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In the Senate, Raising a (Quiet) Republican Voice Against the Administration

By **SHERYL GAY STOLBERG**

WASHINGTON, Oct. 3 - One day after the Supreme Court sealed the 2000 election for [George W. Bush](#), his running mate, Dick Cheney, went to the Capitol for a private lunch with five moderate Republican senators. The agenda he laid out that day in December 2000 stunned Senator Lincoln Chafee of Rhode Island, sending Mr. Chafee on a painful journey of political conscience that, he said in an interview last week, has culminated with his decision not to vote for Mr. Bush in November.

"I literally was close to falling off my chair," Mr. Chafee said, recounting the vice president's proposals for steep tax cuts, missile defense programs and abandoning the Kyoto environmental accords. "It was no room for discussion. I said, 'Well, you're going to need us; it's a 50-50 Senate, you're going to need us moderates.' He said, 'Well, we need everybody.' "

For Mr. Chafee, who was a prep school buddy of the president's brother Jeb and whose father, the late Senator John Chafee, was close to the first President Bush, that day was the beginning of an estrangement with the president, whom he had worked to elect. In the months since, he has opposed Mr. Bush on everything from tax cuts to gay marriage and the war in Iraq. Now, this life-long Republican has concluded that he cannot cast his ballot for the leader of his party.

"I'll vote Republican," he said, explaining that he would choose a write-in candidate, perhaps George Bush the elder, as a symbolic act of protest. Asked if he wanted [Senator John Kerry](#) to be president, Mr. Chafee shook his head sadly, as if to say he could not entertain the question. "I've been disloyal enough," he said.

On Capitol Hill, some regard Mr. Chafee, a soft-spoken, gentle man who once shod horses for a living, as the Republican counterpart to Senator Zell Miller, the fiery Georgia Democrat who is campaigning for Mr. Bush. But the truth is more complex. While Mr. Miller is retiring, Mr. Chafee is planning to run again in 2006. His misgivings about his party's conservative tilt have thrust him into a powerful position in Washington, where Republicans' memories are still fresh of how another moderate, Senator James M. Jeffords of Vermont, defected in 2001 and became an independent, temporarily giving Democrats control of the Senate.

Mr. Chafee insists he has no intention of defecting. But it is no secret that Democrats would welcome him, and already, Mr. Jeffords is offering him counsel.

"I understand the feelings that he has," Mr. Jeffords said. "I'm going to be talking to him, so I'm not going to say any more. I probably shouldn't have even told you that."

At 51, Mr. Chafee, who was appointed to the Senate after his father's death in 1999 and then won handily in an election the following year, is a curious figure in Washington. Pensive and intellectual, he hardly appears suited for the bare-knuckle world of politics and seems to exist on the periphery of things, ambling about the Capitol like an absent-minded professor making a study of its power-hungry inhabitants.

Some call him quirky; others think of him as the accidental senator, a political version of the loner protagonist in the Anne Tyler novel "The Accidental Tourist."

"I don't think he marches to the same drummer as other politicians," said M. Charles Bakst, a political columnist for The Providence Journal who has followed Rhode Island politics since the 1960's, when John Chafee was governor. "When they march, one of their big drums is party, and I don't think he cares very much what this party says or what another party says."

But Mr. Chafee says he does care. In heavily Democratic Rhode Island, he has been a Republican since birth; his parents named him Lincoln after the first Republican president. He says he is waiting for the moderate wing of the party to rise again; in the meantime, he was asked if he went to bed at night wondering how he could remain a Republican.

"Yes," he said, "I don't deny that."

Born into wealth and privilege, Mr. Chafee never envisioned following his father into politics. Instead, after graduating from Brown University in 1975, he took

his grandfather's advice to "get a trade." Having grown up around horses, he settled on a blacksmith school in Bozeman, Mont., and spent seven years working at harness race tracks.

He says it was great training for politics. "In order to shoe six, seven, eight horses a day, you've got to have a lot of grit," Mr. Chafee said. "It's hard work. They're not all going to stand there perfectly." And besides, he added, "to get along with horses, you've got to be flexible."

Mr. Bakst, though, said Mr. Chafee was anything but flexible: "He's very stubborn. He doesn't buckle. Whatever he's going to do, he does it, and he seems impervious to pressures, deals, enticements."

By 1985, having returned to Rhode Island, Mr. Chafee was elected as a delegate to the state's constitutional convention. He loved watching the power brokers at work, even if he was not one of them. By 1992, he was mayor of Warwick. He was already thinking of running for the Senate when his father, who was planning to retire, died.

That year, former President George Bush came to Rhode Island and raised \$300,000 for Mr. Chafee, an unheard of sum for a Republican in tiny Rhode Island. Now Mr. Chafee fears he has bitten the hand that fed him. "I don't want to get him angry," he said of the elder Bush. "I'm in enough trouble."

Yet the Rhode Island senator said he was angry himself- at what he regards as broken campaign promises by the current occupant of the White House. He said Mr. Bush's promise to be "a uniter, not a divider" resonated with him, as did Mr. Bush's remark in a 2000 debate that the United States would have to be humble, not arrogant, to be respected in the world.

"As soon as victory was achieved came people with a completely different agenda than being humble," he said. Asked if he regretted supporting the president, he said, "I regret that some of the answers to important questions weren't more forthright and that there wasn't more adherence to campaign rhetoric."

So when Ken Mehlman, the Bush campaign chairman, called Mr. Chafee last spring to see if he would serve as co-chairman of the president's re-election effort in Rhode Island, the senator said he just let the matter pass. "I didn't give him a firm no," he said, "and as time went by, it kind of went away."

In the Capitol, Republicans are trying to keep their disenchantment quiet. Senator Trent Lott of Mississippi - who suffered from Mr. Chafee's independence when the Rhode Island senator called for him to step down as majority leader over racially charged remarks - laughed at the mention of Mr. Chafee's name. Pressed for comment, Mr. Lott said tartly, "You have my response."

In Rhode Island, a recent poll showed Mr. Chafee with a 56 percent approval rating. But the senator is well aware that his critique of the president, coupled with his repeated votes against tax cuts, could spell political trouble for him from the right, of the sort faced by Arlen Specter, the Pennsylvania senator who beat back a tough primary challenge this year. Mr. Chafee said he watched the Specter race closely, knowing that the Club for Growth, an antitax group, financed Mr. Specter's challenger.

"Steven Moore, Club for Growth, has said we will not go after Link Chafee," he said. But in an interview, Mr. Moore said the club "would consider" a challenge. He described Mr. Chafee, who, citing concerns about the deficit, was one of just three senators to vote against extending the middle-class tax cuts, as "to the left of Ted Kennedy and Hillary Clinton."

But Grover Norquist, a leading conservative and president of Americans for Tax Reform, said it would be ludicrous to challenge Mr. Chafee. "A Republican from Rhode Island is a gift from the gods," Mr. Norquist said, "and is not to be looked at askance."

That seems to be the prevailing sentiment among Republicans in the Senate, who are treating the gentleman from Rhode Island gingerly these days. At a recent lunch with colleagues, Mr. Chafee said, he offered them an apology and found himself comforted by a conservative, Senator Judd Gregg of New Hampshire.

"I said, 'I'm a pro-choice, antiwar, antideficit Republican,' " he recalled. "And Judd Gregg said, 'The key word there is: Republican.' "

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