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Lotta Racism is Getting Overlooked

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Just last year one of the U.S. Senate's most powerful members used the "N word" on a nationally televised news show. You don't remember reading about that? Well, it's not your fault, since neither the **Chicago Tribune** nor The New York Times ever reported it at the time.

And two years earlier, a letter published in The New Republic magazine pointed out for the first time in any news media that a 1988 scholarly history had detailed how that same senator four decades before, at age 27, had declared in a fan letter to one of America's most notorious racists that he would never fight in the armed services if doing so would require him to serve alongside Negro "race mongrels."

Now that story doesn't ring a bell either, does it? Again, it's not your fault, since no national newspaper reported it at the time.

In both instances, the specific language was pretty memorable. On "Fox News," the senator told viewers that "I've seen a lot of white niggers in my time." And in 1944 the senator, writing to Mississippi's Theodore G. Bilbo, whom historians identify as America's "most crudely intemperate" racist politician, declared that "never in this world will I be convinced that race mixing in any field is good. I am loyal to my country and know but reverence to her flag, but I shall never submit to fight beneath that banner with a Negro by my side. Rather I should die 1,000 deaths, and see Old Glory trampled in the dirt never to rise again, than to see this beloved land of ours become degraded by race mongrels."

Whew.

But, much as you suspect, the senator in question is not Trent Lott (R-Miss.). Instead, it's former Senate majority leader Robert C. Byrd (D-Va.), whose mid-1940s record as a Ku Klux Klan activist has been public knowledge for many years. Byrd served as Senate Democratic leader from 1977 through 1988, stepping down only in order to take up the "more" powerful, though less publicly heralded, chairmanship of the Appropriations Committee, which he still holds today.

Republican partisans have hoped that hyping Byrd's record might somehow neutralize the intense firestorm that ended Lott's Senate leadership last week. Indeed, Lott's seeming endorsement of now-retiring Sen. Strom Thurmond's (R-S.C.) segregationist 1948 presidential campaign heightens the possible parallel. Just as Thurmond mounted a daylong, one-man filibuster against a 1957 civil rights bill, Sen. Byrd spoke non-stop for more than 14 hours in a futile attempt to block passage of the landmark Civil Rights Act of 1964.

Yet partisan tit-for-tat quickly grows stale. Instead, the Lott controversy illuminates how up until now the selection of hugely powerful congressional leaders has borne little resemblance to the extensive public vetting that both presidential contenders and judicial nominees undergo.

Senate majority leaders like Lott and Byrd attain office without receiving any of the public scrutiny that Gary Hart, Bill Clinton or George W. Bush experienced, or any version of the senatorial examination that Supreme Court nominees like Robert Bork and Clarence Thomas received. Only when that huge difference is appreciated can we understand why no one should be surprised by what lurks in the personal backgrounds of America's most powerful senators.

Ever since Trent Lott was first elected to Congress 30 years ago, it has been publicly known that from 1968 until 1972 he served as the top congressional aide to his southern Mississippi predecessor, Rep. William M. Colmer. And among Mississippi politicians, it has been well-known for 35 years that in 1967, as a newly minted lawyer, Lott worked in the successful gubernatorial campaign of Rep. John Bell Williams.

Now to most non-Mississippians, Colmer's and Williams' names are understandably unfamiliar. But just as knowledge of Byrd's Ku Klux Klan activism should leave us unsurprised when he uses the "N word," knowing that Williams and Colmer were notoriously outspoken segregationists, even in 1967-1968, ought to leave us unsurprised when someone who enlisted in their behalves repeatedly declares that the segregationist Thurmond should have been elected president in 1948.

Only last week was it finally reported how in 1980, Mississippi's leading newspaper had quoted then-Rep. Lott as saying at a public campaign rally that featured Strom Thurmond almost exactly what Lott said at Thurmond's 100th birthday party earlier this month: "If we had elected this man 30 years ago, we wouldn't be in the mess we are today."

No uproar ensued then, just as no uproar followed Sen. Byrd's televised use of the "N word" in March 2001. And one entire week went by before Lott's birthday party endorsement of Thurmond's 1948 campaign became front-page news.

But a major transformation has just taken place, as for the first time in our history congressional leaders are now being held to the same rhetorical and biographical standards that presidential candidates and judicial nominees have faced for over a quarter century. Some members of Congress may want to rebuff or deny this momentous shift, but the downfall of Trent Lott will substantially raise the bar for everyone who comes after.

PHOTO: Sen. Robert Byrd (D-W.Va.) has also made some questionable remarks. Tribune photo by Pete Souza.