

Political Memo;
A Wary Rank and File Watch Daschle's Attack

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The New York Times
January 9, 2002, Wednesday, Late Edition - Final

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WASHINGTON, Jan. 8

Wondering why Senator Tom Daschle, the majority leader, attacked President Bush's \$1.35 trillion tax cut last week, but did not call for it to be changed? Just listen to a few of the 12 Senate Democrats who voted for the cut.

Senator Zell Miller of Georgia is openly questioning the political smarts of his party leader and bristles at Mr. Daschle's charge that the tax cut probably likely worsened the recession. "Maybe it's at a level that my brain can't reach," Mr. Miller said. "How do you have as one of your highest priorities to re-elect the moderate Democrats from South Dakota, Montana and Missouri on one hand, then on the other hand blame them for voting for a tax cut that he maintains has created this recession? Hello?"

Senators John B. Breaux of Louisiana and Dianne Feinstein of California have defended their votes on television talks shows.

And Senator Robert G. Torricelli of New Jersey said today that he might have reconsidered his vote for the tax cut last spring -- had he known the country was about to face a terror strike, war and recession.

Even so, Mr. Torricelli said, "I think to advance changing the tax reduction legislation in the midst of recession isn't good economics and it's worse politics."

Such wariness is a sign of the deep divisions within the Democratic party and the daunting challenge facing Mr. Daschle.

For every Democrat who fears revisiting last year's tax cut fight, there is another who insists that the party has an obligation to call for freezing or rolling back part of the tax cut for the very wealthiest Americans to pay for more domestic security and Democratic priorities like a prescription drug benefit or more education spending.

"We're not talking about raising taxes," said Representative Jan Schakowsky, an Illinois Democrat. "We're talking about stopping future tax cuts for the wealthiest of taxpayers."

Still, Mr. Bush's approval ratings are stratospheric right now and even Democrats sympathetic

to freezing part of the tax cut remember how Ronald Reagan hammered their party as big taxers and spenders.

Tax debates can be treacherous ground for Democrats, they say, particularly when facing a popular Republican president, and they are determined not to let Mr. Bush revive old images of their party.

"The Republicans and the White House will demagogue this like hell," said Representative David R. Obey, a Wisconsin Democrat. "It's right for Democrats to be careful."

Being careful means buying time by speaking in terms of fiscal discipline and waiting for the public to turn its attention from the war to the faltering economy.

"The war will wind down here and then people will take a hard look at what's happening to the finances of this country," said Senator Byron L. Dorgan, a North Dakota Democrat.

To help focus the public's attention in this year of mid-term elections, Democrats will be doing their best to strike the same themes as Mr. Daschle: that the federal government is once again spending more than it takes in and that this will require painful choices.

President Bush, the Democrats will ruefully intone, never spoke about these painful choices but said only that federal surpluses were so plentiful that tax cuts, debt reduction and programs like prescription drug benefits were all affordable.

And the Democrats will say it is up to Mr. Bush to show presidential leadership and point the way to renewed surpluses.

"The Republicans have dug this hole," said Thomas S. Kahn, the minority staff director on the House Budget Committee. "It's now their responsibility to explain how they intend to fill it up.

"We look forward with great interest to the president's budget and State of the Union address," he said.

The Democrats have used this tactic successfully before, when Mr. Bush's father was president and pledging "no new taxes," even as the country was awash in deficits.

Then, too, the Democrats said that easing the deficit required presidential leadership, and they waited the senior Mr. Bush out, until he agreed to raise taxes in 1990.

This time, though, they are facing George Bush's son, who came away convinced that his father's chief political mistake was reneging on his pledge -- and so is unlikely to make the same move.

Some liberal Democrats are even privately complaining that their party leaders are making a mistake by focusing on the deficit and sounding like accountants at a time when they should be promoting plans for putting people back to work.

Still, at the very least, Democrats say, their focus on the deficit will allow them to resist any further long-term reductions in tax rates when the bitter debate over an economic stimulus package resumes.

Mr. Bush and other Republicans have been pushing hard for the measure to accelerate income tax cuts. Democrats have countered with short-term tax breaks for businesses that get people back to work and increase their payrolls.

Ultimately, standing pat carries risks for Democrats too. No longer in the minority, Mr. Daschle has responsibilities to show that he will not just block the president's program, but join Mr. Bush in governing. Mr. Daschle will eventually have to produce some budget plan that unifies his fractious party and pass it through the Senate.

Mr. Bush is already working to portray Mr. Daschle as an obstructionist. And Republicans say they will try to make the 2002 election a referendum on Mr. Daschle's role as a roadblock to the president's programs.

Indeed, Representative Thomas M. Davis III of Virginia, who heads the Republican re-election effort in the House, said that his candidates would argue to voters "it's the Democrats who are holding it up. Until they deliver a Republican Congress these matters won't be solved."