

The Torricelli case: another debacle for the Democratic Party

By Patrick Martin
3 October 2002

The collapse of New Jersey Senator Robert Torricelli's reelection campaign, barely a month before the November 5 election, is a demonstration of the moribund and reactionary character of the Democratic Party. Controlled and corrupted by big business, it is incapable of conducting any struggle against the Bush administration and the domination of American politics by the extreme right.

Torricelli announced his withdrawal Monday in a maudlin and self-justifying speech in which he portrayed himself as a fighter for women, the elderly, the sick and the poor, and said nothing about the corruption charges that compelled him to step down. The first-term senator was censured by the Senate Ethics Committee in June for his relationship with Korean-American businessman David Chang, now serving a federal prison sentence for making illegal campaign contributions to Torricelli's 1996 campaign.

New Jersey state Democratic Party officials selected the 78-year-old former Senator Frank Lautenberg, who retired two years ago, to replace Torricelli as the Democratic candidate, after several younger politicians declined. New Jersey Attorney General David Samson went before the state Supreme Court Wednesday to argue for a waiver of the statutory deadline for replacing a candidate.

Republican Party officials opposed the waiver and threatened to appeal any state court decision to the US Supreme Court—to the same 5-4 right-wing majority which ruled for the Republican campaign in *Bush v. Gore*. The Supreme Court could end up deciding which party controls the Senate, since the Democrats hold only a 50-49 edge, with one independent. With 34 of the 100 Senate seats at stake in the November 5 election, neither party has a clear lead.

Torricelli's political career encapsulates an important political process—the corruption and decay of American liberalism—which underlies the rightward shift in the Democratic Party over the past quarter century. An ambitious law student who worked as a mid-level Carter-Mondale political operative in 1980, Torricelli entered national politics in his own right in 1982, winning election to a northern New Jersey congressional seat. Demonstrating the prowess at soliciting money that became his political motif, Torricelli out-raised and out-spent the Republican incumbent.

During his 14 years in the House, he was best known for his close ties to right-wing anticommunist lobbies, including the Cuban-American National Foundation and Taiwanese and South Korean interests, which funneled huge sums into his campaign coffers. He was also one of the most fervent Democratic supporters of the Persian Gulf War, voting to authorize the first President Bush to wage war over Kuwait.

Torricelli rose to chair the House Foreign Affairs subcommittee with jurisdiction over western hemisphere affairs, a position which he

employed to back an array of unsavory regimes, including the Haitian military dictatorship which overthrew the elected government of Jean-Bertrand Aristide in 1991. As a member of the House Intelligence Committee, he defended CIA payments to Haitian military leaders, declaring, “The US government develops relationships with ambitious and bright young men at the beginning of their careers and often follows them through their public service.”

In 1992, Torricelli introduced legislation which became law as the “Cuban Democracy Act,” imposing severe penalties on non-US companies which trade with Cuba, in violation of the US-imposed embargo, and restricting travel to the island by US citizens and family remittances to Cuba. The Torricelli Act, as it became known, laid the basis for the notorious Helms-Burton Act of 1996, which tightened the US economic straitjacket on Cuba even further.

In 1996, when New Jersey Democratic Senator Bill Bradley retired, Torricelli sought the Democratic nomination to succeed him. He raised over \$9 million for the campaign, an unprecedented amount for the statewide race, and easily defeated Republican Dick Zimmer. He was quickly elevated to a top position in the Democratic leadership, heading the Democratic Senate Campaign Committee, which raised \$85 million for the 2000 elections.

Together with arch-reactionary North Carolina Republican Jesse Helms, Torricelli introduced the Taiwan Security Enhancement Act in March 1999, backing sale of a broad range of weapons systems to the Taiwanese government, and requiring the White House to justify any decisions to bar the sale of certain armaments to Taiwan. He also joined in the witch-hunting of Taiwanese-American nuclear scientist Wen Ho Lee, who was falsely accused in 1999 of being a Beijing spy.

Torricelli continued his alliance with the right-wing Cuban exiles obsessed with the overthrow of the Castro regime, campaigning for legislation that would have kept Elian Gonzalez in the United States and blocked his return to his Cuban father. He later backed the nomination of Cuban-American Otto Reich to a high position in the Bush State Department, despite his documented connection to anti-Castro terrorism, and in May 2001 co-sponsored the Cuban Solidarity Act, to award \$100 million in contracts to extreme right-wing groups like the Cuban-American National Foundation to promote “democracy” in Cuba.

The New Jersey senator's legal problems began with a local police investigation of political corruption in Bergen County, his home base. The probe led prosecutors to David Chang, the Korean-American businessman who had given Torricelli tens of thousands of dollars in gifts, including cash and appliances, as well as large sums for his 1996 Senate campaign. Torricelli admitted to having traveled with Chang to South Korea on several occasions, where he lobbied the

South Korean government on behalf of his campaign contributor. Chang and six other men were convicted for giving illegal contributions to Torricelli, and US Attorney Mary Jo White in New York City began a formal investigation.

