

CONVERSATIONS

WITH BILL KRISTOL

Conversations with Bill Kristol

Guest: Senator Joseph Lieberman

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I: Gore-Lieberman 2000 (0:15 – 20:20)

KRISTOL: Hi, I'm Bill Kristol. Welcome back to CONVERSATIONS. And I'm very pleased today to have as our guest Senator Joe Lieberman. Thanks for joining us, Joe.

LIEBERMAN: Great to be with you, Bill. Thank you.

KRISTOL: And I've looked forward to discussing your long, distinguished, varied, interesting career in public life. Maybe I'll begin by just asking you is there one moment that stands out? What's the most when you wake up late at night, what's the one moment, flashback moment that comes to you first when you think about that long and distinguished career?

LIEBERMAN: So, I've been lucky. I've had a lot of great moments. I mean I suppose the – when I got elected to the Senate in 1988 as an upset winner, that was a big moment. In 2006 after I lost the Democratic primary, ran as an Independent and won. That was really a thrilling moment, maybe the most thrilling.

But really the most memorable moment, I would say, would have to be the barrier-breaking opportunity that Al Gore gave me when he asked me to be his running mate in 2000 as Vice President, and then that whole campaign and then the remarkable aftermath of it. But it was – it was thrilling.

KRISTOL: I remember hearing about your pick. I was at a beach house. I remember it seems like very early in the morning the news broke; I did a radio interview, instant analysis. Knowing nothing, I, of course, was happy to pontificate about it. But I mean so how did it happen, how does a vice presidential pick – but afterwards, everyone said, "Oh, Gore-Lieberman, sure." But it was a surprise at the time, as I recall. Was it a – to me, it was. It was to you?

LIEBERMAN: It was to me, too. I would say to make a long story short, once I got into politics, really my dream was, if you'd asked me when I started out, was to be a U.S. Senator. And I had realized that dream. I never dreamed of being on a national ticket. So how does it start – I mean, I'll try to do this so this is not the whole conversation but –

KRISTOL: You're a Senator from Connecticut and Al Gore gets the Democrat nomination.

LIEBERMAN: Yeah, I'm a Senator from Connecticut. I know – I know Al. We've served together. We worked on things together. And it's probably April of 2000 and, maybe it's March, and Warren Christopher, the former Secretary of State, asked, "If you can come by and see me in my office," and he says that Al Gore has asked him to chair the selection committee for Vice President. And I had known Christopher some, particularly on Aspen Institute programs, which he had chaired on relations between the former Soviet Union and the U.S. Anyway, we had spent time together.

So he came to the office and he told me what he was doing and he said, "I wanted to ask you for people you would recommend that Al Gore think about." I'm talking to a lot of people, so I mentioned some people. And then he said, "Would you be interested in being considered?" So, you know, I naturally said, "Well, it'd be an honor. I can't imagine it's plausible. But, yes, sure."

So that was that, and then he – I think that might have been it for that conversation and then he called me back and said – this was probably early May. I remember it because I took the call in the house. And there may have been one in between in this in, but the house here in Washington. And my wife, Hadassah, and our youngest daughter, Hani, were there. And it was Christopher and he said, "We've gone all over the names and Al is – would like very much to put you on the short list to be considered. Are you – is that okay? You may want to talk to your wife." And there had been one conversation in between where he said that I was under active consideration. And my wife and I had talked about it. Again, we said, you know, "This is really an unexpected turn of events. It's exciting and thrilling, it's awesome. It's not going to happen, but if they really want to vet me, then, of course, we'll do it." I said that to him.

I remember we had a funny conversation in which he said, "You may want to think about it because this vetting process is very painful. We're going to go everything in your life." And I'm trying to remember whether it was me – because I knew Christopher well enough – he said, "It's like a medical procedure without an anesthesia." So I said, "You mean sort of like a colonoscopy without – anyway – without a painkiller?" "Yes." So I said, "Yes, if he wants to."

And then Hani and Hadassah were – I remember this – were not in the room where I took the call and I said, to paint a picture for you, I said, "Come on down." We had our living room/dining room and there were steps upstairs. I said, "Sit on the steps. I want to –" I pulled a dining room chair out and I looked at both of them on the steps and I said – I told them the story. "Oh my God!" So that began a vetting process.

I remember that Mike Berman who was a friend of mine who had been Walter Mondale's campaign manager and he heard I was being vetted and he said I – he called me up and he said, "I'm really glad they're looking at you." He said, "Honestly, everything is going to be turned upside down in your life." It's interesting because they had the problem with Mondale and Ferraro that – So he said, "Go home tonight. Tell Hadassah to sit down at the table. You sit down directly opposite her. Look her straight in the eye and say, 'Sweetheart, is there anything about your past life that I don't know because if there is something I should know, it's going to come out, they're going to find it.'" And she said, "Oh, don't worry about it. It's fine."

So they chose attorney Jamie Gorelick, who was – she had been in the Clinton Administration. And I knew her a little bit, not much – to head the vetting team. They had something like six or seven people working on it. It really was exhaustive. I mean, I remember they told me they sent somebody up to New Haven to read my editorials while I was the editor and chairman of the *Yale Daily News*. And I remember that they said that the two most radical things I did was, one, to call for the recognition of a country that was then known as Red China. And the second was that I was a very fervent advocate for co-education at Yale. Neither one of those was –

KRISTOL: Did much damage.

LIEBERMAN: Did much damage. So the – and we're all keeping it quiet. I mean, I actually had a friend named Jonathan Salad who was in between jobs, a lawyer. And I realized they were asking for an enormous amount of personal information, financial. I needed somebody really to organize this. So we quietly hired him for not very much and he did a great job at pulling everything together.

KRISTOL: You kept this totally quiet, I mean your own staff, Senate staff didn't know –

LIEBERMAN: We kept it very quiet. Really Jonathan was separate. We made sure that the Senate, only one person in the office, my Chief of Staff and my executive assistant who knew. But no one else did. Later on, one of my key people said, "I kept wondering why was Jonathan Salad around," you know, after it came out. They spoke to a lot of people about me.

