

The Left Prays, but the Right Pays

By MICHAEL MEDVED

NASHVILLE, Aug. 8—Vice presidential candidate Richard B. Cheney ignited a firestorm of criticism with a shrill appeal to religious fanaticism, combined with a gratuitous attack on President Clinton's marital failings. Speaking in glowing terms of his running mate, the former defense secretary intoned: "He has never, never wavered in his responsibilities as a father—as a husband—and, yes, as a servant of God Almighty!"

These remarks provoked protest from activists and public-interest groups. In a statement released within hours of Cheney's gaffe, People for the American Way declared: "By identifying one candidate as 'a servant of God Almighty,' Mr. Cheney implies that those who dare to oppose his agenda are, in effect, the enemies of God. This was one of the most God-soaked performances by a prominent politician since Pat Robertson's presidential campaign."

The Anti-Defamation League also warned of the intolerant implications in Cheney's address, noting that he mentioned God no fewer than 10 times within the first three minutes. Joe Andrew, spokesperson for the Democratic National Committee, demanded a retraction and apology "on behalf of all those who wish to keep religion from infecting our politics—and want to keep partisan politics from infecting our religion."

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It's understandable if you happened to miss this explosive story from last week's news, because I've altered one key detail in the partially fabricated account above. The words attributed to a vice-presidential candidate are accurate enough, as is the description of the context in which he delivered them, but it was Joseph Lieberman—not Mr. Cheney—who gave the speech in Nashville. Because the politician identifying his running mate as a "servant of God Almighty" represented the Religious Left rather than the Religious Right, we heard an eerie silence from the liberal watchdogs who normally snap and snarl if Republican candidates claim divine authority for their positions.

Talking Of God

When George W. Bush, in a primary-season debate, named Jesus Christ as his favorite political philosopher, he provoked scorn from the punditocracy. Those same talking heads offered only oohs and awe at Mr. Lieberman's God-talk in Tennessee. "Dear Lord, Maker of all miracles, I thank you for bringing me to this extraordinary moment in my life," the senator prayed in the midst of his speech. He also departed from his prepared text to cite the biblical book of Chronicles, to "give thanks to God and declare His name."

The double standard in the initial response from mainstream media to the Lieberman candidacy has been too glaring to ignore. Let George W. Bush make one brief visit to Bob Jones University and he receives months of acid criticism because that school forbids interracial dating and expresses disrespect for Catholicism. Meanwhile, Mr. Lieberman prays every week in Orthodox Jewish congregations

that refuse to recognize any marriage between a Jew and a non-Jew, reject conversions by non-Orthodox rabbis, insist on divided seating between men and women, and defy all notions of Barbara Boxer-Maxine Waters "morality" by opposing the ordination of females.

For many conservatives, Mr. Lieberman's personal commitment to the politically incorrect tenets of traditional Judaism represents the most appealing aspect

Republicans who cite God a lot get pilloried as budding Ayatollahs. But when a Democrat like Mr. Lieberman does it, no one minds.

of his candidacy. As an observant Jew myself, and for 15 years president of precisely the sort of modern Orthodox congregation that Mr. Lieberman attends, I'm personally grateful for the way his candidacy has (so far) attracted respectful attention for our common faith. For years, Mr. Lieberman's high-profile example served as an inspiration for all those who struggle with traditional rules of Sabbath observance and kosher food—and all religious believers ought to welcome his warm-hearted references to God and the Bible in the public square.

As the campaign unfolds, perhaps Mr. Lieberman will even speak up for the right of others to make similar references without angry responses from secular fundamentalists—even if those others happen to be Republican and Christian.

Why has this double standard flourished so shamelessly in America? The answer lies in the basic assumption by most in the media that liberals are at heart good people—so that any expression of religiosity only seems to amplify and reflect that core goodness. Conventional wisdom holds, on the other hand, that a conservative outlook emerges from selfishness and cruelty, so that when a conservative speaks of religious faith it is merely an attempt to mask his inherent heartlessness with "Elmer Gantry" pieties. When "progressives" (Jesse Jackson, Bill Clinton and the Rev. Robert Drinan) cite religious sources in public debate, they do so to "uplift" or "inspire" America. If conservatives refer to the same biblical authority, then they are cast as Ayatollahs who want "to ram their values down our throats."

In addition to resisting this hypocritical dismissal of religious conservatives, one can also hope that Mr. Lieberman will avoid an already evident tendency to patronize his own Orthodox faith—depicting it as a collection of quaint customs devoid of a clear message on the moral issues of our time. On "Larry King Live," in his maiden interview as a vice presidential

nominee, the senator was asked about one of these issues—abortion—and the apparent contradiction between Orthodox Judaism's anti-abortion strictures and his own record of support for even partial-birth abortion.

In response, Mr. Lieberman danced deceptively around the issue by pointing out rabbinic debate over where to draw the line between life and "potential life"—without noting that Jewish law also demands respect for "potential life" and sanctions abortion only when the life of the mother is directly threatened. He then added words that might rightly appall religious believers of all faiths: "It's a matter of personal judgment," he told Mr. King. "And like everything else in Judaism, ultimately, it's up to each of us to decide what we think is right."

Like everything else in Judaism, Mr. Lieberman? When God gave the Ten Commandments and told human beings not to steal, or commit adultery, did he really suggest that it's up to each of us to decide what we think is right? If we can each make personal judgments about what constitutes moral behavior, then by what right did Mr. Lieberman, in the most famous speech of his career, condemn the choices of President Clinton? Jews of the senator's comments to Mr. King might well take away the impression that Orthodox Judaism is strict and unbending when it comes to kosher kitering or avoiding automobiles on the Sabbath, but infinitely flexible concerning respect for human life and other tormenting moral issues.

On abortion, gay rights, integrated barracks for male and female soldiers, and a host of other issues, Mr. Lieberman's political positions undeniably diverge from Orthodox Jewish teaching. He could easily explain this contradiction by acknowledging the clear personal obligations Jewish law imposes on all its adherents, but noting that he considers it inappropriate in a nation that is 98% non-Jewish to attempt to write those religious commandments into secular statute books.

Instead of emphasizing the important distinction between duties to God and the demands of the state, he made a clumsy attempt to conflate Judaism and relativism, to identify an ancient and unmistakably judgmental religious system with contemporary, gelatinous, follow-your-feelings solipsism. It was, to put it mildly, not the senator's finest hour.

The Real Barrier

As endlessly noted by the press, Mr. Lieberman's candidacy has already broken barriers. If he finds a firmer footing in his new role in the months ahead, the senator may yet break down even more important barriers. Beyond partisan politics, he can use the indisputable fact that the media cut him extra slack as a Democrat and a Jew to move the nation toward more open, honest talk of God, of the Bible and of religious faith as a valid element of our public discourse.

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