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National Journal | Joe Lieberman Intends to Go Out Fighting

Sara Sorcher 12/07/12

Sen. Joe Lieberman is taking his last stand for the military budget—which, he says, has already been terribly eviscerated—before he retires after 24 years in the upper chamber. For the independent (former Democrat) from Connecticut, time is running out as we approach the fiscal cliff. Edited excerpts from his interview with National Journal follow.

NJ As sequestration looms, how are you advocating for the defense budget?

Lieberman The congressional attempt to avoid the fiscal cliff and do something about the debt long term is very hierarchical. The real negotiation is going on between the president and the bipartisan leadership of Congress and ... between the key staff members. Most of us are in a position of either talking to or writing to our respective leaders. If [the] sequester goes into effect and the Defense Department has to take another round of cuts this coming year, it'll be a real failure by Congress. That would really be a sour note on which to conclude.

NJ The talks seem to have made little progress.

Lieberman Everybody just assumes that sequestration will not occur. But if we do nothing, it will occur. Congress is getting quite good at doing nothing. I know people say, "Well, at a minimum, you'll kick it down the road." Probably, but even that requires bipartisan agreement. Our defense budget has already taken, pursuant to the Budget Control Act last year, cuts of almost a half-trillion dollars—which, in my opinion, already pose unacceptable risk [to] our national security

NJ If we go over the cliff, you won't be here to help mitigate the consequences. What does that feel like?

Lieberman Thus far, [these past two years] have been the most uncompromising, unproductive in my 24 in Congress. My hope and prayer is that we will have a big bipartisan breakthrough on the debt. The last two years doesn't give hope for that.

NJ Senate Armed Services Committee Chairman Carl Levin says he might accept \$100 billion more in defense cuts over the next decade. Do you have a dollar figure in mind?

Lieberman There is a number: Zero. A bit stubborn, maybe some people think absolute. This is going to be one of my last votes as a senator. But I'm not going to vote for any more cuts in defense, because I think it will compromise our security.

NJ Your Homeland Security Committee is investigating the Benghazi terrorist attack. How was your meeting last week with U.N. Ambassador Susan Rice, who is under fire for misconstruing the attack that killed Ambassador Chris Stevens?

Lieberman I ended up with the conclusion, validated by the acting director of the CIA, Mike Morell, that what she said on those Sunday-morning television appearances were the talking points she was given by the intelligence community. There are obviously questions about if something was taken out of those talking points. The answer is yes, but not by Ambassador

Rice. Some of my colleagues are troubled that Rice at one point said that al-Qaida had been decimated, then at another point said it was too soon to say whether al-Qaida or al-Qaida-related groups or other extremist groups were involved in the attack. Which is an accurate answer. She said, "I understand the confusion. I should have said, what I meant was, 'Core al-Qaida has been decimated—Osama bin Laden, and most of the rest of the central command.'" I think she's telling the truth.

NJ Could Rice be confirmed by the Senate as secretary of State?

Lieberman I don't think Ambassador Rice should be criticized or punished in any way for what she said. Whether she's nominated for something or not, that's the president's decision, and I won't be here to vote for her or against her. But if I were here, I wouldn't vote against her because of those Sunday-morning TV appearances. I think that would be unfair.

NJ You were part of a national-security trio with Republican Sens. John McCain and Lindsey Graham. What will happen to the "three amigos"?

Lieberman It has been a very important part of my Senate experience. Senator McCain and I became friendly right after I got here, but we really started working together in response to the genocide in the Balkans. Senator Graham came here in the 2002 elections. There was no admissions process into the amigos; it just seemed to happen. The two of them and I disagree on a lot of domestic issues. But I think we harken back to an earlier, more bipartisan tradition on foreign policy and national security. I'll miss them, but I think we'll always be amigos.