportunity to get involved, strengthening democracy, making a deeper commitment to civil liberties and civil rights," says Reich, as he and an aide scramble to catch a bottle of water that has just slid off a counter. Not missing a beat, the candidate continues, "It's really about a harkening back to a time when progressives said that, Yes, Massachusetts can be a model for America, and America really can be a beacon for the world."

Part "Happy Warrior," part professor on the ultimate sabbatical (after quitting the Clinton Cabinet in 1997 he took up a faculty post at Brandeis University), Reich is absolutely certain that it matters to make this point, even as sweat smoothes away the last creases in a once-crisp Oxford shirt. "I try my best to suppress my policy wonk instincts, but I don't always succeed," he admits, with a knowing laugh at the stereotype he so ably fills. "I used to really worry about it. Then I started to understand that this is why I'm running--to talk about big issues, get a dialogue going, maybe change the world."

On the way to changing the world, nothing has gone quite according to plan. And yet, this unexpectedly focused and charismatic candidate has kept his bus on the road long enough and well enough to raise the prospect that he could get a chance to make Massachusetts the model he imagines--and that many of the state's voters seem to enjoy imagining with him. "Thank God there is someone in the race with something to say," a thirtysomething woman tells Reich as he buttonholes commuters at the Alewife T station outside Boston. "I know you understand labor issues," says another. "Thank you for what you did on gay marriage," says Janet Hanseth, 24, referring to Reich's decision to eschew vague talk of equal rights for a blunt commitment to support gay marriage. As she heads for the turnstiles Hanseth exclaims: "Robert Reich is awesome. He's what the Democrats need to be."

Hanseth will get no argument from Reich on that account. A year after he declared the Democratic Party dead, Reich is personally attempting to animate the corpse with a campaign that is breaking most of the rules of modern politics. While several of the Democrats he faces in the September 17 primary have been campaigning--and raising money--for

years, Reich entered the contest in January with almost no bank balance and a pundit prognosis of "no way."

But name recognition from his Clinton years, an outsider appeal that makes him a credible advocate for reform in a year when Massachusetts is ready for change, unapologetic liberalism and volunteer energy that recalls nothing so much as the 1968 Gene McCarthy campaign, in which he got his political start as a campus organizer, have combined to help Reich leap hurdles that were supposed to be insurmountable. A month after he entered the race, Reich's political team--many of them veterans of Bill Bradley's 2000 presidential campaign--turned thousands of supportive e-mail messages into a network of political neophytes that flooded Democratic precinct caucuses and stormed the June state party convention, winning their man a place on the September 17 ballot.

Since the convention, Reich has emerged as a serious contender--tying in polls for first place with the party's endorsed candidate, State Treasurer Shannon O'Brien, and leading State Senate President Tom Birmingham, the favorite of the state's unions. In mid-July, after the withdrawal of former Democratic National Committee chair Stephen Grossman, a millionaire candidate with whom Reich was competing for suburban votes, *Boston Herald* columnist Wayne Woodlief declared that the "new dynamic" raised the possibility that Reich could actually win the nomination.

The key word is possibility. "People know his name and they generally respect him," says Benjamin Thompson, a community leader in Boston's African-American neighborhoods. "But politics in this town is more complicated than that. You have to connect with people. You have to build networks. The other candidates have been doing that for years. I don't know if Bob Reich can catch up in two months."

Time and money remain real barriers for what in many senses is an afterthought candidacy. Reich--who says he decided to make the run after concluding that "every aspect of state government was malfunctioning, and none of the candidates for governor seemed to be articulating the sort of reform message that the moment called for"--is the first to admit that he remains a long-shot contender. Unlike several other Clinton officials who have hit the campaign trail before him, like former White House Chief of Staff Erskine Bowles, who is seeking a North Carolina Senate seat; former Energy Secretary Bill Richardson, the front-runner for governor of New Mexico; and former White House political director Rahm Emanuel, who is all but certain to win a House seat representing Chicago, Reich is neither independently wealthy nor closely linked to business interests. Nor is he getting any help from the former President, who has never forgiven his former Labor Secretary for criticizing his behavior in the Lewinsky scandal or for *Locked in the Cabinet*, Reich's dissection of the Administration's policy failures. Despite fundraising boosts from Bradley, former New York Governor Mario Cuomo and folksinger Loudon Wainwright III, and a grinding routine of afternoon calls to potential givers, Reich's campaign bank balance in July was just a little over \$200,000--less than one-tenth of the war chests of O'Brien and Birmingham. Depending on how a battle over funding of the Massachusetts Clean Money initiative is resolved, even the race's lowest-polling contender, former State Senator Warren Tolman, an earnest reformer who is the only Democratic candidate to qualify for the public-funding scheme, could have a bigger bankroll than Reich.