I'll add this, Bill, because it is interesting. This is a – this is a process. I mean, the selection by a presidential nominee – and by that time, Al Gore was the clear nominee – is one of the most sort of singular unilateral exercises of authority in American politics because it's not that the nominee for president doesn't talk to people but basically he or she can do – choose whoever they want. And it's not, clearly, this is all quiet, covert but there's also a way in which you want to advance your cause but you want to do it subtly.

And so you know my colleague from Connecticut, Chris Dodd, I took into my confidence. And you will not be surprised to hear that there were some people on the left of the party that we thought might not be enthusiastic about it even then. So he talked to some of the labor unions and some of the education groups, civil rights groups. And then things happened that are totally accidental. A friend of mine that was a businessman – I'll mention him, he passed away, he deserves credit – Sam Hayman. He sensed that I was being considered. He called me up and he said, you know, "By coincidence, Al Gore's brother-in-law, his name was Frank Hunger, has represented me in cases and I'm pretty friendly with him. I'm going to make a pitch to him about why you're the right nominee." And he did. And in a very eloquent letter, really flattering. And you know who knows because Frank Hunger was quite close to Al at that time. So –

KRISTOL: So this all goes on behind the scenes? And then – and then at some moment –

LIEBERMAN: Goes on behind the scenes. And then it's going a little later than normally it does but we're about, oh, probably we're within a week of the convention. And what my wife began to call the bobbing heads on television, that is the rumored nominees, some of which were real and some of which never, I found later, were considered. But the rumored possible selections in that last weekend when it was leaked that Al Gore was going to make his choice were down to – they're really quite a threesome – John Kerry, John Edwards, and me. And –

KRISTOL: But at this point, you haven't had a direct conversation with Vice President Gore?

LIEBERMAN: So – a very important question, about a week or 10 days before this, I get a call from the vice president's office that he's now interviewing the sort of short list, so to speak. It was probably five or six people. And in a really ornate process, they told me that a fellow named Philip Dufour who was sort of the Chief of Staff at the residence is going to come and pick me up in a van with tinted windows at my house and drive me in the back way to the vice president's residence.

So I went in and I had a conversation. And in a way, it was awkward because Al and I are friends, we were fairly close then. But he really has to interview me and you know we went over some of the things. And he too asked me is there anything about your past that we haven't found out that I should know because it is going to come out.

KRISTOL: It's just the two of you?

LIEBERMAN: It's just the two of us and no staff and it was a cordial conversation. I mean I knew him well enough to joke a little bit. And that was it. I mean it was clear to me that I was being considered but I still had no knowledge. The weekend before, we were in New Haven where we lived and as I ended up being one of the final three, the house is surrounded by an increasing number of satellite TV trucks, were all around. It's an amazing – and my neighbors are pouring out and everybody is wondering what's going to happen. So we hear the decision is going to be made on a Sunday night and interestingly –

KRISTOL: So this I think a week before the convention, is that right?

LIEBERMAN: The conventions, this is August already.

KRISTOL: Right so the convention is going to be a week later –

LIEBERMAN: Yeah it's going to follow, it's going to start a week Monday.

So this is Sunday night. We know that the decision is being made. I had people sort of close in the Gore campaign who are telling us things. About that evening, my mother had come up from Stanford. She was then about 80, maybe 85, actually. And I get a call from my press secretary. He tells me he's just heard from somebody at one of the networks and he's sorry to have to be the one to tell me but they've heard from inside that they've selected John Edwards. So, I – you know, I pull out a bottle of wine, I bring the family together. I said, you know, "This was incredible that we got this close," and we have a toast to America and everything, isn't it wonderful?

And we go to sleep but the TV trucks are out there and I get up in the morning and I flip the remote on about 5 of 7 before – I'm still in bed with Hadassah. And the local TV anchor is saying, "Now, let me just repeat that really exciting news. The AP is reporting that Vice President Gore has chosen our own Senator Joe Lieberman to be his running mate." What?

KRISTOL: So you see this on TV before you get a phone call from anyone?

LIEBERMAN: I didn't get a phone call. I wake Hadassah up. All hell breaks loose. I'll tell you about not getting a phone call from Al Gore.

I mean, if you want a little local color. One of my few jobs, as Hadassah would tell you, in the house is I make the coffee in the morning. So it's August. I'm in my underwear. So I walk down into the kitchen to make the coffee and there are TV cameras at each of the windows. So I go hit the floor.

Anyway, we saw things were changing. And people started to call about 7:30. I'm upstairs. Hadassah yells up, "Joe, it's Al." So I pick up the phone and the voice on the other end says, "This is fantastic." I said, "Who is this?" "Al Fromm."

KRISTOL: A Democratic political –

LIEBERMAN: He was a political guy. Actually, weirdly enough, I had a longstanding previous commitment to speak in Hartford that morning at the state labor convention and I still didn't know – I thought it was real, I still didn't know, so my campaign manager, Sherry Brown, I called in Hartford. And I said, "Can you talk to somebody and" –

KRISTOL: Plus, you're on the ballot this year for reelection.

LIEBERMAN: I'm on the ballot for Senator, right, so that's why I'm going to the labor convention. So she calls and she says, "Yep, they say it's real, go to the convention, they want you to go and make a speech." And so we drive up. And I finally hear from Al. You know, I never actually asked why he didn't

call me earlier. I'm coming back to New Haven after I made the speech. It was probably 12:30 by that time. He calls me in the car. Of course, at that time, we had these enormous car phones.

KRISTOL: There's no email. People, sort of, I'm, young people watching are thinking, "Well, didn't they email or text," but there's no email at this point?

LIEBERMAN: Email, no. I know. So then he says, "You probably heard I want you to be my running mate." I'll tell you a quick story. Stop me if I'm going too long.

About two weeks later, a really fine reporter named Ron Fournier who at that point was with the AP rides to Wilmington, Delaware, for a campaign stop and he tells me, "I've got to tell you a story," because he was the one who broke the news because by that time, the Gore campaign didn't trust most of the press. So they gave it to Claire Shipman who broke on – I think she might have been with the *Today Show* at that point or maybe with ABC, maybe ABC. And Fournier.

