COMMENTARY

A centrist who must woo the left, Lieberman walks a narrow line

The senator can best serve by remaining true to his beliefs.

By David Finkle

Discussing Joseph Lieberman's accommodation on the Democratic ticket, a television commentator noted this week that the outspoken Connecticut senator "must now be brought to heel."

The phrase, of course, has a trained-dog connotation that must make Lieberman enthusiasts — among whom I count myself — wince, but it reminded me of a time when the surprise nominee did bring himself to heel.

It was back in Lieberman's college days. When he was an undergraduate, he was on the staff of the Yale Daily News, as has already been mentioned nationally by, for instance, David Gergen, who was also on that staff.

So was I.

Nobody in the '60s — or for many years before — simply walked into the OCD (for "Oldest College Daily") building, announced he wanted to report, and was welcomed gleefully, given a typewriter, a press pass and an assignment.

Aspirants had to complete an apprenticeship known as "heeling." For eight weeks, the men hoping to add their names to the masthead were tested by covering routine stories. These lowly scribes were called "heelers" and were expected to execute their duties in the heelers' room, a cathedral-like stone enclave, the walls of which were covered with pages from ancient issues of the Yale Daily News.

Joe Lieberman passed all tests with flying colors. What you see today is in large measure what you got 40 years ago.

Not only was the senator as obviously intelligent, concerned and authentic as he is now, he also looked about the same. At 18, he had the craggy face made even craggier by a ready smile. He was already someone nearly impossible to dislike, no matter how much you might have disagreed with his political beliefs. (And, trust me, the OCD was rife with across-the-spectrum politicians — the Bill Buckley, '50s influence still in the dusty air.)

So the literal truth is that Joe Lieberman knows firsthand about heeling. The question becomes: Is it time for him to heel — to toe the line — again?

To some extent, Lieberman is in a lose-lose situation. Already he's being damned if he does and damned if he doesn't — knocked by his own party and Republicans as well for his stand on, say, affirmative action. If he falls in with Al Gore's notions about, say, school vouchers, he's seen as caving; if he sticks to his convictions, he and Al Gore are seen as worrisomely disunited.

Wait a minute. Is absolute unity a condition to be devoutly — and Lieberman does nothing if not devoutly — sought? The Republicans sneering at the Gore-Lieberman teaming for its occasional clashes are the same people attempting to tar Gore for his close association with Bill Clinton's policies. One of Al Gore's biggest challenges — possibly his biggest — is declaring himself independent of the President.

It's a situation, by the way, he partially brought on himself. When you think about it, how self-destructive might it actually have been if he had been the one, rather than Lieberman, to speak out publicly about the President's moral lapses?

At the end of the day, isn't it healthier — wouldn't the public understand it as more real — if a president and vice president were observed acknowledging whatever differences exist between them and either agreeing or agreeing to disagree?

Wouldn't it be far better for the country were Lieberman — or any vice presidential candidate, for that matter — to replace heeling with making himself available to keep a partner on his toes?

David Finkle is a freelance writer in New York. His e-mail address is finkledr@aol.com



TIM BRINTON

An eloquent speech, slightly tarnished by a shopworn message.

By Alvin S. Felzenberg

Democrats think they have found a way to transcend the schizophrenia that characterized their convention: They will present their tired, shopworn message through more likable messengers.

They are gambling that voters will fall so in love with their newest national figure that they will not listen too closely to what he says. That strategy was much in evidence in Sen. Joseph Lieberman's eloquent and stunning vice presidential acceptance speech Wednesday night.

Lieberman's talk was appealing not for what he said but for who he is: the son of hard-working immigrants, a good and decent man, a person of faith, and the first Jew to join a national ticket.

Lieberman used his prime-time debut to reassure the middle class about the Democratic Party. His well-known disdain for Bill Clinton's private actions and his outspoken criticism of Hollywood values and greed render him the Democrat most capable of commanding their respect.

After he spoke of a future that consisted of more than the "size of the feast but the number of people at the table," Lieberman cast himself and Gore as the next in a line of leaders who broaden opportunities for more Americans. Most of his listeners were not surprised that he mentioned Presidents Lincoln, Roosevelt and Clinton. Some delegates, though, may have had to be strapped into their seats when he uttered the name *Reagan*.

This was the second time the Connecticut senator evoked Reagan's memory at the convention. Referring to Gore's wife at a rally, he playfully turned a favored Reagan phrase to the Democrats' advantage when he said, "Let's win one for the Tipper."

Lieberman's references to Reagan were certain to attract the attention of "Reagan Democrats" (Southern whites, Catholics, suburbanites, blue-collar men), who may once again decide an election. Once he commanded it, though, he spoke less to their concerns than to those of the old-guard Democratic base.

