



THE VIEW

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IT'S TIME TO CUT SENATOR LOTT SOME SLACK

BY
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The recent debate and vote on the controversial Immigration Bill will go down as Exhibit A in the ability of internet jockeys and “bloggers” to affect the outcome of public policy initiatives. The comprehensive immigration legislation was strongly favored by President Bush and too few of his Republican colleagues to enable its ultimate passage. In the process Senate Minority Whip and Mississippi Senator Trent Lott has been blasted from every angle for joining President Bush in supporting the bill. A casual perusal of the internet reveals an unrelenting verbal pummeling of those who dared hang in with the President in trying to get meaningful immigration law reform.

Mississippians have a penchant for sending bright Senators to Washington who have the ability to think for themselves although they may be lonely in the stands that they sometimes take. Furthermore, we tend to keep them in the nation’s capital until they have attained the seniority necessary to move into positions of leadership in arguably the world’s greatest deliberative body. What we lack in numbers we make up for in leadership. Far more times than not, this leadership has served us well. Only last year, then Senate Appropriations Committee Chair Senator Thad Cochran threatened to bring the appropriations process to a halt until Congress accepted its responsibilities with regard to the Katrina disaster. In 1985 Senator John Stennis walked away from the majority of his Southern colleagues and voted for the reauthorization of the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

Senator Lott has been roundly vilified for going against the wishes of the vast majority of his constituents and voting the way he thought best on the immigration bill. It should be instructive to examine the nature of this tactic for a moment. Kenneth Janda, Jeffrey Berry, and Jerry Goldman contrast the representative roles of “Congresspersons as trustees” and “Congresspersons as delegates” in their book, *The Challenge of Democracy*. The authors state that to answer the question, “Should members of Congress vote the way their constituents tell them to vote even if it goes against their knowledge and conscience?” reveals whether one believes in the “trustee” approach or the “delegate” approach to representation. If the answer to the preceding question is “No” then you agree with conservative English political philosopher Edmund Burke that legislators, after gathering and weighing the facts, must be free to vote in line with what they think is best even if that is counter to the sentiment expressed by the majority of citizens. In such case you believe that the office has been entrusted to the incumbent. In short, the officeholder is a “trustee” placed in that position by his fellow citizens. On the other hand, according to Janda, Berry, and Goldman, if you believe that a legislator is duty-bound to exactly reflect the majority view of his/her constituents then you embrace the philosophy that the member of Congress is a “delegate” and as such will reflect only the majority views of those who sent him. The role of delegate is perhaps easier than that of trustee because one must merely gage the sentiments evident in the ample number of political polls and vote the way said polls indicate. The trustee role can be a lonely one since it is virtually impossible to explain to all who are interested why you believed the decision you reached is the right one. This is the position in which Senator Lott finds himself.

The reality is that both Senator Cochran and Senator Lott have been exemplars of the trustee approach to representing us as citizens of Mississippi. In the case of the immigration bill their analyses lead them to different conclusions. It is probably unfair in today’s political climate to assume that the delegate approach would have a chance to work anyway. Consider the fact that most recent polls showed that around 70% of the people opposed the immigration bill and opposed the President’s position on it. By contrast many of those who opposed the immigration bill steadfastly support the President on the war in Iraq while polls show that again 70% of the public oppose the war. Hence, by holding fast to the logic of the delegate approach the war would be over.

For my money give me the Senators who can weigh the facts and make the tough call. It was Senator Cochran himself who came to Senator Lott’s defense in an Associated Press article in the Sun Herald newspaper. Senator Cochran



was quoted as saying, “Senator Lott had a responsibility which he carried out in a highly professional way. He did the best that could be done with a tough issue.” There are many detailed and tough decisions facing those to whom we entrust the high office of United States Senator. Mississippians can take comfort that when the all important votes are taken they are based on the best knowledge and information gained from hours of study and deliberation. Mix this understanding with a healthy portion of character and the result is representative government as it was intended to be by the founding fathers.

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