And he told me – I'll tell you the story quickly – that they were going to decide. Chris Lehane who was Al Gore's press secretary, said, "We're going to decide tonight or we're calling you. You're going to break it." And so it got to be about 11:30, and he called Lehane and he said, "I'm still at the office, is it really going to be tonight?" He says, "It is but go home and just stay by your phone." And apparently Al made the decision after midnight. They called Chris Lehane about 5 – they called Ron Fournier about 5 or 5:15.

So Lehane, as Fournier tells this to me, he says, "We've made a selection and you're going to break it but you've got to guess who it is." So he says – he's telling me this story – "John Kerry." And no, Lehane says no. "John Edwards?" No. So he says, "I knew it. You're going to the Midwest. It's Evan Bayh." No. And then he says, "Oh, my God. You're making history. It's Joe Lieberman." Yes. And that was the way the story came out. So –

KRISTOL: Fantastic. And when was the – and I have this image of you and Hadassah, your wife, your mother, as I recall, some of the kids at least at this very kind of emotional, moving press statement and press conference. Is that Monday afternoon or Tuesday or morning?

LIEBERMAN: No, it was – so here's an interesting story. Later, there was a – the Gore campaign assembled a vice presidential team, management team, campaign manager, press, etc. And they were waiting, they told me later, in Nashville and they didn't know whether they were going to North Carolina for Edwards, Boston for Kerry or New Haven for me.

They flew up, they came to the house, and then they flew us down to Nashville. I mean, I knew things were changing because as we headed out, the Press Secretary was Kiki McLean who I had known some before. And before we go out the door of the house to get in the car to go to the New Haven airport, she says, "Sir." She always called me sir, even when we were friends. "Sir, the press reactions to your nomination have been extraordinarily positive. Please do not stop and talk to the press on the way out."

So I go out the door of my house and there are these three guys from the Connecticut press, two I remember particularly, Mark Davis and Tom Monahan. I've known them for 30 years. "Hey, Joe." So what am I going to do, I go over and talk to them. But she says to me later, "I can see you're going to be trouble." Anyway, we were –

KRISTOL: So it was the next morning that the big thing in Nashville?

LIEBERMAN: Yeah, the next morning. I'll tell you a quick story. We had a lovely dinner, the Gore family and my family. And Al Gore said at that dinner, he said, "I want you to know that I decided two weeks ago that I wanted you to be my running mate but I really thought it would be irresponsible for me to try to talk to some other people about whether they thought America was ready for a Jewish Vice President, the proverbial heartbeat away from the presidency."

So I always wondered whether Al did a poll. I think if I were him, I would have done a poll. But he said he called a number of friends. And he said to me, "I called a number of my Jewish friends, and I called a number of my Christian friends. And here was what I found. Most of the Jews were extremely anxious and uncertain about the reaction to your nomination." He said, "Every Christian friend I called said there would be no problem." So then with a little bit of Gore humor, which people don't remember sometimes, he said, "So, since I know that there are so millions more Christians in America than Jews, I decided I could choose you, which is what I wanted to do." Anyway, that was it.

And then it was announced the next morning at the War Memorial Plaza, a big plaza in Nashville. It was thrilling. And Hadassah did something. He asked her to get up and sort of say something. She toasted him at the dinner on Monday night and said you know for her personally, she's a child of Holocaust survivors, there was really – I get choked up – it was really unbelievable that she was where she was with her husband nominated to be the second highest office in America, the greatest country in the world. And he said to her afterward, you know, "I want you to introduce Joe tomorrow and if you want to say something like that, say it," and she did, it was really quite moving. It was a great day. A lot of the World War II vets, identified them and it was –

KRISTOL: I remember her remarks actually –

LIEBERMAN: So that whole day was really, if you ask people what's the most thrilling moment, really it was. And even though it ended in the strange way it did, I always say not to re-litigate the results, but you know we did get a half million more votes and it does – it vindicated Gore's confidence that America was not going to judge me based on my religion. And it's a wonderful thing to be able to say.

KRISTOL: That's great.

II: From Connecticut to Washington (20:20 – 39:59)

KRISTOL: So let's go back to the beginning. How did you get into politics? Had you always thought of public life, elected office?

LIEBERMAN: I hadn't always. I've thought about this question so I'll give you the answer that I've given myself. How did I get into politics? There was no single factor but I grew up in a religiously observant home. My folks were not in politics at all, they were in, you know, community organizations. But from them and from my rabbis, I got a heavy dose of my responsibility to try to improve the world in whatever way I could. The other – so that was one factor.

The other factor I think second was when I got to high school particularly I started to read history and biography. And to make a long story short, I had a sense of how individual leaders could have either a very positive or a very negative effect on –

KRISTOL: Any particular heroes on the positive side?

LIEBERMAN: Well, you know, there's nothing really too unusual about this. So, Churchill was always and Teddy Roosevelt. Franklin Roosevelt, to some extent.

But this actually leads to the next – and Truman was a hero – this leads to the final factor which was when I was graduating from high school and going off to Yale College, Senator Kennedy was running for president. And for me and a lot of others of my generation, that was a catalytic effect – experience because he was young, he was articulate, he was cool. And he brought together a lot that I was interested in. And it's a longer story but the whole idea of being both supportive of a muscular foreign policy, let's say, and being progressive on things like civil rights really gelled for me.

So those three things came together and got me interested. I began to pursue it during my college years somewhat with what I studied, I studied politics and economics and I did a paper my senior year on the then political boss in Connecticut, John Bailey, who was also John F. Kennedy's national chairman of the Democratic Party.

KRISTOL: And had been key to helping him get the nomination.

LIEBERMAN: He had and he was part of that old, he was a link to the old urban bosses, most of whom in the Democratic Party, most of whom were Irish Catholic at the time and Bailey was very close to them.

There was a former governor, then Senator Abe Ribicoff, who really was a kind of hero for me growing up. He was Jewish, so that was clearly part of it. He was a very impressive kind of can-do high integrity sort of moderate. He had a great speech he gave at one point when he was governor with a Republican legislature, which he called the "Integrity of Compromise." It still reads well today.

