

Tom Daschle demands apology from President Bush September 25th, 2002

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And I'm John Ydstie.

A dramatic turning point today in Democratic support for President Bush's campaign for action against Iraq. In an emotional speech on the floor of the Senate, Majority Leader Tom Daschle accused the president of playing politics with the issue of Iraq and demanded an apology. NPR's David Welna reports from the Capitol. DAVID WELNA reporting:

Only yesterday the most powerful Democrat in America was saying his party members were prepared to give the administration the benefit of the doubt on Iraq, but then Senator Daschle saw a front-page story in today's Washington Post quoting this remark by President Bush.

President GEORGE W. BUSH: The Senate is more interested in special interests in Washington and not interested in the security of the American people.

WELNA: The president was speaking on Monday in New Jersey expressing frustration with Senate Democrats' resistance to labor provisions he wants in homeland security legislation. But Daschle responded to those remarks today as a much broader swipe at Senate Democrats.

Senator TOM DASCHLE (Democrat, South Dakota; Majority Leader): That is outrageous, outrageous. The president ought to apologize to Senator Inouye and every veteran who has fought in every war who is a Democrat in the United States Senate. He ought to apologize to the American people. That is wrong. We ought not politicize this war. We ought not politicize the rhetoric about war, and life and death.

WELNA: Shortly after that at the White House President Bush was asked if Iraq was a legitimate political issue.

Pres. BUSH: Legitimate national security concern is what it is. You may try to politicize it. I view it as my main obligation--that is, to protect the American people.

WELNA: Senate Minority Leader Trent Lott, for his part, said he was saddened by the tenor and tone of Daschle's speech.

Senator TRENT LOTT (Republican, Senate Minority Leader): Who is the enemy here, the president of the United States or Saddam Hussein? That's who was attacked this morning here on the floor of the United States Senate.

WELNA: Daschle's emotional speech suggested a new strategy by Democrats who've been

frustrated by Iraq overshadowing the economic issues they want to emphasize in the run-up to the midterm elections.

Speaking with reporters after the speech, Daschle for the first time raised questions about the good faith of Republican leaders who've been negotiating with him on the language for a resolution on Iraq. Daschle suggested those leaders may be stalling for time to keep Iraq on the front burner.

Sen. DASCHLE: Well, it just sheds grave doubt about what their intentions are. It really brings to question their real motivation here. Are they extending these negotiations because they want to move this vote closer to the election? That's what it appears.

WELNA: Daschle is also frustrated by what he considers obstructionism by Republicans on the homeland security legislation that's been stalled for weeks now in the Senate. But he and other Democratic leaders who've been pushing to deal with an Iraq resolution quickly have also been feeling pressure from within their own party's ranks. Many Democrats who questioned the wisdom of rushing a resolution on Iraq and who believe the issue is being used politically by Republicans have been pressing for a more confrontational stance. Illinois House member Jan Schakowsky expressed their frustration in a rally outside the Capitol last week.

Representative JAN SCHAKOWSKY (Democrats, Illinois): Am I the only one who thinks the emperor has no clothes?

WELNA: Schakowsky and other Democrats have been especially frustrated by their leader in the House, Dick Gephardt, who has enthusiastically backed the president on Iraq. But in a sign that even his support has its limits, Gephardt today also warned about using the prospect of war with Iraq for political purposes.

Representative DICK GEPHARDT (Democrat, Minority Whip): To decide that kind of an issue based on political considerations or to pull that kind of an issue into a political campaign is in my opinion immoral.

WELNA: But especially after the strong words heard today at the Capitol, it's clear Iraq already has become an issue in the hard-fought election campaign. David Welna, NPR News, the Capitol.