While Torricelli had been a highly vocal defender of Clinton during the 1998-99 impeachment, he struck a quite different note during the 2000 election controversy in Florida. In an evident desire to ingratiate himself with the incoming Bush administration—which would make the decision about whether he should be prosecuted on campaign finance charges—he was among the first Democrats to urge Vice President Al Gore to drop all legal challenges to the theft of the election.

After the US Supreme Court's unprecedented intervention to suppress vote-counting ordered by the Florida courts, Torricelli issued a statement calling on Gore to halt any further opposition. "If this is concluded in the next 48 hours, the person who is on the losing side of this should go and meet with the winner," he said. "They should make an appearance together. There should be an immediate call for national unity and for accepting the results of this election, getting about the country's business."

After Bush entered the White House, Torricelli further signaled his desire for a rapprochement with the far right by voting to confirm the nomination of John Ashcroft for attorney general and then by supporting Bush's \$1.35 trillion tax cut for the wealthy. He was one of only a handful of Senate Democrats to do both.

The payback came in January of this year, when the Justice Department decided not to press criminal charges against Torricelli for the 1996 campaign. After the leading Republican hopeful, Essex County Executive Jim Treffinger, quit the race because of a corruption scandal of his own, national Republican Party officials essentially conceded Torricelli's reelection. They allowed a politically unknown businessman, Douglas Forrester, owner of a pharmaceutical benefits company, to claim the party's nomination.

The apparent deal between Torricelli and the Republicans only came unstuck after the Senate Ethics Committee unanimously censured his conduct in June and the New Jersey senator fell sharply in the polls. With control of the Senate resting on a one-vote margin, the Republican Party began pouring funds into the New Jersey campaign, bombarding the state with advertisements denouncing Torricelli as a crook.

Last week came the coup de grace—a Justice Department report, drafted last May but withheld until the decisive moment, which declared that there was "substantial corroborating evidence" for Chang's charges against Torricelli. The nine-page memo detailed allegations that went well beyond the issues addressed by the Senate Ethics Committee. It was given enormous media publicity, and state and national Democratic Party officials began to move against Torricelli. On Sunday evening, they leaked the news to the *Wall Street Journal* and other publications that Torricelli was considering withdrawing, effectively compelling him to make the announcement that he would step aside.

One of the most unattractive individuals in American politics, Torricelli is living proof that the rise of gangster elements to the leadership of the Republican Party was matched by an analogous process among the Democrats. He was one of a group of congressmen who personally participated in lucrative Initial Public Offerings, raking in hundreds of thousands of dollars in instant profits from IPO deals ranging from a savings bank in Perth Amboy, New Jersey to the launching of China Telecom Ltd. in Hong Kong.

The Senate censure had particular resonance because it coincided with the series of revelations on the plundering of corporate assets—and workers' pensions—by top executives at Enron, Worldcom, Tyco and a number of other firms. Popular revulsion over this rampant corruption in the top business echelons justifiably extended to Torricelli, who was benefiting from similar practices.

During the course of Torricelli's career, the New Jersey Democratic Party became more and more dependent on a handful of multimillionaires. The senior Democratic senator, Frank Lautenberg, was the founder of a billion-dollar corporation, ADP, which processes payrolls for hundreds of companies. He financed his first campaign for the Senate, winning a seat by spending over \$6 million—a huge sum in those days (1982). When Lautenberg retired in 2000, he was succeeded by an even more free-spending Democratic magnate, former Goldman Sachs banker Jon Corzine, who paid \$60 million to win the same seat.

Whether coming from large individual fortunes or the legalized bribery known as "campaign fundraising," this huge influx of money—derived largely from the stock market boom on Wall Street—inevitably had a corrupting effect on the whole political structure. In New Jersey, Torricelli set the pace, with a jet-setting lifestyle that was in the sharpest contrast to Democrats' bogus claims to represent the interests of working people.

The *Bergen Record*, the daily newspaper in the suburban county where Torricelli began his political career, interviewed a former staffer, Georgiana Evans, after his withdrawal from politics. "The more time she spent within Torricelli's circle," the newspaper wrote, "the more she became uncomfortable with his habit of taking free vacations and other gifts for which he should have paid. 'He and Bianca Jagger would sit around and talk about who could get the most for free,' said Evans, referring to the professional model who became one of Torricelli's girlfriends.

"Evans recalled how Torricelli would go on spending sprees, dropping more than \$1,000 on an overcoat or even more than that on a piece of sculpture, using money that seemed to come from nowhere. Evans grew uncomfortable and said several promising staffers became so sickened over Torricelli's money management that they quit. In the end, she felt she had to leave, too. 'We could spend the better part of our lives telling Bob, "Don't take the money,"' said Evans."

A local Bergen County politician and Torricelli supporter, Democratic Assemblywoman Loretta Weinberg of Fort Lee, placed his pursuit of personal wealth in context, observing, "If the people around you are making \$100 million, you think, why not me?"

The tawdry end to Torricelli's career only underscores the necessity for working people to break with both the parties controlled by big business, Democrats and Republicans alike, and build a new, independent political party which will fight against the profit system on the basis of a socialist program.

To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>