

What Hath God Wrought?

Lieberman and the Right

By DAVID FIRESTONE

TWELVE years ago, lashing out at his opponent, Senator Lowell P. Weicker Jr. accused Joseph Lieberman of espousing the "Jesse Helms-Jerry Falwell-Pat Robertson platform" by advocating a moment of silence in public schools.

Was Mr. Lieberman, an Orthodox Jew and political moderate, somehow aligned with a group Mr. Weicker characterized as the "extreme right wing"? Connecticut voters apparently ignored the charge, and a few months later Mr. Lieberman was sitting in Mr. Weicker's seat.

Last week, however, many of those same religious conservatives found themselves admiring Mr. Lieberman's advocacy of a spiritual foundation to American public life, even as they wondered how he got away with saying it. Now the Democratic vice-presidential candidate, Mr. Lieberman has continued to espouse a greater role for faith, but was rebuked by the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith only when he suggested last Sunday that belief in God is the basis of true morality. The group said such an appeal "is contrary to the American ideal." Mr. Lieberman later backed away from his comment.

Many Christians from divergent political strata quickly came to Mr. Lieberman's defense, saying they had been advocating the same things for years yet they had been vilified. Forest Montgomery, of the National Association of Evangelicals, said members of his group were "very comfortable with everything the senator's been saying," even as they chafed at a double standard applied by the news media. The Dr. Richard D. Land, president of the Southern Baptist Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, said he was delighted at Mr. Lieberman's stance, but added that if an evangelical Christian had said the same things, he would have been accused of promoting theocracy.

"There remains, in the national media and many of the country's elites, an extreme prejudice against evangelicals, who are seen as threatening," said Dr. Land, who is an ordained minister. "But just as it

took Nixon to go to China, maybe it will require an Orthodox Jew to restore to its rightful place the role of religion in this society. Because if it desirable for an Orthodox Jew to say these things, it should certainly be kosher for an evangelical or a Roman Catholic to do so."

But, in fact, Mr. Lieberman's message —

and his nature as a messenger — is substantially different from that of Christian conservatives over the last 20 years. Evangelicals believe that their mission is to spread the Gospel of Jesus to all nonbelievers; the Southern Baptist Convention's Web site describes its "strategy for evangelizing the world" by "aggressively pursuing con-

verts." As a Jew, without a sectarian mandate to proselytize, Mr. Lieberman bears none of the baggage of the religious salesman, and is thus more palatable to a wider public.

"Since there's no fear that he will evangelize or poke into your personal affairs, he sets up a perfectly designed experiment," said Alan Wolfe, director of the Center for Religion and American Public Life at Boston College. "Now we'll be able to see how much American unease there is about the subject, once they don't have to worry about the intrusiveness of the messenger."

There is a carefully calibrated blandness, too, about Mr. Lieberman's presentation that is designed to appeal to a wide audience. Many religious scholars say the senator's airy, almost generic soufflé of faith and policy recalls an older, nonsectarian spiritual underpinning to government that has stronger roots than the hard-edged prescriptions of the religious right.

Many conservatives have linked their beliefs to a set of specific policies that do not always enjoy widespread support, such as an opposition to abortion, a rejection of homosexuality or support for school prayer. Mr. Lieberman says his support for subsidizing medication for the elderly grows out of the Fifth Commandment's insistence on

respect for parents. But in general he has not invoked faith to justify any measure that is considered politically divisive.

"Most Americans like to have their politics informed by morality, and their morality informed by religion, but they don't believe religion should be used by politicians to justify a particular piece of legislation," said Martin E. Marty, the religious historian. "Lieberman is very much in that mild tradition of Dwight Eisenhower, trying not to disturb anyone."

In stressing the religious foundation of American society and government, Mr. Lieberman is advocating what has been called the country's "civil religion," the spiritual but nonsectarian ties that bind America's majority of believers, of whatever faith. The term, which originated with Rousseau and was modernized by the sociologist Robert N. Bellah in the 1980's, encompasses the basic beliefs that led the Founders to proclaim that the Creator had endowed man with certain "inalienable rights."

"This was the common stock of political thought in the 18th century," said Mr. Bellah, co-author of "Habits of the Heart" (University of California Press, 1996) and a sociologist at the University of California in Berkeley. "As Tocqueville wrote, a religious foundation was particularly necessary in a democratic society, because it depends on the self-control of its citizens. Without those inner guidelines, democracy would never have worked."

BUT faith can be used to justify any number of political positions, and over time, Americans have learned to be uncomfortable with that. In the early years of this country, ministers cited passages in the Bible to justify slavery. Later on in this century, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. grounded the civil rights movement in the same document. Today, in South Carolina, there are religious people on both sides of a proposed state lottery for education that is on the ballot in November. Many religious opponents of abortion believe Mr. Lieberman is a hypocrite for advocating faith while supporting abortion rights.

"His voting record on abortion is in direct contradiction to the teaching of his faith," said Holly Gatling, executive director of South Carolina Citizens for Life. "Where is his faith when it comes to the unborn?" Mr. Lieberman has said that Orthodox Judaism considers abortion to be a personal matter, although many Orthodox Jews disagree.

But many of those unhappy with the senator's votes are still pleased that he has cast them in moral terms, convinced that he has now opened the doors for others to do the same.

"To say the Lord says we should vote a certain way is a debasement of religion that verges on sacrilege," said the Rev. Richard John Neuhaus, a Catholic priest who is editor of First Things, a conservative religious journal. "But there's nothing wrong with making policy proposals in frankly moral terms, which used to be the norm in this society. The only thing strange about what Senator Lieberman is saying is that people think it's strange."

