

SANCTIMONIOUS JOE IN THE CROSSFIRE

If I had my way, Harry Reid would bounce Sanctimonious Joe out of the Democratic Party unceremoniously (after all, in matters having to do with Joe Lieberman, one is usually well-advised to follow Jane's lead). But I wanted to explore some of the other tensions spelling doom for Joementum.

Generally, the press claims that the Republicans would be happy to have him. After all, they've lost 5 seats (at least) in two elections in a row, so by taking Holy Joe, they can pad their numbers and retain a little more power. Yet almost all those claims rely on this quote from John Ensign:

Republicans over the past weeks have made it clear they'd welcome Lieberman if he chooses to defect. "Joe Lieberman is certainly going to be a wild card," Senator John Ensign, a Nevada Republican, told MSNBC last week. "And it depends – you know, we welcome Joe. I think Joe's a terrific guy with a lot of integrity and does what he believes."

Ensign, of course, was head of the NRSC this year—the guy tasked with ensuring electoral success for Republican Senate candidates. Things didn't work out so well for Ensign in that role. So it is understandable that he'd want to downplay his own failure by adding Joe to the "R" column.

But hearing John Ensign say he'd welcome Joe with open arms is very different from hearing Mitch McConnell say the same thing. And for McConnell—who is now tasked with trying to prevent wholesale Democratic policy victories, having an occasionally liberal Senator from Connecticut on your team has some drawbacks. In recent years, Joementum has shown no taste for party discipline; he might be different under

the Republicans, but if so, he will certainly lose re-election in 2012. McConnell is a damn good Minority Leader (unfortunately), but I suspect he is weighing seriously whether he wants to deal with the headache of Joe's whining over the next several years.

And then there's the matter of what the Republicans could offer Joe. As it is, they're either going to have to beg the Democrats to expand the committees, or they're going to have to take committee assignments away from some senators (for example, Tom Coburn will lose his membership in SJC unless they expand that committee). So does McConnell really want to add another senator to the list of those who need committee assignments? And, almost certainly, McConnell would think twice about giving Joe any kind of authority save on a committee dealing with foreign affairs, since on other issues Joe tends to side with Democrats. (Though, to be fair, there is space but not ranking membership on both the Armed Services Committee—which lost Dole and Warner and possibly Chambliss, with McCain as Ranking Member; and Homeland Security—which lost Sununu, Warner, Domenici, possibly Coleman, and possibly Stevens, with Collins as Ranking Member).

Mostly, though, McConnell knows the Republican Party is going to be conducting some real soul searching over the next several years. Now, perhaps he sees the wisdom of bolstering the moderate wing of the party (and the moderate senators—those who can make or break any filibuster—will be in a position of real power in this Senate). But it's unclear whether the Republicans want to muddy the issues by inviting Sanctimonious Joe to participate in their infighting.

As Markos suggested, the safest place for Holy Joe in a Democratic senate might be in our own caucus—where we can keep an eye on him and where he would be unable to start petulant witch hunts into Obama's actions. I suspect McConnell might decide Joe would be worth the risks and

headache (in which case, be my guest, Senator McConnell!!).

One of the most interesting aspects of this puzzle is timing: Reid has given Lieberman two weeks. We probably will know the outcome of the Stevens election by then (though there's still the question of what will happen to the felonious senator). But we may not know the outcome of the Coleman election, and we definitely won't know the outcome of the Chambliss election before then. So to some degree, McConnell will have to make his offer to Joementum without knowing fully what kind of caucus he will have.