So I had some role models. And I went to work for a typical summer internship the summer of 1963 for Senator Ribicoff. It was his first summer here. It was really wonderful. And I got you know intoxicated by Washington. I began to think about doing it as a career, although I still would have been much too bashful to have said that to anybody.

But if you stopped me when I came out of Yale Law School in 1967 and asked me, "What's your dream, Lieberman?" And I referred to this briefly before – I wouldn't have told you because it was too presumptuous. But really it was already to go into politics and really the ultimate was probably based on Ribicoff and to some extent Kennedy's previous to be a U.S. Senator. And so you know as they say, I lived the dream after that.

KRISTOL: So you graduated from law school and do what?

LIEBERMAN: So I graduated from law school. I end up staying in New Haven, though I'm from Stamford, Connecticut. And for a lot of reasons that are not relevant to this discussion. And I begin to get involved in community life. I start to volunteer in the Democratic Party. Believe me nothing, nothing very weighty or important. I get active in the Jewish community, oh, I'm in a few community causes, one to save a park you know, from a highway going through it. Classic.

And then I get involved somewhat – these were my liberal Democratic days – there's a progressive movement that forms in the state. Well, I'll tell you quickly. 1968 says something about me. The left of the party was all moving for Gene McCarthy against Lyndon Johnson and I was waiting for Bobby Kennedy, you know. And when Bobby Kennedy comes in, there's so few – you know, the Left is going for McCarthy, the pols are waiting for Humphrey or sticking with Johnson, and I volunteer for Robert Kennedy and I end up being some state official, you know, coordinator of the campaign or something. And then I meet a lot of people there.

And anyway I start to get active in 1969 in a reformed – African American man reformed Democratic campaign for mayor. He loses. And then in 1970, the incumbent state Senator in my district, the Democrat, runs for the U.S. Senate, and he's a tough guy. I mean, we later became friends, Ed Marcus, but all the people, state reps and others who were the natural successors to Ed Marcus were they wouldn't declare that they were interested in his seat until he played out the Senate run. I was 27 years old. You know I was too young and foolish to think that I had anything—I didn't have anything to risk because I didn't have anything.

And just talking to people, I felt he was vulnerable. So I shortly after he declared for the U.S. Senate, like two or three months, early in 1970, I declared for his state Senate seat. And, you know, I built up some support. And lo and behold, he loses the nomination and he comes back and grabs the party nomination away from me but I challenge him in a primary and I beat him by, I don't know, 200 votes out of about

7,500 being cast. I had – Senator Ribicoff endorsed me because he really didn't like this guy, Marcus, so he gave me some credibility.

KRISTOL: So you beat an incumbent Democratic State Senator in a primary?

LIEBERMAN: I beat an incumbent Democratic State Senator. It was really a children's crusade. It was mostly students from Yale and southern Connecticut, Albertus Magnus, including, incidentally a tall, likeable kid at Yale Law School named Bill Clinton, who volunteered in the campaign. Later on when he became president, you could find at least 10,000 people in New Haven who remembered campaigning alongside Clinton but there were only 7,500 people who voted on the whole primary.

So, I mean, this is a lesson. I took a risk. And I say to young people interested in going into politics, don't hesitate to take risks. Sometimes when people have come to me in the years later and said, "I'm thinking of running for this office. What do you think?" And I said, "Well, first you've got to" – and applied this to myself both in the Senate campaign in the State Senate and later when I ran against Senator Weicker in 1988 – I said, "First off, you've got to conclude that you can do a better job than the person you're running against because you've got to convince the voters you can do that, you've got to have a reason. The second is you've got to feel that it's possible you can win."

Now, some people will run even if it's not possible for the principle of it – that was not my nature. But I said, "You're never going to be certain you're going to win because you're – but it's worth taking a risk." And in that case in a Senate run particularly and even when I ran for Attorney General, the biggest steps forward in my career came when I took the biggest risks. And that was certainly the case in 1970 when I got elected to my first office.

KRISTOL: And then you were a State Senator and then Attorney General of Connecticut?

LIEBERMAN: Yeah. State Senator for 10 years, the last 6 as majority leader, 6 years when a woman named Ella Grasso was governor, a phenomenal political person. I could spend an hour and a half talking about her, she taught me a lot.

KRISTOL: We'll do that in another conversation.

LIEBERMAN: She always felt that if – she died in 1980 of cancer, which was very young – and I always thought that if she had lived, she would have been somebody's Vice President. She would have been the first woman on a national ticket. She was very –

KRISTOL: She died quite young, right, yeah.

LIEBERMAN: She did, she did. In 1980, just to show you that not everything was up, up, up and away in my career, the incumbent congressman in my district, Bob Giaimo, announced very surprisingly that he was retiring. And I had this feeling – you know I've been 10 years in the state Senate, it's getting a bit repetitive, I had a couple of cases that I knew in Connecticut where people had turned away from opportunities and they never came again.

I must admit, I never dreamed of being in the U.S. House but I thought you know this is a moment of opportunity. It was a Democratic district so I declared for the U.S. House, I got the nomination and I lost the election in the Reagan landslide.

KRISTOL: Oh, I forgot that.

LIEBERMAN: Oh, yeah, no that was – I learned a lot from that, too. I mean one of the things was –

KRISTOL: So that was Reagan's presidential year and he swept even Republican congressional candidates in in your district? Wow.

LIEBERMAN: He did. A good guy named Larry Denardis who was a moderate Republican by those standards then beat me. But I learned a lot in that campaign. It is true you learn by losing.

One was that about three weeks out we did the last poll because we were not polling everyday as they do now, and I was 19 points ahead and Larry Denardis with two weeks out started a really negative campaign of TV ads and radio on me. And I'm beginning to hear questions from people and I call my consultants in Washington. I never had consultants before. And they say, "Don't worry about it, we've seen this, you're 19 points ahead." So –

KRISTOL: Typical, typical.

