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Challenge to Lieberman could hurt all Democrats By Lawrence J. Haas

Enraged that U.S. Sen. Joe Lieberman supports the war in Iraq, insurgent Democrats who are fueling Ned Lamont's primary challenge to Lieberman have tightened the gap with the incumbent. They may feel good about it but, in fact, they are threatening not just the Democrats' hold on that seat but also the national party's growing chance of retaking control of the Senate.

The insurgent strategy suffers from two major flaws. First, in potentially putting a safe Democratic seat in play for Republicans, it is extraordinarily short-sighted. Second, it rests on a faulty premise about Lieberman's record in adhering to core Democratic principles in his voting and his advocacy.

The strategy contrasts sharply with how Pennsylvania Democrats are treating a similar situation. There, Democrats rallied around state Treasurer Bob Casey in his quest to unseat Republican Rick Santorum, the incumbent U.S. Senator — even though Casey's pro-life position on abortion puts him on the wrong side of a core Democratic issue.

Last month, Pennsylvania's Democrats gave Casey a landslide victory over two primary opponents, unifying the party behind an effort to beat Santorum, the third highest-ranking Senate Republican. These Democrats concluded — correctly — that the upside of beating the incumbent in November far outweighs the downside of running with a pro-life candidate.

After all, nothing would improve the political power of Democrats more this year than winning control of the Senate, putting them in position to block Republican efforts to further pursue their hard-core agenda. With control of the Senate and, with that, all of its committees, Democrats would be able to investigate the Bush administration's alleged malfeasance, conduct serious oversight of the administration's ongoing activities and keep dangerous proposals from becoming law or even coming to a vote on the Senate floor.

Charlie Cook, Washington's savviest political prognosticator, has given Democrats a shot at retaking the Senate if they defeat all of the most vulnerable Republican incumbents and win an open seat in Tennessee. But that prediction presumes Lieberman wins his primary — and then wins re-election, as he surely would.

A Lamont victory, however, would give Republicans a shot at the seat in November. If a Republican won it, Democrats could kiss goodbye the possibility of a Democrat-controlled Senate.

And for what? Other than on the war, Lieberman has always marched in lock-step with Democrats.

Surveying Senate votes last year, Congressional Quarterly found that Lieberman stuck with his party 90 percent of the time. The Democratic leader, Nevada's Harry Reid, stood at 92 percent, and Connecticut's Chris Dodd was at 94 percent. Lieberman's party-unity rating well outpaced those of such Democrats as Louisiana's Mary Landrieu (76), North Dakota's Kent Conrad (76), Montana's Max Baucus (74), and Nebraska's Ben Nelson (46).

The state's Democratic political establishment continues to stand strongly with Lieberman.

Core left-leaning groups continue to see him as a reliable friend. The League of Conservation Voters, Washington's most politically aggressive environmental group, endorsed his re-election, citing his national role in thwarting Republican efforts to open the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge to drilling and his effort to protect Connecticut's environment.

Among organized labor, Lieberman has won endorsements from unions of carpenters, bricklayers, letter carriers and other postal workers, communications workers, electricians, firefighters, hotel and restaurant workers and Teamsters. Also endorsing him are women's and gay and lesbian groups.

The fact is, from fiscal policy to the environment to the bread-and-butter issues that affect working families, Lieberman is a tried and true Democrat. His support for the war hardly merits an inter-party insurgency that could threaten Democrat control of that seat and the entire Senate.

Nearly two hundred years ago, Henry Clay declared that he'd "rather be right than be President." Stubborn to the point of obstinacy, he never reached the Oval Office and, in turn, never could bring his vision to the nation at large.

Will Connecticut's Democrats take the posture of Henry Clay, declaring that they would "rather be right" on the war and insist that everyone else must be as well — even to the point of jeopardizing their hold on the Senate seat?

If so, they better be prepared for the potential consequences — a new Republican Senator who votes with President Bush on not just the war but everything else, and a Senate that remains in Republican hands and continues to pursue an agenda that Democrats find so toxic.

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