

[loserman no more]

Lieberman's Revenge

If the Connecticut hawk can't convert the Democrats, he'll take them down.

By Michael Brendan Dougherty

JOSEPH LIEBERMAN was once at home in the Democratic Party. He won his Connecticut state senate seat in 1970 as a Democrat, rising to majority leader. Then he won the attorney generalship in 1982, where he stayed until his U.S. Senate victory. His friends still argue that he was robbed of the vice presidency in 2000.

Even after losing the 2006 Senate Democratic primary to the antiwar Ned Lamont, Lieberman promised to remain faithful to his party. He announced that he would caucus with the Democrats and stand with them on procedural votes if elected, though he owed his seat to the GOP: 70 percent of Connecticut Republicans cast their ballots for Lieberman, compared to only 33 percent of Democrats. Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid allowed him to keep his seniority and his committee positions. And Lieberman told colleagues that he wished to see a Democrat elected president in 2008.

That doesn't mean Lieberman hasn't been trying to renovate his old home. His plan: "to keep alive the principled, internationalist, and muscular foreign policy tradition that once lay at the heart of the Democratic Party." This translated into reflexive approval for the 1991 Gulf War "because our president has asked us to vote to support him" and early advocacy of intervention in Kosovo because "fighting for the KLA is fighting

for human rights and American values." From 1995-2001, he chaired the Democratic Leadership Council, a hub for liberal hawks, and in 2002, he joined the Project for a New American Century's Committee for the Liberation of Iraq.

Lieberman argues that his is not only a principled position but a politically advantageous one. He told a group at Johns Hopkins University last year that by the time he reached office, liberal internationalism "had been out of fashion in Democratic circles for 20 years. But then, Democrats had also been out of power for most of those 20 years—something that struck me and many others as more than coincidental. Simply put, the American people didn't trust Democrats to keep them safe, and the McGovernite legacy was a big reason why."

With the nomination of Barack Obama, Lieberman sees the McGovernite faction ascendant. So he has reneged on his promise and endorsed Republican John McCain, renewing his ideological assault on his old party. "Dean Acheson once warned, 'no people in history have ever survived, who thought they could protect their freedom by making themselves inoffensive to their enemies,'" he recently wrote. "This is a lesson that today's Democratic Party leaders need to relearn."

But Joe Lieberman has changed his teaching tactics. For this self-styled "Independent Democrat," being loyal to his former party now means inflicting

defeat upon it. If he becomes a major figure in the McCain administration along the way, so much the better.

Writing in the *New York Post*, Lieberman explained why he crossed party lines: "[T]he dangers we face as a nation are too profound, and the challenges we face too real, for us to let partisan politics decide who we will support." He campaigns regularly with the Arizona senator and co-authors editorials with him. "I am spending all the time I can outside the Senate to help him become our next president," he recently told the press.

Acting as a gunslinger for McCain means firing direct shots at the presumptive Democratic nominee: "My Senate colleague Barack Obama ... has not been willing to stand up to his party's left-wing on a single significant issue in this campaign, nor for that matter has he worked with Republicans in the Senate during his three and a half years there to forge the tough, bipartisan compromises that produce results for the American people." By contrast, Lieberman claims that McCain "has shown the political courage throughout his career to do what he thinks is right—regardless of its popularity in his party or outside it ... to reach across party lines to get things done for our country."

His primary line of attack against Obama has been the Illinois senator's vision of diplomacy. He criticizes Obama's willingness to meet with the president of

Iran, whom Lieberman calls “the terrorist leader of a terrorist regime.” Meanwhile, Lieberman says Obama and the Democrats “have simultaneously pledged to abandon the democratically-elected government in Baghdad.” He hurls similar charges at Obama for agreeing to meet with Kim Jong Il while he “turns his back on South Korea with his opposition to a trade agreement with Seoul.”