Reich says he is counting on ideas, as well as "people power," to overcome his financial disadvantage. That may be the oldest spin in the political playbook. But Reich has had considerable success convincing observers and activists that for Massachusetts Democrats, who have not won a gubernatorial race since 1986, fresh ideas are essential. "I think the historic vision of the Democratic Party as the party of working people, of the outsiders, the reformers, the challengers of the establishment and the status quo, is the right vision. That's what we should want to be," he explains. "But we have to update the vision, make it relevant to a new generation, to people who work at different jobs that require different skills."

The author of nine books, including *The Work of Nations*, which a decade ago briefly seemed likely to serve as the new Clinton Administration's economic policy blueprint, Reich has peppered Massachusetts voters with detailed proposals on everything from corporate accountability to government reform to affordable housing. He's got plans to raise the cigarette tax in order to pay for healthcare for the uninsured; to fight pollution with fuel-efficient, low-emission vehicles; to expand access to women's reproductive health services in small cities. Reich may be the only major candidate who would take time out from fundraising calls to sit with his policy team and go over the second draft of a healthcare reform proposal: "I'd like to see us make more of a case in this section for why we need to protect community hospitals," he tells aides, who have come to accept that they are not going to de-wonk the guy.

The intense focus on agenda has earned Reich enthusiastic support from hundreds of volunteers, including high school and college-age students as well as some of their teachers. "I started volunteering for Bob Reich the first night of his campaign," says Katherine Newman, the Wiener Professor of Urban Studies at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government. The volunteers are also drawn to him because he offers a sense that their help matters. At a job-training center in Lawrence, in an African-American church in Dorchester, in the small towns of the Berkshires, he repeats variations on the theme: "What I've got to do, if this candidacy is going to have a chance, is to break into that cycle of risk aversion and cynicism, and convince people that politics is worth another try." That message resonated with Steve Attewell, a 19-year-old Reich volunteer from Newton. "In the old days politicians talked about great societies and new frontiers. Now politicians come off like people applying for management positions," complains Attewell. By contrast, the volunteer says, Reich has "this vision of something better. And as long as he's willing to give up what he's got to pursue the vision, a lot of us are willing to go with him."

Ultimately, that vision extends far beyond Massachusetts. Reich says the national Democratic Party is failing to thrive because it lacks both courage and ideas--a condition similar to the national Republican Party in the early 1990s. Just as Republican governors such as Michigan's John Engler and Wisconsin's Tommy Thompson renewed their party with an ambitious--if frequently wrongheaded--policy agenda that Newt Gingrich would eventually take national, Reich thinks a new wave of Democratic governors can jump-start their party's Congressional delegation. With the biggest Democratic gains this fall very likely to be at the Statehouse level rather than in Washington, Reich says that by 2004 Democratic governors could be the key to change. "Because it is easier to move quickly at the state level, governors have an opportunity to set a great deal of the agenda," he claims.

Reich's closest competitor for the Democratic nomination is O'Brien, a moderate with New Democrat tendencies and a record of having run and won statewide. She is backed by the unlikely--and at least until recently some thought unbeatable--combination of old-boys-club Democratic leaders in the Statehouse and EMILY's List, the national donors' network that seeks to elect pro-choice Democratic women. But a July revelation that O'Brien failed to notify the State Ethics Commission that her family held stock in Fleet Bank when she approved Fleet's 1999 takeover of BankBoston, as well as lingering questions about the purchase by the state pension fund, which O'Brien chairs, of stock in Enron, for which her husband was a lobbyist, have helped Reich keep a firm grip on the coveted reformer tag. And he is holding his own among suburban women, who might otherwise be inclined to vote for O'Brien.

