

shows to the head while in prison. McCain says. Like always, the audience laughs and like always the phrase hangs in the air: While in prison. While in Vietnam. While being tortured. He does not need to say more. Just as when he climbs back onto his bus and now, in a better mood, he shows off his new black topcoat and tells the reporters without any prompting that "It only took them one day to tailor it for my shortened arms." Shortened when they were broken. Shortened when he ejected from his plane. Shortened when they were twisted and beaten by his captors. "There is no depths I won't sink to in seeking your support," McCain tells people. Most people think he is joking. Most people should think again. Bill Bennett, as always, has the answer. "Americans are the most romantic people in the world," he says, "and they've fallen for the guy, they've fallen for McCain. They fell for Clinton. They've fall-

story to the public, but McCain entered the race with his ready-made. He always says that you need more than a story, and that is true (McCain's other assets include a powerful Senate chairmanship, family wealth, a quick wit), but McCain's Vietnam experience is so compelling because it allows Americans to think about Vietnam and not have ambiguous feelings: You can easily consider McCain a hero without worrying about whether you were for the war or against it. McCain's wounds heal.

So first came the story and next came the delivery system. While other candidates followed the strategies of past presidential campaigns—keep tight control of the message and make the media deal with handlers rather than the candidate—McCain invited reporters on the bus and talked to them nonstop. The staff is not even in earshot. McCain spends so much more time with reporters than with his

son, Bush's handlers have been promoted almost as much as Bush has.) It looked refreshing, different, authentic. "When we started out, McCain had Kosovo (he made an early call for decisive U.S. action there), campaign finance reform, and 5½ years in the Hanoi Hilton," Dan Schnur, his communications director, says. "But the open access accelerated interest in McCain. That led to improving poll numbers, which led to increased fund-raising." And because McCain appeared to be such a maverick, he attracted the support of independents and Democrats, many of whom assume that he is some kind of moderate, when, in fact, his voting record is that of a hard-edged conservative. "We've done a hell of a job fooling them, haven't we?" McCain told *U.S. News* with a laugh. He went on: "I am a proud conservative Republican, but I've had a lot of people who come up to me and say, 'Look, I don't agree with you

The Great Expectations game

In presidential primaries, it's not always whether you win or lose but whether you meet expectations that matters. Like it or not, pundits and political analysts evolve a conventional wisdom of who has to do well where. Inevitably, that score card is crucial. Here are the key states and the early expectations.

Iowa caucuses

Monday, Jan. 24

Must win: Bush, Gore.

Few voters, quirky rules, but momentum starts here. (Forbes badly needs a strong second.)

New Hampshire primaries

Tuesday, Feb. 1

Must win: McCain, Bradley. Insurgents must show their stuff—though both would limp ahead with a close second.

South Carolina GOP primary

Saturday, Feb. 19

Must win: McCain. He's counting on veteran-rich rolls to start a rebel yell. The Bush folks think the only yell will be McCain's crying "Uncle!"