A Sampler: Invoking an Even Higher Authority

George W. Bush, at the annual convention of B'nai B'rith International in Washington on Monday.

"Our nation is chosen by God and commissioned by history to be a model to the world of justice and inclusion and diversity without division. Jews and Christians and Muslims speak as one in the commitment to a kind, just, tolerant society."

Al Gore in an interview on Tuesday at a television station in St. Louis.

"He [Lieberman] also believes, as I do, in separation of church and state. I believe in what he's saying. He's a man of

great faith and I knew that when I selected him."

Joseph I. Lieberman at Fellowship Chapel, affiliated with the United Church of Christ, Detroit, on Sunday.

"As a people, we need to reaffirm our faith and renew the dedication of our nation and ourselves to God and God's purposes."

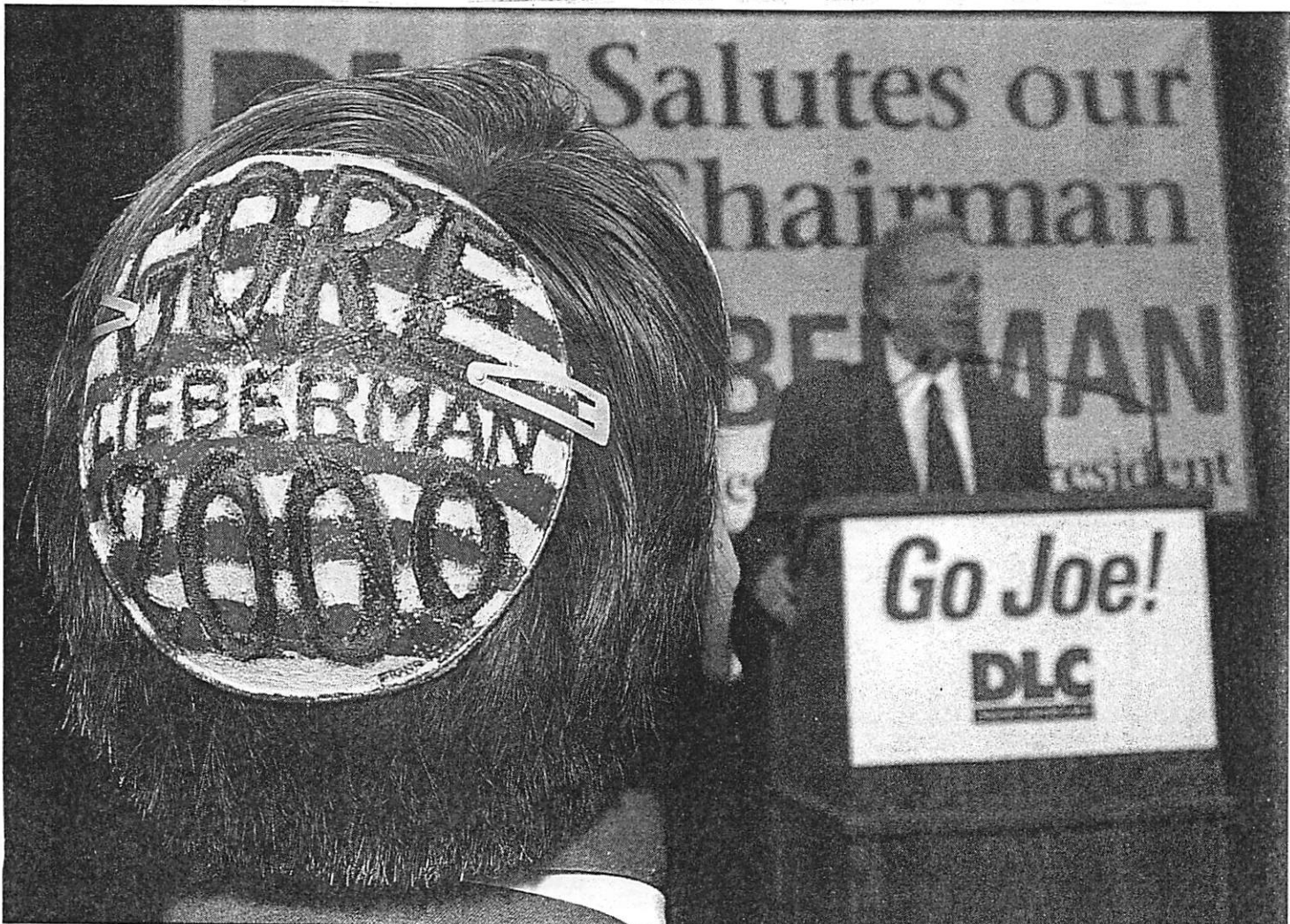
Mr. Lieberman in a Monday interview.

"Religion in my opinion can be, and in my opinion usually is, a source of good behavior. But two things: I know religious

people who I consider not to be moral, and I also know people who are not religious who I consider to be extremely moral. So ... I'm talking here about probabilities."

Dick Cheney at the Fellowship of Christian Athletes national headquarters in Kansas City, Mo., on Tuesday.

"We can recognize organizations like the Fellowship of Christian Athletes. It doesn't require anyone to buy into a particular set of religious beliefs or philosophical concerns. We have a lot of groups out there, Christian, Muslim, Jewish, that do good work in the community."



The Gore-Lieberman ticket endorsed on a yarmulke in Los Angeles.