Birmingham, a good-natured, government-is-part-of-the-solution Democrat, has been slow to get traction, although his campaign is well financed and widely endorsed. The 400,000-member state AFL-CIO is backing the legislator, who has always delivered for Boston's powerful building trades unions. Those unions are a serious political force; last year, in one of the most closely watched Democratic Congressional primaries in the country, they flexed their muscles to elect former Ironworkers union leader Stephen Lynch to represent South Boston. Massachusetts union leaders speak highly of Reich--state AFL-CIO president Robert Haynes says the candidate has an "intrinsic understanding of the issues and problems affecting men and women in unions." But when Reich appeared at a debate sponsored by the labor federation, Haynes grilled him about his support in 1993 for the North American Free Trade Agreement. Reich's response was to try to shift the blame for NAFTA onto his former boss: "When I was Secretary of Labor, President Clinton--let me repeat this, President Clinton--was the one who supported NAFTA." It's not all about NAFTA, of course. Reich's stances on trade issues are far closer to the labor line than Al Gore's, for instance. By most accounts labor is more pro-Birmingham than anti-Reich. But the former labor secretary's inability to win labor endorsements--or at least to neutralize them--has prevented him from opening the clear lead he would almost certainly have achieved with union support.

When all is said and done, however, Labor and Democratic Party endorsements don't mean as much as they once did in a state where the biggest landmark in many towns is an abandoned mill. The suburbs of Boston are now major vote generators in Democratic primaries. And in the same suburbs that produced Michael Dukakis--and that still embrace the former governor's serious mix of social liberalism and social tinkering--Reich's bold moves on issues like gay marriage and big ideas about education and healthcare reform poll well. Indeed, the secret ingredient in Reich's appeal, which comes wrapped in cool graphics, hip colors and lots of humor, is an earnest and old-fashioned faith in the prospect that politics can be reformed. Running less against his three primary opponents--all veteran Massachusetts pols with solid if not always inspiring legislative records--than against the caution and cynicism that have sapped the Democratic Party of its credibility as an alternative to the Republicans, Reich gets his biggest applause when he talks of transforming politics and public policy by sweeping away "cronyism and corruption" in government and the business

world.

If that applause translates into a Democratic primary win, Reich still faces a tough race against handsome, popular and very rich Republican Mitt Romney, the CEO of the Salt Lake City Winter Olympics Organizing Committee, who has overcome questions about whether he meets state residency requirements to top most polls. Romney has been beaten before--by Ted Kennedy in the Republican revolution year of 1994--but he is a capable contender who is already taking shots at Reich, the one Democrat who matches his star power. Reich enjoys sparring with Romney, a venture capitalist running in a year when the old "run government like a business" line is a tougher-than-usual sell. "I can run circles around him," Reich boasts after a press conference where the Democrat unveiled a corporate responsibility agenda that mercilessly tweaks Romney.

Whether he gets a chance to run circles around anyone remains to be seen, but Reich surely relishes the race. Driving across Boston long after dark on a day that began before dawn, Reich has a cassette of the Beatles singing "Revolution" in the tape player. But he's not listening. He's got one more point to make. "I've never run for elective office before. I have no big endorsements. We're running this campaign on a shoestring, and yet we're tied for the lead in the polls," says Reich, his voice rising to preacher pitch. "It could all start right here in Massachusetts," he says. "The way we are going to give the Democrats in Congress the courage of their convictions is to have reform Democratic governors around the country who are trying out new ideas, implementing new programs and showing that they work better than what the Republicans are proposing. Massachusetts is the perfect testing ground. If we cannot energize the Democratic Party and its agenda here, where can we?"

Reich's wife, Clare Dalton, gently reminds him that he is about to miss the exit that will take them home to their big old house in Cambridge. "Yes, yes," says Reich, who notes with a knowing grin that, against the odds, he is successfully executing a difficult left turn.