



“Big Media” Meets the “Bloggers”: Coverage of Trent Lott’s Remarks at Strom Thurmond’s Birthday Party

On a wintry afternoon in early December 2002, a crowd of well-wishers gathered in the Dirksen Senate Office Building in Washington, DC to celebrate the 100th birthday of the Senate’s longest-serving member and first centenarian, Strom Thurmond. The party was an effusive and sentimental affair, attended by the senator’s family, friends and supporters from his home state of South Carolina, and a number of his Republican colleagues. Once a figure of controversy for his unyielding opposition to racial integration, Thurmond had softened his position over time; and, with his advancing years and record-setting tenure in the Senate, had gradually come to be remembered less for his 1948 run for president as the pro-segregation Dixiecrat Party candidate than for his longevity and well-known fondness for women.

The entire event was broadcast live on C-Span and covered briefly in the media the following day. Some of the more extensive coverage—in *The Washington Post*, for example, which carried an article on the party on its front page—described the famous guests, the warm ambiance, and the parade of speakers who offered affectionate tributes to the frail guest of honor. Most press reports of the party included some brief excerpts from their speeches, which hailed Thurmond for his long career of public service and gently chaffed him about his age and his “storied appreciation for young women.”¹

Almost none, however, reported on comments made by Senator Trent Lott of Mississippi at the beginning of his tribute to Thurmond. “I want to say this about my state,” intoned Lott, who was expected to reassume the post of Senate majority leader the next month when Republicans

¹ Mark Leibovich, “Strom of the century: The Hill sings ‘happy birthday’ as Sen. Thurmond turns 100,” *The Washington Post*, December 6, 2002, p. A1.

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regained the majority in that chamber.² “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’s words—with their seeming endorsement of a candidacy that embraced the Dixiecrats’ segregationist platform and vague implications of negative consequences arising from its defeat—seemed to stun the exuberant crowd. There was, in the words of one later account, “an audible gasp and general silence.”³ But the Mississippi senator quickly moved on to other themes, and the party recovered its festive mood.

Lott’s remarks did not go unnoticed by the scattering of print and television journalists present, but with the notable exception of one ABC News reporter, they chose not to refer to them in their accounts of the party, which largely mirrored the genial tone of the event. Nor did the press revisit the matter in the days immediately following the party; the story of Lott’s speech surfaced sporadically in newspapers and on TV talk shows, but was not given sustained or prominent coverage. Among one group of political writers, however, Lott’s words received close and unremitting attention. These were the “bloggers”—the slang term for the pundits who kept online journals of commentary known as “weblogs.” While the mainstream media stayed largely silent on Lott, the “blogosphere,” as some called it, hummed with indignation and outrage.

Within two weeks, however, the hum would grow into a roar and, under intense pressure from his own party, Lott would step down as majority leader—an event unprecedented in the annals of the Senate. In the aftermath of this unforeseen and, to many, astonishing outcome, some credited bloggers with playing a central role in the unraveling of Lott’s fortunes and hailed them as a potent and unconventional new voice in the nation’s media.

Background: The Evolution of the Blogosphere

In the still-young world of the Internet, weblogs were not a new phenomenon. They dated back, says Dave Winer, a pioneer designer of weblog software tools and a fellow at Harvard’s Berkman Center for Internet and Society, to the beginnings of the modern-day Web in the early 1990s. Weblogs were variously described as “running online journals,” “personal op-ed pages on the Internet,” and “a hybrid form of journalism/commentary/conversation.”⁴ By the early years of the 21st century, they had acquired a number of characteristic features: multiple daily postings in “reverse chronology”—i.e., last one first; links to other relevant sites; “blogrolls”—i.e., links to

² Lott had served an earlier stint as majority leader, from 1996-2001; he became minority leader in mid-2001, when Vermont Senator James Jeffords left the Republican Party to become an Independent, giving the Democrats the majority in the Senate.

³ Thomas B. Edsall, “Lott decried for part of salute to Thurmond; GOP Senate leader hails colleague’s run as segregationist,” *The Washington Post*, December 7, 2002, p. A6.

⁴ Chris Mooney, “How ‘blogging’ changed journalism,” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, February 2, 2003; John Podhoretz, “The Internet’s First Scalp,” *New York Post*, December 13, 2002; Mark Jurkowitz, “The descent of Trent Lott brings the rise of ‘bloggers,’” *The Boston Globe*, December 26, 2002, p. D1.

other recommended blogs; archives of past postings; and a comment section for readers. But, as Winer notes, “a lot of these things are optional; none of them are required.” Winer himself concluded that the one defining characteristic of a weblog was “the unedited voice of a person.” That was, he wrote, “the essential element of weblog writing, and almost all the other elements can be missing. ... [A]s long as the voice of a person comes through, it’s a weblog.”⁵

Although weblogs had been around since about 1992, it was not until 1999, when free “Blogger” software became widely available, that their numbers began to increase rapidly.⁶ The blog population—both writers and readers—grew exponentially after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. That date, Winer recalls, “was a very big event for [weblogs]. All of a sudden, people wanted to communicate, and the press couldn’t really catch the story at first. On the day itself, the blogs did a better job than the professional journalists that were covering it. A lot of firsthand accounts were recorded on weblogs. The growth was huge that day.” By 2002, there were over 970,000 registered users of Blogger software, though Winer estimated that active blogs more likely numbered in “the tens of thousands.”⁷

Political Blogs. In the no-holds-barred environment of the Web, anyone could launch a weblog on any topic.⁸ “We’re amateurs in the strictest sense,” says Winer. “That’s a key part of the definition. ... We don’t make money doing this. ... [We do] it for love.” In the subset of blogs that largely concerned themselves with political issues, however, the amateur and the professional freely mingled. Some, like the anonymous blogger “Atrios,”⁹ had no background in politics or journalism; he started his weblog, “Atrios.blogspot.com,” in April 2002, as a way, he says, to “simply add my two cents into the discussion.” Others, like Joshua Micah Marshall, were professional journalists. Marshall had been Washington editor for *The American Prospect*; for him, his weblog—“Talkingpointsmemo.com,” which he began in November 2000—was both a vehicle for airing his views and a launching pad for a freelance career. Still others were a blend of the two. Glenn Reynolds, a University of Tennessee law professor and self-described “Renaissance dweeb,”¹⁰ had launched his blog—“Instapundit.com”—in August 2001 as “a hobby” and a way to keep his hand in on the latest developments on the Web. At the same time, Reynolds, the author of books and articles on such topics as space policy and gun rights, was no neophyte in the world

⁵ Dave Winer, “What Makes a Weblog a Weblog?” May 23, 2003. Online. Available at <http://blogs.law.harvard.edu/whatmakesaweblogaweblog>.

⁶ Mooney, *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, February 2, 2003.

⁷ Noah Shachtman, “Blogs make the headlines,” *Wired News*, December 23, 2002; Michael Hastings, “Blogman becomes Harvardman,” *Newsweek Web Exclusive*, February 27, 2003.

⁸ One subgroup of bloggers, for example, devoted their weblogs to the subject of cats; they were, according to one report, derisively referred to as “kittybloggers.” [Rona Kobell, “Bloggers on Parade,” *The Baltimore Sun*, March 13, 2003, p. 1E.]

⁹ Atrios made himself available on his web address, but as a policy will not reveal his identity. Unless otherwise noted, all comments and quotes by him are drawn from an e-mail interview.

¹⁰ Noah Shachtman, “With incessant postings, a pundit stirs the pot,” *The New York Times*, January 16, 2003, Section G, p. 5.

of politics or journalism; and he was “mostly motivated by the journalistic blogs that I read” — notably, one authored by political commentator Mickey Kaus, whose freestanding “Kausfiles” blog was eventually hosted on the online magazine, *Slate*. Reynolds’s site grew to be one of the most popular blogs on the Web—the “Grand Central Station of the cyberset,” in the words of one media observer¹¹—drawing an estimated 50,000 people on a weekday; Marshall and Atrios attracted sizeable readerships as well—in 2002, roughly 20,000 people visited their sites on an average weekday.

Overall, the political blogs represented a fairly even mix of viewpoints—Marshall and Atrios, for example, were generally considered liberal, while Reynolds was a libertarian—but some believed that the strongest voice to emerge from the blogosphere came from the right end of the political spectrum.¹² The perceived rightward tilt was boosted by the presence of prominent conservative and libertarian journalists in the blogosphere. These included, most notably, Andrew Sullivan, the former editor of *The New Republic*, whose blog—entitled “The Daily Dish”—was an influential force in the world of political bloggers. In addition, the online edition of the conservative magazine, *National Review*, hosted a popular group blog, called “The Corner,” authored by commentators Jonah Goldberg, Robert George, Richard Brookhiser, and others, as well as one by David Frum, a former speechwriter for President George W. Bush. The *Wall Street Journal* hosted the “Best of the Web Today”—a compendium of news and opinions from websites and blogs with commentary written by James Taranto—on its “OpinionJournal” website.