Lieberman doesn't just criticize Obama's policies, he regularly strikes at his former party's ideology. In May, he delivered the keynote speech at a fundraising dinner for the influential journal *Commentary* in which he lambasted Democrats for giving in to defeatism: “At critical moments and on critical issues of foreign policy and homeland security, they have resurrected the profoundly wrong and persistently unsuccessful McGovern-Carter worldview...” He longed for “the Democratic Party that I grew up in—a party that was unhesitatingly and proudly pro-American, a party that was unafraid to make moral judgments about the world beyond our borders, a party that grasped the link between the survival of freedom at home and the survival of freedom abroad.” Invoking Harry Truman and John F. Kennedy, Lieberman urged his former comrades to be once again, “a party that understood that either the American people stood united with free nations and freedom fighters around the world against the forces of totalitarianism, or we would fall divided.”

But Lieberman's boyhood Democratic Party is not one his former friends and colleagues recognize. “Lieberman badly misrepresents history,” says George Jepsen. “Let him not forget Jack Kennedy learned the hard way from the Bay of Pigs to be skeptical of military-only solutions.” Jepsen recently served as chairman of the Connecticut Democratic Party and later chaired Ned Lamont's

campaign. In contrast to Lieberman's deference to Gen. David Petraeus, Jepsen recalls that Kennedy rejected the advice of the officer class during the Cuban missile crisis, averting war.

Lieberman's crusade raises an obvious question. “I am sometimes asked why... I do not simply become a Republican,” he said recently. “I continue to be a Democrat because I believe there is a critical need for two great American political parties with strong national security wings. We need a Democratic Party whose national security strategy isn't subject to editorial review by Moveon.org and Daily Kos.” And, of course, Lieberman remains a liberal at heart. He favors universal health care and has been a reliable supporter of abortion rights throughout his career. He supports gun-control legislation and fiercely opposed the nomination of Samuel Alito to the Supreme Court. He has joined McCain in supporting campaign-finance reform, cap-and-trade schemes for carbon reduction, and “comprehensive immigration reform.” None of these are conservative positions, but since Lieberman has rallied to the defense of President Bush's policies in Iraq, the conservative movement has rallied to him.

Eight years ago, the Right mocked Lieberman's half of the 2000 Democratic ticket as “Loserman.” But instead of viewing his 2006 campaign with detachment, leading conservatives rushed to his aid. Rush Limbaugh, Sean Hannity, Glenn Beck, and *National Review* ignored the Republican candidate, Alan Schlesinger, and endorsed Loserman. NRO editorialized that a win by the anti-war Lamont would mean “the Daily Kos crowd will have succeeded in remaking the Democratic party while reducing the party's national influence.” They conceded, “Life is full of trade-offs.” Of course, the editorial proved precisely wrong. In the midterms, “the Daily Kos

crowd” connected with a public tired of war, and Democrats saw their national influence rise.

But movement conservatives are not dissuaded. Ever supportive of Bush's war policies, they continue to abandon their own intellectual forebears even as they sign on to Lieberman's campaign to revive Truman and Kennedy. Larry Kudlow, who in 2000 derided Lieberman as “a typical Northeastern Democratic liberal,” has done a perfect 180, recently describing Lieberman's remarks to *Commentary*, as “a tour-de-force speech that impressed me once again with the brilliance of Joe Lieberman. Frankly, he would make a good president. Undoubtedly, he will have a major cabinet post if John McCain wins.”

But however disloyal these political maneuverings might seem to Democrats, they can't claim that Lieberman is motivated by personal animus. Bob Hanfling, an old hand in Connecticut Democratic politics going back to the '70s, says, “Whether you agree with him or not, it is unthinkable that he would take positions on such serious matters out of spite.” It would be “inconsistent with his integrity. He deep down believes that it is good for the U.S. and good for Israel, good for the Middle East.” Lieberman's own words demonstrate that his political commitments are rooted in ideology. He gave his audience at *Commentary* a pitch-perfect neoconservative view of patriotism, rejecting the conservative attachment to mere hearth and home and liberal skepticism about America's capabilities and intentions. His love of country is “rooted not in arbitrary attachment to our country's land or its borders, but in a recognition that the values that were present at the creation of America and animate it still—the values of freedom and justice and opportunity—are not just our own national values; they are universal and eternal values, which are right and true

