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TV, Print Journalists Largely Avoid the L Word, See New “Centrist” Credibility for Dean After Gore Nod

“Centrist” Al’s Boost for Hard-Left Howard

In breathless sentences this morning, network anchors proclaimed the “bombshell” announcement that 2000 loser Al Gore was endorsing Howard Dean for President. As the news leaked out last night, the networks rushed to underline Gore’s clout. ABC, CBS, CNBC, CNN, and NBC all seized the opportunity to remind viewers that Gore won the popular vote in 2000.

But the endorsement also opened the door for an analysis of the ideological positions of Gore and Dean. While four years ago, TV reporters castigated George Bush’s courting of the “far right,” many suggested Gore’s nod moves Dean toward the center, even as they danced around the word “liberal.” To review:

ABC. Last night, Peter Jennings eluded the L word: “This is very big news for the Dean campaign because he has run well outside the Democratic establishment.”

CBS. Last night, reporter Wyatt Andrews predicted the Gore news “will reverberate with the voters Dean now needs the most: **centrist and Southern Democrats.**” This morning, reporter Jim Axelrod only called Dean “hard-charging” and noted the endorsement “would be the first from a leading member of the Democratic Party establishment and a huge step for a candidate running as an outsider....It will likely give Dean a boost among **centrists and southern Democrats,** voters he needs to win the presidency.”

In an interview with former Gore aide Tony Coelho, co-host Rene Syler touched on Dick Gephardt’s claim that Dean was on the “wrong side” on Clinton tax hikes, assault weapons bans, racial quotas, and Medicare “cuts.”

NBC. This morning, reporter Carl Quintanilla touted the pick: “Winner of the popular vote in 2000, Al Gore brings Dean the support of key primary voters still mad about the Florida recount, and he helps erase Dean’s image as too scrappy, **too liberal to rally moderates.**” In an interview with jilted Joe Lieberman, Matt Lauer avoided the L word: “In

your opinion, has Al Gore changed? This was Bill Clinton’s Vice President, he was the New Democrat, **the centrist,** and now he’s endorsing Howard Dean, someone who’s seen by most people as an outsider.”

Avoiding the liberal label also happened in print. *USA Today’s* Jill Lawrence used no labels, only noting Gore shared Dean’s “strong record” on “gay rights.” Dan Balz of *The Washington Post* had no mention of ideology except union leader Gerald McEntee boasting the Gore nod would dispel the image of Dean as “another George McGovern.”

The New York Times twice labeled Dean an “insurgent” instead of a liberal. Todd Purdum wrote: “Gore embraced an insurgent candidate who has spent months railing against the brand of **centrist-at-home, hawkish-abroad** Democratic politics that Mr. Gore worked 20 years to help build.”

No Leftists Here, Just “Insurgents”

“Mr. Gore’s decision put him in the odd position of supporting an insurgent candidate who has built his campaign attacking the centrist Democratic positions that the former Vice President has espoused for two decades.” — Adam Nagourney and Jodi Wilgoren in today’s *New York Times*.

Some found Gore moving left instead of Dean moving right. Katie Couric asked Tim Russert: “Because Al Gore is considered **a more centrist Democrat....** Does that help him with that kind of moniker in terms of being **too liberal** to be electable?” Russert saw a tiny tilt: “He has been addressing the Moveon.org crowd, people that I believe have **a little bit left to, of center,** where Al Gore had been....it appears that Al Gore is trying to shed that and move **a little bit further to the left,** embracing Howard Dean.”

ABC’s George Stephanopoulos also noted: “In this campaign, Joe Lieberman has been the **centrist candidate** – for the war, for free trade. Al Gore had become more **liberal and populist** over the last year.” But Lieberman earned a lifetime American Conservative Union rating of 20. If such a liberal record makes him a “centrist,” reporters may never identify the “far left” of the Democratic Party where Dean resides. — *Tim Graham and Brent Baker*

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