

The Reform Party Prophet?

By G. Donald Ferree, Jr.

In recent days Connecticut's Lowell P. Weicker, Jr., has often been mentioned as a potential Reform Party candidate for the presidency in 2000. He has national visibility from a former career in the US Senate as a three-term Republican maverick, was elected as a third-party governor in 1990, and has a reputation for saying what he believes regardless of party politics.

His home state has a recent tradition of not aligning with traditional party stalwarts, having given H. Ross Perot more than 22% of the vote in 1992, and currently sending a mixed House delegation to Congress.

Connecticut once had a tradition as a strong party state, in which such figures as legendary Democratic Chair John Bailey (father of former Congresswoman Barbara Kennelly) ruled state politics and functioned as kingmakers. Indeed, until the late 1960s, the party lever was mandatory on all state voting machines. Before one could vote for any individual candidate, one literally had to pull a party lever for the machine to unlock. Since then, the state has developed something of a reputation for departing from the two-party norm. The proportion of Independents has increased sharply. Multi-way races for statewide offices (particularly for governor) have been common.

Furthermore, sentiment among the public has been favorable to third-party efforts. As recently as July 1999, in a *Hartford Courant/UConn Connecticut Poll*, some 68% said it was a good idea for third-party candidates to be on the ballot for president. Just shy of four in

G. Donald Ferree, Jr., is director, the Hartford Courant/UConn Connecticut Poll, the University of Connecticut.

ten said there was either a big chance or some chance they would vote for such a candidate in 2000. This is a larger group than said they were pretty sure to vote for a major party nominee, with a sizable group saying it would depend on the nominees—which at least is not a rejection of someone other than a Republican or Democrat. So this would seem to be fertile ground for a third-party presidential candidacy.



Lowell P. Weicker, Jr. Courtesy of CT State Register & Manual 1993

Nonetheless, the same July poll that showed such clear support for a third party effort in principle found only one resident in five (20%) wanting Weicker to run for the presidency in 2000. Why the discrepancy? The answer would seem to lie in the fact that, unlike many persons considered for Reform Party leadership, Weicker actually has a record as a political chief executive, and his local reputation may not yet have fully recovered from it.

Weicker first came into the national spotlight in 1970, when he was comfortably elected to the Senate as a Republican in

a three-way race. Incumbent Thomas Dodd (father of the current senior senator) ran as an independent after his censure by the Senate for mishandling campaign funds. Weicker quickly established a reputation for being, in his own words, "nobody's man but yours," bolstered by his visible participation on the Senate Watergate committee. Despite challenges from the Republican right, he won re-election in 1976 and 1982.

In 1988, for the first time in years, Weicker did not have significant opposition from within the GOP, but instead faced well-known Attorney General Joseph Lieberman. Lieberman took a "New Democrat" stance arguably to the right of Weicker on a number of issues ranging from policy on Cuba to the place of religion in public life. In a campaign where both men were widely liked, Weicker lost by ten thousand votes.

Two years later, however, in 1990, Weicker came back to win a three-way race for governor. He had left the Republican Party and formed "A Connecticut Party," which cross-endorsed candidates for other offices. Thus, in a state which had been governed by Democrats since Ella Grasso became the first woman elected anywhere in 1974, Weicker, winning 40% of the vote (edging out the Republican, 37%, and nearly doubling the Democrat's 21% total), became a prominent third-party governor.

Then a fiscal storm broke. Confronting a huge revenue-expenditure gap (evident prior to the election, but labeled by the incoming administration as much larger than anticipated), Weicker proposed a massive tax increase centered on an income tax—a measure he had decried during the campaign as "pouring gasoline on a fire." Ultimately, the legislature adopted what was essentially his plan, but his popularity plummeted.

In 1994, Weicker announced that he would not seek another term, but anointed Lieutenant Governor Eunice Groark his successor. She ran a respectable third in a four-way race (with conservative Tom Scott, Democrat Bill Curry, and eventual winner Republican John Rowland).

Weicker has not been an active player in Connecticut politics since Groark's campaign, so there has been little opportunity to provide fresh information about him to the public. His most visible intrusion was an op-ed piece in the *Hartford Courant* published earlier in August, extolling the virtues of a third party (specifically the Reform Party) effort in 2000, but distancing himself somewhat from consideration.

Since the nadir of the tax imbroglio, Weicker's favorability has recovered a bit. When state residents were asked to look back and rate his performance in office, he did better on balance than at the end of his term in 1994 (fewer rated him at all, but the typical grade was higher). Still, his rating remained substantially worse than when he was a senator in 1988.

Weicker remains widely known in Connecticut. Of course, to know him is not necessarily to love him. The balance of Weicker's favorability ratings tilts more negatively (48%) than positively (34%). Just before the 1992 election, opinion on Weicker broke 54 to 29% in favor of him. After the dust had settled some on the state's fiscal situation, in December 1993, he stood at 37 to 52%, but he recovered a 43 to 47% balance by May 1994.

Compared to other figures in state and national politics. Weicker's current favorability balance is worse than that for George W. Bush (54% favorable to 15% unfavorable), Elizabeth Dole (50 to 22%), John McCain (26 to 9%), Bill Bradley (39 to 6%), Al Gore (47 to 36%) or Bill Clinton (48 to 43%). He does better, however, than Pat Buchanan (14 to 46%) or Ross Perot (26 to 60%).

It would appear, then, that absence does not make the heart (much) fonder. There has been some improvement in the view the public has of Weicker, at least since the depths of its unhappiness with the state's fiscal situation and his plan for dealing with it. But "Weicker revisionism" has yet to take hold in Connecticut.

If Weicker's performance (and his connection to the sharp tax increase) did not help the view the public had of him, neither did it seem much to affect gen-

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eral sentiment about political Independents. For example, in February 1994, some 51% of state residents said that Weicker's status as an Independent had not really made much difference in his ability to govern. And almost as many felt it had made his job easier (20%), as felt it had made it harder (25%).

When residents were asked on that same survey about the preferred partisan status of the next state chief executive, the Republicans and Democrats were essentially tied (21 to 17%), but as many (22%) opted for neither major party and four in ten expressed no opinion. At the same time, a strong majority of state residents (79%) felt that the Weicker-Groark creation of A Connecticut Party would "pretty much disappear once Weicker and Groark leave office." This dwarfed the group (11%) who expected it would "come to be a major party like the Republicans and the Democrats." It must be said that the predictions of ACP's demise have pretty well been borne out.

This raises an interesting point about third-party efforts. In Connecticut as elsewhere, there seems to be a substantial openness to the *idea* of third-party efforts, which has

sometimes been amply realized at the ballot box. In part, this relates to the decline in party loyalties once so important in American politics. In part it reflects a distrust of "politics as usual" and a desire for new solutions and new leaders. But in practice, it cannot easily be separated from the appeal (or lack thereof) of specific candidates.

They can bring the promise of their personalities. But they often have a lack of concrete experience which can be an advantage, if it avoids past baggage and implies breaking new political ground. In some cases—and for different reasons both Perot and Weicker are examples—greater familiarity can lead some of those who might look to a third party in the abstract to shy away from a particular person bearing a third party banner.

Within Connecticut, Lowell Weicker has that baggage, having followed up a mostly successful career in the Senate with a rather problematic stint as governor. That experience seems to make many of those in the state who know him best to love him less than might be the case elsewhere. Of course, outside the Nutmeg State, Weicker's specific gubernatorial experience is less salient and less relevant, perhaps, than what he has done on the national level. If he is a third party prophet, in other words, he may fare better outside Connecticut than within it. ●