Arizona GOP primary

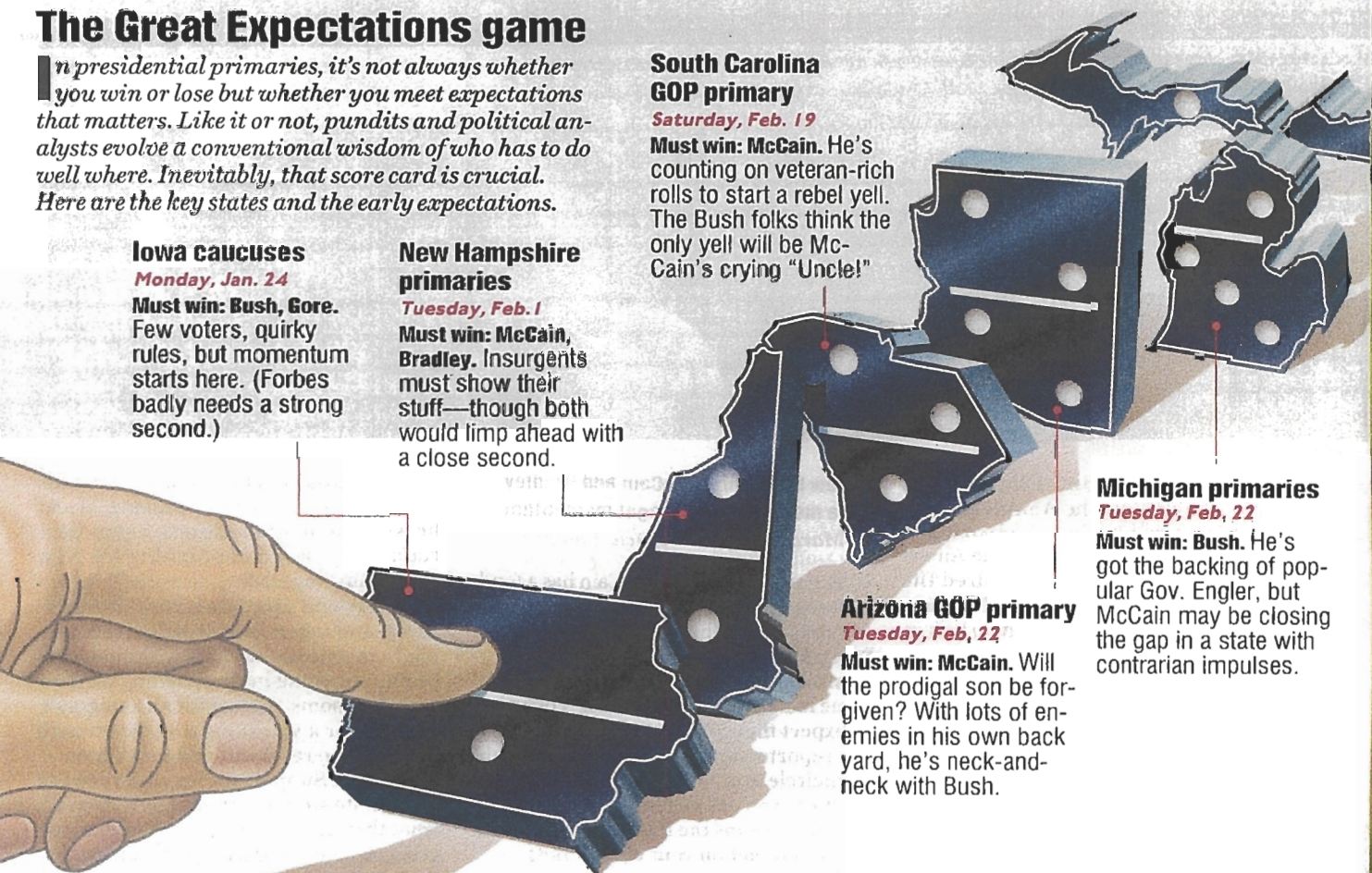
Tuesday, Feb. 22

Must win: McCain. Will the prodigal son be forgiven? With lots of enemies in his own backyard, he's neck-and-neck with Bush.

Michigan primaries

Tuesday, Feb. 22

Must win: Bush. He's got the backing of popular Gov. Engler, but McCain may be closing the gap in a state with contrarian impulses.



on a number of issues, but I'm going to be voting for you.' There's a whole lot of them that come up and say that."

The McCain campaign also made a key strategic decision: Reversing a strategy that had been dogma for both parties since Jimmy Carter decided in 1976 to run in every caucus and primary state, McCain decided to husband his resources and stay out of Iowa. By so doing, he'll be able to spend almost all of January in New Hampshire, while Bush must also fight off the cash-rich Steve Forbes in Iowa. But every time the McCain staffers get good news—a poll here, increased fund-raising there—the same thing happens. They fantasize that with a little campaigning they can beat Forbes in Iowa, use that momentum to smash Bush in New Hampshire, roar into

California primaries

Tuesday, March 7

Must win: Everybody. The megastate moved up its primary in order to decide it all. There could still be more battles, but anyone who loses here is in huge trouble.

Georgia primaries

Tuesday, March 7

Must win: Gore. A taste of his shoot-the-moon-pie strategy: He's counting on black votes and will remind moderate whites that Bradley's a liberal.

Florida primaries

Tuesday, March 14

Must win: Bush, Gore. If it's not over by now, the underdogs are probably overdogs, heading for Illinois, New Jersey, and maybe a convention fight.

Texas primaries

Tuesday, March 14

Must win: Bush, Gore. If Bush really needs Texas, he's got a big problem. But Southern Tuesday could help Bush and Gore stop the bleeding.

New York primaries

Tuesday, March 7

Must win: Bradley, Bush. The keystone of Bradley's sweep-the-northeast strategy. And a place for Bush to prove that all his money matters.

Ohio primaries

Tuesday, March 7

Must win: Gore. This Super Tuesday sleeper is a test of whether Big Labor really likes Al or if Bradley can extend his northeast reach.

Washington primaries

Tuesday, Feb. 29

Must win: Bradley. Bradley's best western beachhead. He's courted the techie independents and can make California pay attention.

Virginia GOP

Tuesday, Feb. 29

Must win: Bush. An Establishment state. If McCain's still standing after today, he'll have momentum—and money—to burn.

South Carolina, and start the dominoes falling (illustration).

"Every three or four weeks we have an Iowa meeting," Schnur says with a sigh. "It's somebody saying we have to go to take another look. We're not doing it." Still, with McCain now running third in Iowa polls, state GOP Chairman Kayne Robinson wonders if he didn't pass up a golden opportunity. "I think it was probably a bad de-

this way: If Bush loses those, he's dead." Schnur, who shares McCain's penchant for finding wisdom in movies, likes to talk about *The Man Who Would Be King*, in which the natives think Sean Connery is a god—until his bride bites him and the trickle of blood reveals him to be just a man. "If people see that trickle of blood, it will be hard for him to go on," Schnur says. "If there is a split in the first four, March 7 will be decisive, and I have never seen a state better suited to a candidate than California is to McCain."

So McCain hurtles through the New

There is a big difference between the underdog campaigns of McCain and Bradley and those that are merely hopeless. How do you tell one from the other before anyone votes? Aside from polls, one good score card is the number of TV cameras that show up at campaign events. These days, McCain and Bradley are guaranteed at least five or six at most stops. But Orrin Hatch? Alan Keyes? Gary Bauer? Except for debates, they'd have to stick up a 7-Eleven to get on TV.

No pizzazz. Steve Forbes is a different story. Four years ago, he spent a fortune in Iowa and came in fourth, he spent a fortune in New Hampshire and came in fourth, and all he earned for his troubles was a reputation as a slash-and-burn campaigner. This time around he has retooled. He has purchased the talents of an expe-

● This week U.S. News adds an exten-

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