

FRANK G. SLINKARD

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Editor
Fortune Magazine
Time & Life Building
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New York, NY 10020
Via e-mail to fortunemail_letters@fortunemail.com

RE: Fortune's Senior Writer Jeffrey Birnbaum's Outrageous Accusation.

Dear Editor:

In the June 9, 2003 issue of *Fortune* magazine, Senior Writer Jeffrey Birnbaum contends that Senator Joe Lieberman's campaign for the Democratic nomination for president is doomed, in significant part, because "Lieberman is a Jew." (Birnbaum's title: "A Jew in 2004?") The charge is as false as it is incendiary. I am not a member of the Democratic Party, but anyone -- anyone candid and honest -- knows that Lieberman's tepid reception among Democrats is *because he's too moderate for them*, not because he's Jewish. In fact, I am convinced that the only people who will find Birnbaum's article convincing are non-Jews who are ignorant of Democratic Party politics.

Birnbaum makes three main contentions, each false: Democrats will not vote for Lieberman for president because he's a Jew, his campaign is held back because of rising anti-Semitism, and Jews are not supporting Lieberman because many of them worry that "it's a bad time for a Jewish president." I will consider each of the contentions, in order.

Birnbaum first contends that Democrats will not support Lieberman in the primaries because he's Jewish (and by Birnbaum's account, an "especially unfamiliar" Orthodox Jew). To advance his contention, Birnbaum must explain away the good reception that Lieberman received in 2000 as a vice-presidential candidate. Birnbaum describes this change in mood to new office that Lieberman now seeks, because "as a candidate for the top job, he faces much tougher scrutiny..." By this account, the Democratic anti-Semites who kept their prejudice in check when Lieberman ran for vice-president cannot exercise similar restraint now; the job Lieberman seeks is just too important.

Birnbaum misunderstands -- incomprehensibly -- the view that people have of a vice-presidential candidate. It's fair and accurate to say that most Americans -- including Democratic voters -- see a vice-presidential candidate as a potential president, should the president die, become incapacitated, or resign. Lieberman's religion would have been in voters' minds in 2000, to an extent not much different from 2004 (and not so differently that Lieberman would be touted widely in 2000, but supposedly scorned as a Jew now).

Birnbaum next contends that anti-Semitism is on the rise in America, and that rise explains Lieberman's poor showing. He cites a survey from the Anti-Defamation



League that contends that 17% percent of Americans hold views about " 'Jews that are unquestionably anti-Semitic.' " Two quick points are worth raising. First, Birnbaum does not share these survey findings in any detail. The article offers no explanation of the survey's findings, or a description of the survey's terms. The omission is fatal in an article that offers no other evidence of rising anti-Semitism. The only evidence of an increase is this one survey. That there is anti-Semitism is clear, and a moral failing. How, particularly, does the survey show that there is *increasing* anti-Semitism? Birnbaum never tells us.

Second, he never shows - because he cannot -- that these 17% are the ones, or any others, supposedly holding Lieberman back through religious bigotry. Anyone reading the article can see that the survey findings are not directly attributable to Democratic primary voters, or attributable to any particular voters. Birnbaum doesn't even try to connect the two -- merely the mention of the ADL survey is intended to imply bigotry in the ranks of Democrats.

(Birnbaum gives the game away when he admits that "[p]lenty of people won't vote for him simply because of his religion, whether they admit it or not." Thus Birnbaum wants to charge millions of Democratic primary voters with anti-Semitism, but somehow no one will step forward to declare openly this prejudice, the reputed number of bigots notwithstanding. Their silence also explains, for Birnbaum, his lack of direct evidence of bigotry against Lieberman. Easy, indeed: Birnbaum can allege anti-Semitism as an obstacle to Lieberman, but it's so pervasive, like ether, he cannot find a way to prove its existence.)

Birnbaum offers additional, inadequate evidence in support of his article. The article quotes political scientist Scott Huffmon of Winthrop University in Rock Hill, S.C. on the Confederate flag controversy: " 'In a place where the Confederate battle flag is so prominent [South Carolina], [Lieberman's] religion will be prominent in the minds of many people.' " I cannot believe that Birnbaum offers no more support of his contention than a quotation alleging that Lieberman's religion "will be prominent" in the minds of many people. The obvious, but unanswered, questions spring to mind: What is the nature of these prominent views, how many people hold them, and will they have any influence on Lieberman's candidacy in South Carolina, or elsewhere? Birnbaum never tells us.

Birnbaum blames both Jews and non-Jews for Lieberman's poor showing in primary-state opinion polls: non-Jews oppose him because he's a Jew, and Jews don't support him enough though he is. Perhaps, in the end, this is the most offensive and risible part of Birnbaum's article. The article reads like an anti-Semite's worst screed -- the Jews are disloyal even to their own, Birnbaum contends. In fact, Birnbaum contends that "Jewish money" hasn't started flowing to Lieberman. Is that all it takes? If Birnbaum thinks that Lieberman can only succeed if the Jews support him, and will only fail because non-Jews are anti-Semites, then Birnbaum's ignorant of presidential politics, offensively ignorant. There is a difference between an uncomfortable truth and a false contention, and Birnbaum must believe that Fortune's readers are too poorly schooled, or too stupid, to distinguish between the two.

What nonsense he pushes -- Jewish opinion is far too diverse to require or expect such loyalty. Conservative Jews have every reason to support a Republican, not Lieberman; liberal Jews have every reason (though I think mistaken ones) to support a conventional liberal, not a moderate like Lieberman. The pollster that Birnbaum quotes to the effect that some Jews think that it's a bad time for a Jewish president

remains unnamed, a coward behind his anonymity. I am sure that there is such a pollster, but why bother finding one? A serious reader will give little credit to the unnamed quotation, and a foolish reader will believe Birnbaum without any sources at all.

Birnbaum wants to find anti-Semitism as Lieberman's presidential downfall, and so he finds it, supporting it with worthless evidence. Here's a better answer: he's too moderate for the increasingly liberal Democratic Party. (Birnbaum acknowledges this as a possibility, but upon finding the truth, he discards it in favor of a smear of religious prejudice.)

I could as easily contend that Birnbaum's article is not evidence of anti-Semitism of Democrats, but of nepotism favoring Senior Writers. This explanation accounts for both the flimsiness of Birnbaum's reasoning, its false explanation for Lieberman's challenges, and the fact that it made its way past an editor into the pages of **Fortune**. I am sure that the charge is false, but being false it has as much support as does Birnbaum's thesis, and I've wasted far less ink in making it.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Frank G. Slinkard". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a prominent initial "F".

Frank G. Slinkard