Not everyone considered these true weblogs. Frum’s in particular lacked almost all of the distinguishing characteristics of a blog—the blogroll, the links, the multiple postings—and, perhaps, the spontaneous quality that Winer identified as the “unedited voice of a person.” Nevertheless, as the blogosphere evolved and grew in the early 2000s, the already loose definition of a weblog became looser and embraced a range of types, from the more communal kinds that incorporated readers’ comments and linked them to numerous other sites and blogs, to those that more closely resembled the format and style of an online column. The line between amateur and professional blurred further, as some political blogs were hosted on various online publications and still others looked for ways to generate income from their blogs.¹³ Moreover, as one columnist¹⁴ noted, the line between blogging and “traditional journalism” likewise blurred as news magazines like *Reason* and *The New Republic* created blogs of their own, and well-known journalists set up shop in the blogosphere. “The turning point,” he wrote, came when “the mighty Glenn

¹¹ Howard Kurtz, as quoted in Duncan Mansfield, Associated Press, “UT’s Instapundit gains influence as power broker on the Internet,” *The Commercial Appeal* (Memphis, TN), February 10, 2003, p. B6.

¹² Some attributed this to the advent of a new class of bloggers spawned by the events of September 11; they were known as “warbloggers,” and many of them, in the words of one account, “tilted to the political right. . . .” [Mooney, *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, February 2, 2003.]

¹³ The most ambitious of these efforts came from Sullivan, who launched a pledge drive in early December 2002 that reportedly netted \$85,000; others put “tip jars” for donations on their blog page or, as Marshall and Reynolds were doing, sought advertising revenues. [Shachtman, *The New York Times*, January 16, 2003.]

¹⁴ Mooney, *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, February 2, 2003.

Reynolds began dividing up his blogroll ... between those who were part of ‘big journalism’ and those who were ‘pure bloggers.’”¹⁵

Influencing “Big Media.” Blogger enthusiasts pointed to a number of features of their medium that they considered superior to conventional journalism. “I’ve been inside the sausage factory of American journalism,” says Winer, who wrote for *Wired* magazine at one point, “and I know that it’s not pretty. I know they have lots of inaccuracies. I know they get the story wrong a lot. ... I don’t think they get better quality than bloggers do; I think bloggers actually, if anything, get better quality.” For one thing, Winer notes, the links that bloggers often provided to their source material enabled readers to judge for themselves whether a story had been distorted in the telling. More important, perhaps, the interactive nature of blogs provided a built-in corrective to errors in reporting or interpretation. As a blogger, Winer points out, “you’re going to get fact-checked like no reporter has ever been fact-checked. You’re going to have a thousand people read your blog, and they’re all going to check your [facts] like you wouldn’t believe.” Glenn Reynolds attested to the truth of this assertion. “I can’t make a mistake,” he says, “because if I put up something wrong, boy, people tell me in a hurry. ...”

Still, for some political bloggers, the mainstream media were their most important audience, in part for the wider exposure they could provide. “For the most part,” Atrios maintains, “the influence of blogs is limited to the degree to which they have influence on the rest of the media. Except for the very top hit-getting sites, blogs need to be amplified by media with bigger megaphones.” While no one could say for certain how often journalists visited the blogosphere, it was generally believed that they kept an eye on at least some of the more prominent blogs. Talkingpointsmemo.com, for example, attracted “a disproportionately large audience of people in the publishing and journalism business,” says Marshall. “I would say it’s quite widely read among DC-based journalists and people on Capitol Hill.” Blogs, Reynolds told one reporter, were an “outside-the-Beltway phenomenon with a lot of inside-the-Beltway readers.”¹⁶

What journalists found when they visited these weblogs typically would not be new stories, but a closer look at those that were of interest to the blogger. “There is very little—though some—original reporting on weblogs,” Atrios observes. “... It’s more about focusing on stories which would otherwise be buried or simply focusing on key details from stories which may be overlooked, as well as providing an interesting or different spin on those stories.” For a blogger like Marshall, providing what he calls “a kind of counter-conversation to what’s going on in the mainstream media, particularly the national daily newspapers” was a driving force in his weblog writing. “I’m not certain,” Marshall says, “that I would do it at all if I didn’t feel it was actually

¹⁵ Reynolds began using the classification system on his blogroll in mid-2002.

¹⁶ Jurkowitz, *The Boston Globe*, December 26, 2002.

affecting the news cycle—not in the way that it would if I were writing front-page stories in *The New York Times*, but not in an insignificant way either."

Blogging was, "in a sense," Atrios muses, "just one more way to ... try to create a buzz about a story. ..." In that regard, bloggers would find their ideal subject in some offhand comments made at an event that received only glancing attention from the national press.

The Party and the Press

At the Party. On Thursday, December 5, 2002, the day of Strom Thurmond's birthday party, the nation's capital was blanketed in snow and, with Congress out of session, relatively quiet. At the Dirksen Senate Office Building, however, a celebratory crowd of about 500 people—mostly supporters from South Carolina, but also a number of Washington dignitaries, including several Supreme Court justices, past and present Senate colleagues, and members of the Bush cabinet—kept the afternoon gathering warm and lively. Also in attendance to report on the festivities were a smattering of print journalists—mostly from the "Hill dailies" that covered congressional doings, as well as reporters from *The Washington Post* and *The Baltimore Sun*—and representatives from the major television networks and cable companies: ABC, NBC, CBS, Fox, CNN, and MSNBC. C-Span was on hand as well to broadcast the affair on TV.

As the party progressed, jokes and fond sentiments mingled in speeches that extolled Thurmond's achievements, most of them delicately sidestepping his segregationist past; those who did mention it pointed out that, as former Senate Majority Leader Robert Dole put it, Thurmond "came to symbolize a reasoned transformation," referring to the South Carolina senator's gradual shift from fierce resistance to support for federal civil rights laws.¹⁷ Many teased the senator about his age and especially his predilection for young women. The capstone of the event was an appearance by a Marilyn Monroe impersonator who sang "Happy Birthday, Mr. President Pro Tempore"—a reference to the largely ceremonial post Thurmond held as the most senior member of his party in the Senate, and a winking allusion to another birthday bash, when the real Marilyn Monroe had serenaded President Kennedy—and planted a kiss on the senator's forehead.

The Monroe impersonator was mentioned in many of the stories that appeared in newspaper accounts the following day, Friday, December 6. For the most part, the national press provided abbreviated coverage of the party, often drawn from Associated Press reports; the *Los Angeles Times*, for example, ran a piece of less than 500 words, taken from the AP. *The New York Times's* report, which did not use AP, was a scant 47 words long, buried on page 26 of the newspaper. Closer to home, *The Washington Post* and *The Baltimore Sun* offered more extensive

¹⁷ Thurmond voted for the Martin Luther King holiday and an extension of the Voting Rights Act, which he had originally opposed; he was also the first senator from the South to hire a black staff member. [Jim Abrams, Associated Press, "Thurmond celebrates a century milestone," *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, December 6, 2002, p. 17A; Leibovich, *The Washington Post*, December 6, 2002.]

coverage, briefly reviewing Thurmond's controversial career and his evolution as a supporter of civil rights, and highlighting some of the memorable tributes at the party, both earnest and humorous. Among the foremost speakers quoted was Trent Lott. Thurmond's life "tracks the trajectory of the 20th century," he said, and called the senior senator "a towering figure in the history of the Senate."¹⁸ Lott also kidded with Dole about introducing the centenarian to the teenage pop star Britney Spears, and declared that his 89-year-old mother had "a crush on Strom."¹⁹

None of the major newspapers reported on the one awkward moment of the party, occasioned by Lott, when he declared that the nation "wouldn't have had all these problems over all these years" if it had followed Mississippi's lead in voting for Thurmond in the 1948 presidential election. Nor was it mentioned on most television newscasts or interview shows. Jonathan Karl, for example, interviewed Lott on CNN the morning after the party, and did not allude to the senator's remarks.²⁰ The only major media outlet to highlight Lott's comment was ABC News and that, says Mark Halperin, ABC News's political director, was "because we have a very smart young off-air reporter who covers the Senate for us, named Ed O'Keefe, and Ed was monitoring the event and heard [Lott's comment] and had the presence of mind, unlike many of the other people monitoring it, to say, 'This is news.'"

Ed O'Keefe's Story. O'Keefe, who had been working for ABC News for a little over two years, recalls that Lott made his comment on Thurmond's run for the presidency early in his speech. The senator "appeared to be reading from longhand notes, or perhaps even a prepared text," O'Keefe says, but this remark seemed to be delivered "off the cuff." At first, when Lott declared that Mississippi had voted for Thurmond and was "proud of it," some in the audience laughed and applauded. But the next line—the reference to "all these problems over all these years"—"really silenced the room," O'Keefe remembers. "Others described it as an audible gasp; I noted a distinct silence." In either event, "the mood changed." Lott, however, "recovered quite well," O'Keefe adds, and "moved right into the rest of his speech, which was quite funny, and people just kind of let it go."

