INTERVIEW WITH THOMAS DASCHLE

December 19, 2007
Washington, D.C.

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To cite an interview, please use the following general format: [name of interviewee] Interview, [date of interview], William J. Clinton Presidential History Project, Miller Center, University of Virginia.
Martin: This is Paul Martin. I am here with Senator Tom Daschle. It is December 19, 2007, and we are in his offices in Washington, D.C. He has graciously agreed to talk to us about his experiences in the Senate and dealing with the Clinton administration. I was hoping that you could start with the 1992 campaign. You were running for reelection at the same time as President Clinton was running. Did you have interactions on the campaign trail?

Daschle: We didn’t have significant interaction. At that time, [J. Robert] Bob Kerrey was a candidate and he was my candidate. I endorsed him. He came to South Dakota on occasion. I really didn’t know Bill Clinton all that well. He was kind enough to come into my offices at the time. I was not yet leader. I was a member of the leadership, but not the leader.

He visited in my office at one point and he expressed the hope that, if he was elected, we could work together. I don’t think he came to South Dakota during the general election; he came during the primary. At that point South Dakota had an earlier primary date and it was one of those, a little bit like South Carolina, or Nevada now. It was viewed as not a crucial state to win, but one that was important because of the early lineup. They’ve since changed that. So my early occasions to meet the future President were really limited to that: once or twice in South Dakota during the primary, and then once in my office.

Martin: My memory—I was in college at the time and I supported Bob Kerrey as well, but I was in California and Bob Kerrey was done well before the California primary.

After your preferred candidate whom you had endorsed is out of the race, do you then have further contact with Clinton, or not until the actual general election?

Daschle: I really don’t think that I did. I don’t remember anything specific involving Bill Clinton at that time. I remember being in Houston at a political event, and watching 60 Minutes as he and Hillary [Clinton] responded to one of the early crises that they faced in the campaign, involving allegations of his personal life. I remember thinking at the time that it would be highly unlikely that somebody who was having those kinds of difficulties could win. We watched this spectacle and were intrigued by how well we thought he handled the interview. The interviewer was [Steve] Kroft with 60 Minutes. In any case, I don’t think I had any other personal conversations with him.
Martin: During the campaign the Senate would be still in session. Do you remember conversations with other Senators about the race and what people thought about? At this point Clinton would have secured the nomination by around March or April. What was the general sense within the Senate, Democratic Senators, about Bill Clinton as a candidate?

Daschle: Bill Clinton was fairly well known because as Governor he came to Washington with some frequency. He was also involved with this new group called the DLC, the Democratic Leadership Council. In that context, during that relationship with members of Congress who shared his view about the direction the party needed to take, he had many venues that allowed us an opportunity to hear him and to meet with him. Over that period of time he became much more familiar than a lot of Governors from smaller states might have been. So we had a significant degree of appreciation of his political skills and his general persona, but I don’t think that many of us felt that we knew him previously as much as we knew him in a professional and political sense.

Martin: So you had plenty of exposure to him prior to ’92.

Daschle: Correct.

Martin: Clinton is elected in November, you get re-elected in November, and then we have the transition period. Do you remember consultations after he becomes elected? What is the new agenda going to be? Is he meeting with Senators at this period of time?

Daschle: As I recall, he did. On occasion he had the leadership come to the Oval Office or come to the Cabinet room. I was a very junior ranking member of the leadership. I was Chairman of the Policy Committee and from time to time as they invited us, I was invited to be a participant.

Of course, we were in the majority, and George Mitchell was a very close friend of mine and somebody I spent a lot of time talking with. I always felt that he and President Clinton had a fairly good relationship. He and I sometimes would go down, and one night in particular Mitchell and the President spoke at some length. I recall how afterwards the President was walking out of the room with his arm around George Mitchell. I’d never seen anybody put their arm around George Mitchell, because that isn’t Mitchell’s style or character. He obviously felt close to Mitchell.

Martin: Starting in 1993, you become co-chair of the Democratic Policy Committee, but that’s a new position that Mitchell created. Is that right?

Daschle: That’s right.

Martin: What were your responsibilities?

Daschle: The responsibilities really were three. I ran a weekly meeting. We initiated this weekly meeting that still goes on today. It’s on Thursdays. It is a luncheon meeting where we would focus on an issue. I would bring in guest speakers. “Speakers” is kind of a loosely held term.
here. They didn’t speak, they just sat and led a round-table discussion—I think that’s probably a better way to put it. When we initiated that, George was very good about letting me experiment with how that worked.

