

FACES AND PLACES

Trent Lott

Senate Minority Whip Trent Lott of Mississippi shocked Washington with his announcement that he is retiring by the end of the year, ending a 35-year career in Congress. Lott was the number two Republican in the Senate and had been elected to his post by his colleagues only last year. It was a comeback for Lott since he was forced to resign as Senate Majority Leader in 2002, after making remarks that were interpreted as supporting the old segregationist policies of the South. Lott's retirement means that the GOP will have to try to keep 23 open seats in next year's election, compared to 12 for the Democrats.

Nawaz Sharif

Only weeks after Pakistan's former prime minister Benazir Bhutto returned after several years abroad, another former prime minister has returned. Nawaz Sharif was forced out of office by the current prime minister, Pervez Musharraf, in 1999 and has lived in exile since then. He tried to return to Pakistan in September, but on orders from Musharraf he was kicked out after only a few hours. Musharraf faces a great threat from the popular Bhutto in the election scheduled for January. Observers think Musharraf is allowing Sharif to stay this time because Sharif, who also plans to run for office, might help reduce the threat he faces from Bhutto.



Russia

In the lead-up to Russia's December 2 parliamentary election, more than 100 protesters, including former world chess champion Gary Kasparov, were arrested in Moscow. Opposition leaders accused the administration of President Vladimir Putin, which is expecting a huge victory, of tolerating no opposition protests. Days later, Putin accused the U.S. of pressuring Western election monitors into boycotting the elections in an attempt to discredit the results. Putin, whose term as president will end early next year and who cannot serve as president again according to Russia's constitution, has said he might seek the prime minister's seat under the new Parliament.

Annapolis, Maryland

This city was the site of a historic Middle East peace conference that took place last week. Negotiated by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, the talks included not just Israeli and Palestinian officials but attendees from several other Arab countries, including Saudi Arabia and Syria. President Bush spent his first several years in office taking a "hands-off" approach to the long conflict, and these are the first direct peace talks of his administration. The talks will focus on the establishment of an independent Palestinian state as well as a host of other regional issues.