

Presidential hopefuls test the wind

All over Washington, and across the U.S., politicians are popping up out of their burrows. Little pink noses carefully sniff the air. Pulses race. Plump bodies twitch and shudder with passion. No, it's not mating season. Something far more exciting: Presidential fever.

Last Tuesday's mid-term elections meant the end of Republican control of the Senate, twilight time for the Ronald Reagan presidency and the beginning of the 1988 race for the White House. Or perhaps scramble would be a more accurate term, for the field is teeming with Democratic and Republican hopefuls.

During a recent trip to Washington, I also sniffed the air and noted the following political aromas:

REPUBLICANS: No. 1 is, of course, Vice President George Bush, a man highly respected in a city of vipers for his integrity and decency. As VP, Bush has the advantage of "territory." Incumbents always have a huge advantage over challengers.

Bush's problem is that he has not yet managed to project a distinct personality: the role of VP is always blurry and vague. Is he a sort of Son of Reagan, or Ronny II? Or is there much more to George Bush?

The VP's backers claim that Bush is now in his "caterpillar stage" and will soon emerge, glorious and resplendent in his own right. Maybe. Smart Republican money is backing Bush but hedging bets with other candidates. If Bush falters, the Republican race could end up looking like a Japanese banzai charge.

Ready to run are Buffalo Rep. Jack Kemp; Gov. Pete DuPont; Howard Baker; Alexander Haig; Paul Laxalt; Pat Robertson and Bob Dole. I just learned that Pat



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Buchanan, the tough-talking conservative speechwriter, is also poised to enter the fray.

Still, the Republican race is not what one would call exciting. Bush elicits ho-hums, and Kemp is regarded as, well, a bit slow. No one knows Dupont and, anyway, Americans don't like aristocrats. Baker and Dole are about as inspiring as flat tires. That loose cannon, Alex Haig, is rightly seen as a rather dim windbag. Laxalt bears the curse of coming from Nevada, with its gangster-ridden casinos. Buchanan is viewed as a hothead, talking in tongues; Robertson is, to many, a disturbing oddity.

DEMOCRATS: Emboldened by this week's victory, they are smelling blood. But Teddy Kennedy won't dare run, insist savvy Washington operatives. There are, it is said, too many books on Chappaquiddick ready to be published.

Kennedy's other leftmate, Rev. Jesse Jackson, makes smoke but no fire. On the Democratic right, Sam Nunn, Virginia Gov. Charles Robb, and Bruce Babbitt are a sensible but so far hardly electric trio. Of the three,

Robb, old LBJ's son-in-law, could emerge a strong contender.

The Democratic middle is currently occupied by the popular New York governor, Mario Cuomo; plus Gary Hart; Richard Gephardt; and Joe Biden. At present, Cuomo is the front-runner. Political pros, however, think that this man of mercurial temper and short patience will self-destruct along the way — or may refuse in the end to run. Italian-American candidates have an uphill slog. Remember the nasty old political joke: WASPS get the presidency; the Jews run Congress; Italians have the Mafia; and blacks get the post office.

A lot of smart Democratic money is now flowing to Sen. Joe Biden. Youthful, slick as vinyl and highly polished, Biden is the ideal media candidate. He is being strongly backed by southern California's liberal Jewish community which is usually the bellwether of Democratic party politics. Keep your eye on smooth Joe.

What about that dark horse, media-darling Lee Iacocca? Will he run? A lot of people are pushing him. But Iacocca is infamous for having the shortest fuse in the industry. It's hard to imagine the explosive Iacocca putting up for long with the inanities of politics.

There are many more potential candidates, some quite good. But they are disqualified because of poor TV images. Or because they have a frumpy wife or lack good looks — the key reasons, polls show, why the majority of women vote for a candidate. Disturbing, but true.

Washington seems doomed to become a remake of *Dynasty*. For Democrat political hopefuls, who already excel in those feminine qualities of physical attractiveness and reckless spending, prospects are looking great.