But O'Keefe, who had studied up on Thurmond in preparation for the party, was familiar with the history and the pro-segregation platform of the Dixiecrat Party. "When I heard it," he remembers, "I thought, that didn't sound right; that couldn't have been in his prepared remarks." O'Keefe quickly contacted Linda Douglass, ABC's congressional correspondent, who began making phone calls "to a lot of different interest groups and folks" to seek a response to what Lott had said. Douglass was "trolling for reaction," as O'Keefe puts it, which was standard journalistic

¹⁸ Julie Hirschfeld Davis, "Strom Thurmond makes his 100th birthday; hundreds of people gather on Capitol Hill to honor longest-serving senator," *The Baltimore Sun*, December 6, 2002, p. 3A.

¹⁹ Leibovich, *The Washington Post*, December 6, 2002.

²⁰ Karl later pointed out that he had not attended the party and was unaware of what Lott had said. [Howard Kurtz, "A hundred-candle story and how to blow it," *The Washington Post*, December 16, 2002, p. C1.]

practice when someone had made a possibly controversial statement. The press, Halperin notes, "is usually not in the business of saying, 'Oh my God, this is outrageous,' but rather of asking someone else [to express an opinion]." The point-counterpoint of "he said/she said, back-and-forth," Halperin continues, "...is—to some extent to the detriment of our business and our country—so often what it takes not only to make something a story, but for journalists to realize that there *is* a story."

While Douglass was calling around, O'Keefe "took a temperature check" of reporters and staff of other networks who were also on hand for the event. "Some had noticed [what Lott had said], others had not," he recalls. "No one thought it was going anywhere." These included those who were in the room and had heard Lott's speech, and agreed that "it sounded racist." O'Keefe remembers that an employee of another network "had one of their producers in their [Washington] bureau look at it and later came back and said, 'No, I don't think it's anything.'" This gave O'Keefe some pause, causing him to second-guess his judgment. "I think there is something to the [notion] of pack journalism," he reflects, "of individuals believing that if something is noteworthy, ... everyone will get it. ... If they didn't all get it, then it couldn't possibly be a newsworthy item."

Still, Linda Douglass's canvassing had turned up some reaction to Lott's remarks. She had called representatives of groups that might be expected to provide the requisite counterpoint—such as the progressive organization, People for the American Way, and the NAACP.²¹ But, with no news reports of the birthday party circulating yet, Douglass was in effect doing the journalistic equivalent of a classroom teacher "cold-calling" unprepared students. "She was doing nothing more than saying, 'This is what [Lott] said. Have you heard? Do you have any reaction?'" he explains. "Now, it was ... by that time an hour after the comment had been made. Nobody had heard it yet; there was nothing to react to. So we really didn't gauge much of a reaction. But people said, 'If indeed that was what he said, then, yes, that would be upsetting.'" In particular, Wade Henderson of the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights reacted strongly, and quotably, to Lott's remarks, which he characterized as offensive.

Douglass wrote up a summary of some of the responses she had heard and sent it around to producers at ABC, " [to] kind of gaug[e] whether or not they felt that was raising it to another level," O'Keefe explains. O'Keefe himself followed that up with a memo of his own describing "the mood of the room." In his note, he recalls, he pointed out that, "in contrast to Dole, Lott made no mention of [Thurmond's] growing with the times or moderating his views." Both memos met with little response; according to O'Keefe, some ABC news programs, such as "Good Morning America," expressed interest in doing a piece on Lott, but did not have time to include it during their broadcasts the next day. Elsewhere, O'Keefe was not getting much reinforcement for his view that Lott's remarks were newsworthy. "Quite a few people that I talked to personally," he

²¹ O'Keefe himself telephoned Lott's office for comment, but his call was not returned.

recalls, "said, 'I just don't see it,' and began to make me think, well, maybe it is nothing." By the time he left work on the evening of December 5, he was wondering whether he "was wrong," and had perhaps "just overreacted."

Nevertheless, ABC News did air a brief piece on Lott's speech on its "World News This Morning" program, which was broadcast the day after the party, Friday, December 6, at 4:30 a.m. eastern time. It began with a mention of the birthday celebration and then screened a videotape of Lott talking about Thurmond's 1948 run for the presidency. The anchorman, John Berman, then said: "Lott's remark drew sharp criticism from Wade Henderson of the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights, who pointed out that Thurmond ran for president in 1948 as a segregationist. Others at yesterday's party noted that his views changed in later years." The broadcast then moved on to other news items.

More consequentially, the incident was written up on *The Note*, a widely read news summary that appeared each morning—"anytime, depending on the luck of the draw," according to Halperin, "between 9:00 a.m. and 11:00 a.m."—on the network's news website, ABCNews.com. Halperin, one of its authors, describes *The Note* as giving "us a capacity, in almost a kitchen-sink kind of way, ... to say that this was important." The December 6, 2002 edition of *The Note* began with the major stories of the day: the just-announced resignation of Treasury Secretary Paul O'Neill, and the run-off Senate election in Louisiana, a tight race with important consequences for the make-up of the Senate. The piece on Lott's remarks was longer than the one that had aired on "World News This Morning," and more pointed in its commentary. "Maybe Lott was being jocular," it observed, after providing an excerpt from his speech. "But a plain reading of what he said did generate some anger." It also used Wade Henderson's reaction to provide some historical context for Lott's remarks. "This was an offensive and blatant attempt to rewrite the history of the last 50 years," Henderson was quoted as saying. "...Thurmond ran for president as a Dixiecrat, a segregationist. He gave the longest filibuster in history to try to stop passage of the Civil Rights Act. In his statement today, Lott also embraced those dubious achievements. ... Lott betrayed his role as the Majority Leader of all Americans."

After those two mentions on the morning of Friday, December 6, the Lott incident largely faded from the TV screen for the time being, although a couple of political talk shows did bring up the subject on their Friday night broadcasts. On CNN's "Crossfire," James Carville quoted Lott's remarks (citing ABC News) and provocatively asked his conservative counterparts on the show, "What is it about segregation that so fascinates you conservatives?"—a question that drew an angry response but not much discussion.²² And on PBS' "Washington Week" that night, host Gwen Ifill concluded the show by screening the video segment of the party featuring Lott's remarks, for what she called "tonight's little history quiz, something we call 'What was he

²² Transcript, CNN *Crossfire*, December 6, 2002. In reply, Tucker Carlson said, "That's so dumb that I'm not even going to respond to it."

thinking?” If I invited listeners to e-mail the show and “[t]ell us what you think Senator Lott meant.”²³

But the incident received no further coverage on ABC News—or any other televised newscasts—in the days immediately following the party. Part of the problem, O’Keefe points out, was that “there had to be a reaction” that the network could air alongside Lott’s remarks, and “we had no on-camera reaction” available the evening of the party, when the news was still fresh. By the following night, he adds, “you’re dealing with the news cycle: 24 hours later—that’s old news.” To keep the news fresh enough to warrant continuing television coverage, says Halperin, would require two things: “the Democrats being up in arms about it, and the newspapers writing about it.” Television news, Halperin acknowledges, “would be smarter and better for America if we didn’t necessarily require both those things, but we typically do.” Television, he adds, “is so expensive and complicated to do that, historically, it has sometimes been too reliant for not just facts and ideas, but [for] judgment about what is news, on newspapers.”

But Democrats were largely quiescent, and the national press had, at least on the face of it, judged that Lott’s remarks did not constitute a news story. The incident received no mention at all in major newspapers, with one exception: a piece by veteran *Washington Post* reporter Tom Edsall that ran on Saturday, December 7, two days after the party.

Tom Edsall’s Story. Edsall, who did not attend the party, first learned of Lott’s remarks by chance, when he overheard Mark Leibovich—a “style” reporter for the *Post* who covered the event—describing it to a colleague the next day. “He was saying,” Edsall remembers, “‘There was this one quote I really wish I’d gotten in, but it just didn’t fit in a story about a birthday party.’” When Edsall heard what Lott had said, his “ears perked up,” he recalls. “I’ve written a lot about Trent Lott and his [association] with basically white supremacist groups in the past.”

Specifically, Edsall, who was also the author of a book on race and politics, had written a series of articles, back in December 1998 and January 1999, detailing Lott’s connections to the Council of Conservative Citizens (CCC), a self-described “racialist” group with strong ties to the pro-segregation white “Citizens’ Councils” of the past. When Lott, who was then Senate majority leader, denied any “firsthand knowledge” of the CCC, Edsall printed excerpts from a 1992 speech Lott had given before its members, praising them for standing for “the right principles and the right philosophy.”²⁴ But though the stories on Lott’s relationship with the CCC were “pretty damaging,” Edsall notes, “I don’t believe they ever made the front page.”²⁵ Other newspapers, including *The New York Times*, did pick up the story, and it was the subject of a number of articles

²³ Transcript, *Washington Week*, December 6, 2002.

²⁴ Thomas B. Edsall, “Lott renounces white ‘racialist’ group he praised in 1992,” *The Washington Post*, December 16, 1998, p. A2.

