

Senator quits race

By David Espo
The Associated Press

WASHINGTON — With a coveted committee chairmanship at stake, Sen. Bob Smith of New Hampshire quit his independent campaign for president on Thursday as he moved toward a likely return to the Republican Party he abandoned with a scathing attack three months ago.

At the same time, the conservative New Hampshire lawmaker responded "yes" when asked whether he still believes what he said on leaving the GOP in July.

At a Capitol lawn news conference, Smith said he was folding his presidential campaign, citing as a reason the prohibitive cost of running as an independent. In politics, he said, "you have to be prepared to lose."

Smith said he wouldn't answer any questions about his political affiliation until after weekend funeral services for Sen. John Chafee, R-R.I., who died unexpectedly Sunday.

But he confirmed he had spoken in recent weeks with Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott, GOP National Chairman Jim Nicholson and others "about coming back to the Republican Party."

Smith made clear that his contacts occurred before Chafee died.

The timing is a sensitive issue because the Rhode Island Republican was chairman of the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee, and Smith is seeking to inherit the post. If he had remained a Republican, the chairmanship would have belonged to Smith by virtue of seniority. But Sen. James Inhofe, R-Okla., is now the panel's senior Republican, and he, too, wants the post.

Smith said he would make a formal announcement about his plans Monday. But he did nothing

to discourage speculation that he would return to the GOP at that time.

"I know that people in the party have been reaching out to me," he said.

Lott, R-Miss., said he expects Smith to return to the GOP fold. Asked whether the senator had apologized for his comments about the party, Lott replied, "Well, no. But I feel like he knows we were not too pleased with that. We're beyond that."

Nicholson issued a statement during the day that said of Smith: "I have come to know him well, to respect him greatly and I have assured him that if he were to return to our party, he would be welcomed."

Smith bolted the GOP last summer when he was faring poorly in the presidential public opinion polls. He said then that he would likely run as a third-party contender. He exited with a blistering speech in the Senate.

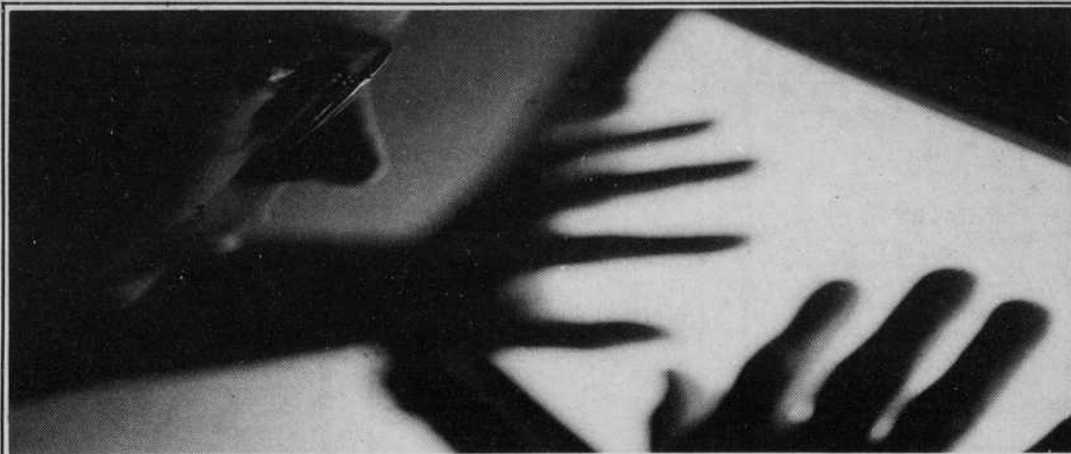
"We won the revolution on issues. We won the revolution on principle," he told his colleagues then.

"But the desire to stay in power caused us to start listening to the pollsters and the consultants again, who were telling us for some inexplicable reason that we need to walk away from issues

"I want my party to stand for something," he said, contending Republicans routinely ignored their own party platform on issues as diverse as abortion, foreign policy and gun control.

Smith's remarks angered some fellow Republicans, but he said Thursday, "It wasn't personal."

His departure speech was still posted on his Senate Web site on Wednesday, but was removed overnight.



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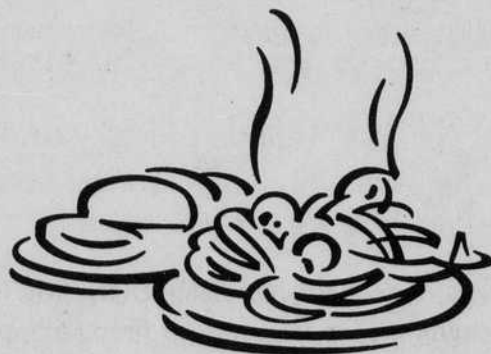
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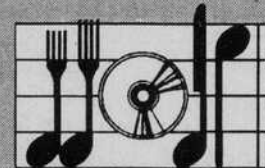
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