Doing Gore's bidding, he had kind words for teachers and environmentalists and unkind ones for oil companies and across-the-board tax cuts. He said once again that he no longer has any qualms about affirmative action.

Lieberman, the "new Democrat," might have done well to have lifted a line from a promising Democrat who mounted the podium the previous night: Rep. Harold E. Ford Jr.

Just as liberal as his elders on most issues, this Generation Xer (and the only African American to deliver the keynote since Barbara Jordan 24 years ago) spoke of his peers' yearning to enter the private economy, where they could create wealth. He was the only speaker in three days to suggest that the path to a good and just society extends beyond expanded government programs. In his votes and in past speeches, Lieberman also has shown himself aware that the way out of poverty lies in the acquisition of capital rather than in handouts. Alas, the guardians of liberal orthodoxy were in no mood to hear it in Los Angeles.

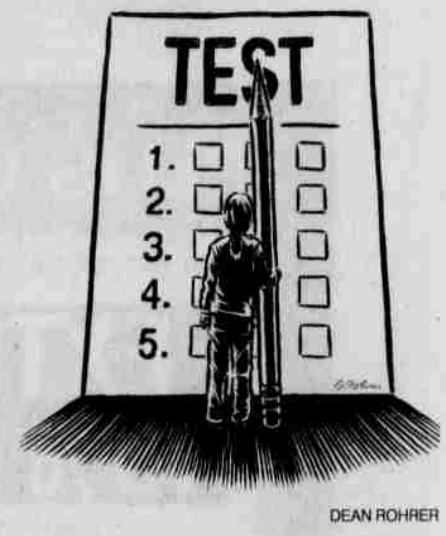
The Democrats' strategy of talking left through a centrist voice is — to borrow a phrase from Al Gore — risky. Unless Gore comes up with something else — and soon — undecided voters will continue to admire Lieberman but vote for Bush.

Win or lose, the odds are strong that this gentle man from Connecticut will be addressing many more conventions — perhaps from a position where he gets to call the shots.

Alvin S. Felzenberg, a visiting fellow at the Heritage Foundation, writes, comments and lectures about the American presidency.

David Boldt *Alarms and Diversions*

Speech by NEA president actively skirted the truth



DEAN ROHRER

The Democratic convention did some good things for Al Gore's candidacy, but the speech Wednesday night by National Education Association President Bob Chase left a dark cloud hanging over the events in Los Angeles.

Even in the realm of political rhetoric, it's rare to encounter remarks as deliberately misleading as his, particularly in regard to the state of education in the state of Texas. The charges he leveled, such as the accusation that state spending on education in Texas is "at its lowest level in 14 years," were baffling since state spending on education has increased 37 percent under Gov. George W. Bush.

It turns out Chase was referring to state spending as a percentage of total education spending, state and local, a meaning few listeners would likely grasp. Jay Greene, a former professor of government at the University of Texas who is now a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute, said Chase exhibited "a callous disregard for the truth."

Leaving aside questions about the factoids in his speech, Chase's larger act of mendacity was to ignore the overarching fact that Texas has produced impressive gains in student achievement that show public schools can indeed improve.

Texas' education spending increased 37 percent under Gov. George W. Bush.

The Democrats can claim Bush doesn't deserve all the credit for this because it results from high-stakes testing and other reforms by his Democratic predecessor. There are several grains of truth in that.

They can also argue about the reasons for the improvement, which, besides testing, may include more early childhood programs, smaller class size, more contracting out of school operations and charter schools.

The teachers unions, of which Chase's in the largest, might actually want to seize on the fact that the Texas breakout was achieved without tuition vouchers. (On the other hand, there has been the threat that a voucher plan would be enacted, and Texas is a hotbed of privately financed voucher experiments.)

What neither Chase nor anyone else can do at this point is ignore that this phenomenon is taking place. What makes Chase's willingness to do just that so unnerving is that he represents an organization that seems to have a first mortgage on Al Gore's political soul.

The political power of teachers unions is awesome. About 12 percent of the Democratic delegates belong to teachers unions, according to the Wall Street Journal. The NEA has reportedly said it will donate $7 million to political candidates and causes this year. The teachers unions' ability to turn out the vote is legendary.

So what, exactly, is the Texas story? To begin with, there has been a dramatic improvement in the scores on the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills. The percentage of students passing the tenth-grade test, has risen from 53 percent in 1994 to 78 percent in 1998. Moreover, the pass rate for black and Hispanic students has gone up even faster.

Much like the initial reports of crime reduction in New York City, these results have been assailed from all sides. As recently as this spring, an article in the Washington Post declared that the results on the state test "aren't backed up by other tests," such as the national tests administered by the National Assessment of Education Progress.

