

# Republican candidate arrested for murdering opponent

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24 October 1998

The Republican candidate for state senate in an east-central Tennessee district was arrested October 23 on charges that he murdered his Democratic opponent four days earlier. Byron Looper, 34, was arrested without incident as he returned to his home in Cookeville early Friday morning.

Looper was an extreme right-wing zealot who changed his middle name from Anthony to 'Low Tax' before the election campaign. He won election as tax assessor of Putnam County, Tennessee in 1996, with the support of the county Republican Party.

The man he apparently murdered, incumbent Democrat Tommy Burks, 58, had served eight years in the state house and 20 years in the state senate, and was expected to win reelection easily. Burks was shot to death in his pickup truck October 19 as he was preparing to receive a group of visiting school children at a pumpkin patch on his Cumberland County farm.

Looper's career is marked by militarism, racism and right-wing paranoia. Born in Putnam County, he attended the US Military Academy in West Point for three years, before receiving an honorable discharge after a knee injury. Moving to Georgia, where his mother now lived, he became active in politics, running for the state legislature in 1987, then working as a legislative aide for a relative, Max Looper, who was described by a Georgia Democratic Party official as an active member of the Ku Klux Klan.

Byron Looper returned to Tennessee in 1992, ran for the state legislature and lost in 1994, then won his bid to become Putnam County tax assessor in 1996. His two years in office have been marked by increasing controversy and scandal, as Looper sought to convert the low-profile post into the launching pad for a statewide political campaign.

The tax assessor's office flooded the state media with

press releases from Looper, while failing to file property tax valuations with the state government on time. There were charges that Looper had offered tax breaks to local businessmen if they would make sizeable donations to his political war chest. His ex-girlfriend sued him for child support and fraud, charging he had used his official position to steal her house.

Last March Looper was indicted on 14 counts of official misconduct, theft of services and official oppression, after a Tennessee Bureau of Investigation probe. He faces trial in December. While Looper claimed the charges were politically motivated, the TBI is a state agency controlled by Republican Governor Don Sundquist.

Looper sought the Republican nominations for US House of Representatives and state senate in the same primary, losing the House nomination to a rival candidate backed by the state party, but winning the state senate nomination by default. Burks had refused to debate or seriously campaign, and was expected to win easily.

The murder of Burks left Looper the only candidate on the ballot, since Tennessee state law does not permit replacement of a candidate who dies less than 30 days before election day. Both the state Democratic Party and the state Republican Party said they would urge a write-in vote for Burks's widow Charlotte to avoid a Looper victory.

Burks was an extremely conservative Democrat who won notoriety and ridicule two years ago when he introduced legislation--which failed to pass--to require the firing of school teachers who taught evolution as fact rather than theory. The Democrat sponsored two amendments to the state constitution which are on the November 3 ballot, one to add a victims' rights section,

the other to remove the word 'comfortable' from the legal language describing the conditions under which state prison inmates are to be confined.

That such a reactionary could become the target of an even more right-wing political activist has a definite significance. It demonstrates the kind of fascistic and sociopathic elements which the Republican Party, and especially its extreme right wing, have begun to attract.



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