LIEBERMAN: Anyway, the other thing going on was that throughout most of the campaign, in the Democratic district, nobody is talking to me about Jimmy Carter. And then the last weekend, people started to say, you know, "I'm voting for you but I want you to know I'm voting for Reagan, I don't like Carter." And there was a sweep. One of the things we didn't do –

KRISTOL: Reagan carried this –

LIEBERMAN: He didn't carry the district but he did very – he carried the city and did quite well. And one of the other lessons I learned there is that based on the media consultant polling advice, I never responded to my opponent's negative attacks on me, and I never let that happen again in any campaign. So then it was weird because –

KRISTOL: And you'd given up your state Senate seat to run for the Congress?

LIEBERMAN: Yes, I had given it up and I'm going around New Haven or wherever I'm going and people are – after I lose the election – are talking to me like I've died. You know, and a voice goes off in my head after about 5 or 6 weeks of this which says, "I just lost an election, I mean, big deal. I'm still alive, I've got –"

So there's an incumbent Attorney General. It's not clear he's going to run. But there again I announced for the nomination while he was still presumably running. Later, he decided not to run. I got the nomination. I won the election. It was a wonderful – I had six great years as Attorney General. And then – stop me if I'm talking too much – after the, I get reelected Attorney General 1986 so my pollster, Stan Greenberg, who was later Clinton's pollster, he was a Yale professor, we had some money left over and my campaign manager, Sherry Brown, said, "Let's do an exit poll."

And I was thinking about running for governor in 1990 so Greenberg does a poll and he comes back. I'll never when he called us to run over to his office on Friday afternoon. And it was like March of '87 and he says, "I ran you against two of the Democratic congressman also thinking about running for governor, and you're third. You're in third place because they are intensely supported in their districts. So it's going to be a fight for you to get the nomination in a couple years."

But he said, you know, "An interesting number – I ran you against Weicker, I polled Weicker, Lowell Weicker, who was the incumbent Republican Senator, maverick, etc. And he's – his reelect numbers are like 45, and I ran you against him in this poll, and you were behind him by 25 points, but he's only in the low 40s." And when I look back at that I think on the basis they convinced me to run. So they didn't convince me then but then the party started to talk to me because they needed a nominee to run against Weicker, they had nobody. I was in the middle of my Attorney General term; I didn't have to leave the office.

Serendipity, twist of fate, the chairman of the Senate Democratic campaign then is none other than a guy I knew from Yale, John F. Kerry. And he starts to recruit me to run, and I said to him what I always said to the candidates, young people that came to me, I said, "I've got to have a reason to vote against this guy, he's very popular, they still think of him as the Republican who turned against Nixon and Watergate. The state has a lot of Independents, he's a pro-choice Republican, so they've sort of made him a hero."

Anyway, Kerry came back with some stuff on his record that – and then we did another poll later in the year and basically it was sort of the same kind of numbers. And I'll forget Stan Greenberg said, "You're the perfect candidate to run against him, Weicker, because you can run" – Stan said – "a right-left campaign. You can go to the right of him on crime, which was a big issue then, and on foreign policy." I mean, he had criticized Reagan, blah-blah-blah. And to some extent, you can go to the left of him on environmental protection because he's got a bad record on environmental protection.

So I started this long-shot campaign. It was a tough campaign. He ignored me for most of it. Early in – we had some debates in which I took the fight to him and it came out pretty well but still I was behind. I'll forget in the middle of September I was still down 16 points in the polls, and I called the guy who was doing my media then, Carter Eskew, here in Washington. We became very close. I said, "What's going on? We're hitting him with everything." And he said, "Well, it could be that the public has embraced him so tightly because of Watergate and his maverick status that they're not going to let him go. But it could also be that every time we whack him with something, they're loosening the hold and something is going to happen and they're going to let him go."

And we did this ad that portrayed him as a sleeping bear who sort of stayed in a cave doing what he wanted to do and came out and growled every – And it fit the public's – what they wanted. And suddenly the *Hartford Current* has this poll, a big headline, "Senate Race is a Dead Heat," and then Weicker really turns on me and hits me with a lot of negative stuff and it bounces back and forth but I win by 10,000 votes out of a million three hundred thousand. So it was less than 1 percent. It was really quite remarkable.

KRISTOL: I've always thought that race was a little more of a model than people realize for Clinton in '92 at the presidential level, the ability to be both a moderate, a pretty hawkish Democrat, and in Clinton's case, he wasn't really to the right of Bush on foreign policy but certainly didn't let Bush get to the right of him, I would say, on foreign policy and defense and also was going to reform welfare and raised a couple of not conventional liberal causes but also attacked – I was part of that Administration, the Bush Administration, in the normal anti-Republican attacks on environment and social issues and so forth.

LIEBERMAN: I think you're right.

KRISTOL: And you were close. I mean, Clinton was then Governor of Arkansas and you would – you guys had stayed in touch. I mean, you were –

LIEBERMAN: Right, right. So Stan Greenberg, my pollster was also his pollster in '92 so there was a – there's the most direct connection.

But Bill Clinton had become active in the Democratic Leadership Council, the moderate Democratic group which Al Fromm and others formed after the '84 Reagan victory over Mondale. And as Al once said to me, what the goal – Al was then probably in his 40s – he said, "Our goal was to elect, see if we could elect a Democratic president in his lifetime" – he was in his 40s. And, of course, then Clinton became chairman of the DLC.

I reconnected with him through the Democrat Leadership Council, and I supported him quite early and I actually committed to him in '91. He did a cute thing. He called me up, said – this is '91 – and he said, "You remember in 1970 when I was at Yale Law School, I supported you for State Senate?" And I said, "I

do, Governor.” And he said, “And you won, right?” I said, “I did, I did. You helped me a lot.” And he said, “Well, you owe me.”

And so it was a little joke because he knew I was going to support him anyway. So I did work hard for him early on, and I think he did, in some ways, I hadn’t thought about it, but you’re probably right that our campaign in ’88 created a certain precedent for what he tried to do.

KRISTOL: You won, Dukakis lost. I think it showed that you could run as a more complicated kind of Democrat and not antagonize necessarily the liberal base, though.

LIEBERMAN: Correct. Now that all changed later on in my career, particularly around the Iraq War when the party lost that whole strong foreign policy –

KRISTOL: We need to get to that. I can’t tell you how cheered up I am though by the fact that – don’t take this the wrong the way – that you lost that congressional race in 1980 because I’ve been saying for years that successful politicians and successful leaders in America seem to always have at least one loss in their background, which I think for me is interesting because it shows that they took risks, they didn’t just run the safe races. And I think as you said, people often learn from losses.