²⁵ In the *Post*, Edsall’s articles appeared on page 2; the paper also carried op-ed pieces on the issue.

and op-ed pieces; but at a time when the nation was preoccupied with President Clinton's looming impeachment trial, it never made front page news.²⁶

Edsall was familiar not only with Lott's history, but "with what Strom Thurmond had run on. And for someone to make that statement [at the party]," he thought, "was pretty extraordinary." He talked with Leibovich on Friday, December 6—the day Leibovich's story on the party was printed—and learned more details of the reaction of partygoers: that there had been an "audible gasp" and then silence when Lott made his remarks, and that conservative black columnist Armstrong Williams, who was seated next to Leibovich, seemed to "tense up." Leibovich would later publicly lament his failure to include the incident in his write-up of the party; but Edsall points out that Leibovich was a "style writer [who was charged with] writing a feature story about this event for Strom Thurmond. ... I think he would have gotten [the remarks] in the story if he could have." Edsall also believed that ignorance of Thurmond's distant past might have accounted for the scant attention generally paid to Lott's reference to Thurmond's Dixiecrat candidacy. "I just think that people now see Strom Thurmond as this doddering old guy, ... and have no knowledge of the central role he played in southern politics."

Edsall experienced this information gap firsthand, when he proposed to write an article for the *Post* on Lott's speech at the party. He had decided on this course after talking with Leibovich and then reading the quote itself on *The Note*, which he regularly scanned every morning. "That's when I actually saw it in print," he says. "It sort of stood out. And at that point I began to press that we should do a story on that quote." Initially, however, he met with some "reluctance" from the editorial staff, who regarded it as "an older story, ... not a 'yesterday' story. I don't think [they were] aware of what Strom Thurmond's 1948 campaign was all about." When it was suggested that the story be run as an item in the *Post's* "political" column, which consisted of several short pieces about "smaller, not significant developments," Edsall resisted. "I thought that was not adequate," he explains. Eventually, Edsall succeeded in convincing his editors that the story warranted more space in the newspaper. "I think as soon as they saw the story that I wrote," he says, "and they became aware of what Strom Thurmond had said during his campaign, what the platform of the Dixiecrat Party was," they grasped its significance and printed it as a separate column.

Edsall's article, 661 words long, provided the first detailed context for Lott's remarks, starting with its title: "Lott decried for part of salute to Thurmond; GOP Senate leader hails colleague's run as segregationist." The column reprised Lott's remarks and then noted that the Dixiecrats had broken away from the Democratic Party in 1948 in opposition to President Harry Truman's support for federal civil rights legislation and had formed their own party, whose platform stated in part: "We stand for the segregation of the races and the racial integrity of each race." Edsall also quoted Thurmond, who declared during his presidential campaign: "All the

²⁶ The *Times*, for example, ran a piece on Lott and the CCC on page A9 of its January 14, 1999 edition.

laws of Washington and all the bayonets of the Army cannot force the Negro into our homes, our schools, our churches.”

Along with a primer on Thurmond and the Dixiecrat Party, Edsall provided some pointed reaction to Lott’s remarks. “I could not believe he was saying what he said,” declared Rep. John Lewis (D-GA), a veteran of the 1960s civil rights movement. “... Is Lott saying the country should have voted to continue segregation, for segregated schools, ‘white’ and ‘colored’ restrooms? ... That is what Strom Thurmond stood for in 1948.” On the other side of the political spectrum, William Kristol, editor of the conservative *Weekly Standard*, expressed shock as well. “Oh God,” he told Edsall. “It’s ludicrous. [Lott] should remember it’s the party of Lincoln.” Reached for comment, Lott’s office responded this time with a brief statement delivered by the senator’s spokesman. “Senator Lott’s remarks,” it said, “were intended to pay tribute to a remarkable man who led a remarkable life. To read anything more into these comments is wrong.” Edsall closed his column with a brief reference to the earlier controversy over Lott’s association with the Council of Conservative Citizens, and a quote from the CEO of the Council, who, asked to comment on Lott’s remarks, responded, “God bless Trent Lott.”

Although Edsall had won the battle to print his article, he did not succeed in winning a prominent spot for it in the *Post*. It appeared on page six of the newspaper’s Saturday, December 7, edition. A few other papers—including the *Chicago Tribune* and the *Houston Chronicle*—carried Edsall’s article as well, but by the following day, the story had disappeared from the press.²⁷ There were no fresh developments, Edsall explains, to warrant a second look. “For the story to move in the press,” he says, “you’ve got to get a new news peg on it every time.”

But while the major newspapers and television networks were largely silent, some weblog commentators had pounced on Lott’s remarks and were attacking them with vigor and persistence. At a time when no newspapers were featuring op-ed articles or editorials on the issue, bloggers from the political right and left were excoriating Lott and calling loudly and unequivocally for his ouster as majority leader.

In the Blogosphere

Two bloggers—“Atrios” and Joshua Marshall—independently spotted Lott’s remarks on Friday, December 6, the day after the party. As Atrios recalls, he learned of them either through an e-mail from a reader or from *Slate.com*’s message board.²⁸ It was “no surprise to me that Lott

²⁷ The Cleveland *Plain Dealer* ran an extensive retrospective on Thurmond’s life in its December 8 edition, which contrasted the recent accolades of his Senate colleagues with his segregationist past; it did not, however, allude to the birthday party or Lott’s remarks.

²⁸ *Slate*’s “Chatterbox”—a political “scuttlebutt” column written by Timothy Noah—posted Lott’s remark on early Friday afternoon, citing *The Note* as its source and prefacing it with a terse comment from Noah: “What’s a little segregationism among friends?” It also provided links to *The Note*, a video excerpt from the party, and an excerpt (with audio clip) of a Strom Thurmond speech from 1948.

had said something like this,” says Atrios, who remembered the earlier controversy over the senator’s ties to the CCC, nor that “the media would basically ignore it.” The media, he maintains, “generally have a tin ear when it comes to racial issues,” and were, moreover, constrained by their own conventions. “‘Straight’ journalism,” Atrios argues, “is supposed to play it straight; news articles are supposed to simply be a ‘he said/she said’ kind of thing: report what Trent Lott said, report the response from the CBC [Congressional Black Caucus] and the head of the DNC [Democratic National Committee], report Lott’s RNC [Republican National Committee] colleagues saying he doesn’t have a bigoted bone in his body ... end of story.” But the blogosphere—like talk radio, to which it had been likened²⁹—observed no such journalistic conventions. Bloggers weighed in quickly on Lott, offering readers a short course on Dixiecrat politics and their own acid commentary on the matter.

Atrios.blogspot. Atrios started the ball rolling at 1:21 p.m. on December 6, when he posted the excerpt from Lott’s speech on his weblog, citing ABC News’s O’Keefe as his source; the posting was accompanied by a quote from Thurmond’s 1948 campaign—a variation on the one Edsall cited in his article—and some sardonic remarks of his own. “Since political correctness is the scourge of society,” Atrios wrote, “I won’t mention [that] the problems Lott is referring to are the Civil and Voting Rights Acts.” Later that same day, noting that “here is what Senator Lott was proud of in 1948,” Atrios posted a 1948 Democratic Party “sample ballot” from Mississippi, which attacked Truman’s civil rights program for its “anti-lynching and anti-segregation proposals,” as well as an excerpt from the Dixiecrat platform, which contained remarks belittling blacks’ fitness to vote. Atrios happened to have the ballot on hand because he had been researching the “modern neo-confederate movement,” he explains, for a story he had been “flogging” on his weblog; he posted it, he says, to demonstrate that Dixiecrats did not represent “a principled embrace of states’ rights”—as some “revisionists” claimed—but “an explicit embrace of racism.”

Talkingpointsmemo. Marshall learned of Lott’s speech through the *National Journal’s* daily online political summary, *Hotline*, which cited *The Note* as its source. The *Hotline* entry, which was briefer than the original, quoted Lott’s remarks, followed by Wade Henderson’s bristling response. Marshall, too, was familiar with the Dixiecrat platform and with the stories on Lott’s association with the CCC, which he considered to be “a much bigger deal” than Lott’s remarks at the birthday party. “It surprised me,” Marshall says, that “he was able to get away with [that] back in 1998.”

On the afternoon of December 6, at 3:20 p.m., Marshall posted Lott’s remarks, preceded by commentary apprising readers of the Dixiecrats’ avowal of segregation and opposition to voting rights. “Oh, what could have been!!!” Marshall wrote sarcastically after quoting Lott, and added, “Just another example of the hubris now reigning among Capitol Hill Republicans.” After that first posting, Marshall says, “I just started hitting it and basically hitting it and hitting it and hitting it.”

²⁹ Kevin Canfield, “‘Bloggers’ lead the way in Lott story,” *The Hartford Courant*, December 17, 2002, p. D1.

The following day, Saturday, December 7, Atrios and Marshall returned to the subject. Both noted that CNN's Jonathan Karl had interviewed Lott that morning and failed to bring up his remarks at the party; both also pointed out that CNN's "Inside Politics show," which aired Karl's interview, had picked up Matt Drudge's story (on December 5) about Massachusetts Senator John Kerry's alleged \$150 haircut, but made no mention of Lott's problematic comments. Atrios, who took up the issue more volubly that day, also posted excerpts from Edsall's *Washington Post* article, comments on Lott from other readers, and a lengthy list of "reasons" given for lynching.³⁰ He noted as well that Lott's home state of Mississippi had led the nation in "black victims of lynching from 1882-1930."

