



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on January 25, 2011

Republicans Lose Favorite Democrat

With poll numbers showing his approval rating at an anemic 25 percent among Connecticut voters, U. S. Senator Joe Lieberman insisted it was not the fear of losing a bid for a fifth term that caused him to announce last week that he will not be a candidate for reelection in 2012.

"I know that some people have said that if I ran for re-election, it would be a difficult campaign for me," Lieberman acknowledged during his announcement at the Marriott hotel in his hometown of Stamford. "So what else is new?" he asked. "It probably would be a difficult campaign for me. But I have run many difficult campaigns before."



Lieberman has indeed defeated the pollsters and the pundits as well as rival candidates in a political career that began 41 years ago when he challenged and defeated state Senate Majority Leader Ed Marcus of New Haven in a Democratic primary. He was elected that fall and remained in the Connecticut Senate for 10 years, becoming majority leader in 1975. Aside from his loss as vice presidential candidate in 2000, the only defeat Republicans have been able to hang on Lieberman came in his bid for a congressional seat from Connecticut's third district in 1980. His comeback began two years later when he was elected Connecticut's attorney general. Lieberman "transformed the office by standing up for consumer rights, taking on polluters and tracking down fathers who had defaulted on child support payments," the [New Haven Register](#) declared last week. When he won reelection in 1986, he was the top vote-getter on the ballot, outpolling even Governor William O'Neill.

But it was in his first U.S. Senate campaign in 1988 that Lieberman demonstrated a political style and strategy that he would later herald as the "third way." He was considered a long shot in that race, going up against three-term Republican Lowell P. Weicker, a "moderate" (read "liberal") Republican who was popular with independents and Democrats, as well as those Republicans who admired the senator for his frequent breaks with party leadership. As a member of the Senate committee investigating Watergate, Weicker gained notoriety as one of Nixon's most persistent critics.

During the Reagan years, he built on his reputation as a political "maverick," defending health and education programs against threats of Republican budget cuts and opposing the administration on foreign policy issues, including its support for the Contras battling the communist government in Nicaragua. While liberal Republicans lauded Weicker for his "independence," there was, not surprisingly, growing discontent on the right.

In 1982, Prescott Bush, Jr., brother of then-Vice President George H. W. Bush and son of former U.S. Senator Prescott Bush, announced his candidacy for Weicker's seat. But the incumbent made such a strong showing at the party convention that Bush folded his tent and dropped his plans for a primary race. An anticipated primary challenge in 1988 also came to naught, leaving Weicker apparently safe from rebellion on the right.



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His leftward leanings became more pronounced as he showed up at the Republican convention to renounce the party platform and warn of the growing influence of Pat Robertson, Jerry Falwell and others on the "religious right." His ardent defense of abortion "rights" made Weicker eligible for the endorsement of the National Organization of Women, which was duly bestowed on him. A Democrat would find little running room to Weicker's left. But as [Steve Kornacki pointed out](#) on Salon.com, Joe Lieberman was not campaigning from the typical Democratic playbook.

But the real reason Lieberman was formidable was that, unlike every other big name Democrat in Connecticut, he was actually well-positioned to capitalize on Weicker's liberalism. An unapologetic proponent of capital punishment (then a hot button issue, with crime rates soaring), he sided with the Reagan White House on aid to the Nicaraguan Contras, advocated a hawkish foreign policy, and played up his devout religious faith, leading some in the anti-abortion community to conclude that he shared their views. Another Democratic candidate would have worried about Weicker eating into his liberal base, but Lieberman set out to claim all of the turf to the incumbent's right.

For some on the right, Lieberman's salient virtue was that he wasn't Weicker. Neo-conservative icon William F. Buckley, Jr., founder of *National Review* and star of public television's "Firing Line," announced the creation of a ["BuckPac" committee](#) in support of the Lieberman candidacy. A vote for Lieberman, Buckley would recall years later, was a "vote for the ideological decontamination of the Republican Party, Lowell Weicker having, by 1988, emerged as the weepiest liberal willow in public life. Moreover he had perfected a self-infatuated pomposity that made voting against him a carnal pleasure."

It was a pleasure shared by enough conservative Republicans and "Reagan Democrats" to drive Lowell Weicker out of office, though he would win the election for governor as an independent two years later. But in 1988, even as Connecticut voted for Bush over Democrat Mike Dukakis, Lieberman eked out a 10,000-vote victory over his Republican opponent.

