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Lieberman Denounces Tilt to Left

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WASHINGTON, Aug. 4 — Staking out the political center, Senator Joseph I. Lieberman of Connecticut warned today that nominating Howard Dean, the former governor of Vermont, as the Democrat to face President Bush in 2004 would be "a ticket to nowhere."

During an appearance here at the National Press Club, Mr. Lieberman was asked about the increased attention in the news to Dr. Dean. Mr. Lieberman said: "A candidate who was opposed to the war against Saddam, who has called for the repeal of all of the Bush tax cuts — which would result in an increase in taxes on the middle class — I believe will not offer the kind of leadership America needs to meet the challenges that we face today."

Mr. Lieberman, one of nine Democrats competing for the nomination, was amplifying the concern expressed last week by the Democratic Leadership Council, the centrist organization that he once led and that famously propelled Bill Clinton and his "third way." The council's message was that Dr. Dean, and to a lesser extent Senator John Kerry of Massachusetts, are too far to the left and could lose in a landslide in November 2004 and leave their party in the political wilderness, a phrase that Mr. Lieberman repeated today.

"As I said in my prepared remarks," Mr. Lieberman said in response to a question about Dr. Dean, "I believe that that kind of candidate could lead the Democratic Party into the political wilderness for a long time to come. It could be, really, a ticket to nowhere."

Such blunt criticism of a fellow Democrat seemed a tacit admission both that Dr. Dean had emerged as the unofficial front-runner and that Mr. Lieberman was struggling to capture the popular imagination.

Mr. Lieberman, who was the Democratic vice-presidential nominee in 2000, has been leading his rivals in some national polls but trailing Dr. Dean and Senator Kerry in the important early-voting states of Iowa and New Hampshire.
Mr. Lieberman's supporters say that if he can make strong showings in those states, he is positioned to carry states like South Carolina and Arizona that vote next. He is, he argued today, the only candidate who can beat President Bush because he holds moderate views, like being strong on defense and supporting certain tax cuts, that correspond to those of most Americans.

Critics argue that Mr. Lieberman is benefiting in national polls from the name identification he earned in 2000 and that his campaign has so far lacked energy, vision and serious financial backing. Moreover, they say, his positioning himself as "Bush-Lite" gives voters no reason to oust the incumbent and choose him.

Trish Enright, a spokeswoman for Dr. Dean, said, "Governor Dean, unlike many Democrats in Washington, understands that the only way to beat George Bush is to stand up to him and bring more people into the political process." She said that comments like those from Mr. Lieberman only drew more voters to the Dean camp.

"That inside-the-Beltway vocabulary no longer really resonates," she said. "It's stale."

Stale is just how Mr. Lieberman characterized what he said was the leftward tilt of the primary field as he placed himself squarely in what he calls the Clintonian middle. He recalled that the former president ran against "the stale orthodoxies of left and right" and proved that Democrats "were not big on spending, soft on crime and weak on defense."

"I share the anger of my fellow Democrats with George Bush and the wrong direction he has taken this nation," Mr. Lieberman said. "But the answer to his outdated, extremist ideology is not to be found in the outdated extremes of our own."

He implicitly placed some of his rivals in that camp of the extreme. "Some said 'no' to eliminating Saddam Hussein, or were ambivalent about it, either before or after the war," Mr. Lieberman said in a veiled reference to Senator Kerry. "But we must not shrink from the use of force when our security or our values are at stake."

In a jab at Representative Richard A. Gephardt of Missouri, Mr. Lieberman said, "Some respond to the health-insurance crisis with a break-the-bank $2-trillion program, leaving no money to invest in jobs, to invest in our schools, to support our firefighters and cops, or shore up Social Security."

Mr. Lieberman calls himself an "independent-minded Democrat," a phrase that advisers said was designed to distinguish him from the pack and address the perception that he is more conservative than he is. "Because he has taken on Hollywood and talks about values, people associate him with the right," one said.

On the campaign trail, though, Mr. Lieberman emphasizes just those qualities. At a house party on Thursday in Nashua, N.H., with 75 people, he said of Mr. Bush: "I'll take him on where he's supposed to be strong, on experience and values." He added: "I'm not going to let them make us into an anti-values party."

The host, Elliot Lasky, 58, an optometrist, said that Mr. Lieberman was "the only candidate who bridges the gap of where the Democrats ought to be — strong on
defense and liberal on social issues."

But others were less certain. Doug Muder, 46, a computer software writer who so far has seen five of the Democratic candidates, said he had come to see Mr. Lieberman because he was "wondering if he was too conservative for me."

"I don't think I'll vote for him in the primary," he said, because he opposed the war and is leaning toward Dr. Dean. "But I was impressed enough that I won't be tempted to defect to the Green Party if he's nominated," Mr. Muder said of Mr. Lieberman.

Andy Smith, a political scientist at the University of New Hampshire in Durham, said that Mr. Lieberman appeared to have made the calculation that he had already lost the liberal "activists and elites" and was aiming his candidacy at blue-collar, middle-of-the-road voters who were not paying attention yet.

Mr. Lieberman's problem, Mr. Smith said, was a lack of charisma.

"He doesn't have that energy in him, and he's not seen as the hip candidate," he said. "Old Joe Lieberman, he's a good guy, staid, adult, but he's not catching fire and will have a difficult time catching fire because of the electorate and because of his characteristics as a speaker."