

US Senate leader Trent Lott resigns

Hypocrisy and posturing attend a reshuffling of reactionaries

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The political spectacle which has preoccupied official Washington for the last two weeks came to its predictable culmination Friday with the announcement by Trent Lott that he was stepping down as leader of the Senate Republicans. Lott was under increasing fire over his comments December 5 hailing the 1948 presidential campaign of Strom Thurmond, who ran as the candidate of the States' Rights Party on a segregationist program. [See "Republican Senate leader regrets end of Jim Crow segregation"]

The Republican leader's standing crumbled quickly in the last week, after his former deputy, Don Nickles of Oklahoma, called for a new election. Several other senators backed this demand, and Lott agreed to hold a closed-door meeting of the Republican caucus on January 6 where the vote could be taken. On December 19, Senator William Frist of Tennessee announced he would challenge Lott in the caucus vote. With heavy backing from the Bush White House, Frist rapidly won the support of a majority of the 51 Republican senators. The next day Lott conceded the race, clearing the way for Frist to become Senate majority leader when the new Congress reconvenes.

There are two major elements in the Lott affair: gross hypocrisy, as bourgeois politicians who have pandered to racist sentiments for decades proclaim their shock at Lott's praise for the defenders of segregation; and ruthless infighting, exemplified by the campaign of a section of the Republican right to utilize the crisis opened up by Lott's remarks to remove the Senate leader and push the Republican Party in an even more reactionary direction.

Rarely in recent American history has so much has been said and written about racism, with so little sincerity, as in the past two weeks. Lott himself made one apology after another, each more transparently hollow and repugnant than the last. By the time of his appearance on Black Entertainment Television, the senator who had spoken fondly of the days of white supremacy was pledging support for affirmative action.

Virtually every Senate Republican denounced Lott's comments at the Thurmond birthday celebration. President Bush chimed in during a speech before a largely black audience in Philadelphia. He was followed by Secretary of State Colin Powell, Florida Governor Jeb Bush, Texas Governor Rick

Perry and other prominent Republicans.

None of these newfound converts to the struggle against racism answered the question, why celebrate Thurmond's birthday at all? Does living to be 100 mean a political amnesty for bigotry and reaction? Presumably Bull Connor, Lester Maddox and George Wallace would have been similarly feted as charming examples of Americana had they reached the century mark.

The role of the media is also noteworthy. None of the 12 reporters who attended the Thurmond celebration found anything critical to write about a tribute to a man who based his political career on the defense of racial oppression. None mentioned Lott's remarks wishing that Thurmond had won the 1948 presidential campaign. It was only a C-SPAN broadcast of the event that triggered a round of Internet criticism of the Senate Republican leader, leading to the appearance of a small article in the *Washington Post*. The initiative for pursuing the matter was taken not by the Democrats, but rather by a section of the Republicans close to the Bush administration who were dissatisfied with Lott's performance as Senate majority leader.

The corporate-controlled press was careful to place their criticism of Lott within the framework of overall support for the Bush administration, portraying Bush as a longtime racial moderate who was genuinely outraged by Lott's comments.

The *New York Times* editorialized: "No one has put more effort than George W. Bush into ending the image of the Republican Party as a whites-only haven." The *Washington Post*, in a lengthy news analysis December 15, wrote, "Lott and Bush symbolize the two wings of the southern GOP—the first emerging from the segregationist past; the second the son of a Yankee migrant who moved to the Sunbelt to make his fortune and stayed to build a Republican Party."

The truth is that Bush and Lott, whatever their differences in style and social origin, are both representatives of the right-wing forces whose current domination of American politics is based on a deliberate strategy of catering to racism. [See "The Republican Party and racism: from the 'southern strategy' to Bush"]

In the most serious crisis of his campaign for the 2000 Republican presidential nomination, the South Carolina primary which followed his defeat by John McCain in New

Hampshire, Bush made a speech at the campus of Bob Jones University, the fundamentalist college which prohibits interracial dating and regards Catholics as Satan-worshippers. He ostentatiously declined to voice any opposition to the display of the Confederate flag at the South Carolina state capitol, declaring it a purely state matter. Bush supporters circulated racist attacks on McCain, who has an adopted Asian daughter.

