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A TRIBUTE TO RETIRED SENATOR J. STROM THURMOND

LINDSEY GRAHAM*

As Senator Thurmond leaves the political stage, it's fair to say that he has touched virtually every South Carolinian in some way. He has established a reputation for constituent service that has become legendary. Most South Carolinians, regardless of party, region or race, truly believe that if you had a problem Strom Thurmond's office would try to help.

Senator Thurmond will be viewed as one of the most adaptable politicians in our nation's history. He has changed as the country and region changed, always making himself relevant to the times. The fiery speeches of the 1948 presidential campaign gave way to the appointment of the first African American judge in the state's history by Senator Thurmond, recognition from the Urban League and national historic black college associations for his many contributions.

Toward the end of Senator Thurmond's political career, he received unmatched political support, along with the highest African American voting percentage, of any Republican in the South. Senator Thurmond's service to his state and nation transcends decades and has been service without scandal.

It's hard to believe, but Teddy Roosevelt was President when Thurmond was born in 1902. When he graduated from Clemson College in 1923, President Warren Harding died and Calvin Coolidge was elected President of the United States. In 1942, at the age of 40, Thurmond called in a favor from President Franklin Roosevelt so that he could enlist and fight in WWII. He landed in the first wave of the Normandy Invasion on June 6, 1944. After the war, he returned to South Carolina and was elected Governor in 1946. In 1948, he ran unsuccessfully for President of the United States. Senator Thurmond then compiled a long and distinguished career in the U.S. Senate. To put it in perspective, he was elected to the U.S. Senate in 1954. I wasn't born until 1955.

One of my most memorable experiences with Senator Thurmond came when he agreed to campaign for me in 1994 when I was a candidate for the U.S. House of Representatives from the Third Congressional District.

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I arrived at the Oconee Airport to greet Senator Thurmond as he climbed out of a small, single-engine plane. Already well into his 90s, I worried about how Senator Thurmond would do if we crammed the schedule with too many events. Before the weekend was up, I realized I was the one who needed to be concerned about how I was going to keep up with him.

We drove from the airport to Westminster for the annual Apple Festival and arrived just in time to take part in the parade. Senator Thurmond wanted to ride a horse in the parade but we weren't able to locate one on short notice.

After the parade, we shook hands with just about everybody in town before Senator Thurmond decided he wanted to head over to the funeral home. He wanted to go pay his respects to the owner of the funeral home who had once served in the state legislature in Columbia. But that wasn't the only reason. Senator Thurmond, known far and wide for his reluctance to part with any more of his hard-earned money than absolutely necessary, also remembered the funeral home owner used to give out free apples. Sure enough, after the owners initial surprise at having Senator Thurmond walk unexpectedly through the front door, apples were awarded.

We got him back in the car to cool off a bit, and he wanted to go to Oconee Memorial Hospital to visit a cousin. He waved and chatted with staff and visitors. He seemed to know everyone's parents, grandparents, aunts, and uncles.

Later that afternoon, it was time to leave for a fund-raising event we had scheduled. The outdoor event at the home of friends was quite a gathering. When it came time for us to say a few words, people continued to mill about, greeting old friends and saying hello. We were having difficulty getting the crowd quiet. It was at that moment Senator Thurmond decided to take matters into his own hands. He walked around the edge of the pool, proceeded to the end of the diving board and began bouncing up and down as if he was preparing to jump in. Needless to say, this got everyone's attention.

After the fundraiser, I figured Senator Thurmond would be ready to go home and rest. Instead he asked me, "Where are we going next?" We had already spent the better part of a whole day campaigning in the stifling early September heat, and I had to think for a few minutes as I hadn't expected him to go on this long. Then I remembered there was a football game at my old high school, so we headed over to Daniel High School. We arrived just minutes before halftime.

As Senator Thurmond walked into the crowd there was a buzz. Word spread like wildfire that Senator Thurmond was there. We made our way to the press box and Thurmond accepted an invitation to address the crowd. They repaid him with a standing ovation.

Back to the car and again I heard "What's next?" It was getting close to 10 p.m. I couldn't think of anything but he knew there was a rodeo going on about thirty miles down the road, so that's where we headed. But, we didn't just attend the rodeo. Oh, no. Senator Thurmond went to the center of the ring and stood on a barrel and proceeded to deliver a political speech. Once again, he brought the crowd to their feet.

When we got back to the car, he asked what we were going to do next. I told him I had had enough. He was free to go to the mill as workers changed shifts, but I was going home and going to bed. We dropped him off to get some rest. I don't know if he ever made it to the mill for the shift change, but with Senator Thurmond I wouldn't bet against it.

