

# commentary

from other pens...

## Potential President, Daschle focuses on 2002

As Democrats with an eye on the White House work the crowds in Iowa and New Hampshire, Tom Daschle is on the West Coast raising money for Senate candidates and driving a rental car around his home state.

Democrats who show up on potential presidential lists are fairly public about their interest in running — even if they don't know their final plans. Not Daschle, the 54-year-old Senate majority leader from South Dakota. "I really haven't devoted any time or effort or consideration to that question," Daschle said this week in a phone interview.

So what's Tom Daschle up to? That's the question on the minds of the party's veteran political operatives.

"This guy wants to hold onto the U.S. Senate," said Democratic consultant Dane Strother, who is helping in several Senate races in the South.

Keeping the Senate in Democratic hands is his most important political task for now, even if Daschle decides later to run for president.

So he was working his way up the West Coast early this week, raising money for Democratic Senate candidates. Those he's helped recently include incumbents Paul Wellstone of Minnesota and Tim Johnson of South Dakota as well as challengers Bill Bradbury of Oregon, Ron Kirk of Texas and Alex Sanders of South Carolina.

Several leading Democrats were traveling to the Iowa State Fair this week. Daschle was at a state fair recently, but in South Dakota, where he campaigned this month for Johnson, the state's Democratic junior senator.

"My view, always, in politics is that only the paranoid survive," Daschle said in an interview from Seattle. "We may be ... in the most important Senate election in generations."

With Democrats holding onto the Senate by a 50-49-1 margin, Daschle puts Democratic prospects of keeping their majority at 50-50.

Daschle has ordered his staff not to speculate about his political plans after the 2002 elections. But he is routinely included on lists of presidential hopefuls and neither he nor his associates encourage or discourage his inclusion. He was among the group that spoke to the centrist Democratic Leadership Council in New York last month.

"There is no answer today," Daschle said. "I want to make sure we're successful in retaining the majority."

After the 2002 elections, "we'll take a look at the political future."

Other Democrats considering the race include 2000 Democratic nominee Al Gore, House Democratic leader Dick Gephardt of Missouri, North Carolina Sen. John Edwards, Massachusetts Sen. John Kerry, Connecticut Sen. Joseph Lieberman and Vermont Gov. Howard Dean.

Associates of those Democrats say they don't expect Daschle to run, but note he could pull together a credible campaign quickly.

For now, Daschle is working for Senate candidates in just over a dozen races. The three early primary states — Iowa, New Hampshire and South Carolina — all have critical Senate races, and other senators campaigning in those states are very visible on national television.

"In some ways, I think it is an advantage to have people who are willing to do the national travel and the Sunday shows," Daschle said.

Because he is the leading Democrat in Congress, he ends up being the leading opponent of some Bush proposals. On Thursday, he was in the audience at Mount Rushmore in his home state as President Bush talked about homeland security. Conservative groups have targeted Daschle with harshly critical ads in his state.

"I feel a little bit like the kid who got an A on an exam," Daschle said. "The polling we've done suggests they haven't had any effect."

