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## A Senate Race in Connecticut

Published: July 30, 2006

Earlier this year, Senator Joseph Lieberman's seat seemed so secure that — legend has it — some people at the Republican nominating convention in Connecticut started making bleating noises when the party picked a presumed sacrificial lamb to run against the three-term senator, who has been a fixture in Connecticut politics for more than 35 years.

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But Mr. Lieberman is now in a tough Democratic primary against a little-known challenger, Ned Lamont. The race has taken on a national character. Mr. Lieberman's friends see it as an attempt by hysterical antiwar bloggers to oust a giant of the Senate for the crime of bipartisanship. Lamont backers — most of whom seem more passionate about being Lieberman opponents — say that as one of the staunchest supporters of the Iraq war, Mr. Lieberman has betrayed his party by cozying up to President Bush.

This primary would never have happened absent Iraq. It's true that Mr. Lieberman has fallen in love with his image as the nation's moral compass. But if pomposity were a disqualification, the Senate would never be able to call a quorum. He has voted with his party in opposing the destructive Bush tax cuts, and despite some unappealing rhetoric in the Terri Schiavo case, he has strongly supported a woman's right to choose. He has been one of the Senate's most creative thinkers about the environment and energy conservation.

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But this race is not about résumés. The United States is at a critical point in its history, and Mr. Lieberman has chosen a controversial role to play. The voters in Connecticut will have to judge whether it is the right one.

As Mr. Lieberman sees it, this is a fight for the soul of the Democratic Party — his moderate fair-mindedness against a partisan radicalism that alienates most Americans. "What kind of Democratic Party are we going to have?" he asked in an interview with New York magazine. "You've got to agree 100 percent, or you're not a good Democrat?"

That's far from the issue. Mr. Lieberman is not just a senator who works well with members of the other party. And there is a reason that while other Democrats supported the war, he has become the only target. In his effort to appear above the partisan fray, he has become one of the Bush administration's most useful allies as the president tries to turn the war on terror into an excuse for radical changes in how this country operates.

Citing national security, Mr. Bush continually tries to undermine restraints on the executive branch: the system of checks and balances, international accords on the treatment of prisoners, the nation's longtime principles of justice. His administration has depicted any questions or criticism of his policies as giving aid and comfort to the terrorists. And Mr. Lieberman has helped that effort. He once denounced Democrats who were "more focused on how President Bush took America into the war in Iraq" than on supporting the war's progress.

At this moment, with a Republican president intent on drastically expanding his powers with the support of the Republican House and Senate, it is critical that the minority party serve as a responsible, but vigorous, watchdog. That does not require shrillness or absolutism. But this is no time for a man with Mr. Lieberman's ability to command Republicans' attention to become their

enabler, and embrace a role as the president's defender.

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On the Armed Services Committee, Mr. Lieberman has left it to Republicans like Lindsey Graham of South Carolina to investigate the administration's actions. In 2004, Mr. Lieberman praised Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld for expressing regret about Abu Ghraib, then added: "I cannot help but say, however, that those who were responsible for killing 3,000 Americans on September 11th, 2001, never apologized." To suggest even rhetorically that the American military could be held to the same standard of behavior as terrorists is outrageous, and a good example of how avidly the senator has adopted the Bush spin and helped the administration avoid accounting for Abu Ghraib.

Mr. Lieberman prides himself on being a legal thinker and a champion of civil liberties. But he appointed himself defender of Attorney General Alberto Gonzales and the administration's policy of holding hundreds of foreign citizens in prison without any due process. He seconded Mr. Gonzales's sneering reference to the "quaint" provisions of the Geneva Conventions. He has shown no interest in prodding his Republican friends into investigating how the administration misled the nation about Iraq's weapons. There is no use having a senator famous for getting along with Republicans if he never challenges them on issues of profound importance.

If Mr. Lieberman had once stood up and taken the lead in saying that there were some places a president had no right to take his country even during a time of war, neither he nor this page would be where we are today. But by suggesting that there is no principled space for that kind of opposition, he has forfeited his role as a conscience of his party, and has forfeited our support.

Mr. Lamont, a wealthy businessman from Greenwich, seems smart and moderate, and he showed spine in challenging the senator while other Democrats grouched privately. He does not have his opponent's grasp of policy yet. But this primary is not about Mr. Lieberman's legislative record. Instead it has become a referendum on his warped version of bipartisanship, in which the never-ending war on terror becomes an excuse for silence and inaction. We endorse Ned Lamont in the Democratic primary for Senate in Connecticut.

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