Marshall, meanwhile, continued to track, and critique, the media's response to Lott's remarks. On Monday, December 9, for example, he pointed out that the incident was mentioned the previous day on NBC's "Meet the Press" and quoted David Broder, one of the commentators on the show, at some length. Broder's response to Lott's remarks was, to Marshall, disappointingly tepid. "Does Broder really need his calls returned by Lott *that* badly?" [italics in original], Marshall asked. "Is that really the best he can do?"³¹

Instapundit. Meanwhile, Glenn Reynolds had read Lott's remarks on Marshall's weblog on December 6. As he recalls, his response was "pretty much like, Jesus, what is this guy thinking?" That evening, in a 9:15 p.m. posting on his weblog, Reynolds bluntly declared that "Trent Lott deserves the shit he's getting from Atrios and Josh Marshall," and provided links to their sites. While he was inclined to be charitable to Thurmond, who, he argued in his posting, "should be allowed to celebrate his 100th birthday without people focusing on his allegiance to a hateful and oppressive ideology half a lifetime ... ago," Reynolds judged Lott more harshly. "But to say, as Lott did," Reynolds wrote, "that the country would be better off if Thurmond had won in 1948 is ... proof that Lott shouldn't be Majority Leader. ..."

Reynolds fully expected the story of Lott's remarks "to make a splash" in the press, he says, and the Mississippi senator to "immediately issue a clarification." When neither was forthcoming, Reynolds, like Atrios and Marshall, began taking up the issue on a daily basis and, in addition, provided links to other blogs offering commentary on the subject. "I started collecting everything that everybody said about it," he recalls, "because it got a lot of play around the blogosphere."

Each successive day, the postings on Instapundit—as well as on Talkingpointsmemo and Atrios—grew longer and more vociferous. By Sunday, December 8, some online pundits had

³⁰ The "reasons"—there were over 70 in all—ran the gamut from "rape-murders" and burglary to "arguing with white men" and "indolence."

³¹ Broder had framed Lott's remarks within the context of racial politics in the South and had observed that "[a]s long as that racial divide continues, any kind of comment like this on Senator Lott's part is going to have all kinds of bad resonance."

begun to notice the press's continuing silence on the issue. "Seems the Blogosphere is way ahead on this one," Reynolds mused in an 11:10 a.m. posting. "Where's everybody else?"

Voices from the Right. The same question was posed very early the next morning—12:16 a.m. on Monday, December 9—by Andrew Sullivan, who voiced his opinion on the simmering controversy for the first time, and in no uncertain terms: "Trent Lott Must Go," the heading on the posting declared. Labeling the senator's remarks "disgusting," Sullivan put them in the context of Lott's unsavory past associations. "This isn't the first piece of evidence that Lott is an unreconstructed racist," he wrote. "He has spoken before gussied-up white supremacist groups before." Sullivan called on the Republican Party to remove Lott as majority leader or "come out formally as a party that regrets desegregation and civil rights for African-Americans."

Like Reynolds, Sullivan took note of the reticence of politicians and media pundits of all political stripes. "Why are the Republican commentators so silent about this?" he asked. "And the liberals?³² ... And where's *The New York Times*? ... And where's the president?" He closed the posting with a challenge: "So here's a simple test for Republicans and conservative pundits. Will they call Lott on this excrescence? Or are they exactly what some on the Left accuse them of?"

As it happened, that same day—Monday, December 9—a number of conservative commentators did speak out, albeit on weblogs or online columns. Using language that, while not as strong as Sullivan's, was nevertheless emphatic in its outrage and icy in its disdain for Lott, these writers joined Sullivan in questioning the senator's suitability for the majority leader post. At 9:57 a.m., Jonah Goldberg posted his reaction on *National Review Online's* (NRO) group weblog, *The Corner*. Unlike Sullivan, Goldberg—NRO's editor-at-large—regarded Lott's remarks as "incandescently idiotic" rather than racist. "Morally, they were indefensible," Goldberg wrote, and politically costly as well, because they would "confirm the suspicions of millions of blacks and liberal whites about what is in the hearts of conservatives and Republicans. ..." More ominously for Lott, Goldberg hinted at widespread disaffection with him among conservatives. "I would be more tempted to defend Lott—who I doubt actually believes what he said—if Lott didn't have [a] habit of saying things that make me cringe," Goldberg wrote. "... I simply don't know anybody who really loves Trent Lott. ... He was useless during [Clinton's] impeachment, he loves pork (not the tasty kind), and—obviously—he's ineffective in communicating a coherent and principled message. So tell me, What is he good for?"

Also on December 9, David Frum, the conservative commentator and former Bush speechwriter, wrote a strongly critical piece on Lott in his "diary," which was hosted on NRO. Like Goldberg, Frum considered Lott's remarks more witless and unthinking than racist. What was "intended to be nothing more than a big squirt of greasy flattery," Frum wrote, nonetheless came out as "the most emphatic repudiation of desegregation to be heard from a national political

³² Sullivan did make note of Marshall's commentary, as well as William Kristol's shocked reaction to Lott's remarks.

figure since George Wallace's first presidential campaign." Like other conservatives who spoke out, Frum worried that Lott's remarks would cause "serious damage" to the Republican Party, not to mention Lott's own standing in it, and called on the senator to provide more than the perfunctory explanation he had issued so far. "If he can't do that," Frum warned, "Republicans need to make it clear that Lott no longer speaks for us."

Frum also took note of the almost complete absence of coverage of Lott's remarks in the mainstream media. The "only media source" to make mention of them, he observed, was *The Note*. "On another day," Frum maintained, "the *Note's* report might have triggered a media stampede, but the announcement of the firing of [Treasury Secretary] Paul O'Neill and [chairman of the Council of Economic Advisors] Larry Lindsey at 10:10 a.m. on Friday obliterated all other Washington news." Not every media critic went along with Frum's speculation about the cause of the press's silence, but many would later agree with him that the Lott story "seem[ed] to be left behind in the dust." However, Frum added, "I cannot help thinking that this story is not over—that Republicans will hear Lott's words quoted at them again and again in the months to come." Frum proved to be prophetic, although perhaps sooner than he had anticipated: starting the next day, Lott's words would indeed be quoted in the media again and again, and with increasing prominence.

The Press Awakens

The drumbeat of criticism of the press for its silence on Lott had begun to grow louder and more persistent by Tuesday, December 10. Possibly the loudest salvo to date came from Howard Kurtz of *The Washington Post*, who took up the issue on the morning of December 10 in his "media notes" column on the *Post's* website. "What, you weren't aware the Senate majority leader was in hot water for appearing to embrace the segregationist cause?" Kurtz rhetorically asked his readers. "Perhaps that's because, until this morning, most major newspapers hadn't done squat on this story." Kurtz suggested that if a Democrat "had made this kind of inflammatory comment, it would be the buzz of talk radio and the *Wall Street Journal* would be calling for tarring and feathering.³³ But Lott seems to be getting something of a pass"—except, Kurtz pointed out, from "online pundits," who were almost unanimous in calling for his ouster as majority leader. Andrew Sullivan picked up on Kurtz's criticism in his "Daily Dish" weblog later that day, asking whether "DC socialization"—the symbiotic community of newsmakers and "media bigwigs" in the nation's capital—had made it "hard [for journalists] to pounce on people they know, like, respect or need as a source." This was, Sullivan continued, "another advantage for the blogosphere. We don't give a damn. And by and large, we say what we believe."

³³ The *Journal* did speak out that day in an editorial which declared that Lott had "played right into the hands of opponents who are eager to paint the Republican Party's Southern ascendance as nothing more than old-fashioned bigotry." [As quoted by Jonah Goldberg in *National Review Online*, December 11, 2002.]

But by that time, there were signs that the press was throwing off its lethargy—or reluctance—and beginning to pay closer attention to the Lott incident. This was the result, arguably, of a series of events that provided the press with some "new news pegs," as Tom Edsall put it, on which to hang the story.

