

# THE LAST LIBERAL

*The Legacy of Joe Lieberman*

*James Kirchick*

In January 2004, the *New Republic* endorsed Joe Lieberman for president. By this time, recriminations against Democrats who had supported the Iraq War (or, in the parlance of the American left, “Bush’s War”) had already begun to arise in mainstream liberal circles, and the magazine’s decision was unpopular with many of its readers. The young, online-savvy movement behind Vermont Governor Howard Dean, who had won over the party’s base and much of the liberal intelligentsia with his virulent attacks against the Iraq War, appeared to be the wave of the Democratic future.

Nonetheless, the Democratic senator from Connecticut and 2000 vice-presidential candidate, the flagship journal of liberal opinion declared, offered the “clearest, bravest alternative” to Dean’s “self-righteous delusion.” The Vermont governor, the magazine argued, represented the “old Democratic affliction” of “an excessive faith in multilateralism and an insufficient faith in the moral potential of US power.”

By contrast, Lieberman’s support for the Iraq War and subsequent criticism of the Bush administration’s failure to deploy more troops to stabilize the country exemplified his “brave, consistent foreign policy record.” The magazine favorably contrasted Lieberman’s voting for \$87 billion in Iraq

---

James Kirchick is a contributing editor for the *New Republic*, a fellow with the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, and a columnist for the *New York Daily News*, *Haaretz*, and *Tablet*.

reconstruction aid with the “contradictory” positions of fellow candidates Wesley Clark and John Kerry (the eventual Democratic nominee), who supported the war yet “opportunistically opposed” the funding package. In addition to his tough foreign policy stance, which fell squarely within a “hawkish liberal tradition” going back decades, Lieberman’s “overall economic record is progressive and responsible,” the magazine concluded.

Four years later, the *New Republic* would decry the “Zell Millerization” of Lieberman, a reference to the Democratic Georgia senator who endorsed George W. Bush in 2004 with a rabid speech at the Republican National Convention. This was an absurd analogy, not least because of the men’s completely different temperaments (Lieberman, whatever his political virtues, can scarcely vary the tone of his voice). Mainly, though, Miller had actually voted more often with Republicans than with his fellow Democrats, whereas Lieberman boasted a party loyalty record higher than fourteen of his Democratic colleagues. That year, Lieberman earned an eighty-five percent rating from Americans for Democratic Action. No matter. Lieberman had “become a cog in the Republican message machine,” the magazine declared. “He’s becoming a standard-issue conservative,” Peter Beinart, editor of the *New Republic* when it endorsed Lieberman, would later bemoan in the *Daily Beast*.

Liberal rage at Lieberman has only increased with time. In 2009, *Washington Post* blogger Ezra Klein imputed lethal motives to Lieberman, alleging that his opposition to elements of President Obama’s health care reform package indicated a “willing[ness] to cause the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people in order to settle an old electoral score.” The *New Republic*’s TRB columnist echoed that view, and suggested that the “wrong, uninformed” opinions expressed by Lieberman—a graduate of Yale College and Yale Law School and a former editor of the *Yale Daily News*—were a result of the fact that he “isn’t actually all that smart.” Lieberman, this editor surmised, “is the beneficiary, or possibly the victim, of a cultural stereotype that Jews are smart and good with numbers.”

What happened in these intervening years? One thing is the transformation of the *New Republic* from a publication that upheld a traditionally liberal, hawkish worldview into something altogether different, mimicking a similar movement in the Democratic Party and the American left. After

dropping out of the 2004 presidential race, Lieberman lost his state's 2006 Democratic Senate primary to Ned Lamont, a left-wing, antiwar challenger with inherited millions and fanatic support from the online "netroots." Lieberman's reluctance, unlike practically every other Demo-

**“While most Democrats turned their backs on Lieberman following his primary defeat, the right did not exactly open its arms. Lieberman had become, in effect, a party of one.”**

crat and prominent left-of-center journalist in the country, to denounce the Iraq War and claim deliberate malfeasance on the part of the Bush administration in “selling” it to the American people earned him the ire of the party base.