The second thing I did was to run our retreats. Then the third thing he had me do every year was to actually visit each member’s office and ask them what they thought the agenda ought to be for the coming year, the coming Congress. I spent an inordinate amount of time setting up these meetings in their offices with Senators, asking them what they thought the agenda should look like. Every year we did that.

**Martin:** How much time would it take you to meet with them all?

**Daschle:** Each meeting was a half hour. There were 50 people, so 25 hours I guess.

**Martin:** That’s a pretty significant commitment. Can we pick up on that for a second? Because one of the things that we’re interested in is how a political agenda develops. Especially, you have a brand new President coming in; you have majority power in both the House and the Senate. Who leads? Who follows? How does one craft an agenda, say, from 1993 to 1994?

**Daschle:** Obviously the Clinton administration had a lot to say. I would say they are the more—the executive branch is always the more proactive of the two branches, but the legislative branch also has the ability to weigh in, to listen or not to listen, especially if you’re in the same party. Maybe even more so if you’re not in the same party. There’s more responsibility then to lay out the agenda if your party isn’t shared by people at the other end of Pennsylvania Avenue.

It’s an ongoing discussion, conversation, involving the leadership, the membership, the administration if you’re of the same party, and supporters. There’s no one way to do it. I remember having these meetings after I did all of this. We put together a recommendation of the things that we were going to focus on. It got to be a very heated discussion, probably similar to a platform fight at a convention. People felt there ought to be priorities that weren’t listed, and things that shouldn’t be priorities. It was a difficult process that isn’t done any more like that. I don’t think Harry Reid does it. I ended up not doing it quite that same way.

**Martin:** Why?

**Daschle:** It really seemed to be a source of a great deal of controversy.

**Martin:** One can almost think that you would get too much information by doing what you did.

**Daschle:** Right.

**Martin:** It puts you in a great position to comment on your sense of diversity of opinion on agenda for this period of time. What were the things that most Senators wanted to push forward on? What got left off the agenda?
Daschle: Boy, it’s hard to say. I don’t recall, to be very candid with you. I do recall that healthcare was really a hot issue, because in that special election in ’91, Harris Wofford won and that generated a great deal of discussion. He was perceived to have won because of his position on healthcare. It created sort of a national expectation that healthcare would be high on the agenda.

I don’t recall if there were any significant foreign policy issues. There was a good deal of debate about the state of the economy and what we needed to do there. The deficit was growing. We had that big negotiated agreement with President [George H.W.] Bush, where he raised taxes and was accused of breaking a campaign promise. I think that the social agenda and how it looked at the time was really a big part of it. We had the Clean Air Act at the time. That was something that George Mitchell felt very strongly about. We passed that.

Martin: You passed that with Bush 41.

Daschle: Exactly.

Martin: Was there a sense that Clinton was due his agenda as the incoming President?

Daschle: I think so. To a certain extent that any President is given the benefit of the doubt with regard to—not that there is doubt—the opportunity to present his case, what the agenda should be. Congress is likely to listen, but not necessarily comply. We had a little bit stronger majority—we had 55 or 57 Senators at the time—and the thought of being in the minority in just two years just didn’t occur to most Senators. That’s how it ended up in ’94. But yes, I think coming in a new President, somebody who won in spite of a lot of challenges—when Ross Perot was talking about campaign finance reform—that was hot.

Martin: That’s right. Were there issues that Senators didn’t want to pick up that were part of Clinton’s agenda?

Daschle: Not that I can think of. I’m sure there were, but I can’t really of think of what they would have been at the time.

Martin: Clinton becomes inaugurated as President and he instantly runs into some trouble with nomination confirmations. Zoë Baird withdraws at a certain point and he has some other issues with confirmations. What does that do to Senators who are watching a new incoming administration?

Daschle: I think the perception—he also got into the whole question of “Don’t ask, don’t tell.”

Martin: That’s right. That’s right off the bat as well.

Daschle: Right out of the box. There’s such a formative period right there for any new President. You try to size them up. Carter had similar issues involving water projects and he upset [Thomas P.] Tip O’Neill. There is this period where the President gets to know the Congress, the Congress gets to know the President, and you’re creating first impressions. I would say the overall first
impression of the Clinton administration was not very good because of the fights, because of the need to be on the defensive almost right out of the box on issues that most members didn’t want to have to deal with.

