

Defection costs Republicans control of the US Senate

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Senator James Jeffords of Vermont announced Thursday he was quitting the Republican Party and aligning himself with the Democrats in the upper chamber of the US Congress. While Jeffords declared himself an independent, the effect of his defection from the Republicans was to hand control of the Senate, previously split 50-50, to the Democrats.

Jeffords' move ended at a stroke the Republican's monopoly control over the executive branch and both houses of the legislature. The Democrats will regain control of the Senate for the first time since 1994. Republican Trent Lott of Mississippi will be replaced as Senate majority leader by Democrat Tom Daschle of South Dakota, and the Democrats will assume the chairmanship of all Senate committees.

The turn of events took the Bush White House and the Republican leadership in Congress by surprise. Bush's Chief of Staff Andrew Card said he did not learn of Jeffords' likely defection until Tuesday morning. It was not until Wednesday that the White House made a concerted effort to dissuade Jeffords from bolting the party, calling him in for separate meetings with Vice President Dick Cheney and President Bush.

Speaking at a press conference in his home state the following morning, Jeffords made a pointed attack on the right-wing agenda of the Bush administration, declaring he was at odds with the White House and the Republican congressional leadership "on very fundamental issues—the issues of choice, the direction of the judiciary, tax and spending decisions, missile defense, energy and the environment, and a host of other issues, large and small."

He placed particular emphasis on the issue of education—Jeffords chaired the Senate education committee—denouncing Bush for refusing to allocate increased funding and abandoning his campaign pledge to improve the schools. "[The] Republican Party stood for opportunity for all," he said, "for opening the doors of public school education to every American child. Now, for some, success seems to be measured by the number of students moved out of the public schools."

Jeffords said the first months of the Bush administration had convinced him there was no room within the Republican Party for a senator with his views. Invoking what he called a Vermont tradition of moderate Republicanism and implying that his former party had gone over to extremism and intolerance, he paid tribute to Vermont Senator Ralph Flanders, whose "dramatic statement 50 years ago" helped "to bring the close on the McCarthy hearings—a sorry chapter in our history."

Jeffords' move was the first instance of a change in party affiliation directly causing control of the Senate to pass from one party to the other. The actual changeover will be delayed for several days, in accordance with Jeffords' promise to the White House to wait until the administration's tax-cut bill is signed into law before making his departure official. The bill, a \$1.3 trillion reduction in tax rates that overwhelmingly benefits the wealthy, passed the Senate on Wednesday with the support of twelve Democrats.

A third-term senator from the politically liberal northeastern state of Vermont, Jeffords was one of a dwindling number of moderate

Republicans in Congress. He was long known as a maverick in the increasingly right-wing Republican Party, having voted against Reagan's tax cut in 1981 and supported a number of Democratic initiatives during the Clinton presidency.

Generally conservative on fiscal questions, Jeffords has consistently opposed the Republican leadership on such issues as abortion, gun control, the environment and education. He was the only Republican senator to co-sponsor Clinton's health care reform in 1993, a measure which Clinton and the Democrats abandoned in the face of a corporate lobbying campaign and opposition from congressional Republicans. Jeffords was one of five Republicans to vote against both articles of impeachment in the 1999 Senate trial of Clinton.

Jeffords came under attack from both the White House and the Republican leadership in the Senate last month when he refused to support Bush's original plan for \$1.6 trillion in tax cuts. His opposition in the evenly divided body forced Bush to trim back his tax windfall for the wealthy. This provoked a vitriolic reaction from within the Republican Party, including a public campaign in the pages of the *Wall Street Journal* demanding that Bush punish Jeffords by stripping him of his committee chairmanship and making him an object lesson to other would-be dissidents.

Bush retaliated against Jeffords by excluding the Senate education committee chairman from a White House ceremony where Bush presented the award for teacher of the year—to a teacher from Jeffords' home state. The White House then threatened to oppose a federal program considered vital to dairy farmers in Vermont. When Jeffords sought more money for special education programs, his request was summarily rejected by Lott and the rest of the Republican leadership.

The party tops apparently never imagined that their tactics could boomerang. Their political blindness intensified the shock and gloom in Republican ranks and prompted a flurry of recriminations. One unnamed Republican strategist told the *New York Times*, "It's just amazing that they were so tone deaf. It's devastating."

Republican Senator Gordon Smith of Oregon made the wry observation that a policy of reprisals was not particularly wise in a Senate divided evenly between the two parties. Senator John McCain of Arizona, who made an unsuccessful bid for the Republican nomination against George W. Bush in 2000, snapped, "The lesson to the K Street lobbyists and the Republican apparatchiks is, 'Don't threaten people.'" In a written statement issued Thursday he declared, "Tolerance of dissent is the hallmark of a mature party, and it is well past time for the Republican Party to grow up."

The small group of Republican moderates from New England was particularly shaken. Senator Olympia Snowe of Maine said, "Something has gone terribly wrong," and added, "The (Republican) conference is crestfallen that it came to this point, that he felt so beleaguered and alienated that he was driven to make this kind of decision." Lincoln Chafee of Rhode Island let it be known he too might consider leaving the

Republican Party.

