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**Lott steps down after support, condemnation from fellow Baptists**

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Editor's note: This story updates the previous story about Senator Lott

WASHINGTON (ABP) – Amid both support and criticism from unlikely places, embattled Sen. Trent Lott (R-Miss.) has resigned his party leadership post – but said he will retain his seat in the Senate.

Lott, a Southern Baptist, offered at least five apologies for public statements that seemed to support America's racially segregated past. However, none seemed to satisfy his critics on the right or the left, and Lott announced his intention to resign Dec. 20. "In the interest of pursuing the best possible agenda for the future of our country, I will not seek to remain as Majority Leader of the United States Senate," Lott said, in a statement released by his office.

However, in the same statement, Lott vowed to finish his term as a member of the Senate. This allayed the fears of some Republicans that Lott would resign his seat if forced to step down from his leadership post – setting off a chain of events that could have resulted in a return of the chamber to Democratic control.

Lott has received heavy criticism since his controversial Dec. 5 comments, when he said the country would have been better off if it had elected segregationist Sen. Strom Thurmond as president in 1948. Ironically, much of the criticism came from Lott's conservative allies, while he gained surprise endorsements from some liberal leaders.

In a Dec. 14 radio broadcast, conservative Southern Baptist ethicist Richard Land said Lott has "an enormous and glaring blind spot in his personal understanding of just how wrong and evil segregation was and how horrific the privations were that were visited on African-Americans during that period." Land, president of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, has been a close political ally of Lott. He also called for Lott's resignation, saying, "To be able under any circumstances to say such a thing reveals a grossly inadequate understanding of the true injustice of that time and incomprehension of the civil-rights revolution as the most important social movement of the 20th century. Such a lack of comprehension disqualifies one from national leadership, in my opinion, in the 21st century."

But another Southern Baptist, seminary professor Dave Black, took Lott to task for apologizing for his pro-Thurmond comments. "Why isn't Trent Lott using this as an opportunity to discuss the issue of states' rights and limited constitutional government, the very platform on which Thurmond ran?" Black, who teaches at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, wrote in a column for the online publication [www.patriotist.com](http://www.patriotist.com). "Aren't those ideals still worth defending today?"

The Patriotist's website decries the presidency of Abraham Lincoln and calls the Union's role in the Civil War "an unbridled campaign of terror aimed at a group of States that had the audacity to form a government more suited to their needs than the federal empire." Black's column is also featured on his personal website at [www.daveblackonline.com](http://www.daveblackonline.com).

Meanwhile, Rep. John Lewis (D-Ga.), long known for his strong advocacy of civil-rights causes, broke ranks with the Congressional Black Caucus to say he believes Lott was sincere in his apologies and in his opposition to racism. "I believe his apology is sincere and I accept his apology," said Lewis, a Baptist, in a Dec. 17 statement.

President Bush issued Lott a stern public rebuke Dec. 12, saying Lott's comments "do not reflect the spirit of our country." While never officially calling for Lott's resignation, several reputable news organizations quoted White House sources as saying Bush would welcome Lott's ouster as helpful to a GOP trying to reach out to minority voters.

Lott had tried to convince colleagues and the public that he has changed his ways. In a nationally televised Dec. 16 interview on Black Entertainment Television, Lott cited his Christian faith as one of the factors that led him belatedly to question the segregationist societal norms he once defended. "There was a society ... that was wrong and wicked. I didn't create it, and I didn't really understand it for many years," Lott said. "I had concerns over some of the things I saw. But I didn't act on them when I should have."

The controversy over Lott began shortly after a 100th birthday celebration Dec. 5 for Thurmond, a South Carolina Republican who is retiring from the Senate this year. Lott said he is "proud" that his state of Mississippi voted for Thurmond in 1948, when Thurmond, also a Southern Baptist, ran for president on the segregationist "Dixiecrat" ticket. If Thurmond had been elected,

Lott said, America "wouldn't have had all these problems over all these years."



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