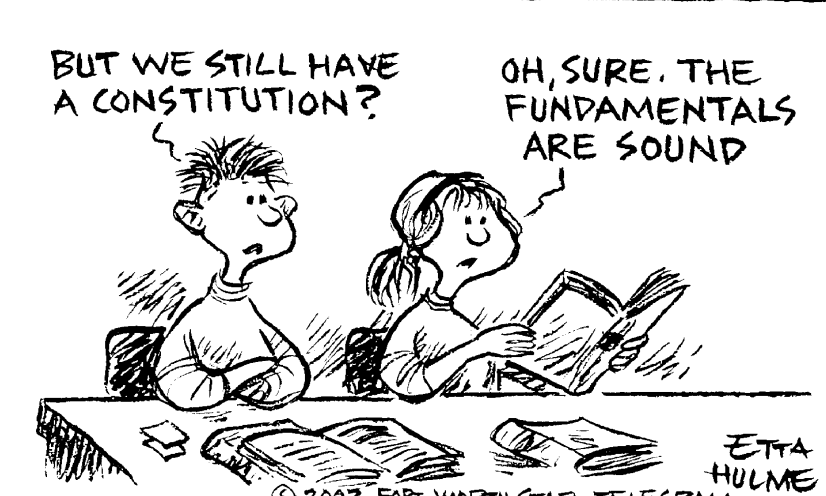
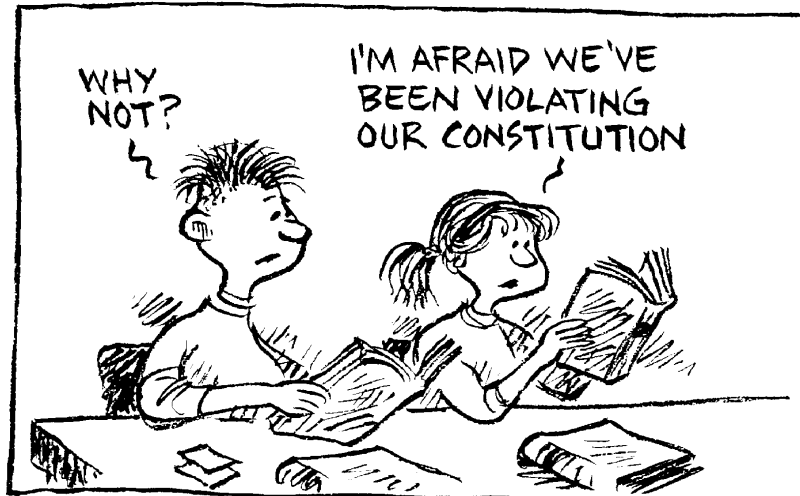
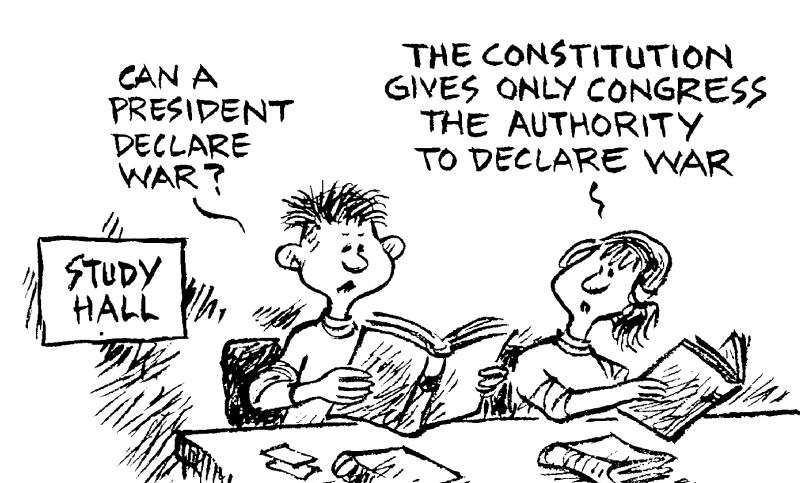
His prominence may make him a popular target for conservatives, but also keeps his name on the list of potential presidential candidates.

"He's on the list because of his institutional position," said David Rohde, a political scientist at Michigan State University.

Rohde said that if Daschle decides to run for president, being Senate majority leader "is a good platform to start from."

"But he needs more information," said Rohde, "not the least of which is the outcome of the 2002 elections."

**EDITOR'S NOTE** — Will Lester covers politics and polling for The Associated Press.



## Kansas is known for its weather

I don't know about you, but I live in a state known for its weather.

Kansas always "has weather, whether or not."

People who travel through our state by car ratify the old label "The Great American Desert," but I've always enjoyed Kansas.

Well, almost always.

Growing up, my sister and I were tasked with the job of dusting. Mainly because Mom didn't like to do that, I think. Now I grew up before the time of air conditioning. If you were to survive the heat of a Kansas summer, you had to open doors and windows to capture any and all breezes.

Breezes. Now that's a word not often heard about Kansas weather. More often than not, it's not breeze, but wind. And maybe that should be WIND!

Open windows and doors invited in the welcome wind (not always cooling), but also allowed in the constantly present dust. All our dusting on a Saturday morning never solved the dust problem; it



**lorna g. t.**

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just slowed down the accumulation.

Today I don't worry as much about dust as my mom did. Maybe it's a generational thing. A clean house and the first one to hang out the laundry on Monday morning used to be marks of a good housekeeper.

A pastor's wife once told me it was also how parishioners judged the pastor's wife.

Today I think many of us judge by different standards - at least I hope we do.

An unknown author puts it this way: "Dust if you must.

But wouldn't it be better to paint a picture, or

write a letter, bake a cake, or plant a seed.

Ponder the difference between want and need. Dust if you must.

But there is not much time, with rivers to swim and mountains to climb!

Music to hear, and books to read, friends to cherish and life to lead.

Dust if you must.

But the world's out there with the sun in your eyes, the wind in your hair, a flutter of snow, a shower of rain.

This day will not come around again.

Dust if you must.

But bear in mind, old age will come and it's not kind.