Martin: Like gays in the military.

Daschle: Yes.

Martin: I know it’s hard to parse when perceptions shifted, but a lot of the story that we’ve heard is that the transition period was also rocky. Is this trickling out to the political sphere during the transition, or are they keeping this fairly quiet so that people in the Senate aren’t aware that the transition is a little rocky?

Daschle: You could see that the transition was rocky. We probably didn’t have all the facts or the information about what was causing it to be as rocky as it was, but you can’t go through public fights like that and not question whether or not they could have been avoided or handled differently. I think there was a confirmation of the perception that things weren’t going well.

There was also Whitewater right out of the box. That also caused a lot of people to be concerned that this President could have some ethical or legal questions down the road. It appeared that they were not going to go away any time soon.

Martin: Were there nominations that signaled to you good things and bad things about this incoming President?

Daschle: It’s possible, but I don’t recall.

Martin: How about the choice of [Thomas] Mack McLarty for his first Chief of Staff? Does that mean anything for someone in the Democratic leadership?

Daschle: It was a choice that most people could understand. Mack was a good friend of mine. I think he had the confidence of President Clinton just because of their long relationship. There was understandable concern about his limited Washington experience, but at the same time the sense was that President Clinton needed somebody who knew him well. Mack had run a utility company in Arkansas. Again, any new President, especially the President of your own party, deserves the benefit of the doubt. While there were concerns, I don’t think they were serious ones. Mack has such a great personality that a lot of people were more than happy to give President Clinton the benefit of the doubt because they liked Mack.

Martin: He had some early policy challenges that imply other folks weren’t giving him the benefit of the doubt. Leading up to the stimulus package, he’s having a lot of trouble getting the full Democratic Senate on board with some of his early policies. He has trouble with the budget coming down in August. The people who are opposing the budget and opposing the economic stimulus package are coming from places like David Boren in Oklahoma. Is it a situation that the President misunderstood how the Senate works, in terms of people having different electoral
calendars and constituencies? I’m trying to get a sense of why the Senate caused him as much trouble as it seemed to in those two years.

Daschle: It all began to pile up. There was sort of a cumulative effect, with each one of these things layered on, that led first to concern about what impact it was going to have on the administration, but ultimately concern about what impact it was going to have within Congress. Of course Congress at that time was controlled by the Democrats and we had a problem of our own, the big check scandal. That check scandal became huge, and very troubling to a lot of members. Members lost their careers on the basis of the scandal.

So it was a combination of Congress feeling paranoid about our prospects for retaining control or retaining the kind of working control that we had. But there was also concern about the competency of the administration over time that exacerbated so much of that concern.

Martin: What exactly was the administration doing that made folks question their competence?

Daschle: Well you start with the nominations. You go from that to—certainly there was a vague sense of what the President was trying to do in his first time in office. There really wasn’t a clear appreciation of what his priorities were or what he wanted to do. It appeared that he just wanted to do everything. He kind of threw everything at the Congress in the hopes that something would ultimately stick, have traction, pass through.

I remember at one point there was a concern about his relationship with members of Congress, that it was beginning to fray. So he made a real overt effort to try to get us to be supportive and to feel more comfortable with him. In my case what they asked me to do—I’d usually run in the morning, and at that point he was running, so I would be invited to come to the Oval Office to have a run with the President. At that time he was running outside. It became quite a spectacle. It didn’t last a real long time, but nonetheless we were invited to do things like that, to sit with him, to bond a little bit more effectively with the President, given what was perceived to be an increasing amount of difficulty, both privately as well as publicly.

Martin: What do you think the cause of the distance was? Was it the White House staff? Were they abrasive? Or was it more the question of, We don’t really know what this President is trying to do?

Daschle: It was a combination. There was a little bit of a sense of arrogance: “Well, this is what we want.” It wasn’t easy to accommodate that with members who had similarly strong views about policies and the direction they thought we should take, many of whom had been around a long time. It was a combination really of both, especially in the early time. There was also a frustration, as I said, about allegations involving the President that just didn’t seem to go away. That was frustrating to Democrats for a long time.

Martin: That carries over the entire administration.

Daschle: Right.
**Martin:** Can we talk a little bit about the politics leading up to a couple of the major policy fights that Clinton is going to have in this period?

**Daschle:** Sure.

**Martin:** What was the breakdown that happened with the economic stimulus package early on in April? Why did that go down in flames?