In Washington he continued to promote and defend those "hawkish" foreign policies not unpopular in a state that is home to a number of defense contractors, including United Technologies subsidiary Pratt & Whitney, and Electric Boat, a subsidiary of General Dynamics. Ever the interventionist, Lieberman supported Bush's invasion of Panama and was co-author of the Gulf War resolution, becoming one of the few Democrats in the Senate in favor of authorizing the President to initiate a war with Iraq over its invasion and occupation of Kuwait. He and McCain were stalwart supporters of President Clinton's bombing campaign during the Bosnian civil war.

But it was not until he became the leading Democrat in support of George W. Bush's war in Iraq that Lieberman began to lose favor with his party's liberal base. By 2006, Lieberman was nearly as unpopular with the Democrats as the war itself, and he lost in the party's primary to Greenwich businessman and antiwar candidate Ned Lamont. Tenacious as ever, Lieberman ran as an independent and drew enough Republican and independent votes to win a fourth term.

Ironically, it was during a pre-primary debate in July of 2006 that Lieberman claimed the party's future would, in part, depend on the success of his candidacy. "I want Democrats to be back in the majority in Washington and elect a Democratic president in 2008," [he said](#). "This man [Lamont] will frustrate and defeat our hope of doing that."

Yet six months later, in January of 2007, he told Chris Wallace on "Fox News Sunday" that he might support a Republican in the next year's presidential election — which, of course, he did, endorsing his



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good friend John McCain early in the primary season and campaigning for the McCain-Palin ticket throughout the fall of 2008. McCain, for his part, has made no secret of the fact that Lieberman was his first choice for a running mate, an idea he dropped when he became convinced that it would lead to a revolt from within his party's conservative base. McCain's decision to play it safe no doubt cost Lieberman the distinction of being the only American to lose as vice presidential candidate in both political parties.

Lieberman has long been a devotee of the ["third way"](#) in American politics, a path he described with a minimum of clarity in 1995, when he was chairman of "centrist" Democratic Leadership Council, formerly chaired by both Bill Clinton and Al Gore.

"Our third way," he declared, "rejects both the old Democratic notion that government can and should solve all the people's problems, and the new Republican notion that government can and should do little or nothing to solve the people's problems. The third way substitutes in their place the principle of mutual responsibility, that government does best when it helps people solve their own problems." But for many Connecticut Democrats Lieberman was himself a problem, one he solved by announcing his retirement in 2012.

"I have mixed feelings about it; I was looking forward to beating him once and for all," Tom Swan, Lamont's campaign manager in 2006, told the [Hartford Courant](#).

"It was by constantly using the Democrats as a foil, to ingratiate himself with the Fox newscasters and Republicans, that caused bitterness," observed Bill Curry, the former state comptroller and two-time Democratic gubernatorial nominee. "I never saw anyone so adept at passing off opportunism as high-mindedness."

Yet [when Lieberman spoke at the Republican convention in '08](#), he had the delegates cheering not only McCain and Palin, but even for Bill Clinton, as he praised the former President for his accomplishments on welfare reform and balanced budgets. (Republicans still cheer for balanced budgets, even as Republican Presidents drive deficits to somewhere north of Jupiter.) The fact that Lieberman himself was so warmly received by the delegates is a testament to his remarkable ability to ingratiate himself with either party. For Lieberman may have lost the love of liberals, but he remains devoted to liberalism. His hawkish stands on defense fit in neatly with his support for an ever-expanding role for government on domestic issues. He opposed the Bush tax cuts, but supported both the Bush Wall Street bailout and Obama's massive economic stimulus and health care reform. Like McCain, he supports large-scale and costly environmental regulations, including the "cap-and-trade" plan to lower carbon emissions. He voted for a ban on "assault weapons," a label vague enough to cover virtually any kind of firearm the government might like to outlaw. He voted repeatedly against a ban on partial-birth abortions and has championed the repeal of the "Don't ask, don't tell policy" to ensure that openly homosexual and lesbian men and women would be able to serve in the armed forces.

Not an agenda that would get most people ovations at a Republican National Convention, but Lieberman left the platform with hosannas ringing in his ears.

It's not that Republicans have been ignorant of Lieberman's big-government liberalism. Surely McCain is not. It's just that when you come right down to it, the devotion most Republicans voice for free markets, constitutional government, the right to life and traditional moral values can't hold a candle to their enthusiasm for foreign wars. A Democrat can be "one of us" as long as he supports those glorious interventions that give us cause to wave the flag and sing "God Bless America" in the seventh-inning



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stretch while bodies pile up on battlefields half a world away. In 2013, Americans will still be fighting and dying in Afghanistan and perhaps in Iraq as well, despite the official 2011 "deadline" for American withdrawal. But Republicans in the U.S. Senate will be without their favorite Democrat, another victim of "collateral damage."

War is hell.



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