And someone once said to me, “Well, but Lieberman is the exception to this,” but, I mean, but you’re not. I mean, Obama lost a primary in 2000, remember, when he ran for Congress first. Clinton lost a governor’s reelect race. George W. Bush lost a race. Reagan lost, of course, famously. So as I say, I’m cheered up that you’re part of this –

LIEBERMAN: Well it really made – the irony of that 1980 campaign is that that was supposed to not be a risk. In other words, as the Democratic candidate for Congress. And my whole attitude when I ran again – I mean the truth is if I had lost my Attorney General race, probably my political career would have been over. But having lost a congressional and still realized that I was alive and that, you know, there were other parts of life, I actually ran with less inner tension. It’s a strange thing to say, having lost.

And, of course, as I said, I learned some specific things about that, which is – and they’re very practical – try to keep polling so you see daily, if you can afford it, see any changes that are going on, and also if people attack you, you’ve got to respond, otherwise the negatives will seep in. A third is to try to make a case for yourself.

III: The 2006 Senate Campaign (39:59 – 46:27)

KRISTOL: I want to talk about public policy in your years in the Senate. But let’s do one more election which was another famous one – you had quite few of them – which was ’06 where in a very unusual way, you lost a primary and then won as an Independent.

So did you – you were challenged by an antiwar Democrat, obviously and since you had been a defender of the Iraq War, which had become very unpopular by ’06.

LIEBERMAN: Right. So I supported the Iraq war, as almost everybody did in the beginning, including most Democrats in the vote to authorize it in 2002, 2003. But well I just felt that if – then there was a very strong antiwar movement, mostly in the Democratic Party and I felt that if we did what they wanted us to do, which was to pull out of Iraq, it would have been disastrous, not only for Iraq but for America and our foreign policy and our credibility.

So I stuck with it. And it was – I began to get – I get really negative reactions, generally and including back home. It really alienated me from a lot of the left of the Democratic Party and frankly some of the middle, too, who were antiwar and anti-Bush. President Bush became such a polarizing figure to them so that a lot of them read it not that I was sticking with the Iraq war for reasons of foreign policy and

American national interests but somehow I was doing it for President Bush, you know just the fact that he and I might have had the same, reached the same policy conclusions never dawned on a lot of those people and –

KRISTOL: And you had supported Senator Kerry in 2004 against Bush, obviously, so you were a loyal Democrat. That but it didn't do any good at that point, I guess.

LIEBERMAN: I did. I did. Yeah. Yeah. So. No, no, it didn't. It really got to me irrational.

You know, at the end of 2005, we did a poll and I met with that same consulting team. Carter Eskew, Stan Greenberg and Sherry Brown. And I remember Carter said, "I think you should think – think about running as an Independent for reelection because I'm looking at these numbers and I have a sense of what's happening in the antiwar movement. I think if somebody comes along and challenges you in a primary, particularly if they have some money but even if they don't, you're going to be at risk."

And I got sort of my back up and I said, "The hell with that." I mean, I've been a Democrat all my life. Generally speaking, though I've been a moderate Democrat, more often than not, I've voted the way most of the Democrats in the Senate have. I just refuse to leave the party because of one issue. I can't believe they're going to throw me out for that issue. But they did. And it was actually quite painful.

I mean, if you asked me earlier about what was the most thrilling moment of my career and I mentioned several but the most was the vice presidential. That – that whole primary campaign and the loss on that primary day was really painful because a lot of people that I thought were friends that I had done things for, like, unions that I had supported in various ways. Like one of the defense unions, the machinists, I worked so hard to get stuff for Pratt & Whitney, they went based on the war of all things, they went for my opponent.

And so it was quite a bitter pill. But I had decided that I wasn't going to give up. I wasn't going to let the Democratic primary voters decide – essentially decide whether I deserved to be reelected – and so I ran as an Independent, and, honestly, that was probably, ironically, second to the vice presidential.

Winning that election as an Independent was probably – hard to believe this but – even more exciting to me than getting elected to the Senate over Weickert in the first place, because it was a vindication of me but it was also a vindication of my faith in the system because the Iraq War didn't have the support of a majority of people in Connecticut. So a lot of people in Connecticut who didn't support what I was doing on the war basically said, "This guy is okay, he's doing what he thinks is right. He's obviously not doing it for political reasons because he's not that dumb because he could have gotten reelected, re-nominated easily if he came out against the war."

So and – "he's done a good job for us." And so I got a great mix of – and that year, the Republican candidate was a good guy but not a strong candidate, and I think a lot of Republicans frankly right up to the White House felt that I had been punished for sticking with the president's policy and they supported me. I got over 70 percent of the Republican vote.

KRISTOL: Again, it was a surprise. I remember the day after you lost the primary and people were saying, "Well, his career is over." And I don't think you had signaled quite yet, you certainly hadn't signaled before the primary that you were going to run as an Independent. I guess you did pretty soon after.

LIEBERMAN: I actually had to do it before because of state law. It was very compromising because I had to file the day after the primary, which was probably a way that the incumbents were trying to make sure that nobody who lost a primary could run as an Independent. So we had actually started circulating petitions before.

I must say in that campaign that one of the most thrilling things that happened is that all of the sudden, ads began to appear in Connecticut television by a group called Vets for Freedom. And I didn't know who they were but they actually – I teared up at one of them, they were Connecticut vets of the Iraq war who supported my candidacy and said, "He had our back, now we have his." And after the election, I found out that Bill Kristol had put this whole idea together.

KRISTOL: Not quite put together but I helped them a little bit. They were great kids. They just needed to be connected with some people who could give some money. I'm happy to have played a tiny role in that.

Then, you had six more years in the Senate till you decided?

LIEBERMAN: And they were productive years. The last two, the place became so partisan, my last two in the Senate. But you know John McCain said – my good friend – said to me at one point after I lost the VP in the presidential, he said, after he lost the presidential in 2000, he had some of his most productive years in the Senate. And the truth is now it happened that it was after 9/11, Susan Collins – first Fred Thompson and I and then Susan Collins and I were the leaders of the Governmental Affairs Committee that worked on post-9/11 legislation. And really it was very bipartisan, a lot of good stuff was adopted and I feel very good about that.

