

A week ago, the consensus inside the Beltway was that **Trent Lott** would survive as Senate majority leader.

Now, nearly two weeks after the Mississippi Republican made a throwaway comment supportive of racial segregation at a birthday party, Senator Lott's chances of keeping his leadership position are in serious doubt. He has apologized five times, including last night's planned appearance on Black Entertainment Television.

But he appears to be fighting an uphill battle, as a handful of Senate GOP colleagues build their own case for reconsidering Lott's role as leader.

"I think his chances of surviving are now less than 50 percent," political analyst Stuart Rothenberg said Monday. "There's just too much churning; too many drip, drip, drips; and the faucet's still dripping."

How did this episode go from being a nonstory to reaching the top of the news, threatening the role of one of the nation's most powerful Republicans? Longtime Washington observers see it as one of those moments when an event - Lott's comment - catches the press off-guard and is then brought to life by a combination of forces: the Internet, mainstream reporters, outside activists, and political insiders themselves, including the White House and congressional Republicans.

Nearly every day, something new has happened around the Lott episode, giving the media a hook for a new story that allows them to revisit all the recent events. Sometimes history itself provides the hook, as when reporters dig up old comments and actions by Lott that add to his image of favoring racial segregation. Lott himself, with his multiple apologies, has fanned the flames. The biggest boost to the story so far was when President Bush denounced Lott's comment. Bush didn't call on Lott to step down, but he didn't offer Lott any words of encouragement, either.

The offending comment took place at the 100th birthday party for Sen. Strom Thurmond (R) of South Carolina on Dec. 5. Among lighthearted comments, Lott noted that his home state of Mississippi had voted for Thurmond when he ran for president as a segregationist in 1948, and then said that "if the rest of the country had followed our lead, we wouldn't have had all these problems over all these years."

If the event hadn't been broadcast by C-Span, it's possible the comment would have vanished into thin air. None of the dozen journalists at the party put it in their stories. Part of the problem, says Brookings Institution scholar Stephen Hess, is that the journalists were there to cover a birthday party, not a speech on segregation. "The reporters took it in the context of a birthday party in which people wear funny hats and say stupid things.... They're all too close to it."

Democrats also didn't jump on the Lott comment immediately. In fact, it has been more the reaction of conservative Republicans, including some Web commentators, like David Frum, that has kept the story alive. Internet sleuths and other reporters who have dug into Lott's past, including his record of opposing civil rights measures and contacts with a white supremacist organization called the Council of Conservative Citizens, have also fueled the firestorm.

Some Republican observers, such as William Kristol, editor of the Weekly Standard magazine, have said that conservative Republicans, who have muttered that Lott is too conciliatory with Democrats, are using Lott's comment as a wedge to oust him as leader.

David Bositis, an observer of racial politics at the liberal Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, believes Lott is vulnerable for other reasons as well. "He's not close to the White House and he's not in any way someone who is really necessary for the Republicans in the Senate," says Mr. Bositis. "He's eminently replaceable."

How the story was kept alive in the media is debated among media watchers. Some credit online pundits

who track what's being said on the web and offer links to readers in websites called a blogs. But most say it was online and mainstream media moving in concert that made the story big.

National Public Radio "has been beating the drum for a week now. I think it's an exaggeration to say that the blogs made anything happen. I do think though that they have magnified the impact of influential commentators and columnists," says Janice Castro, an online media expert at Northwestern University.

Conservative bloggers and magazines online did push the story forward, much in the same way they framed the political aspects of the funeral of Democratic senator Paul Wellstone and kept them in the news cycle, notes Sean Aday of George Washington University.

Ultimately, though, says Tom Rosenstiel, director of the Project for Excellence in Journalism, it was the conservative press that alerted the mainstream press that there was a fissure in the GOP that needed attention.

* Kim Campbell contributed to this report.

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