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Running Mates

The Clark-Lieberman Iowa jailbreak.

By William Saletan

Posted Monday, October 20, 2003, at 1:51 PM PT

At 10:06 p.m. Sunday, the Associated Press reported, "Lieberman Pulling Campaign Out of Iowa." Half an hour later, the AP filed a new headline: "Lieberman, Clark Pull Campaigns From Iowa." I don't know the ticktock of who called whom when—it looks like Lieberman jumped first, and Clark decided to follow—but either way, one or both of them decided it was safer to run for the border as a pair. And they're right.

Clark and Lieberman are taking plenty of lumps for quitting the caucuses. Every story on them today is full of quotes from Iowa Democrats and rival campaigns heaping pious, self-interested scorn on them for turning tail. Among other things, critics are suggesting that skipping Iowa doomed John McCain in 2000, when in fact it worked beautifully for him. They're even warning that by giving up on Iowa in the primaries, Clark and Lieberman are risking a backlash in that state in November 2004. On that point, you may recall how little George W. Bush's debacle in the 2000 New Hampshire primary hurt his performance there in the general election.

But imagine how much worse today's media drubbing would have been had Clark or Lieberman pulled out alone. The story would have been that an isolated loser was making himself an isolated quitter. Together, Clark and Lieberman have enough clout to create an alternative, if weaker, story line: The problem isn't them; it's Iowa—and without their participation, the caucuses mean that much less.

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Today's *New York Times* story illustrates this effect. The headline is, "2 Top Democrats Will Not Contest Iowa's Caucuses." Iowa, not Clark or Lieberman, gets singled out and is pitted not just against two candidates, but two "top" candidates. The obligatory spanking quotes from other campaigns and Iowa Democrats are offset by reporter Adam Nagourney's warning that "the absence of General Clark and Mr. Lieberman could plant an asterisk alongside the results of the caucuses. ... That could prove to be a complication

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for Representative Richard A. Gephardt of Missouri and Howard Dean, the former Vermont governor, who are hoping for an unencumbered victory in Iowa as an anchor for their nomination strategies."

If you're Clark or Lieberman, you can't ask for better spin than that. And if you're the next candidate thinking of fleeing Iowa or New Hampshire, you're praying for somebody else to run with.

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William Saletan is **Slate's** chief political correspondent. *Photograph of Joe Lieberman on the **Slate** home page from Reuters.*



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