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A Ned Lamont victory would jeopardize a safe Democratic seat and undermine party unity

By Lawrence J. Haas

The antiwar insurgency behind Ned Lamont's challenge to Joe Lieberman makes no sense on policy or political grounds and, if successful, would haunt the Democratic Party for years to come.

Lieberman is a proven leader who stands with his party on core economic, health, education and environmental issues and brings vital federal funds to Connecticut.

Lamont is a political novice who has already shifted positions on his signature issue (the war in Iraq), voted against families as a local official in Greenwich and, in that capacity, sided with Republicans 80 percent of the time.

If successful, Lamont's challenge not only would put a safe Democratic Senate seat up for grabs but, by splitting Democratic votes between Lamont and an independent Lieberman run in November, would undermine the party unity needed to beat three vulnerable Republican House members from Connecticut * Chris Shays, Nancy Johnson and Rob Simmons.

Thus, Lamont's insurgency threatens Democratic efforts to recapture control of the Senate and House this November * which should be the top goal of Democrats from New York to California.

To be sure, Lieberman's support for the war has angered Democrats. But with anger comes respect, for in the face of controversy Lieberman has not wilted. What you see is what you get. That's why even such antiwar Democrats as California's Barbara Boxer, New York's Chuck Schumer and Nevada's Harry Reid, the party's Senate leader, back Lieberman.

But let's be clear: Lieberman harshly criticized how President Bush took us to war and how he prosecuted it. He slammed Bush over his go-it-alone foreign policy, his refusal to plan for post-war Iraq, and his failure to prevent the Abu Ghraib abuse. Lieberman also called for rolling back tax cuts for the wealthy to provide funds to support the troops.

Lamont offers no such comfort. When Congress debated the war, his campaign first said he opposes a plan to withdraw troops by mid-2007 but supports a plan merely to start withdrawing troops this year. A day later, he changed his mind, saying he supports both plans.

On domestic issues, Lieberman's edge is obvious. He has fought for expanded health care, more education funding and greater protection of our natural resources. He helped block efforts to privatize public employee jobs and to cut funding to enforce federal health and safety laws for workers.

That's why Lieberman has endorsements from a wide cross-section of groups tied to core issues * the AFL-CIO and firefighter, communications worker, postal worker, food and commercial worker, and many other unions; the nation's most politically active environmental group; and the leading national gay and lesbian organization.

Critics say Lieberman strays from party orthodoxy. But his record belies the charge. Congressional Quarterly says he stuck with the party on 90 percent of Senate votes last year, just two points below Reid and far higher than several other Democratic senators.

And Lamont? He now advocates a greater commitment to education, health care and jobs. But, as a local official in Greenwich, he voted to cut public education, raise health care costs and limit some coverage for public employees, and privatize such public services as prison construction, waste management, community centers, and road and tree maintenance. A great-grandson of J.P. Morgan's banking partner, he refuses to release his tax returns. Asked about anti-labor votes, Lamont said, "I don't remember that at all," conceding "if that was the case I was wrong."

So, here's the choice: a proven leader who overwhelmingly sticks with Democrats and is always candid about where he stands, or a novice with a checkered record who already has raised doubts about who he is and what he believes?

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