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If Dean Optes Out of the Public Finance System, He Should Stay Within Campaign Spending Limits Until Democratic Nominee is Apparent

Statement of Public Citizen President Joan Claybrook

On Tuesday, seven of the 10 presidential candidates – including Gov. Howard Dean – signed a Pledge circulated by campaign finance reform groups that committed them to save and strengthen the presidential public financing system and reduce the role of special interest money in presidential campaigns. Now, Dean says he plans to ask his supporters to vote on whether he should opt out of the public financing system for the primaries. The reason: If Dean becomes the Democratic nominee, the \$45 million public funding spending ceiling would put him at a severe disadvantage against President Bush, who has opted out of public funding for the primaries to raise as much as \$200 million.

While we wish that all the presidential candidates would stay within the public financing system and run for president on a level playing field, Bush's excessive campaign spending – which could amount to four times the spending ceiling for any candidate who stays within the public financing system – places an extreme handicap on all other candidates who want to participate in a fair fight.

The huge sums that Bush will raise – mostly from wealthy, special interest donors – for the primaries will not be for seeking the Republican nomination, since Bush has no opposition. The money will be used to blast the presumptive Democratic nominee before the general election even begins.

Dean is giving his supporters two choices: “(a) to fund our campaign ourselves and decline matching funds,”...or “(b) accept federal matching funds and the spending limits.” We believe Dean, and any other candidate who opts out, has a third choice.

A candidate could decide to opt out and still abide by the \$45 million spending limit for the Democratic primaries – until a presumptive nominee exists (which could be as early as March). If that presumptive nominee is Dean, he could be more competitive with Bush – raising and spending additional money to compete with Bush's expected \$200 million. But until that time, adhering to the overall primary spending limit would ensure a relatively equal playing field among the Democrats.

The action of Bush and the probable action of Dean point out what the real discussion should be about: A major overhaul of the presidential public financing system is needed to eliminate special interest funding of presidential campaigns, restore integrity to the Oval Office and create a fair playing field for qualified candidates.

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Public Citizen is a national, nonprofit consumer advocacy organization based in Washington, D.C. For more information, please visit www.citizen.org and www.WhiteHouseForSale.org.

Ralph Nader, Founder

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