News Pegs. The first of these occurred on the Sunday, December 8, broadcast of "Meet the Press," when the show's host, Tim Russert, referred to Lott's remarks midway through the show. By way of preface, Russert reported that "Jesse Jackson called NBC News this morning and said Trent Lott is a Confederate and he should resign as majority leader. How big of a problem is this for Trent Lott?" Russert asked the guest commentators on the show. Although Joshua Marshall had expressed disappointment at David Broder's mild response to Russert's question, there were some fireworks between two others on the program: Joe Klein, *The New Yorker's* political writer, and conservative syndicated columnist Robert Novak. When Novak defended Lott for "making extravagant statements" that were not seriously meant and added, "I don't even think we should dwell on it," Klein countered that "if a Democrat had made an analogous statement ... [y]ou would have been jumping up and down. And I think that this kind of statement in this country at this time is outrageous and it should be called that." Novak responded testily that Lott was "at a damn birthday party. I mean, this is the kind of thing that makes people infuriated with the media, is they pick up something that's said at a birthday party and turn it into a case of whether he should be impeached."³⁴

The exchange between Novak and Klein effectively ended the conversation on Lott on "Meet the Press," but Jackson's call for the senator to resign as majority leader generated some fresh news coverage the following day, Monday, December 9, albeit not front-page. Several newspapers, including the *Chicago Tribune* and the *New York Daily News*, carried brief stories on Jackson's demand that Lott step down as majority leader.³⁵ Still more newsworthy were comments from former Vice President Al Gore who, during an interview aired on CNN's "Inside Politics" on December 9, labeled Lott's remarks at the party as "racist" and suggested that he either apologize or face censure from the Senate. Gore's brief statement represented the first strong public condemnation of Lott by a white Democrat. Up to this point, Democratic Party leaders had scarcely been heard on the issue and, when they did speak up, showed little inclination to go on the attack. The same day that Gore appeared on CNN, Senator Tom Daschle (D-SD), who was about to step down as majority leader, came to the defense of his Republican counterpart. Lott, he told reporters, had explained to him "how he meant [his remarks] to be interpreted. I accept that. There are a lot of times when he and I go to the microphone, [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."³⁶

³⁴ Transcript, *Meet the Press*, December 8, 2002.

³⁵ At least two overseas news sources—Britain's *Daily Telegraph* and China's Xinhua News Agency—also briefly reported on the story that day.

³⁶ Thomas B. Edsall, "'Poor choice of words,' Lott says; senator apologizes for recent remarks about Thurmond," *The Washington Post*, December 10, 2002, p. A13.

Most significant of all, in attention-getting terms, was the first official statement of regret issued by Trent Lott’s office on the night of December 9.³⁷ Earlier that day, Lott’s office had put forth a statement that could be termed an unapologetic apology. “This was a lighthearted celebration of the 100th birthday of legendary Senator Strom Thurmond,” it declared. “My comments were not an endorsement of his positions of over 50 years ago, but of the man and his life.” Hours later, a second statement contained an explicit apology. “A poor choice of words conveyed to some the impression that I embraced the discarded policies of the past,” it said. “Nothing could be further from the truth, and I apologize to anyone who was offended by my statement.”

What prompted the apology, which was almost universally condemned as inadequate, was the subject of some speculation in the press. *The New York Times* noted that Lott’s “expression of contrition came after a reporter pointed out to his office that former Vice President Al Gore had called on him to apologize,” although Lott’s spokesman denied any link between the two.³⁸ Others, like Edsall, believed that Lott was feeling “pressure from non-news sources to some extent. ... I think he was getting complaints from the left and right about his comments.” In particular, according to some accounts, Lott and other Republican leaders had been hearing from prominent black Republicans like Armstrong Williams, the conservative columnist (and former intern for Senator Thurmond), who had been present at the birthday party. “It was like being cut with a chain saw,” said Williams of Lott’s remarks; he had called the senator’s office the next day to express his outrage. Other black Republicans, it was reported, had done the same, making clear their expectation that Lott would be “dealt with.”³⁹

Whatever the precise cause, Lott’s contrition seemed to awaken the slumbering giants of the press. “When Lott finally apologized yesterday,” Howard Kurtz observed online on December 10, “the big papers jumped on the story.”

“Big Media” Weighs In. On December 10, 2002, five days after the birthday party, *The New York Times* ran its first article on Lott’s remarks, a short piece, printed on page 35, on Lott’s apology. The *Post* published a similar story, written by Edsall, on the same day, on page 13. In addition, however, *New York Times* op-ed writer Paul Krugman devoted his December 10 column to Lott’s remarks—the first major newspaper commentator to do so—asking, “What, exactly, did Mr. Lott mean by ‘all these problems’?” Along with questioning the senator’s intent, Krugman also pointed an accusing finger at the “liberal media”—the ironic quotation marks were Krugman’s—for largely ignoring the story. He pointed out that CNN’s “Inside Politics” had

³⁷ Lott himself had left that day for a vacation in Key West, Florida.

³⁸ Sheryl Gay Stolberg, “Under fire, Lott apologizes for his comments at Thurmond’s party,” *The New York Times*, December 10, 2002, p. A28.

³⁹ Lynette Clemetson, “Black Republicans speak of their outrage at Lott,” *The New York Times*, December 17, 2002, p. A31. Meanwhile, Clemetson reported, members of the Congressional Black Caucus, although individually critical of Lott, had collectively “stopped short of a direct call for him to step down.”

"found time to cover" the story of John Kerry's expensive haircut, but not, during his interview for the show, Lott's "apparent nostalgia for segregation. ..."

More than one critic noted that Krugman had apparently drawn his information, unattributed, from Marshall's Talkingpointsmemo weblog. James Taranto, author of *The Wall Street Journal's* "Best of the Web Today," maintained that "Krugman's column seems to owe more to the work of liberal blogger Joshua Micah Marshall, who's been banging this drum harder than anyone," and twitted Krugman for failing to credit his source.⁴⁰ A few days later, on December 13, in a second column on Lott, Krugman acknowledged his and others' debt to Marshall, whose weblog, he wrote, "is must reading for the politically curious, and who, more than anyone else, is responsible for making Trent Lott's offensive remarks the issue they should be."

Marshall himself expressed little concern over the initial lack of attribution. Krugman, he says, had "very prominently mentioned my site in his column a number of times. ... I'm an admirer of his work, and I think he's an admirer of mine." Marshall was more miffed when the Associated Press failed to attribute a scoop of his in a December 11 news item: the revelation that Lott had filed an "amicus brief" in 1981 on behalf of Bob Jones University, which was at the time suing the US government over its decision to rescind the school's tax-exempt status because, as Marshall wrote on his weblog, it "practiced racial discrimination," in particular, banning interracial dating. In its story, the AP merely noted that the "old court papers" (i.e., the amicus brief) had "surfaced."⁴¹

By this time, however, weblog writers were being outstripped by the national press, which was in hot pursuit of scoops of its own. Perhaps the most damaging of these was a story that appeared simultaneously in the *Times* and the *Post* on Wednesday, December 11. Back in 1980, it was discovered, Lott had used similar language at a rally for Ronald Reagan, who was then running for president. According to a November 3, 1980 account in the Jackson, Mississippi, *Clarion-Ledger*, Strom Thurmond, the keynote speaker at the event, had railed against President Jimmy Carter, and then declared: "[We] want that federal government to keep their filthy hands off the rights of the states." Lott, who followed Thurmond on the podium, told the gathering, "You know, if we had elected this man [Thurmond] 30 years ago, we wouldn't be in the mess we are today."⁴² The revelation that Lott had previously voiced similar sentiments about Thurmond undermined, for many, his explanation that his speech at the birthday party had been simply a "poor choice of words," uttered impulsively in a warmhearted moment.

⁴⁰ James Taranto, "Best of the Web Today," *OpinionJournal.com*, December 10, 2002. Andrew Sullivan also noted in his weblog that "Krugman seems to have drawn from lots of blogosphere arguments for his column today."

⁴¹ Marshall posted a story on the amicus brief on the morning of December 11, after receiving a tip about it "over the transom, on the website," he recalls, and followed it up a few hours later with a link to the brief itself; the AP story came out at 5:00 that afternoon.

⁴² Thomas B. Edsall and Brian Faler, "Lott remarks on Thurmond echoed 1980 words," *The Washington Post*, December 11, 2002, p. A6. "For many supporters and opponents of civil rights," Edsall and Faler wrote, "the phrase 'state's rights' stood for the right of states to reject federal civil rights legislation."

The reporting of Lott’s 1980 speech revealed some of the journalistic limitations that bloggers faced. The *Post* had received a tip on Lott’s remarks at the rally from a historian who had been doing research on “civil rights and political culture” in Mississippi.⁴³ But when the *Post* was slow to respond, the historian went instead to the *Times*, which ran the story, citing him as its source. Edsall, however, had caught wind of the tip and feeling “damned if I wanted *The New York Times* to beat me on a story on my own turf,” he says, hurriedly placed a call to *The Clarion-Ledger*. As Edsall recounts it, he told the paper’s editor, “Look, there’s a hell of a story here that I could use and you could use. Let me give you the lead and we can share it.” The paper agreed to fax him its original article on the 1980 rally, which became the basis for Edsall’s story.

In the meantime, Marshall had also received a tip—from “somebody with a political connection,” he says—about Lott’s 1980 speech, but was unable to track it down. “Early today,” he wrote in a December 10 evening posting—the night before the story broke in the *Times* and the *Post*—“I got a tip that back in 1980 Trent Lott had used nearly the identical ‘poor choice of words’ to lament Strom Thurmond’s defeat in 1948. ... Try as I might, I couldn’t get a hold of a transcript to confirm it.” A lone blogger, Marshall observes, simply did not have the resources available to reporters in the national press. “I’m happy to line myself up against any individual journalist,” he says, “but any individual news organization is a different story.”