Intelligence analysts who have briefed Sen. John McCain on international issues generally report that he is not very knowledgeable about most parts of the world, despite of his years of experience in government and his campaign's insistence that one of his principal strengths is foreign-policy expertise. When speaking with an area specialist or expert, McCain is primarily interested in stating his own perceptions and is not generally regarded as an attentive listener. Analysts do not like briefing him because he becomes angry and sometimes personally offensive when someone contradicts his view. One analyst stated that McCain's alleged expertise on international issues is essentially bogus. He speaks no foreign language, and his international experience derives from brief postings at military bases, junkets while serving as Navy liaison to the Senate, and the misfortune of his rather more extensive stay in the Hanoi Hilton.

As a congressman, McCain served on committees dealing with Department of the Interior issues, Indian affairs, and the problems of aging—all areas of particular interest to his Arizona constituents. As a senator, he has served on the three committees dealing with the armed services, Indian affairs, and commerce. He is regarded as an expert on the military, both because of his background and due to a genuine interest. But McCain's only foray into foreign affairs as a senator has been his chairmanship of the International Republican Institute, a controversial quasi-public arm of the Republican Party engaged in democracy promotion overseas. McCain's position with IRI requires him to make an occasional speech on policy, but he has no hands-on role and is not much interested in particular issues. One of the private contributors to IRI is the notorious private mercenary firm Blackwater USA, which donated \$15,000 to the group's coffers in 2005 and 2006 and in return received a contract for \$18 million to protect IRI workers overseas.

McCain's foreign travel in recent years has been in the security and diplomatic cocoon that has become normal for someone with a senator's status. His comments during and after visits to Iraq have been lampooned in the media for being completely disconnected from the situation on the ground. Like George W. Bush, McCain has not been inclined to vacation outside the United States, and he appears to have little curiosity about the world and its peoples. According to the analysts who have interacted with McCain, his recent misstatements about various Muslim groups and other foreign-policy issues are not slips. They reflect a real lack of interest in other countries that makes it impossible for him to empathize with their problems, leading to a monochromatic view of the world and the facile assumption that it is always better to solve issues dealing with foreigners by dropping bombs.

McCain, whose foreign-policy advisers are exclusively neocons, receives regular briefings from the distinguished scholars at the American Enterprise Institute, which are presumably more to his taste than the less colorful information provided by the \$42 billion per year intelligence community.

Philip Giraldi, a former CIA Officer, is a fellow at the American Conservative Defense Alliance.

not only for us in our own time, but for all people in every time."

While Lieberman may not be acting out of pique, that doesn't mean his politics are untainted by ambition. One former Connecticut colleague attests that Lieberman has long felt touched by destiny: "He always had this vision he would be the first Jewish president, and things were just going to work out." Until Florida, they did. McCain's improbable nomination gives Lieberman another chance. Jepsen states bluntly, "He has to rise with McCain. ... McCain likes him and no one is more indebted to him ... it's his ticket to the next step up."

Lieberman rebuffs speculation about his position in a McCain administration, but he does drop hints. In his speech at the Paul H. Nitze School at Johns Hopkins University, Lieberman identified himself with Nitze, a hawkish Democrat who served in the Truman and Kennedy administrations. To combat anti-interventionists in both parties, Nitze helped to reconstitute the Committee on the Present Danger, which lobbied against détente and the SALT II agreement. While remaining a Democrat, Nitze later served as Reagan's chief negotiator in arms reduction treaties and as a special adviser to the president and his secretary of state. Lieberman seems eager to follow in Nitze's footsteps.

In reality, Lieberman's wish to see two American political parties with "strong national security wings" is a desire to see dissent from anti-interventionism forever discredited. McCain's primary victory has temporarily secured hawks' supremacy in the GOP. And while Lieberman may never again influence his party in a direct manner, a McCain victory in November, aided by Lieberman, could be used to frighten Democrats into accepting the neoconservative view of history: that doves will always lose, that America is fundamentally an activist nation. It's up to Democrats to prove him wrong. ■