

Trent Lott to co-chair Taiwan Caucus

REGULAR ALLY: The veteran Republican congressman and ardent supporter of Taiwan will join Democratic Senator Tim Johnson as chairman of the pro-Taiwan body

By Charles Snyder
STAFF REPORTER IN WASHINGTON
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Former Republican US Senate majority leader Trent Lott will be the next co-chair of the bipartisan Senate Taiwan Caucus, sources told the *Taipei Times*.

Lott, one of the strongest supporters of Taiwan in Congress, will replace George Allen, the Virginia Republican who lost his seat in November. Lott's appointment is expected to be announced in the next few days.

Throughout his congressional career spanning more than four decades, Lott has regularly supported Taiwan and its causes, first in the House and then in the Senate.

He was a vocal critic of former US president Bill Clinton when Clinton went to China in 1998 and declared his "three noes" policy, which included US opposition to Taiwanese independence, to a "one China, one Taiwan" stance and to Taiwan's admission to international organizations that require statehood.

Calling Clinton's stance "counterproductive," Lott called on Congress to "repair the damage that has been done."

But perhaps Lott's strongest pro-Taiwan position over the years has been his ardent support for US arms sales to Taiwan.

This ardor apparently stemmed from the fact that his home town in Pascagoula, Mississippi, could provide some of what Taiwan needed through its Litton-Ingalls shipyard, part of the giant defense contractor Northrop-Grumman.

A shipyard in his district produced the Kidd-class destroyers that Taiwan recently took possession of from the US after President George W. Bush agreed to sell them in 2001. In addition, Lott's Mississippi district produces the Arleigh-Burke-class destroyers with the AEGIS missile defense systems that Taiwan has long wanted, but which successive administrations have denied Taipei.

His district also once produced the diesel-electric submarines which Taiwan's legislators have been debating buying for years.

Last year, Lott said that he would support official visits by Taiwan's leaders to Washington if the Legislative Yuan made progress in approving the long-blocked package of weapons Bush promised in April 2001.

He made the comments during meetings with Taiwanese students during an annual student ambassador program sponsored by the US-based Formosa Foundation.

It was not clear whether he was making his support for the visits conditional on the purchase of arms.

One of the remaining members of Congress who voted for the Taiwan Relations Act of 1979 -- which regulates and legitimizes formal US-Taiwan relations in the light of US recognition of Beijing at the end of 1978 -- Lott is said to have been the first member of Congress to visit Taiwan after that law was enacted.

Lott would join Democratic Senator Tim Johnson of South Dakota as co-chairman of the 23-member Senate caucus, which was created in September 2003.

Johnson is currently in hospital recovering from a brain hemorrhage that he suffered last month, shortly after being re-elected to his Senate seat.

While his recuperation is expected to take several months, Johnson is said to be recovering well, speaking and undergoing physical and speech therapy.