**Daschle:** It went down in flames for a couple of reasons. One, there was a great deal of dissention within our own caucus about whether to support it or not. Ultimately, as you may recall, the budget package passed by one vote, Bob Kerrey’s vote, and that was a piece of real work. Because of my relationship with Bob, George asked if I would try to shepherd that and ultimately it worked. I think it was a combination of just fear about the political consequences of supporting it, deep differences of opinion about what the package should look like, and a lack of—he didn’t have a very good relationship with [Daniel Patrick] Pat Moynihan. His lack of a good relationship probably hurt his agenda as well.

**Martin:** So is the main conflict between Moynihan and [Robert] Byrd? Are those the leaders of that dispute?

**Daschle:** As I recall, that’s what it was.

**Martin:** Because Byrd is strongly in favor of the stimulus package, which is mostly an appropriations package.

**Daschle:** Exactly.

**Martin:** Is this a situation where, from a historical point of view, one can look at this and see this as a fight over what the Democratic Party does during this period of time?

**Daschle:** Right.

**Martin:** You have a struggle between the President and Congress, especially some of the older, more senior folks in Congress wanting to move in different directions from the President. Do you think that’s a fair characterization?

**Daschle:** I think that’s fair.

**Martin:** So we go from the failure of the economic stimulus package—the Republicans filibuster and it dies. Then you have this lull between April and August with the budget going through. Can you talk about that period? How does one recover from the stimulus package and get to at least 50–50 on the budget?

**Daschle:** I don’t remember any of the specifics. I’d have to go back, but what happened in that time is that the President didn’t give up; he just wanted to continue to work to try to find ways to overcome the problem and bring Democrats and Republicans together. At the same time, the
President began to realize that his message was not resonating all that well and that he needed to put a lot more emphasis on his message. For a while, I don’t think he understood how to do that. It took a while. In that period of time especially, it was very difficult to get him to understand that the Congress was probably never going to pass that particular package as it was, just because of all the regional dissention, especially.

**Martin:** When you say that he has to work on his message, are you thinking about his public message, or his message privately to members of the House and Senate?

**Daschle:** Actually a combination. He wasn’t connecting. The sense was that he might have been preoccupied with Whitewater and the allegations there.

At some point, of course, Janet Reno became one of the points of controversy. She wanted to be independent and conduct herself in a way that didn’t show adequate deference to the President and that was of great concern to him. Yet he knew from the [Richard] Nixon days that you don’t fire the Attorney General without having to pay a pretty high price. He was stuck. He had picked Janet. Janet was independent. She had a mind of her own. She knew how she felt and she knew what she had to do. That was all playing itself out almost daily on the front page of the *Post.*

**Martin:** Which does distract from the policy tension that he is trying to push forward.

**Daschle:** No question.

**Martin:** So you were tasked with trying to persuade Bob Kerrey to support the budget?

**Daschle:** Right.

**Martin:** Were there other folks that you were tasked to persuade or to work with?

**Daschle:** Yes and no. Not to that degree. I did have other assignments, but the other assignments were a piece of cake compared to Bob.

**Martin:** Was the sense that they needed Bob’s individual vote, or that he would bring other people along as well?

**Daschle:** A combination, but mostly the former. We knew it was going to be very close. We had worked out a very elaborate headcount, more designed really to know exactly where we were than anything I had participated in. That showed us that we were—that it could be Bob’s vote that made the difference. And that’s exactly what happened.

**Martin:** Was there effort here by the Senate to try to persuade the President to scale back the package a little bit to give you a little wiggle room so that you’re not coming down to 50–50, so that you can pass it with more leeway? You weren’t going to get Republicans at this time, but at least some of the Democrats who were opposed to it?
Daschle: That was the thing. There was a big question about the degree to which we could offer a little more flexibility than what we were being told about this, so that we could broker something and bring about a majority vote that was more comfortable than what we were experiencing. To my knowledge, that didn’t happen.

Martin: Do you have any knowledge of the White House being adamant that this was the package that they wanted to see go through, or do you simply not know?

Daschle: I don’t recall. Especially in the earlier years, they expected allegiance from the Congress and it was not always provided, and that caused a relationship rupture that persisted for a long time.

Martin: You had mentioned that Clinton had tried to reach out to individual Senators. You mentioned inviting you to go running with him. There’s a sense that Clinton reached out in the wrong ways, that he was too quick to offer federal assistance to districts or too quick to start offering chits for people’s votes. Was that a problem that you saw in Clinton?