The Floodgates Open. The revelation of Lott’s 1980 speech triggered a spate of op-ed pieces, editorials, and, for the first time, front-page feature stories in the national press on Lott’s segregation-tinged past, his embattled present, and his increasingly clouded future. On Thursday, December 12, *The Washington Post* ran two op-ed pieces questioning Lott’s suitability for the majority leader post; one, by conservative columnist Charles Krauthammer—entitled “A Clear Choice of Words”—unequivocally urged Lott to resign, arguing that his words were “evidence of a historical blindness that is utterly disqualifying for national office.” That same day, the *Times* printed an editorial entitled “Fire Trent Lott.” Hitherto reticent Democrats also rushed into the fray. “He can apologize all he wants,” declared Rep. Nancy Pelosi (D-CA), the incoming House minority leader. “It doesn’t remove the sentiment that escaped his mouth that day.” Even Daschle, prodded by Rep. Maxine Waters (D-CA), hardened his initially forbearing response. “Regardless of how [Lott] intended his statement to be interpreted,” Daschle said in a statement, “it was wrong to say, and I strongly disagree with it.”⁴⁴

Over the following week, both the *Times* and the *Post* kept up a steady stream of stories on Lott. The *Times* launched a series of articles under the general heading, “Divisive Words,” often printing multiple pieces in the same edition. On December 13, for example, it featured three

⁴³ Carl Hulse, “Lott’s praise for Thurmond echoed his words of 1980,” *The New York Times*, December 11, 2002, p. A24.

⁴⁴ Edsall and Faler, *The Washington Post*, December 11, 2002. Of Daschle’s earlier and milder response, Rep. Waters said, “The Democratic leadership must show its African American constituents that they really do care. ... And I think Daschle didn’t do that.”

separate stories on Lott, two of them on the front page. The *Post* also carried two front-page features that day. Some of these dug deep into Lott’s past and into his civil rights record over the years, turning up, for instance, the fact that Lott had voted against the extension of the Voting Rights Act in 1982 and the creation of a Martin Luther King holiday in 1983—both of which Strom Thurmond had voted for.⁴⁵ Other news sources pitched in with spadework on Lott’s past. *Time* magazine, for example, posted a story on its website reporting that Lott had helped lead the fight against integrating his fraternity during his student years at the University of Mississippi in the early 1960s.⁴⁶

By this time, Lott, in an attempt to calm the roiling waters of controversy, had made another, more personal effort to apologize. In an interview with conservative radio talk show host Sean Hannity on December 11, he labeled his remarks at the party as “terrible” and “insensitive,” calling them “a mistake of the head and not of the heart”—words borrowed from Jesse Jackson’s 1984 speech before the Democratic National Convention after he had been strongly condemned for referring to New York as “Hymietown,” an anti-Semitic slur.⁴⁷

Any hopes that his apology might end the controversy, however, were dealt a devastating—and, most believed, fatal—blow the following day, when President George W. Bush spoke out on the issue for the first time. Up to this point, the White House had been generally, if not fervently, supportive of Lott. But on Thursday, December 12—one week after Thurmond’s birthday party—Bush delivered a stinging rebuke in an address before “a largely black audience,” according to an account in the *Post*. “Recent comments by Senator Lott,” Bush declared, “do not reflect the spirit of our country. He has apologized and rightly so. Every day our nation was segregated was a day that America was unfaithful to our founding ideals.” Although Press Secretary Ari Fleischer later told reporters that the president did not think Lott had to resign as majority leader, privately, according to one report, “anonymous White House aides were spreading the word that Bush never cared much for the incoming majority leader to begin with.”⁴⁸

The next day, Lott cut short his vacation in Key West, Florida, and flew to Mississippi for a press conference, where he offered his fourth and, as the *Post* put it, “by far most profuse apology,” to date. “I apologize,” Lott said, “for opening old wounds and hurting many Americans who feel so deeply in this area.” He called segregation and racism “immoral,” and asked for

⁴⁵ Thomas B. Edsall and Darryl Fears, “Lott has moved little on civil rights issues; analysts say remarks, record consistent,” *The Washington Post*, December 13, 2002, p. A1.

⁴⁶ As reported by Adam Nagourney and Carl Hulse, “Bush rebukes Lott over remarks on Thurmond,” *The New York Times*, December 13, 2002, p. A1. Other accounts noted that Lott did not actively participate in the violence that shook the Mississippi campus in 1962, when it was forcibly integrated by the federal government.

⁴⁷ Thomas B. Edsall and Dan Balz, “Lott apologizes anew for ‘terrible’ remark; GOP leader rejects calls to step down,” *The Washington Post*, December 12, 2003, p. A1; James Taranto, “Best of the Web,” *OpinionJournal.com*, December 12, 2002.

⁴⁸ Lee Hockstader and Helen Dewar, “Sen. Lott fights to save post as leader; he calls his remarks grievous error,” *The Washington Post*, December 14, 2002, p. A1.

"forbearance and forgiveness as I continue to learn from my own mistakes." Over the next several days, Lott stepped up his campaign to hold on to his leadership post, appearing to some to resort to increasingly desperate measures in his attempt to disavow his past. On Monday, December 16, during an appearance on Black Entertainment Television, viewers were treated to the spectacle of Lott telling his bemused interviewer that he would support affirmative action "across the board."⁴⁹

But, as the tally of apologies ran up to five, it became clear that the damage to Lott's standing within his own party was irreparable. With Senator Bill Frist of Tennessee mounting a serious challenge—backed by the White House—for his job, Lott called it quits. On Friday, December 20—a little over two weeks since he had uttered his "throwaway" remarks—Lott announced that he would step down as majority leader. This marked the first time, *The New York Times* noted the following day, "that a party leader in the Senate had been forced from his post. ..."

Post-Mortems

Lott's precipitous fall from grace left media observers with a number of questions to chew over. "How," asked one, "did this episode go from being a nonstory to reaching the top of the news? ..."⁵⁰ Why had Lott been punished for his remarks at the party when, as one reporter noted, "similar racially charged comments in the past went largely unchallenged. ..."⁵¹ And, perhaps the most frequently asked question, "Why did it take so long for Trent Lott's birthday toast to Strom Thurmond to become a story?"⁵² As analysts came forward with various answers and theories, one common theme emerged: the blogosphere had, perhaps for the first time, affected the reporting of a news story and, in the process, achieved a toehold in the world of "big media."

Jaded Reporters, Independent Bloggers. A number of observers attributed the mainstream media's failure to cover Lott's remarks in part to reporters caught offguard at an event where no one anticipated an important news story would emerge. "It was the 100th birthday party of a retiring senator," notes ABC News's Ed O'Keefe. "It was more show than news. It wasn't expected that anything substantive was going to happen." Julie Hirschfeld Davis, who covered the party for *The Baltimore Sun*, made a similar point. There was so much "tongue-in-cheek talk," she acknowledged, "that a lot of us probably tuned out remarks that we might have been more careful listening to if it hadn't been such a jubilant atmosphere."⁵³

Others maintained that long familiarity had inured reporters to Lott and, therefore, as *The Economist* maintained, they were "initially blind to his remarks, perhaps because [they] were used

⁴⁹ "Mississippi burning," *The Economist*, US edition, December 21, 2002.

⁵⁰ Linda Feldmann, "How Lott scandal built momentum," *The Christian Science Monitor*, December 17, 2002, p. 1.

⁵¹ Clemetson, *The New York Times*, December 17, 2002.

⁵² Suzanne Smalley, "Slow burn," *Newsweek Web Exclusive*, December 13, 2002.

⁵³ Kurtz, *The Washington Post*, December 16, 2002.

to such comments.”⁵⁴ The press perhaps “wasn’t that shocked” by what Lott said, suggested Larry Sabato, director of the University of Virginia’s Center for Politics. “... Most of the reporters said, ‘Oh, there he goes again. What do you expect from Trent Lott?’”⁵⁵ But if journalists were jaded or cynical, or simply beholden to their sources, bloggers, it was argued, were none of these. They were, as Andrew Sullivan contended, more distanced from the Washington scene than traditional journalists; moreover, syndicated columnist Ariana Huffington asserted, bloggers were “truly free of the dependence on access, and the need to play nice with the powers that be.”⁵⁶ From their independent perch, they “denounced the remarks vigorously,” as *The Economist* put it, “and would not let up, finally forcing others to take notice.”

The “Percolation” Theory. The notion that the blogosphere had kept the Lott story “percolating,” as one observer termed it, “until the mainstream media picked up on it” was popular among media analysts and bloggers alike.⁵⁷ “News stories,” Joshua Marshall observes, “have a 24-hour audition on the news stage, and if they don’t catch fire in that 24 hours, there’s no second chance.” The Lott story, he continues, “clearly failed that first audition, and what the blogs did is basically ... [keep] the ball in the air for a long enough time for people to realize that this was a much bigger story than people had understood.”