Yet while most Democrats turned their backs on Lieberman following his primary defeat, the right did not exactly open its arms. “I don't see why

any conservative should be overly concerned about Joe Lieberman's plight,” David Keene, then chairman of the American Conservative Union told the late columnist Robert Novak. Lieberman's single-digit ACU rating was evidence, Keene argued, that he was hardly the conservative or even moderate Democrat that his admirers on the right and enemies on the left claimed. Lieberman had become, in effect, a party of one.

Rather than end his political career on this dispiriting note, however, Lieberman ran in the general election as an Independent and won handily. Though he continued to caucus with the Democrats, giving them their crucial, single-vote majority in the Senate, most liberals never forgave him for standing by his vote on Iraq. The betrayal was only compounded when Lieberman endorsed his friend John McCain for president in 2008.

Asked several weeks before the most recent presidential election if he has any political regrets, Lieberman laughed. “I feel like I hear Sinatra” whenever the question is posed, he told me. But when it comes to that aspect of his record that most angered the left and jeopardized his political career, Lieberman is unrepentant. “I don't have major regrets about what I've done in foreign policy,” he says, listing the positions he's championed, from the expansion of NATO after the Cold War to support for the two missions in Iraq. His endorsement of McCain—and the speech he delivered for him at the Republican National Convention—does not arise.

Yet, in what must come as a surprise to many of his liberal detractors, Lieberman mentions his inability “to convince enough of my colleagues that the threat of global warming was real” as his chief disappointment. Indeed, Lieberman has long been one of the leading environmental activists in the Senate. He was a co-sponsor of the 1990 Clean Air Act, a vocal opponent of drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, and attached his name (alongside then Republican Senator John Warner) to the bill that would have created a nationwide “cap and trade” system for greenhouse gas emissions.

That Lieberman would cite his failure to raise more awareness about the threat of global warming (a topic that inspires ridicule, if not outright denial, from the very same conservatives who praise Lieberman as their “favorite Democrat”) as his greatest political regret isn’t all that surprising when you take a look at his legislative record. That’s because on most issues, Lieberman is an old-fashioned liberal. Perhaps his most high-profile accomplishment in recent years was his successful sponsorship of one of the most significant pieces of civil rights legislation since the 1960s: the repeal of the military’s “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy prohibiting gays from serving openly in the military. Lieberman, who as chairman of the *Yale Daily News* in the 1960s wrote an editorial headlined “Why I Go to Mississippi” about his decision to register black voters in the South, saw the fight over gays in the military as the natural extension of the country’s earlier struggle to overcome institutional racism. “The focus of advancing human rights has changed over time from protecting people based on color and gender to sexual orientation,” he told me. The bill thus represented the perfect marriage between Lieberman’s two, core political convictions: commitment to a strong defense and the effort to make America a more fair and equitable society for historically disadvantaged groups. The repeal of Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell may be the most potent achievement in his legislative legacy.

Talking with the mild-mannered Lieberman, and examining his long political career from Connecticut attorney general to four-term US senator, one finds it difficult to comprehend the level of vituperation that has been directed his way from so-called liberals. A survey of the liberal blogosphere and pundit world finds comments ranging from the nasty (Bloomberg’s Jonathan Alter calling Lieberman a “putz”) to overtly anti-Semitic (any article mentioning Lieberman on the Internet is guaranteed to feature at least one reader comment asserting that he is loyal not to the United States but Israel). Sometimes the anti-Semitism isn’t dis-

guised by the anonymity of Internet comments; in 2008, *Time*'s Joe Klein wrote that Lieberman's "plump[ing]" for the Iraq War "raised the question of divided loyalties." Yet such prejudice was hardly an impediment to Lieberman's career. As Lieberman would be the first to say, his life story as the son of a package store owner who rose to become the first Jewish nominee on a major party presidential ticket was made possible by the exceptional nature of American pluralism.

Most of the hatred directed at Lieberman, rather, stems from the fact that he failed to toe the party line when doing so would have been politically advantageous. During his 2006 re-election campaign, liberal blogger Jane Hamsher doctored a photo of Lieberman in blackface to illustrate her conception of Lieberman-as-traitor. In 2008, when his endorsement of McCain especially raised liberal temperatures, *New York* magazine wrote that Lieberman was "perhaps the most hated politician in the United States."