However, last month a detailed report on NAEP results from 1990 to 1996 done by the Rand Corp. showed that Texas' scores on those tests were in the top group of five states. When Texas' results were assessed by comparing students from similar family backgrounds, Texas students came in first. The author of the study said Texas remained in that position when the 1998 NAEP reading test was included.

The Texas tests unquestionably have had some problems, including various forms of cheating and allegations that they're too easy. Another complaint, which Chase repeated, is that Texas has a high dropout rate. It does, but Texas has a big Hispanic population and nationally, Hispanic students are particularly likely to leave school early.

However, the available evidence indicates that the scores have continued to go up even as the abuses have been curtailed; the dropout rate has declined. There may be much to debate about Texas' achievements, but Chase made it clear Wednesday that he'd simply rather not talk about it.

David Boldt's column appears on Tuesday and Fridays. His e-mail address is dboldt@compuserve.com

Tomorrow: Olympic athletes and doping; New economy vs. old economy in the Verizon strike.

How the Democrats looked on TV

By Gerald Kolpan

The Inquirer asked me to use my experience as a TV professional to grade the TV performances of the major players at the Republican National Convention. My judgments reaped a reasonable amount of hate e-mail.

In the interest of equal time, The Inquirer has asked me to rate the Democrats. How fair I've been should be approximately commensurate with the amount of personal attacks on my politics, parentage and erotic practices generated by this column. So please readers, don't be shy.

That said, on to Monday night.

Hillary Rodham Clinton. The first lady hit the stage to the strains of "New York, New York." That's a little like playing the "Missouri Waltz" for Nelson Rockefeller. Not her fault, but tacky all the same.

Hillary looked great. The slightly military outfit combined with a hairdo finally gotten right provided both an attractive appearance and an air of authority.

But if Hillary were in our business, she'd definitely be working at PBS. Her speaking voice, while pleasant, has the kind of neutrality it probably took Judy Woodruff years to attain. Hillary also has the disconcerting habit of smiling with a mouth that doesn't invite her eyes to the party. **Grade B-.**

President Clinton. What can I say? From the dramatic "man alone" walk down the Staples Center corridor, to the slight curl of the upper lip, Bill Clinton gives credence to all the conspiracy nuts who believe that Elvis Presley is alive and living in the White house. Few from either party would argue that Clinton, whatever you may think of his politicsand morality, is America's finest actor, and it shows every time he makes a speech.

And while most presidents begin their terms as handsome, useful men, they invariably end them looking like hell. With Clinton, it's just the opposite. He started in '92 as a pudgy, red-faced schlub and finished up as a tall, slender matinee idol. If this address was truly "the comeback kid's" last hurrah, then we can all say good-bye to a communicator *par excellence*. Elvis has left the building. **A+.**

Tuesday. Caroline Kennedy Schlossberg. Schlossberg's speech Tuesday night certainly proves that public speaking prowess is not necessarily an inherited trait. To be fair, Caroline is not really a public figure, except by birth, and anyone who comes to see her probably agrees with her already. But if you are going to talk to an entire convention of the party your family once ran, a little less droning is definitely in order. Caroline suffers from the same problem that plagues Dick Cheney: lack of dynamics.

As far as her "look" went, Ms. Schlossberg does possess the handsome Kennedy features and I, for one, find overbites attractive. However, in the TV business, bare arms are definitely a no-no. **C-.**

Ted Kennedy. The second biggest surprise of the evening: Kennedy failed to live up to his reputation for fiery oratory. Perhaps it was the tightness of a suit and shirt from which he seemed to be bursting that caused Kennedy's voice to keep breaking. Even so, he did have the advantage of a speech that was well-written and heartfelt. Perhaps the best portion of the address was the device that read, "That is called progress, not partisanship ... and that is Al Gore's way!"

Watching the Old Warhorse of Liberalism, one had to wonder if his performance signaled the end of the party left as we know it? Not that Clinton and Gore think that's a *bad* thing. **B.**

Bill Bradley. The *biggest* surprise of the evening. This certainly was the finest performance I've seen by the usually sleep-inducing former senator from New Jersey. With his dynamic of pitch and tone, and his uncharacteristic employment of *actual facial expressions*, Bradley galvanized an audience that could have easily been lulled into dreamland by the Kennedys.

The most dramatic moment of Bradley's speech offered a stark contrast to that of his also-vanquished counterpart, Sen. John McCain. When McCain offered his endorsement of George W. Bush a fortnight ago, he looked as if he was choking on a Philips Academy basketball; there was no such crushed windpipe dramatics with Dollar Bill. His endorsement seemed open and sincere — or at least as sincere as it gets in an election year. **A.**

Gerald Kolpan (g.kolpan@dca.net) is features reporter for WTXF, Fox Philadelphia and the Fox News Channel.



Reproduced with permission of copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.