KRISTOL: That's great.

IV: On Senators and Presidents (46:27 – 1:02:01)

KRISTOL: So you served four terms in the Senate with a lot of very impressive, interesting, controversial characters from both parties. I mean who stands out? What should we know? What's different from what the rest of us think just watching from afar about being a Senator and working with the other Senators?

LIEBERMAN: Yeah, so, you know beneath all the headlines and all the rest, the Senate is still a hundred people who go to work in the same place every day or every day they're in session. And so personal relations matter a lot.

I remember when I first came in, Democrats were in the majority, maybe 54-55. George Mitchell was the incoming majority leader and he said to me, "Pick out two or three areas that you're really interested in and learn them so that your colleagues know what you're talking about," and he said, "You're going to have more influence even as a freshman than you think because you know there's hundreds of issues and inevitably we rely on each other."

So unfortunately over the 24 years I was there – that was true when I first came in, although you could see partisanship beginning to eat away at that. But at the end of my 24 years, it was really so partisan that it was hard to make the combinations to get to 60 votes to break a filibuster to get things done, although anything I'm proud of – the Clean Air Act of 1990 with the Bush 41 people, the effort to get the U.S. and Europe to stop the genocide aggression in the Balkans, which was done with Bob Dole and Joe Biden, John McCain and me. It was really something. And all the work I did with Fred Thompson and Susan Collins post-9/11. And then again with Susan Collins on the repeal of Don't Ask/Don't Tell – they were all bipartisan.

And anyway the personal relations matter. Part of what's happened in the Senate over the years I think is that there's not enough time for personal relations anymore. People fly in Monday, there's usually what we would call a bed-check vote, nothing major Monday afternoon, 5:30. And then you're there for a couple of days and as majority or minority leaders will tell you, their members start to – Thursday start to pester them. "What time are we getting out today? I've got to get home, I've got an event, I've got a fundraiser somewhere, God knows." So there's not much interaction.

In the old days, they spent more time in Washington. I mean, in the really old days, which aren't so long ago, the Congress would come in in January and they'd stay till the late spring. A lot of them never went home and they'd go home for the summer. That's why people say one of the worst things that ever happened to Congress was air conditioning and probably air travel, too. So, working with people meant a lot, that they trust you, they know what you're talking about, you can build the kinds of relationships that get things done. And those are the most satisfying moments. Sometimes when you do that, you fall out of favor with some people in your party but that's not why – you're not there to please the people in your party, hopefully there to get something done.

So who were some of the most interesting people? Well, Bob Dole is a wonderful man.

KRISTOL: Right, contrary to his public image somewhat of a very crusty, sardonic –

LIEBERMAN: Yeah, just a good guy. And a good pal but really quite principled. I mean, I talked about Bosnia. Bob Dole started to try to get us to do something to stop the aggression in the Balkans when President Bush 41 was president. He didn't wait till Clinton came in. In other words, was a president of his own party.

I ended up in '91 in the vote to authorize the Gulf War. I was a freshman but I made very clear that I was going to support the authorization. Everybody, more senior people were Democrats much to my dismay were bobbing and weaving, ultimately went negative. So I got asked to cosponsor the War Authorization Resolution with John Warner and it passed 52 to 47, real close, I'm very proud that it did.

And Dole, as an example, I was on the floor after the vote and his aide came over to me and said, "Senator Dole wants you in his office right away. You come right there." So I said okay. And you know he's got the one arm and he's holding the phone to his ear – I'm calling the president to tell him the vote." Now, this seems like—when was this, the 19th century? It's possible the President knew about the vote, maybe somebody had called him, but there were not – it was not all instant.

KRISTOL: Right. A formality anyway is to call the president, the leader of the party.

LIEBERMAN: Right. So, exactly. So he wanted me to be there, which was very kind of him, put me on the phone. Anyway, he's just a good –

KRISTOL: That's so hard to believe these days, though. The Republican leader putting a Democratic Senator on the phone.

LIEBERMAN: Yeah, exactly. And he went out of his way. I didn't know the call was going to occur. Just a good guy and a principled guy and a great internationalist, you know. And he'd do unpredictable things, too, which I always liked about him. Great sense of humor. We'll come back for your late night show and I'll tell you some of the more off-color jokes that Bob Dole –

KRISTOL: I'd love hear to hear that. Excellent.

LIEBERMAN: Pat Moynihan when I came in was a real influence on me. He was from neighboring New York. Very bright.

I mean, I'll tell you something interesting about Pat Moynihan. I watched him and I noticed that on a lot of votes, he would come in. There's a table on each side of the well of the Senate, Democrat side, Republican side. And the staffs put a brief description of what's being voted on when the roll call goes off and they'll say the majority leader asks a no vote or an aye vote or the chairman of the committee asks. And I noticed Moynihan would come in very often and just look at it and vote. And I once said to him, "Pat, I'm really fascinated by this." And I went through the whole story. He said, "You know I've decided that on most of these votes, it doesn't matter to people in New York and I'm probably going to vote with

the majority leader or the chairman, so unless I've got some interest from New York or I know about it myself and I'm concerned about it, I'm just going to vote because it's a waste of time for me to."

So and usually he was in his hideaway reading, writing and probably drinking. He was one of the last of the drinkers. But he could do better with a couple of drinks in him – he was more eloquent and more sensible. He prioritized, that's the important thing I want to say about him. Every session, he had one or two big issues that he focused on and generally speaking, he got it done. I missed him when he passed away.

KRISTOL: I think he learned that from being somewhat in the Executive branch, too. And you of course also were Attorney General. I do think people who have got some Executive branch experience at the state or national level understand that you've got to have priorities, there's only two or three things you're going to make a difference on in any term and you've got to focus on those.

LIEBERMAN: Yeah but it's a lesson that – right, the executive experience helps you but the natural pull of the Senate life has you involved in hundreds of issues because you're responding to – or you find the whole thing so appealing that it's hard to say no to anything.

