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Lieberman Gets Ex-Party to Shift on Health Plan

By [DAVID M. HERSZENHORN](#) and [DAVID D. KIRKPATRICK](#)

WASHINGTON — Just the thought of [Joseph I. Lieberman](#) makes some Democrats want to spit nails these days. But Mr. Lieberman, the Connecticut independent, is not the least troubled by his status as Capitol Hill’s master infuriator — and on Monday he showed how powerful that role can be at a time when Democrats cannot spare a single vote.

The day before, Mr. Lieberman threatened on national television to join the Republicans in blocking the health care bill, [President Obama](#)’s chief domestic initiative. Within hours, he was in a meeting at the Capitol with top White House officials.

And on Monday night, Democratic senators emerged from a tense 90-minute closed-door session and suggested that they were on the verge of bowing to Mr. Lieberman’s main demands: that they scrap a plan to let people buy into [Medicare](#) beginning at age 55, and scotch even a fallback version of a new government-run [health insurance](#) plan, or [public option](#).

Mr. Lieberman said he believed that the Medicare expansion was off the table, though he did not get any guarantee. “Not an explicit assurance, no,” he said. “But put me down tonight as encouraged at the direction in which these discussions are going.”

Mr. Lieberman could not be happier. He is right where he wants to be — at the center of the political aisle, the center of the Democrats’ efforts to win 60 votes for their sweeping health care legislation. For the moment, he is at the center of everything — and he loves it.

“My wife said to me, ‘Why do you always end up being the point person here?’ ” he said, flashing a broad grin in an interview on Monday.

Just hours after his televised threat to kill the bill, Mr. Lieberman said, he left a meeting with Senate leaders and top White House officials in the office of the majority leader, [Harry Reid](#), more certain than ever that he held all the cards.

“Harry said, ‘We will do what we can do to secure this,’ ” Mr. Lieberman recalled. “He said, ‘I have got some work to do with other members of the caucus.’ But he said, ‘My own feeling is we need you to get to 60 and so I am going to do my best.’ ”

Many Democrats say they have given up trying to divine the motivations of Mr. Lieberman. Some have suggested that he is catering to insurance industry interests back home. Others say he realizes that he cannot win re-election in 2012 without appealing to Republicans and independents, especially because Democrats will be energized with Mr. Obama running that year.

Mr. Lieberman says he favors the essential elements of the health care legislation but fears that expanding government programs would compound the federal debt. Mr. Lieberman, who lost a Democratic primary in 2006, won re-election as an independent and campaigned aggressively against Mr. Obama last year, said he felt “liberated” from party loyalty.

Perhaps no one confounds Mr. Reid and Senate Democrats more. And back in Connecticut, the anger is often raw.

“If you think you are sick of Joe Lieberman now,” Jim Shea, a columnist in The Hartford Courant, wrote Monday, “just wait until you get sick.” Liberal bloggers have attacked him as “a joke” and worse.

Mr. Lieberman’s threat to block the bill blew up a proposed deal among the Democratic caucus that Mr. Reid had hailed as a breakthrough.

After the meeting on Monday evening, Senate Democratic leaders said they still hoped to pass the bill before Christmas, and Mr. Obama invited the caucus to the White House on Tuesday for more talks.

Democratic leaders said they were caught off guard on Sunday morning by Mr. Lieberman's threat and accused him of acting in bad faith. His comments sent White House officials, including the chief of staff, [Rahm Emanuel](#), scrambling to the Capitol for a meeting to pinpoint where he stood.

Democratic leaders noted that Mr. Lieberman on numerous occasions had voiced support for the Medicare buy-in proposal that he now wants dropped. It was part of a health care proposal that he championed as [Al Gore](#)'s running mate in the 2000 presidential race, and three months ago he expressed support for the same concept.

"What I was proposing was that they have an option to buy into Medicare early," Mr. Lieberman says on a video distributed by Democrats on Monday.

In the interview, he did not dispute that he once supported the idea but said he had not recalled having done so, or the context, until Mr. Reid's office confronted him about it.

Campaign finance advocates have attacked Mr. Lieberman as "an insurance industry puppet," suggesting that he wants to protect private health insurers from competition because he has received more than \$1 million insurance company campaign contributions since 1998.

During his 2006 re-election campaign, Mr. Lieberman ranked second in the Senate in insurance industry contributions. Connecticut is a hub of the insurance business, with about 22,000 jobs specifically in health insurance, according to an industry trade group.

In the interview, Mr. Lieberman dismissed assertions that he was doing the industry's bidding. "It's hogwash and it's weak," he said, noting that he had often sided against the companies. He said he favored a proposal, not included in the health care bill, that would end the insurers' limited exemption from federal antitrust laws.

Mr. Lieberman complained that some people had begun attacking his wife, Hadassah, urging that she be fired from her job at a nonprofit organization that fights [breast cancer](#), because she previously worked in public relations for two pharmaceutical companies.

Mr. Lieberman's opposition to a bigger government role in health care runs counter to public opinion in his state, according to polls. In a [Quinnipiac College](#) survey last month, a majority of voters said they supported a so-called public option.

Douglas Schwartz, director of the Quinnipiac poll, said the profile of Mr. Lieberman's public support suggested he was shifting into a moderate Republican. Mr. Lieberman insisted that it was his liberal colleagues who were holding the health care bill hostage.

"People have said to me, including some people in the caucus: 'We know you are for [health care reform](#). You know how important this is to the president. Would you yourself stop this from happening?' " he said.

"So I say: 'There is a wonderful core health care reform bill on the Senate floor. Would my liberal friends in the caucus stop that from happening and prevent the president from getting this major goal that he has set because they want to add more on to that? Why won't they be reasonable?' "

Robert Pear and Carl Hulse contributed reporting.

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