

US Senate Republican leader complains of 'one-man coup'

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9 June 2001

Republican Senate leader Trent Lott has declared the defection of Vermont Senator James Jeffords from the Republican Party, which transferred control of the Senate to the Democrats, a “coup of one.” The outgoing Senate Majority Leader first made the charge in interviews on right-wing radio talk shows, then repeated it in a memorandum to Republican senators which was made public by his office June 2.

“The American people, and the people of Vermont for that matter, did not vote to put Democrats in control of the Senate,” Lott told his radio audience. “The decision of one man has—however else you describe it—trumped the will of the American people.”

In the memorandum to congressional Republicans, Lott added that the new 50-49-1 lineup in the Senate, with Jeffords sitting as an independent, meant “the Democrats hold a plurality, not majority, in the Senate, and their effective control of the Senate lacks the moral authority of a mandate from the voters.”

“Most importantly,” Lott declared, “we must begin to wage the war today for the election in 2002. We have a moral obligation to restore the integrity of our democracy, to restore by the democratic process what was changed in the shadows of the back rooms in Washington.”

This outburst expresses the rage that has overtaken the Republican right over the sudden loss of its political monopoly in Washington. From January 20, for the first time since the early 1950s, Republicans controlled the White House, the Supreme Court and both houses of Congress. Less than five months later, the Senate leadership is back in the hands of the Democrats, a minority in that body since 1994.

Lott's talk of “coup” is extraordinary given the record of the Republican Party over the past seven years, which has consisted of a series of attempted political

coups, each one more brazen and anti-democratic than the last.

Even while a minority in the House and Senate, in 1993-94, congressional Republicans engineered the appointment of a special prosecutor to investigate the Arkansas business affairs of President Clinton and his wife Hillary. A Republican-controlled three-judge panel then fired special prosecutor Robert Fiske, who had concluded that the so-called Whitewater scandal was a dry well, and replaced him with a Republican zealot, former Reagan and Bush administration official Kenneth Starr.

After gaining control of the House and Senate in the 1994 elections, Trent Lott, Republican House Speaker Newt Gingrich & Co. sought to bully the Clinton administration into submission on spending policy by refusing to pass a budget and forcing three temporary shutdowns of the federal government.

In June 1997, the US Supreme Court voted to allow the Paula Jones sexual harassment lawsuit against Clinton—instigated and financed by Republican operatives—to go to trial, giving the far right a powerful legal weapon to subvert the White House.

In 1998-99, when the Starr investigation and the Paula Jones suit came together to produce the Monica Lewinsky scandal, the congressional Republicans pushed through a party-line impeachment vote in the House and then put Clinton on trial before the Senate. Lott was one of 50 senators who voted, unsuccessfully, to remove a twice-elected president from office over a private sexual affair, despite opinion polls showing overwhelming popular opposition.

Finally, in the 2000 election, there was an actual “coup of one”: the unprecedented intervention by the US Supreme Court to shut down vote-counting in Florida. In a 5-4 decision—a margin of one vote—the

high court disenfranchised thousands of Florida voters and installed George W. Bush in the White House.

Lott did not attempt to square his posture of concern over political shifts engineered in “the back rooms of Washington” with his support for back-room conspiracies directed against the Clinton White House. Nor did he explain why Jeffords' action trumped “the will of the American people,” while the installation of George W. Bush, a candidate who lost the popular vote and was handed the Electoral College vote by Supreme Court fiat, was perfectly legitimate.

Belying Lott's professed concern for democracy was the venue where he first made the charge of a political “coup”—the radio talk show hosted by Oliver North, the former Marine lieutenant colonel who was at the center of the Iran-Contra conspiracy during the Reagan administration. While serving as a deputy to Reagan's national security assistant, North organized both the illegal arms sales to Iran and the covert war against Nicaragua, in direct violation of a congressional prohibition, and then lied about his activities in testimony under oath before Congress. He only escaped prison thanks to the intervention of friendly Republican judges, and has gone on to a lucrative career as a right-wing media pundit.

Lott's frenzy is not his alone. Far-right magazines, columnists and talk-show hosts have denounced Jeffords in hysterical tones. The senator's office has received numerous death threats inspired by the right-wing media campaign, and a round-the-clock guard has been organized for Jeffords by the Capitol police.

The *Wall Street Journal* solemnly denounced “the overturning of the US government by a junior Senator from Vermont,” while urging Senate Republicans to fight a rearguard action against the advancing hordes of leftism, supposedly represented by such pillars of the Washington establishment as the new majority leader, Senator Tom Daschle, and incoming Senate committee chairmen like Joseph Biden of Delaware and Patrick Leahy of Vermont.

The *Journal* denounced the “Jeffords coup” as the product of “ends-justify-whatever-means politics,” and urged the Republicans to reply in kind, with a filibuster against the organization of a Democratic-controlled Senate. This would be coupled with the demand that the Democrats agree to bring Bush's judicial nominees to the floor of the Senate for prompt confirmation votes

rather than kill them in committee—as the Republicans did repeatedly with Clinton nominees.

By the time the Democrats actually took control of the Senate on Wednesday morning, June 6, these fulminations proved to be empty bluster. Lott and Republican Whip Don Nickles backed down on the filibuster threat after a number of Republican senators publicly warned that the tactic would be futile and counterproductive. A five-member delegation of Republican senators met with Daschle to negotiate the reorganization plan, accepting assurances of fair consideration of nominees without any guarantees of automatic floor votes.

Daschle and the Democrats pledged cooperation with the Bush administration, with Daschle himself declaring in his initial speech as Senate Majority Leader that he favored “principled compromise” and rejected political polarization as “an indulgence” that the Senate could not afford. At a news conference Daschle remarked that both Bush and the Democrats gained power by “very, very slim” majorities. “The tenuous nature of our majorities requires that we act accordingly ... that we recognize at the end of the day, we've got to work together and find common ground.”

The Democrats are offering themselves as virtual coalition partners with the Bush administration, to help the White House implement its reactionary agenda with a few cosmetic improvements, while accepting the legitimacy of the Bush presidency and blocking serious examination of the violation of democratic rights in the 2000 presidential election.



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