John McCain and I became very good friends and I have the greatest respect for him. It started really around foreign and defense policy when we started to travel together around the world. It's the one time when you get to know your colleagues because you're away from Washington, often you're on long plane rides. And McCain and I became and still are really good friends. And so I cherish that particularly.

Susan Collins, working very closely with her. And we're similar political people. You might, speaking simplistically, a moderate Republican, moderate Democrat. We both wanted to get things done. We made one of those agreements that really in the old days made the Senate work and still should where we were never going to surprise each other; there would be times when I couldn't do what she wanted, she couldn't do what I wanted.

KRISTOL: So this was the Homeland Security which you chaired?

LIEBERMAN: We chaired, we rotated, depending on who was the majority chair and ranking member. And it was a wonderful relationship really. So, I mean, those were some of the great names that come to mind, people that I –

KRISTOL: And presidents. And so you worked with, I guess, Bush, Clinton, Bush, and President Obama a little bit. Anything striking about those? I mean, how different is it to work with each of them or was it always the same? The White House is the White House.

LIEBERMAN: Yeah. So, no, it is different. I mean, I was – I was new when President Bush 41 came in. I had great respect and affection for him. I knew him a little bit but I didn't have a lot of interaction.

Clinton, I was quite close to and close to the whole White House operation. And he's a remarkable man. I mean, thinking about him now when we're now talking in October of 2014 and it's probably more likely than not that the Republicans will control both houses of the Congress after the election in a week or so. And Clinton faced in that 2000 – in 1994 and went right at Newt Gingrich and he was like that with everybody.

The contrast with President Obama, unfortunately, Obama has very smart ideas but has not worked the Congress very well and people, even those who are loyal to him, don't see him, don't talk to him very much.

Clinton spent an enormous amount of time – I was sitting at – the last year when I was in the Senate, I was sitting at a table in the Senate. We happened to be at the Senate Democratic Caucus and one of the

colleagues said, "When's the last time any of you talked to President Obama?" So I said, he turned to me and I said, "Well, about six weeks ago, I got a call about something that was in my committee." "Wow, six weeks ago." So this guy who was the chairman of one of the major committees – "I haven't seen him or talked to him in six months." And then we started talking about Clinton and I remember saying, "Clinton, he'd call you and the problem was how do I get him off the phone," he was just, you know, until he got your agreement to do what he wanted you to do.

KRISTOL: And you criticized him for his personal behavior, obviously, in the Lewinsky scandal, and he got over that?

LIEBERMAN: Well, it was really interesting – tough, it was a very hard thing for me to do because I liked him but I really felt what he did was awful and that unless I felt myself if I didn't say something, I'd be a hypocrite. I also felt that if somebody who was supportive of him didn't say something, it would not be good. And so it got a lot of attention.

I got a call from Erskine Bowles who was Chief of Staff about three or four days later saying that he was going to express an opinion which wasn't universally held at the White House – he thought I helped the president by bursting the boil, that was the metaphor he used. The following Sunday morning, I'm at home and the phone rings, it's the White House. And it's now about a week and a couple of days since I made the speech. The president says, it was the president, "I just want you to know that there's nothing you said in that speech that I don't agree with. And I want you to know that I'm working on it." And we talked for about 45 minutes. It was amazing.

And then as I told you off-camera, I'll repeat it briefly. On the day that Al Gore selected me to run for Vice President or the story was leaked, I was still at my home in New Haven, President Clinton called. Oh, he was so happy. He said, "You understand from the DLC" – Democratic Leadership Council – "what we're all about, you're the perfect person to do this. And because of the speech you made about my personal mistakes, Al Gore now can run on our record, he doesn't have to be defensive about what I did." I mean it was just really unbelievable. I always wondered, of course, notwithstanding the fact that we continued to see each other around, Clinton and I around Washington after I made the speech, really how did he feel. And I think that's the way he felt.

So President Bush 43, I didn't know. Now, obviously I ran, I was on the ticket against him. I didn't know him. I'll tell you a quick story. After – I'm at his inauguration. I go back into the Capitol and Tom Daschle has hot coffee and stuff in his office so I go in. I come out the door with my wife, Hadassah, and coming around the corner is the President, the new President, and the Secret Service. He's gone into the so-called presidential room where he signed the official documents to accept the presidency. And he says, "Hello" – President Bush does – and says, "You know, your being on the ticket made it closer than it would have been." So I said, "Thank you, Mr. President, I don't know if that's true but thank you and, like, I hope we have an opportunity, if there's ways in which we'll work together." And he said, with that Bush look, "I think we're going to find some ways." Now, little did I know.

So we worked together on you know some sort of – well, the first thing I did with him was support of faith-based groups, I did that later – it was pretty early in February. And then of course we got involved in the whole Iraq War, and he was in his own way, in a story that's yet to be told after I lost the primary, I think he let the word out to people in the Republican Party, including people who were contributors that they should do everything they can to make sure that I didn't go down because they felt I was being punished for having supported the same policy that he wanted and at least on one vote, which was a one-vote difference, I mean, stopped the Senate from cutting off funding.

The – my opponent had a pick-up truck which went around, followed me everywhere in Connecticut that year, which had to replicas, one of President Bush and one of me and we were embracing each other and that was just supposed to be enough – some say kissing each other but really that went too far.

KRISTOL: And you got reelected. In fact, you were a key player in making the surge possible in 2007, which in turn led to what seemed at the time to be – and was at the time, a decent outcome in 2008. And unfortunately it's not been sustained. But –

LIEBERMAN: So I thought President Bush, he wasn't probably as active with Congress as Obama – excuse me, Clinton was but he was pretty good. He's a very good man really. And I think this is already happening, his presidency is going to be viewed generally more positively than it was when he left office.

KRISTOL: Well, on that bipartisan note, let me thank you for joining me today. We'll have a second installment with the off-color jokes from Bob Dole, more stories of you and Bill Clinton.

LIEBERMAN: That will be – that will be probably for pay TV.

KRISTOL: Exactly right, good idea. Thank you, Joe. And thank you very much for joining us for CONVERSATIONS.

[END]