Many in the press and in the blog world gave Marshall credit for “pushing the Lott story to the forefront,” as one observer wrote, “with more vigor than any other online pundit.”⁵⁸ Atrios, too, was credited by some with being “nearly as influential” as Marshall in calling attention to what Lott had said.⁵⁹ But Atrios himself argues that Glenn Reynolds played a key role in elevating the story out of the blogosphere and into the mainstream. “The truth is,” Atrios maintains, “if Glenn Reynolds hadn’t taken a stand on this story, then no one would have considered the role of bloggers in [it]. ... It isn’t because Glenn was the first or the most vocal. Rather it was because he has a big megaphone and real media connections.”⁶⁰

How much of the story made its way from the blogs—as opposed to other Internet sources, such as *The Note*—into the mainstream was difficult to determine. When the story was first breaking in the press, only Paul Krugman directly quoted a blogger—Marshall—and cited him as a source, but there was anecdotal evidence that some reporters and columnists had picked up the story from a weblog. Reynolds recalls that one journalist told him that “he came into the

⁵⁴ *The Economist*, December 21, 2002.

⁵⁵ As quoted in Smalley, *Newsweek Web Exclusive*, December 13, 2002.

⁵⁶ As quoted in Jurkowitz, *The Boston Globe*, December 26, 2002.

⁵⁷ James Hebert, “A penny for your blogs; Internet journalism puts your thoughts at anyone’s disposal,” *The San Diego Union-Tribune*, February 4, 2003, p. D1.

⁵⁸ Canfield, *The Hartford Courant*, December 17, 2002.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ Reynolds, according to Atrios, “had the ear” of commentators such as the *Post*’s media columnist, Howard Kurtz, who “quoted him semi-regularly on various things,” and Mickey Kaus of *Slate*.

office on Monday [following the birthday party], not knowing anything about [it] and went to my site and saw all the posts on Trent Lott and saw all the other people posting about Trent Lott and said, 'Well, this is going to be a story.'"

The "Man Bites Dog" Theory. Still, Reynolds believed that the story would not necessarily have emerged from the blogosphere if conservative and libertarian bloggers had not spoken out so vociferously against Lott. "I think if it had just been the lefty blogs," he says, "nobody would have paid attention." Many others subscribed to this theory, often framed as a "man bites dog" story. The conservative wing of the Republican Party, analysts noted, particularly under the leadership of George W. Bush, had been striving to rid itself of its image as the party that was, in the words of *The Washington Post*, "hostile to the aspirations of African Americans and other minorities. ..." ⁶¹ Lott's comments threatened to undo what progress conservatives had made in attracting minorities to their corner and, *The Wall Street Journal* charged, handed liberals a "race card" to use against them. ⁶² Conservative and libertarian bloggers underscored these concerns in their harsh denunciations of Lott, which appeared in weblogs regularly in the days following the birthday party.

The "Perfect Storm." Others were less persuaded that criticism from the right was the decisive factor in elevating Lott's remarks to a major news story. "I really don't think it's true," says Marshall. "I think that [conservative bloggers] have tried to make that case themselves—not just to push their influence, but to show their own ... stand on principle." Instead, Marshall argues, it was the one-sided nature of the controversy—the fact that few spoke up strongly on Lott's behalf—that attracted the notice of the press. Normally, he explains, an "equilibrium" was established when a controversy arose. "You have the original charge, and then the person's defenders will open up another front, ... [so that] you have your side X and your side Y." In Lott's case, however, the countervailing defense never materialized. "One of the triggers that really made the press pounce," Marshall concludes, "was the recognition at a certain point that he had no defenders, that there was no equilibrium."

Lott was, as a number of commentators noted, never a favorite with conservatives, many of whom considered him an "ineffective leader" and saw in the brewing controversy "an opportunity to get rid of him." ⁶³ Nor was he "universally loved" by his colleagues in the Senate, according to one report; and while key members of the Senate leadership did not openly condemn him, their silence was noted by the press. ⁶⁴ Lott did not help his own cause, Marshall points out,

⁶¹ Thomas B. Edsall and Dan Balz, "Lott faces continuing resentment from conservatives," *The Washington Post*, December 14, 2002, p. A10.

⁶² As quoted in Jim Rutenberg and Felicity Barringer, "Attack on Lott's remarks has come from a variety of voices on the right," *The New York Times*, December 17, 2002, p. A31.

⁶³ Edsall and Balz, *The Washington Post*, December 14, 2002.

⁶⁴ Dana Milbank and Jim VandeHei, "President decries Lott's comments; Bush calls for racial fairness but doesn't suggest senator's resignation," *The Washington Post*, December 13, 2002, p. A1; Hockstader and Dewar, *The Washington Post*, December 14, 2002.

by treating "the whole thing dismissively [at] the outset." In the end, all those factors, combined with the insistent buzz in the blogosphere, came together to create, in O'Keefe's words, a "perfect storm" in which Lott's political fortunes foundered and then sank.

"New Medium" or "Modest Complement"? The story of Lott's downfall moved some commentators not only to give the blogosphere the lion's share of the credit for pushing it into the limelight, but also to herald it as a vibrant new force in the media. Possibly the most emphatic of these was John Podhoretz, who wrote an op-ed piece in the *New York Post* on December 13, 2002, entitled "The Internet's First Scalp." "There's nothing more exciting," he wrote, "than watching a new medium mature before your eyes." The "drumbeat that turned this story into a major calamity for Lott," Podhoretz maintained, "and led directly to President Bush's welcome disavowal of Lott's views yesterday, was entirely driven by the Internet blogosphere." Podhoretz reminded his readers of how AM talk radio had signaled its arrival as a media force after Rush Limbaugh had hammered away at a little-noted story about the abuse of banking privileges in the US House of Representatives, which eventually turned into a major scandal. "L'Affaire Lott," he asserted, "has the potential to be the same sort of event for the blogosphere."

Not everyone viewed blogs as the critical force driving the Lott saga, or as a revolutionary new powerhouse in the journalistic world. While granting the blogosphere a role in getting out the news of Lott's remarks, some observers maintained that it was "online and mainstream media moving in concert that made the story big."⁶⁵ These commentators argued that weblogs were "best understood," in the words of one, as "a modest but helpful complement to mainstream journalism," useful in "putting a deft touch on pre-existing information rather than in generating completely new findings. ..."⁶⁶

Weblog writers were themselves wary of some of the claims being made for them, whether by media commentators or bloggers themselves, regarding both the Lott incident and their newfound influence on the press. Marshall deprecated what he calls "blogger triumphalism" – the notion that bloggers were "faster, smarter, better than the mainstream media." In fact, as Atrios points out, it was not a traditional blog, but ABC News's *The Note*, which he calls "a blog of sorts," that actually "broke the story" of Lott's remarks. And while Reynolds believes that "the blogs drove the [Lott] story," he maintains that it would likely "have become a story without the blogs," in part because of the disaffection of black conservatives who were upset by what Lott had said. "They probably would have made a stink about it," he speculates, "and that probably would have been enough to [make it] a story."

Still, while there were some differences over the particulars, there was general consensus that a symbiotic relationship between the blogosphere and the mainstream media had begun to take root. Blogs were becoming "standard reading material for other journalists," wrote one

⁶⁵ Feldmann, *The Christian Science Monitor*, December 17, 2002.

⁶⁶ Mooney, *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, February 2, 2003.

observer, a process likely hastened by the Lott affair.⁶⁷ Tom Edsall of *The Washington Post* had not been a blog reader before the story broke, he says, but after people began sending him postings from Talkingpointsmemo, he became “a devotee of the blog. It’s now on my everyday list. ... Sometimes he [i.e., Marshall] breaks stuff, but a lot of times he raises questions that are very worthwhile pursuing.”

Blogs, it was argued, served a number of purposes for the press. They acted as an “early warning system for traditional journalists,” wrote one observer; or, as another put it, they were “the trenches where the mainstream media sees the incoming artillery.”⁶⁸ They also offered reporters a forum of sorts for sifting through news stories and evaluating their importance. “There’s a portion of what some of these blogs do that is the public version of the reporters on the bus sort of hashing things out,” Marshall told one reporter. “There’s an insidery aspect of this.”⁶⁹

Like talk radio, blogs in some respects provided an arena in which news and commentary could get a first airing without the balanced viewpoints—the “he said/she said” template—that the mainstream media imposed on its news stories. Bloggers were unburdened as well by what Ed O’Keefe calls the “pack mentality” of reporters, which made them hesitant to wade into news stories alone. “Journalists want to report the news,” he says. “They don’t want to make it.” With its unconstrained, outspoken rules of engagement, O’Keefe suggests, “perhaps the blogs were the only place that the [Lott] story could have been birthed.”

But if blogs offered “big media” a rich vein and a testing ground for potential story ideas, it in turn conferred legitimacy on the blogosphere, and provided the “bigger megaphones,” as Atrios puts it, that the young medium needed to be heard. “Weblogs,” Atrios observed, “still need the validation of print and television media—otherwise it’s just a bunch of people ranting away on the Internet, which is nothing new.”⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Jurkowitz, *The Boston Globe*, December 26, 2002.

⁶⁸ Noah Shachtman, “Blogs make the headlines,” *Wired News*, December 23, 2002; Jurkowitz, *The Boston Globe*, December 26, 2002.

⁶⁹ Jurkowitz, *The Boston Globe*, December 26, 2002.

⁷⁰ Canfield, *The Hartford Courant*, December 17, 2002.