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Reporters Scold "Very Conservative" Senate Leaders and White House "Insults" For Jeffords' Defection

Blaming Conservatives For A Liberal Coup

Reviewing today's defection by Vermont's Jim Jeffords, ABC's Linda Douglass told viewers on last night's evening news that conservatives were to blame for making the liberal Senator feel uncomfortable. "Jeffords' frustration with his increasingly conservative party has been building for a long time," Douglass blurted on Wednesday's *World News Tonight*.

Douglass' liberal spin was echoed a couple of hours later by *Newsweek's* Jonathan Alter on MSNBC's *The News with Brian Williams*: "I was thinking of Ronald Reagan, of all people, when I heard the news. He, when asked why he changed parties, he said, 'I didn't leave the Democratic Party' back in the '50s, 'The Democratic Party left me.' And I think that's the way Jim Jeffords feels about the Republicans, that there was a place in the past for moderate Republicans from the Northeast, and he has been that all along."

Reagan, however, didn't steal the keys to the Senate off LBJ's desk and flip them to then-Republican leader Everett Dirksen on the way out the door, but that's basically what Jeffords did. Jeffords wasn't just trying to scrub the (R) from his newspaper designation; his real move was to install Tom Daschle as Majority Leader and put liberal Democrats like Ted Kennedy in charge of key Senate committees.

But to the networks, Jeffords' Senate coup is not what's controversial; it's simply proof that conservatism is a turn-off. "The Senate leadership is very conservative, very southern," former Clinton spinner George Stephanopoulos admonished on Thursday's *Good Morning America*. "That's not the Republican Party that Jim Jeffords, a northeasterner from Vermont, is part of."

Stephanopoulos also criticized the Bush White House for putting pettiness before policy: "The White House didn't, they insulted Jeffords over the last few weeks. They didn't give him the special education money he's been fighting for

for years. We heard yesterday that they didn't invite him to a Teacher of the Year ceremony that honored a teacher from Vermont." But Stephanopoulos did not express concern that Jeffords' decision to disrupt the U.S. Senate over such slights was, perhaps, immature.

"Who gets the blame?" NBC's Matt Lauer asked *Meet the Press* host Tim Russert on this morning's *Today*. "I think the White House and I think the Republican leadership in the Senate," shot back Russert, absolving Jeffords. "It starts at the very top."

Despite Jeffords' record as the most liberal Republican in the Senate (see box), journalists insisted he is merely a "moderate" or a "maverick" — conservatives are the ones who are out of step. "He is a maverick, an independent," insisted ABC's Douglass on Wednesday's *Nightline*. "This was really about having his own moderate views heard."

"Some conservative Republicans treat Jeffords as a pariah because he and other moderates buck the party," NBC's Lisa Myers similarly declared on Wednesday's *Today*. "What are you telling me, that there is no such thing as a moderate wing of the Republican Party?" CBS's Bryant Gumbel wondered to Indiana's Democratic Senator Evan Bayh on Thursday's *Early Show*.

To be sure, President Bush and Senate Republicans have not gone out of their way to praise Jeffords for watering down the tax cut, but the party that Jeffords can no longer stand is not more conservative today than it was when he sought its nomination last September. But Jeffords decision to put liberal Democrats in charge of the Senate has given the media another excuse to bash conservatives. — Rich Noyes

Vote Check: Jeffords vs. Real GOP Moderates

	Conservative Rating*	Liberal Rating*
Arlen Specter (PA)	62%	40%
Olympia Snowe (ME)	80%	30%
Susan Collins (ME)	76%	25%
Jim Jeffords (VT)	36%	55%

*Conservative ratings from the American Conservative Union; liberal ratings from Americans for Democratic Action. All scores based on 2000 Senate votes.

L. Brent Bozell III, Publisher; Brent Baker, Rich Noyes, Editors; Jessica Anderson, Brian Boyd, Geoffrey Dickens, Brad Wilmouth, Media Analysts; Kristina Sewell, Research Associate; Liz Swasey, Director of Communications. For daily reports of the latest media bias, subscribe to the CyberAlert at www.mrc.org.