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Mike Bloomberg's Middle March

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In Stamford, the multitude of Connecticut residents that take the Metro North train to work every day recognized New York City's Republican Mayor Michael Bloomberg about as easily as they did their own Democratic Sen. Joe Lieberman.

The two politicians stood outside in long black coats one nippy late October morning -- eight days before the mid-term election -- shaking hands and chatting with commuters before breaking for a press gaggle that turned into a love fest of moderation.

Standing in front of a podium with a sign that said, "Sticking with Joe," Bloomberg said if John F. Kennedy's *Profiles in Courage* were written today, "There would be a chapter on Joe Lieberman."

Lieberman stood with the mayor looking equally enamored of the virtues of centrism. The virtue was probably enhanced as hecklers in the audience held signs and tried to shout down Lieberman and Bloomberg.

The next week, Lieberman -- running as an independent after losing the August Democratic primary -- beat the hecklers' choice of Greenwich millionaire Ned Lamont, the Democratic nominee. The triumph of an independent might have made the mayor's Connecticut trip a smart political investment by a very savvy businessman rumored to be mulling an independent presidential run in 2008.

Bloomberg has talked about national issues like stem cell research, illegal immigration and gun control in Philadelphia, Chicago, Baltimore and California -- sort of like, well, a national candidate would do. But in this case, he interjected himself into a race of national prominence by touting a candidate who successfully positioned himself as above the partisan fray compared to the anti-war, blogger-backed Lamont.

Thus, an alliance with Lieberman is a chance for Bloomberg to associate with the symbol of the American middle. It wasn't just the train stop. Bloomberg also held two fundraisers for Lieberman, one at the mayor's \$17 million home in Upper Eastside Manhattan.

"The message of a Joe Lieberman victory will be that the public wants the parties to focus on the issues," Bloomberg proclaimed at the Stamford train station.

Bloomberg repeated previous denials that he was running for president, and said, "I don't know what the politics will be in '08. I think if both parties put up candidates

that the public thought they could seriously consider, there probably would not be room for an independent candidacy."

So, what happens if the candidates aren't acceptable? What if they are just too partisan? The mayor might feel he owes it to his country to rescue the White House from ideologues.

"I expect he would be a gifted, honorable and able president," Lieberman said at the train station, responding to a question. "He's a problem solver. He's not a polarizer. The public is yearning for a non-partisan problem solver."

Yearning. It almost sounds like an endorsement, except for the fact Lieberman agreed he didn't think the mayor would run.

THE LIEBERMAN VICTORY COULD bode well for a third party, triangulation master Dick Morris said in an interview for this story.

"Lieberman's ability to cross party lines easily, certainly is attracting Republican and independent voters and certainly shows that Bloomberg could succeed," Morris said. "His [Bloomberg's] combination of social liberalism and fiscal conservatism and hawkishness on terror is a great combo for independent voters."

Before we view Lieberman's win as an omen for independent candidates, keep in mind he was a three-term incumbent in a race with no viable Republican opponent. Even an enthusiastic Morris will tell you a Bloomberg candidacy only works if Republicans nominate an arch conservative, not a John McCain or a Rudy Giuliani.

"Bloomberg would represent a middle course, which refuses to order from the dinner menu but demands a la carte," Morris said. "An appetizer of pro-choice, a main course of pro-growth tax policies and a dessert of tough on terror."

The dessert could be the key to Bloomberg's potential success as an independent presidential candidate, another reason why an association with the hawkish Lieberman pays off.

Sure, he's a nanny-state mayor who sometimes seems more concerned about the dangers of second-hand smoke and French fries than terrorists. He talks in a rather high-pitched tone that might not strike fear into the heart of Osama bin Laden, and he's said things like, "I don't know why people carry guns. Guns kill people."

But, Bloomberg succeeded Giuliani less than six months after 9/11. He has presided over the nation's biggest terrorist target, and likely deserves some credit for the fact the city hasn't seen another attack since. He promptly secured the city's commuter system after the subway bombings in London. Though he hasn't been the high profile crime fighter Giuliani was, the New York City crime rate has continued to decline under his watch.

Bloomberg won't tolerate questionable performance, having famously fired a city employee for playing solitaire on his computer while on the clock.

Most importantly -- Bloomberg could tap into the Lieberman Democrats out there. Voters who are liberal on virtually every other issue -- guns, abortion, stem cell research, gay rights -- but don't quite trust the party of Howard Dean and Ned Lamont to keep them safe from terrorism would have an option in Bloomberg.

"He is a strong candidate ultimately if he wanted to run for president," U.S. Rep. Christopher Shays, a moderate Republican from Connecticut, said in an interview for this story. "Anybody who can run New York City can run anything. I could support Bloomberg for president."

By the way, it was at a Shays fundraiser in Greenwich this summer where Bloomberg responded, "Absolutely not," to a question about running for president, before adding, "and anybody who's running will say exactly that."

"Michael Bloomberg is one of the most refreshing people I have ever talked with," Shays said. "The bottom line is, he is comfortable with himself. If he loses an election he'll just hop into one of his jets."

Those billions are exactly why he might not give another thought to sinking a few hundred million into a long shot independent candidacy. It's reasonable to assume that a self-financed Bloomberg, with national prominence and actual governing experience, could outperform the 19 percent of the vote Ross Perot captured in the 1992 presidential race. If Bloomberg captured 30 percent, the presidential race would be a dead heat.

HOWEVER, THE POLITICAL WINDS ARE different today than in 1992, said James Campbell, a political science professor at the University of Buffalo, who follows presidential election trends. "I'm not sure there is a rising center," Campbell said in an interview for this story.

Today, both sides are too concerned about the other side gaining power, Campbell said. "If Hillary Clinton is the Democratic nominee, a lot of people will try to make sure they stop her. The way to do that is not to divide the anti-Hillary vote," Campbell said. "On the other side, Bush has been demonized by Democrats. The next Republican nominee will likely defend him. Then he'll be seen by the Democrats as someone they really need to beat. It sets up a dynamic making it very difficult for a third party to be taken seriously."

But if a liberal Democratic Congress overreaches and rubs voters the wrong way in the next two years, Bloomberg might be able to offer himself as a reasonable "non-partisan, problem solver," repeating the theme of Lieberman's post-primary campaign in Connecticut.

Back at the train station, the mayor proclaimed, "Connecticut deserves more than a

party vote. "Joe Lieberman is still making decisions according to his conscience." Invoking George Washington's warning against "factionalism," Lieberman said, "I'm a Democrat, Mike's a Republican. We both understand parties are not our highest loyalty."

And what if Bloomberg presents Lieberman with an IOU for an endorsement in 2008? It's not as if Lieberman owes the Democrats anything given the way John Kerry, John Edwards, Ted Kennedy, Chris Dodd and others jumped ship after the Lamont primary win.

Third parties were once the domain of fringe political movements. Now, the Connecticut Senate race seems to have spawned fervent rhetoric from a radical center bent on stamping out so-called ideologues. The question is, could this message sell in red and blue America?

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