At the time, that said a lot, considering that the widely reviled George W. Bush was still president. But Bush, after all, was a Republican from Texas and could not be accused of betraying liberalism. Lieberman was a Democrat—the party's 2000 vice-presidential nominee, no less—and his refusal to conform with party orthodoxy drove the enforcers of liberal intellectual conformity mad.

But from his first years in the Senate—when, as he pointed out to me, he was the first Democrat to announce his support for the Gulf War and the only northern Democrat to vote in favor of it—Lieberman was always a foreign policy hawk. "I never felt that because I was, in conventional political terms, 'conservative' on one issue I had to be 'conservative' on another and vice versa," he says. A prominent supporter of the 1998 Iraq Liberation Act—legislation calling for the United States to support forces seeking the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, which was overwhelmingly supported by Congress, unanimously approved by the Senate and signed into law by President Bill Clinton—Lieberman's backing of regime change in Iraq was natural, longstanding, and consistent, in contrast to his Democratic colleagues, who supported the overthrow of Saddam until the rubber finally hit the road.

As he prepares to leave the Senate, Lieberman's analysis of President Obama's foreign policy record is mixed. "Some things I worried the pres-

ident would do, he didn't do, like withdraw precipitously from Iraq in 2009," he says. By contrast, "he actually surged in Afghanistan," something Lieberman did not expect. Yet, "in both cases I think we exited too quickly and rapidly, endangering all we gained in great sacrifice," Lieberman says of America's present posture in both countries.

Unlike in 2008, Lieberman refused to endorse a presidential candidate this cycle, denting one of the most common liberal accusations against him: that, far from standing up for a lost Democratic Party tradition of hawkish internationalism, he is really nothing more than a hectoring political opportunist. Lieberman could have almost certainly ensured himself a cabinet position in an incoming Republican administration had he simply endorsed Mitt Romney, much as he endorsed John McCain four years ago. But for whatever reason—perhaps a desire to focus his remaining time in the Senate on the work he was elected to do rather than politicking, or the fact that McCain was a close friend and colleague whereas Romney was neither—Lieberman sat out the 2012 presidential race. In another strange move for an alleged Democratic "turncoat," Lieberman made time to campaign in Nebraska for his former colleague Bob Kerrey, who decided to make a political comeback with a run for the Senate—as a Democrat. After the election, Lieberman also rose to the defense of UN Ambassador Susan Rice as debate swirled around her presumed nomination as President Obama's next secretary of state. In doing so, he bucked his colleagues McCain and Lindsay Graham, with whom he has globe-trotted so often that the trio is sometimes called "the three amigos."

The recent passing of former South Dakota senator and 1972 Democratic presidential nominee George McGovern, coming at the time of Lieberman's retirement from the Senate, has the feeling of a recession. The two men, a generation apart, represented starkly different Democratic Party traditions on foreign policy. McGovern's mantra of "Come Home, America" was the antithesis of practically everything Lieberman has espoused over his more than two decades on the national political scene. Lacking in many of the fawning obituaries of McGovern was the fact that he had been a delegate to the 1948 convention that nominated Henry Wallace the presidential candidate of the Progressive Party, a Communist Party front. Lieberman, meanwhile, though too young to have been involved in politics at the time, often cites Harry Truman—who fired Wallace as his secretary of commerce over his pro-Soviet views—as his political hero.

In a 2007 speech at Johns Hopkins University's Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies, Lieberman lamented that, for over two decades, "the American people didn't trust Democrats to keep them safe, and the McGovernite legacy was a big reason why." This was a correct diagnosis of the Democratic Party's foreign policy wilderness years, lasting from McGovern's crushing loss to Richard Nixon in 1972 through the middle of the Clinton administration, which saw the expansion of NATO and successive missions in the Balkans to stop genocide. And it was unfortunately accurate during much of the Bush administration, when most Democrats seemed to care more about politically expedient attacks on the president than they did about standing by Iraq's democratically elected government. Today, it would be premature to say that the McGovernite wing of the party has won. But the chances of that happening are significantly greater now that Joe Lieberman won't be around to keep the Democrats honest. ❧

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.