

US: Republican Senate leader regrets end of Jim Crow segregation

Patrick Martin
10 December 2002

Senator Trent Lott of Mississippi, the leader of the Republican Party in the Senate, expressed regret last week that Strom Thurmond did not win the presidency in 1948 when he was the candidate of the segregationist States Rights Party. Thurmond, then the governor of South Carolina, challenged incumbent Democrat Harry S. Truman on a program of Jim Crow racism and opposition to any concessions to the oppressed black population of the South.

Lott made the segregationist remarks at a 100th birthday party for Thurmond, who is retiring from the Senate after 46 years. The affair was held at the Dirksen Senate Office Building.

Lott noted that Mississippi was one of four states carried by Thurmond in 1948. "I want to say this about my state," he declared. "When Strom Thurmond ran for president, we voted for him. We're proud of it. And if the rest of the country had followed our lead, we wouldn't have had all these problems over all these years, either."

Lott was neither joking nor speaking off the cuff when he lamented the defeat of Thurmond's racist presidential campaign 52 years ago. He was reading from notes prepared for the occasion, and made no attempt after the fact to claim that he had misspoken. The audience he addressed consisted largely of friends, family and staff of the retiring Thurmond. But even this crowd was taken aback. According to a press account of the occasion, which appeared in the *Washington Post*, after Lott spoke "there was an audible gasp and general silence."

A spokesman for the Senate Republican leader, Ron Bonjean, issued a brief statement in response to press inquiries about Lott's comments. "Senator Lott's remarks were intended to pay tribute to a remarkable man who led a remarkable life," he said. "To read anything more into these comments is wrong." Bonjean refused to explain what Lott was referring to when he said the United States would not have had "all these problems" if

Thurmond had become president in 1948.

The meaning of a Thurmond presidency, however, can be easily determined by examining the program on which he ran for America's highest office. He accepted the presidential nomination of a breakaway section of the Democratic Party in the South, formally titled the States Rights Party, informally known as the "Dixiecrats." He was nominated by delegates from state Democratic parties throughout the South, who met in Birmingham, Alabama to adopt a program which declared, "We stand for the segregation of the races and the racial integrity of each race."

The Dixiecrat breakaway was in response to an effort to commit the national Democratic Party to a mildly pro-civil rights platform, spearheaded by liberals like Hubert Humphrey and Eleanor Roosevelt, and fueled by concern that the Progressive Party campaign of former Democratic Vice President Henry A. Wallace might attract significant black and working class support.

Thurmond pulled no punches in his racist campaign, saying in one speech, "All the laws of Washington and all the bayonets of the Army cannot force the Negro into our homes, our schools, our churches."

A particular target of the Dixiecrats was the drive—initiated by civil rights groups like the NAACP and backed by socialists and other radicals in the labor movement—for a federal anti-lynching law with tough enforcement provisions, which would allow the federal government to intervene when state and local police and prosecutors in the South refused to take action against lynch mobs. Hundreds of black men were lynched in the southern states during the first 60 years of the twentieth century.

Lott's remarks are not an aberration, but rather an exposure of a dirty secret of contemporary American politics: the takeover of the Republican Party, and of the leading positions in the US government, by fascistic

elements whose ideology is a noxious combination of Christian fundamentalism and white racism.

Lott, after all, is not a “fringe” element. He is the third most powerful Republican in Washington, after Bush and Vice President Cheney. He was chosen by a majority of the Republican caucus in the Senate to represent them, and his views, after nearly three decades in Washington, cannot be a surprise to his colleagues. He expresses—perhaps incautiously, perhaps deliberately—the deep-seated bigotry and anti-democratic bias of the Bush administration and the congressional Republican Party.

The Senate Republican leader has longstanding connections to the segregationist far-right in his home state of Mississippi, organized in such groups as the Council of Conservative Citizens, the successor to the White Citizens’ Councils of the 1960s. Lott’s ties to the CCC were given considerable publicity in December 1998, at the time of the Clinton impeachment vote, but Senate Republicans nonetheless reelected him as majority leader.

The Bush White House has said nothing about Lott’s remarks. At a briefing the following day by Press Secretary Ari Fleischer, the following exchange took place:

Reporter: Briefly, you said the president is going to celebrate Strom Thurmond’s 100th birthday. Yesterday, Senator Lott, the incoming Senate majority leader, said he was proud that Mississippi had supported Senator Thurmond when he ran for President in 1948 on a platform supporting racial segregation based on white supremacy. Does the president agree with that? And Senator Lott also said he thought the country would be better off had Senator Thurmond and that cause won. Does the president support that?

Fleischer: Terry, first of all, I haven’t heard that statement before, so in terms of whether it’s accurate or not, I’m not in a position to judge. Second of all, the president looks forward to having an enjoyable day celebrating a distinguished senator’s 100th birthday. And many people have spoken on the floor of the United States Senate, Democrats and Republicans alike, in praise of Senator Thurmond. And I think this is a day in 2002 to celebrate Senator Thurmond’s 100th birthday with pride.

The press briefing was then shut down.

Not a single leading Democrat—including senators and presidential hopefuls like Tom Daschle, still the Senate majority leader until January, John Kerry of Massachusetts, Joseph Lieberman of Connecticut, or John Edwards of North Carolina—has made any comment on

Lott’s remarks. This silence is all the more noteworthy since two prominent black Democrats, Atlanta Congressman John Lewis and Jesse Jackson, publicly denounced Lott. Jackson called for his resignation as Senate majority leader.

The Democratic Party is happy to profit from the votes of black people—retaining the US Senate seat from Louisiana in a December 7 runoff election thanks to a heavy turnout among minority voters—but its leaders say nothing when the Senate Republican leader waxes nostalgic over the days when blacks could not vote in Louisiana or any other southern state.

Equally revealing is the indifference of the American media to what one right-wing columnist—David Frum—called “the most emphatic repudiation of desegregation to be heard from a national political figure since George Wallace’s first presidential campaign.”

On CNN’s “Inside Politics” program, Lott commented about the forced resignation of Treasury Secretary Paul O’Neill and economic adviser Larry Lindsey, but was not asked about his comments on Thurmond. The PBS program “Washington Week in Review” played a segment of the Lott statement, but the only comment from host Gwen Ifill, who is black, was, “What was he thinking?”

Not one of the Sunday interview programs on the major television networks—CBS, ABC, NBC, Fox and CNN—devoted any time to the subject. The silence of the Democratic leadership and the media only underscores the fact that no section of the opinion-making elite in America is seriously committed to the defense of democratic rights.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact