
“Trent Lott’s Mistake”

Now that several weeks have passed since Mississippi Senator Trent Lott’s forced resignation as Senate majority leader, we might begin to acquire deeper insights into the real nature of this recent controversy.

The initial comments that got Lott into trouble, his praise for the 1948 white supremacist presidential campaign of South Carolina Senator Strom Thurmond, were no gaffe or “terrible” misstatement. Throughout his sorry public career, Lott had expressed similarly backward beliefs, and even worse. Back in 1980, for example, at a campaign rally in Mississippi for then-presidential candidate Ronald Reagan, Lott boldly declared that if Thurmond had been elected president on the 1948 Dixiecrat ticket “we wouldn’t be in the mess we are today.”

In 1981, when a fundamentalist Christian college, Bob Jones University, was threatened with the loss of its tax-exempt status because of its policy prohibiting so-called “mingling of the races,” Senator Lott immediately came to the rescue. In a friend-of-the-court brief filed to the U.S. Supreme Court, Lott defended Bob Jones University by arguing that “to hold that this religious institution is subject to tax because of its interracial dating policies would clearly raise grave First Amendment questions. If racial discrimination in the interest of diversity does not violate public policy, then surely discrimination in the practices of religion is no violation.” In other words, Lott’s argument essentially equated affirmative action and equal opportunity programs to create greater diversity and fairness with white racists’ efforts to ban interracial dating!

In 1982, speaking before the Council of Conservative Citizens, a white supremacist group, Lott proclaimed that “we need more meetings like this across the nation.... The people in this room stand for the right principles and the right philosophy.” In 1999, when a Congressional resolution was proposed condemning the racism and intolerance of the Council of Conservative

Citizens, Lott pleaded on behalf of white supremacy. “I think if anybody wants to have a resolution condemning any groups that advocate ... white supremacy or racism, we should support that. But when you start naming one group over another group, or this group or that group, the list is going to be pretty long, and that would be the wrong approach.”

Journalists then reminded the Mississippi Senator that in 1994 he had voted in Congress to condemn a speech by Khalid Muhammad, a minister in the Nation of Islam, as “anti-Semitic, racist and divisive.” Lott’s explanation? “That was one individual. And are we going to start doing that repeatedly, naming individuals and groups?” Clearly, Lott believes that extremism in the defense of white racism is no vice.

In retrospect, it was possible that Lott could have held his Senate majority leader position despite the firestorm of public criticism about his remarks. In fact, a number of liberals and progressives felt that Lott’s unambiguously racist image would be so damaging to the Republicans that he should remain in his job. *New York Times* columnist Bob Herbert put it best: “I say let him stay. He’s a direct descendant of the Dixiecrats and a first-rate example of what much of his party has become.” Keep him in plain sight ... (but) keep in mind that it isn’t only him.”

For forty years, the Republicans have deliberately crafted a “Southern strategy” to appeal to former segregationists and white racists. Reagan demagogically attacked affirmative action as “racial quotas” and defended the principles of “states’ rights”—code words promoting white supremacy. In 1988, George Bush manipulated the racist image of “Willie Horton” to manipulate white voters’ fears about race and crime. In 1990, Republican Senator Jesse Helms used overtly racist television commercials condemning the “reverse discrimination” against innocent white victims of “racial quotas.” The long and ugly Republican pandering to racial bigotry goes on and on.

President George W. Bush’s public censure and repudiation of Lott’s remarks, therefore, had little to do with substance, only image. When Bush spoke before a black Philadelphia church and declared that “recent comments by Senator Lott do not reflect the spirit of our

country,” he knew (and the black audience should have known) that this statement was a lie. Slavery was legal in the United States for nearly 250 years. Jim Crow segregation was legal across the South for nearly a century. Racially segregated neighborhoods, racial profiling by the police, discriminatory home mortgage loan policies by banks, substandard health care services in inner cities are indeed “the spirit of our country.”

At the height of the Lott fiasco, Bush’s pollsters explained to him that racial demographics of America’s electorate are rapidly changing. In the 2000 election, Bush lost the popular vote by over 500,000 votes. If Bush receives the identical percentages of white, black, and Latino votes in 2004 that he had received in 2000, he would lose the election by three million popular votes. The Republican Party recognizes that the old, “undisguised” racism of the Strom Thurmonds and Trent Lotts will no longer work. That was Lott’s mistake and that’s why he was sacrificed. White supremacy functions more effectively when it presents itself to the entire world in a race-neutral language.

Under George W. Bush’s Republican regime, white racism has become “color blind.”

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