The White House sought to offset Jeffords' departure by convincing Senator Zell Miller of Georgia, a right-wing Democrat who co-sponsored Bush's \$1.6 trillion tax cut bill, to defect to the Republican camp, but Miller issued a statement Thursday declaring he would remain a Democrat.

At his press conference, Jeffords noted that the US does not have a parliamentary system, hinting that in the many countries that do, including most of Europe, his action would have resulted in the collapse of the government. While Thursday's events have not toppled the Bush administration, they have highlighted its underlying weakness and fragility.

Notwithstanding the concerted campaign by the media to portray the Bush administration as a model of competence, and the best efforts of the Democrats to magnify its strength by forgoing any struggle against it, the Republican administration rests on an extremely narrow social base. It has no popular mandate for its reactionary agenda.

Nor can the Bush administration escape the fact that it was installed in office by judicial fiat. Not only are its social policies widely opposed by the broad mass of the population, it is considered, correctly, to be illegitimate and an affront to the democratic principle of popular sovereignty.

Even elements within the right wing of the Republican Party have acknowledged, in the aftermath of the Jeffords defection, the weakness of the Bush administration, and urged it to take the loss of the Senate as a warning. In a *Washington Post* column published Thursday, William Kristol noted: "Bush received a half-million fewer votes than Gore last November. The two liberal candidates, Gore and Nader, together won a clear majority. There's nothing worse for a party, and a president, than to seem to be in charge while lacking a genuine popular mandate for their agenda..."

Kristol continued: "Jeffords' defection could also provide a useful splash of cold water for cocky Republicans intoxicated by being back in power but (heretofore) blind to the precariousness of their hold on power."

These remarks reflect the concerns within ruling circles that underlie Jeffords' action. An astute bourgeois politician with 14 years in the House of Representatives and 12 years in the Senate, Jeffords would not make such a radical move unless he was acting in response to serious misgivings in high places over the trajectory and competency of the Bush administration.

The ham-fisted manner in which Bush sought to deal with Republican dissidents like Jeffords is indicative of the administration's approach to the most complex and potentially explosive questions, both at home and abroad. This is a government that proceeds, blindly and recklessly, as though it could solve all problems through the use of intimidation and brute force. It is all but oblivious to the profound social and political contradictions of both American life and international affairs, and the dangers that flow from its own policies.

On the international front, in the space of four months Bush has succeeded in poisoning relations with China and Russia, humiliating South Korea and alarming North Korea, and alienating Washington's allies in Europe and Japan. By giving barely concealed support to Sharon's policies of military aggression and provocation, he has brought the Middle East to the point of all-out war, undermining the bourgeois Arab regimes and shattering the longer-term stability of Israel itself.

Domestically, Bush's policy of tax reductions for the rich, cuts in social programs and the elimination of regulations on business is creating the conditions for economic shocks and social upheavals.

The Bush administration and the forces that dominate the Republican Party reflect the most backward and short-sighted sections of American business. There are, however, other factions within the ruling class that are more cognizant of the explosive contradictions that lie just below the

surface of American life. They would welcome a move to bring the Democrats into a position of greater authority, as a means of providing greater stability and a more considered approach to the defense of American corporate interests.

The Democratic leadership has made clear its willingness to play such a role. Given the tissue thin majority of the Republicans in the House of Representatives, and the 50-50 split in the Senate, the Democrats have had the parliamentary means to stymie Bush's agenda from the outset. This would, however, require a determined struggle, relying on Senate filibusters and similar tactics. As a party, the Democrats have neither the political cohesion nor the desire to conduct such a struggle. In fact, Jeffords' attack on the policies of the Bush administration was far more forthright than anything that has come from the Democrats.

Now that the Democrats will have a functioning majority in the Senate, they will theoretically be in a much stronger position to oppose the administration's policies. The party that controls the Senate committees can bottle up virtually any measure proposed by the White House, and the Senate majority leader sets the chamber's agenda and timetable.

But those who believe Democratic control of the Senate will significantly alter the trajectory of the government are in for an unpleasant surprise. The Democrats will, in one way or another, ensure that the bulk of Bush's agenda is enacted, including the appointment of more right-wingers to the federal courts.

Daschle set the tone on Thursday, declaring he was committed to work with Bush in a spirit of "principled compromise."

To underscore the Democrats' compliance, Daschle and the ranking Democrat on the Senate Judiciary Committee, Patrick Leahy of Vermont, instructed their fellow Democrats to allow the Republicans to bring to an immediate vote the contested nomination of anti-Clinton conspirator Theodore Olson, Bush's choice for the post of solicitor general.

Olson, a right-wing lawyer and central figure in the Republican dirty tricks campaign that culminated in the impeachment of Clinton, was caught giving false testimony during his confirmation hearing last month. Had the Democrats even threatened a filibuster, Olson's nomination would have been all but dead. Instead, as a peace offering to Bush and the Republicans, the Democrats allowed the vote to go forward and even supplied two of their own votes to put Olson over the top.



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