

Let Lieberman Be Lieberman

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A small but incurably mischievous part of me would love to have been a fly on the wall at the very moment the neoconservative Democratic Leadership Council, the Wall Street Journal's editorial board and George Will saw The Post story about Sen. Joseph Lieberman's love-in with the Democratic National Committee's black caucus. The photo of a smiling Lieberman, cheek to cheek with Rep. Maxine Waters, must have curled their toes. And why not? The Connecticut senator was their hands-down favorite for Democratic vice presidential nominee. Unlike other Democrats on Gore's short list, Lieberman had shown an independent streak, standing with conservative Republicans on such key issues as privatization of Social Security, school vouchers and opposition to "racial preferences."

But on Wednesday, facing a ballroom filled with African American convention delegates, several black elected officials and black handlers from the Gore campaign, Lieberman delivered the left-wing equivalent of Gov. George Wallace's "Segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever" declaration, telling the applauding audience: "I have supported affirmative action, I do support affirmative action, and I will support affirmative action."

Now, I'm not one to start trouble, but Jesse Jackson, the elder, couldn't have delivered a more full-throated defense.

Speaking of backpedaling, (here comes the mischievous side again) I wonder what the more than 1,000 students and New Haven residents who packed Battell Chapel at Yale University in 1995 must be thinking of the good reverend 'round about now.

After all, they had rallied on Yale's campus in response to Jackson's call for a public protest against the policies of Joe Lieberman.

'Tis true. Joined on stage by NOW leader Patricia Ireland and a dozen politicians and activists, Jesse Jackson did a number on Lieberman, accusing him of joining with

Republicans to dismantle affirmative action programs. Jackson also drew a big laugh from the crowd when he branded Lieberman "a Demo-publican" who had more in common with Republicans than Democrats.

Jackson also took out after the Democratic Leadership Council, or DLC, chaired by Lieberman, calling it "Democrats for the Leisure Class." Jackson blasted the DLC as "a privatized, suburban wing of the Democratic Party that distances itself from labor and ethnic minorities."

Lieberman wasn't on the scene. But in response to Jackson's protest rally, he said in a written statement that people who refuse to acknowledge problems with some government affirmative action programs "risk dooming all affirmative action programs to defeat. For the fact is that some programs grant benefits based on group membership instead of individual ability, and that runs against the grain of a basic principle of American life."

Ah, but that was before last Wednesday's session in L.A. with the brothers and sisters-- that great day in the morning when an ebullient Lieberman morphed into Bill Clinton, exclaiming: "I feel as if I'm with family." Yes, Lord.

It's not just Lieberman who's changed. Rev. Jackson's also singing a different tune, now that the Gore-Lieberman train is leaving the station. By embracing Lieberman and blessing the Democratic ticket, the Rev. Jackson has won himself a place on board--even if it's only as a straphanger.

And imagine: The Democrats have the nerve to talk about things Dick Cheney did 20 years ago.

But hey, enough of love-ins, cave-ins and flip-flops.

I say to the handlers, script writers and reinvention experts trying to package and sell the Democratic vice presidential nominee as a son of the liberal cause: Back off and let Lieberman be Lieberman.

I've met him when he's come calling here at The Post. You can't help liking the man. He's friendly, smart and decent. But the truth is Joe Lieberman is also a pragmatic, politically astute Democrat of forward-looking persuasion who hasn't been reluctant to set sail from time to time under a conservative flag. It's a fact that can't and shouldn't be hidden or finessed.

Besides, his campaign handlers make matters worse when they try to sell him as a longtime liberal who has occasionally lost his bearings and strayed into conservative

territory by mistake. A case in point: his defense of Ward Connerly's anti-affirmative action Proposition 209 in California.

Lieberman's a bright man. He wasn't confused by the measure. At first blush, he liked it and said as much. But he was savvy enough to take cover when the incoming flak from the party's core constituency began landing around his head and shoulders.

Likewise, Lieberman is not just a legislator who's shown only an "openness" to school vouchers, as one newspaper put it. He's a school voucher maven who not only voted for vouchers four times; he didn't mind offending D.C. home rule sensitivities when they got in the way.

Contending that the District would be a good laboratory for vouchers, Lieberman hooked up with House Speaker Newt Gingrich, GOP leader Rep. Dick Armey, and Republican Sens. Sam Brownback, Dan Coats and Trent Lott to sponsor a school vouchers bill for the city. It was done over the opposition of every D.C. elected official, including Del. Eleanor Holmes Norton. Only a Bill Clinton veto stopped the Lieberman-Army proposal.

A few years earlier, Lieberman was one of only three Democratic senators to support Republican President George Bush's plan to encourage the use of public money for low-income families of children who choose private schools. Democrats defeated that measure, too.

As with his support of George Bush's education program, Lieberman's independence has linked him with people not normally found in liberal or moderate circles.

For example, when he decided to take a stand against political correctness on college campuses and what he feared were efforts to politicize curricula, impose campus speech codes and inject multiculturalism at the expense of Western civilization programs, where did Lieberman turn?

Lieberman's key partner in forming the anti-"PC" **National Alumni Forum** was none other than Lynne Cheney, the former Reagan and Bush administration official portrayed by the press as the quintessential high priestess foe of academic "political correctness" and other sins of liberalism--and wife of the Republican vice presidential nominee, Dick Cheney.

I can't help it; I'd just love to be a fly on the wall at the moment Jesse Jackson and the libs read this.

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