And when you go, and go you must, You, yourself, will create more DUST."

A friend who sent this to me by e-mail also added:

"Remember. A house becomes a home when you can write 'I love you' on the furniture."

Think about it.

## Medicare restrictions imprison the disabled

President Bush may have burnished his "compassionate conservative" image by commemorating the 12th anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act last month, but his key announcement of the day turns out to have been niggling, at best.

Bush described the problem accurately during the anniversary ceremony in the East Room of the White House. "When Americans with disabilities participate in their communities, they should not be penalized," he said.

But today, he continued, "Medicare recipients who are considered homebound may lose coverage if they occasionally go to a baseball game ... or meet with a friend or go to a family reunion.

"New technology is allowing even the most significantly disabled Americans to be more mobile. ... They should not be forced to trade their benefits for a little freedom."

His audience roundly applauded him at that point, but disability advocate Henry Claypool feared when he heard the words "a little freedom" that Bush was going to grant the homebound handicapped nothing more than that.

Bush went on to announce that "we're clarifying Medicare policy so that people who are considered homebound can occasionally take part in their communities without fear of losing their benefits."

According to Claypool, the government's "clarification" basically will keep about 50,000 severely disabled persons "prisoners in their own homes," still unable to venture out more than "occasionally" without losing benefits.

Claypool, co-director of Advancing Independence, a group determined to modernize Medicare and Medicaid, said that "unfortunately, the new government instructions are even more restrictive than the already overly restrictive statute on the homebound."

So he and other advocates, including former Sen. Bob Dole, R-Kan., are going to Congress to get the law changed to allow victims of diseases such as Lou Gehrig's disease, spinal injuries and late-stage multiple sclerosis to leave home without losing payments for nursing care.

Separately, other disability advocates are trying



**morton kondracke**

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to get the government to pay for better wheelchairs that would also allow the disabled to leave home. Currently, Medicare covers only heavy, hard-to-fold models.

(As readers of this column may know, my wife is disabled with Parkinson's disease, but neither policy change would affect her.)

A change in law could transform the life of someone like Mario Giaccone, who broke his neck in a swimming pool accident in 1970 and has been a quadriplegic ever since.

Giaccone, 62, has a van he uses to drive to medical appointments, but it needs repairs. He'd like to find a part-time job, but he's afraid to for fear of losing home-visiting benefits under Medicare.

"Without the nursing nurse service, I can't live," he said. Aides come in seven days a week to get him in and out of bed, bathe and exercise him and prepare his meals and medicine.

Another likely beneficiary of legislation proposed by Sen. Susan Collins, R-Maine, is David Jayne, 41, a victim of Lou Gehrig's disease, who can move only two fingers and operates a voice synthesizer by raising his eyebrows.

In the fall of 2000, he went to a University of Georgia football game and when a local newspaper covered his away-from-home trip, his home healthcare provider cut off services to him.

They were restored after a fight, but Jayne became a leader in the effort to get the regulations — and now, the law — loosened. In fact, the Collins legislation is named after him.

Currently, Medicare law allows the severely disabled "absences of infrequent or relatively short duration" and lets them still maintain home care benefits.

As interpreted in government regulations prior to Bush's July 26 announcement, absences were allowed for medical care, adult day care or reli-

gious services.

Bush's "clarification" added "an occasional trip to the barber, a walk around the block, a drive, attendance at a family reunion, funeral, graduation or other infrequent or unique event."

The agency that runs Medicare said that the list was meant to be illustrative, not comprehensive, but Claypool says that it will be used by regional administrators rigidly to limit what the disabled are allowed to do. The Collins bill would lift all restrictions.

Meantime, the Center on Disability and Health asserts that "frail and disabled persons have become prisoners in their own homes" by Medicare's wheelchair restrictions.

In 1984, Congress ordered Medicare to pay for wheelchairs suitable for in-home use. To save money, the government is paying only for low-priced chairs that are difficult for the disabled to use outside the home.

Disability groups acknowledge there would be a cost if lighter, higher-priced chairs were covered — but that it would be only \$77 million over five years for the 13,000 or so persons affected.

The Congressional Budget Office put a \$1.5 billion, 10-year price tag on the Collins proposal, but advocates say that's ridiculous because no new person is going to develop a grave disability to qualify for nursing assistance.

Last year, Bush unveiled a "New Freedom Initiative" designed to find ways to help the disabled get out of their homes and participate in public life. He's got two opportunities here to make the initiative a reality.

Morton Kondracke is executive editor of Roll Call, the newspaper of Capitol Hill.

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