

# Democratic senator defends Iraq war in Connecticut primary debate

Patrick Martin  
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Senator Joseph Lieberman, the most vocal ally of the Bush administration among Senate Democrats, adamantly defended the Iraq war in a televised debate July 6 with his opponent in the Connecticut Democratic Party primary, millionaire Ned Lamont. Lieberman, a three-term senator and the Democrats' vice presidential candidate in 2000, has only a narrow lead in polls taken in advance of the August 8 primary because of widespread opposition to the Iraq war among Democratic voters.

Lieberman was on the attack throughout the debate, using many of the same arguments against Lamont that Bush's chief political aide, Karl Rove, has employed against critics of the Iraq war—suggesting that anyone who opposes the war is siding with or strengthening terrorists, or opposed to democracy and freedom in Iraq, which Lieberman identifies with the US military occupation.

The Democratic incumbent flatly declared that the US invasion of Iraq was “the right thing.” At the same time, he declared that, whatever the origins of the war, “the fact is, we’re there now.” In words that could have been lifted from a speech by Bush, Rumsfeld, Cheney or Rove, he continued, “We have a choice. And that choice is between helping the Iraqis achieve a free and independent Iraq or abandoning them and letting the terrorists take over.”

Justifying his claim to represent the people of the state even though a large majority oppose the war, he added, “I have leveled with people about it and asked them to respect me for having the guts to take an unpopular political position.”

Lieberman complained that Lamont “is a single issue candidate who is applying a litmus test to me. It’s not good enough to be 90 percent voting with my colleagues in the Senate Democratic Caucus. He wants

100 percent.”

Again aping the arguments of the Bush White House and Republican leaders, Lieberman denounced his opponent for adopting several different positions on the war: “One day saying he is for withdrawal and another day he is not. One day saying he is for a specific deadline, another day he is not.”

Lieberman’s opening statement included a remarkable declaration, reflecting fears that he will pay a heavy political price for his close identification with the Bush administration: “I’m not George Bush. So why don’t you stop running against him and have the courage and honesty to run against me...?” (Bush has gone out of his way to identify Lieberman as his favorite Democrat, going so far as to deliver a kiss to the fawning senator as he entered the Capitol to deliver his most recent State of the Union address.)

Lamont was on the defensive during the opening minutes of the debate, which focused on the war, supposedly his strongest issue. This is an expression not simply of his inexperience as a candidate, as press commentaries suggested, but of the fundamentally unprincipled and self-contradictory position of Democratic Party critics of the war, who seek to appeal to antiwar sentiment while concealing the war’s imperialist aims and defending the strategic interests of American capitalism.

Lamont criticized Lieberman from the standpoint of the Democratic majority in the Senate, which voted for a resolution drafted by Rhode Island Senator Jack Reed urging Bush to begin making troop withdrawals from Iraq by December 31, but setting no deadline or schedule. He also voiced support for the proposal by Massachusetts Senator John Kerry to set a July 1, 2007, deadline for withdrawal.

Lamont argued that the US troop presence in Iraq was

inflaming local nationalist sentiment and making it more difficult to accomplish the goals of the US intervention. He added, “I was impressed when Congressman Murtha stood up and he said stay the course is not a winning strategy. It’s time for us to change course.” In other words, Lamont advocates a different strategy and a change in tactics for achieving “success” in Iraq—i.e., establishing US domination in the Middle East.

While referring once to the false claims of the Bush administration that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction and that US troops would be welcomed as liberators, Lamont made no effort to pin Lieberman down on his endorsement of these lies. His indictment, repeated several times, was that the US intervention was a failure, not that it was a war of aggression and a violation of international law.

He sounded a theme advanced by many Democratic Party “opponents” of the war—that Bush has focused attention on the wrong country. “The biggest threat to the United States and world peace is a rogue nation that has nuclear arms capability,” Lamont said, “and they can sell that to terrorists or potentially launch that. And Korea fits that description. North Korea fits that description.” He called on the Bush administration to work with the Democrats on a joint policy for dealing with Korea, rather than operating unilaterally as it did in Iraq.

On domestic policy there was little difference between the two Democrats, although Lamont struck a more nationalist note on trade, criticizing Lieberman’s votes in favor of free trade agreements. In response, Lieberman referred repeatedly to Lamont’s personal wealth—the cable television executive is a scion of the Lamont family, the co-founders of J. P. Morgan & Co. and long one of the wealthiest clans in America. Ned Lamont’s personal wealth, which is largely financing his primary campaign, is estimated at \$50 million to \$100 million.

Lieberman himself is personally wealthy, if not in Lamont’s league, and he has long done the bidding of the insurance companies, the largest single capitalist enterprise in Connecticut, as well as backing the Bush administration on such issues as its energy bill, a multibillion-dollar boondoggle for the oil and coal monopolies. He sought nonetheless to portray himself as a pro-working-class candidate who had done his best

to defend jobs and promote social services.

As proof of his loyalty to a supposedly progressive Democratic Party tradition, Lieberman cited the endorsements of his candidacy by a series of liberal interest groups, including the AFL-CIO, Planned Parenthood, the League of Conservation Voters and the Human Rights Campaign, a major gay lobby.

Lieberman used these endorsements as well to counter criticism of his decision to begin petitioning for ballot status as an independent. Given his shaky standing in the polls, he is keeping open the possibility of remaining in the race for reelection even if he loses the primary by setting up a three-way contest in November with Lamont and Republican Alan Schlesinger.

The ferocity with which Lieberman is pursuing his reelection, riding roughshod over normal party considerations, was expressed in his demeanor during the debate. As the *Hartford Courant* noted in its coverage: “Unlike the collegial tone employed in his vice presidential debate with Dick Cheney in 2000, Lieberman was alternately caustic and dismissive, leaving Lamont wide-eyed and visibly rattled in the opening minutes of the one-hour confrontation.”

The *Courant* added: “Later, Lamont said privately that he was taken aback by Lieberman’s combative stance at the start of the debate. He’d prepped by watching videos of the Lieberman-Cheney debates of 2000. ‘That was like a tea party,’ he said. ‘He saves most of his venom for when he is debating Democrats.’”

The *Courant* identifies a significant issue, one that highlights the essential political function of the Democratic Party. It is prostrate and impotent in relation to the Bush administration and the Republicans, but ferociously aggressive against any challenge from the left, even when that threat is couched in the mildest terms by a dissident Democratic millionaire from Greenwich, Connecticut.



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