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Viva Trent Lott

The gap Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott opened between himself and the Republican Party's conservative base by supporting the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) was widened by his private claim that he could not possibly have stopped the treaty. In truth, with 26 Republicans voting no, Lott easily could have led seven more senators to prevent ratification.

Why didn't he? Like many senators, Lott's interest in the chemical weapons ban is minimal. But from the start, he wanted to support it, and weeks of hand wringing were a sham. He viewed the issue as transactional—a bargaining chip in deal-making, especially to facilitate budget negotiations where massive Republican surrender seems imminent.

This is a bitter pill for conservatives who celebrated when Lott became majority leader. They remembered Lott's past battles for principle and expected him to fill the leadership vacuum left by the political incapacitation of Speaker Newt Gingrich. Instead, he is compared even by non-Republicans with the Senate GOP leader who supported Jimmy Carter's Panama Canal Treaty against Ronald Reagan. "He's got galloping Howard Bakeritis," Democratic campaign consultant Bob Shrum told me.

Lott, in turn, is infuriated that the right is trashing the Senate's most conservative leader ever. The level of mutual hostility can scarcely be exaggerated.

All this is reminiscent of the 1952 motion picture "Viva Zapata!" which opens with a delegation of Mexican peasants (circa 1909) pleading with President Diaz to return their confiscated lands. The dictator brushes them off, but one peasant insists and Diaz menacingly notes his name. That launches the dissident, Zapata, on a revolutionary career. Later in the movie, an empowered Zapata in the presidential palace imitates Diaz by dismissing a peasant delegation and taking down a lone dissenter's name.

This tableau was reenacted in real life April 10 when some 40 conservatives crowded into a Capitol office, pleading with Lott to oppose CWC. Arriving 45 minutes late, Lott seemed offended by social conservatives involving themselves with national security. An aide belittled the petitioners as representing "a collection of fringe groups." Lott was particularly dismayed that Mike Farris, a leading homeschooling advocate, dared to discuss chemical weapons.

Contrary to complaints from Lott's inner circle, nobody threatened him at that session. But he later engaged in an unpleasant dialogue with conservative activist Paul

Weyrich, who Lott felt did threaten him. Friends say the senator later called himself a "Mississippi redneck" who cannot be intimidated.

Majority leaders seldom get deeply involved in issues, and Lott was no exception here. He relied on advice from the Republican Party's arms control wing instead of its Reaganite hard-liners. He repeated the Clinton mantra that 28 out of 33 disagreements had been resolved. "Those 28 agreements are not worth the paper they are written on," Reagan's assistant defense secretary Richard Perle told me. Not resolved were treaty provisions requiring the

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supply of U.S. chemicals to countries that request them.

Lott addressed this by getting a letter from President Clinton that dances around the problem. He won further cover by requesting his predecessor, Robert J. Dole, to join in dropping opposition. Lott's Senate speech announcing his support was lukewarm at best, conceding "serious problems" with a treaty he implied is not verifiable.

That speech underscores Lott's view of this debate as a political transaction. In return for CWC, the president has agreed to State Department reorganization and promised to send the Senate more treaties for ratification. In privately arguing for CWC, Lott stressed that not since the Treaty of Versailles in 1920 has the Senate rejected a major diplomatic pact. That casts doubt on whether he would lead a fight against the treaties he insisted be brought to the Senate floor.

The overriding consideration, however, is a budget deal with the president. Dick Morris, confidant of both Clinton and Lott, is reported by Senate sources as making this clear to the majority leader: no CWC, no budget.

With the treaty safely ratified, Lott is moving toward a catastrophic budget settlement with piddling tax cuts and hefty non-defense spending increases. In the old movie, Zapata realizes he is emulating Diaz and returns to the revolution. Could Trent Lott do the same on the budget?

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