Congressional Democrats were virtually silent on Lott's pro-segregationist statements until the affair exploded in the media, nearly a week after the Thurmond celebration. Not a single Senate Democrat called for Lott to step down as Republican leader until Lott's position began to crumble within his own caucus.

Senate Democratic leader Tom Daschle made the most craven comments, declaring on December 10 that he had spoken personally to the Republican leader and accepted Lott's explanation that his comments had been misinterpreted. "There are a lot of times when he and I go to the microphone," Daschle said, and "would like to say things we meant to say differently, and I'm sure this is one of those cases for him, as well."

Daschle's posture is a further example of the political reality that has been demonstrated in the course of nearly a decade, from the right-wing subversion campaign against the Clinton administration, to impeachment, the theft of the 2000 presidential election, and the congressional acquiescence with the Bush administration's repressive measures in the wake of September 11. There is no serious support for the defense of democratic and civil rights in any section of the American ruling elite.

The campaign to oust Lott was driven largely by elements within the right wing of the Republican Party, including the *National Review*, the *Weekly Standard*, the editorial page of the *Wall Street Journal*, columnists like George Will and Charles Krauthammer, and radio talk show hosts like Rush Limbaugh. Their animus was hardly inspired by a sudden discovery of Lott's fondness for the days of segregation, something that has characterized his political career for 30 years.

In part, there was concern that Lott had committed a political blunder, blurring out openly what is said privately in such circles, and thus providing a weapon for those opposed to the implementation of an extreme right-wing agenda. But this was not the first such occasion for Lott: three years ago, during the Clinton impeachment trial, his ties to the Council of Conservative Citizens, successor to the segregationist White Citizens Council, were exposed in the press. [See "Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott praised white supremacist group"] The right wing rallied behind Lott and the media obediently dropped the subject.

This time, however, certain political scores are being settled. Lott was a reliable rank-and-file Republican senator, regularly posting one of the most right-wing voting records in Congress (as one commentator noted, he is the only man to have voted

against the impeachment of Richard Nixon and for the impeachment of Bill Clinton). But he was held to be deficient as a party leader.

Lott succeeded Robert Dole as Senate majority leader after the politically disastrous campaign spearheaded by Dole and Republican Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich to force massive budget cuts in 1995-96 by shutting down the federal government. Lott was subsequently criticized for making compromises with the Clinton administration and congressional Democrats to push through legislation and avoid similar budget showdowns.

There was particular anger over Lott's reluctance to press aggressively for conviction of Clinton in the 1999 Senate trial after the House of Representatives had voted for impeachment by a narrow margin. In the view of the extreme right Lott decided, once it became clear that he lacked the 67 votes in the Senate needed to remove Clinton from office, to end the proceedings as quickly as possible.

Lott also had personal ties that called into question his absolute commitment to the destruction of his political opponents. He utilized the services of pollster and campaign manager Dick Morris, a close adviser of Clinton. Moreover, Lott's brother-in-law, Richard Scruggs, was the lead counsel in a class action lawsuit against the tobacco industry, one of the principal financial backers of the Republican Party.

A *Wall Street Journal* editorial touched on this issue, quoting one unnamed Republican senator condemning Lott's ties to Morris. "It may help explain a lot of strange decisions that Trent has made," he said, "including why we had such a shortened and meaningless impeachment trial of Bill Clinton."

In the final analysis, Lott's demise demonstrates how insubstantial and flimsy the public support for the right-wing politicians who presently rule Washington really is. One month ago, in the wake of the recapture of the Senate by the Republicans in the November 5 election, Lott was being portrayed as a political titan, the second most powerful man in America. Now he returns to well-deserved obscurity, remembered only for 45 words that summed up a political outlook steeped in racism and reaction.



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