Daschle: Not particularly. There were cases where it was clear that he was trying to inveigle with members and to use whatever tactics seemed to work. He was very helpful to me in saving an Air Force base in South Dakota. I had heard that Ellsworth was on the base closure list and it was important for it to be taken off. I talked to him personally about it. I talked to Leon Panetta, who at that time was Chief of Staff. He did it and it really meant a lot to me, but I don’t know how widespread his efforts to placate Congress and the Senators was.

Martin: When the President has a major piece of policy like the budget come down to such a close margin—it was close in both the House and the Senate. I interviewed Congresswoman [Marjorie] Margolies-Mezvinsky a few weeks ago to get her story about how the vote came down in the House. Do you see the Presidency learning or responding in any significant way over the next period of time? Did they back off from some of their tactics and try different things? Or does it appear to roll off?

Daschle: No, they kept getting progressively more sophisticated and more sensitive, just smarter about the way they handled things. As time went on they became quite good at building relationships, especially with the Democrats in Congress. That really meant a lot to the Congress. He was graduated into it more.

He was an impressive leader and somebody who understood the politics of legislating as well or better than anybody did. He was very encouraging to many of us. By the time he got to ’94, we knew he was in increasing trouble because of Whitewater, and because of other scandals. There was the Travelgate scandal. All of that was still going on. There was a sour mood in ’94. I remember being pleased that I was able to avoid most of that. It caught up with me in 2004, but had ’94 occurred in ’92, that would have been a totally different situation for me too.

Martin: One of the speculations about why Clinton had as much trouble as he had, especially in those first two years, was the perception among members of the House and members of the
Senate that Clinton actually ran behind them in their Congressional districts, and they didn’t owe any electoral allegiance to the Presidency.

Daschle: Right.

Martin: You ran in ’92, and Clinton ran in ’92. Did you see differences between your interaction and folks who were up for election in ’94 or ’96?

Daschle: Most people distanced themselves from the Clinton administration in ’94. I remember talking to several members. Because there were all these issues out there, they felt that the only thing they could do was to run without an acknowledgement that they were generally supportive of the Clinton administration. There was a good deal of anxiety, fear that Clinton was far more harmful politically than he was helpful. I think it was overblown, but nonetheless, that was the feeling.

Martin: Do you think that that was widespread in the Senate?

Daschle: Pretty much.

Martin: Is that a reason people would vote against things like the economic stimulus or the budget?

Daschle: Oh, sure.

Martin: They didn’t want to be tied to Clinton.

Daschle: Right. They wanted to show some distinction, some difference.

Martin: The policy agenda that Clinton pursues in these first two years—I study Congress, and from the perspective of somebody who watches Congress, it seems like an odd agenda to pursue if you’re a Democratic President trying to keep hold of a Democratic House and a Democratic Senate. He pushes through gun control and a [James] Brady bill and a variety of other things that to some degree split the Democratic caucus.

Daschle: Right.

Martin: What was the response from within the Democratic caucus to Clinton’s pushing these kinds of policies?

Daschle: It depended on who you were talking to. The more progressive part of the caucus was pleased with a lot of what Clinton did, because they didn’t expect him to get elected. He got elected as a hardcore moderate. The first couple of years he had an agenda that was more liberal than what was originally anticipated. People were surprised, to a certain extent, with the agenda that marked his first two years. A lot of people after the ’94 election felt that he didn’t do a good enough job of understanding the importance of certain regions of the country and the concerns that they had over the agenda that he put forward. If I had to guess, I’d say that there was a good
level of frustration by ’94 that he was out of sync and was going to have a lot of difficulty getting reelected.

**Martin:** How did things like the assault weapons ban play out for you politically?

**Daschle:** It was difficult. I voted for it because I believe in it, but I took a lot of heat on it, as I did with other issues as well. But that was one I remember getting a lot of mail, and just a great deal of anxiety.

**Martin:** As a leader in the Senate, how does your decision-making work? Thinking about your state constituency versus your leadership responsibilities, do you have to back bills that you otherwise don’t want to?

**Daschle:** Absolutely not. There were a lot of expressions of hope for unity and hope for support, but at the end of the day they really understood. When I was leader I tried to express that same understanding, that every Senator is the best person to judge where the line is for them, in terms of the degree to which they can support their party or the President, versus the degree to which they have to get reelected. There was always an understanding about that. But it was difficult, because he had agenda items that reflected a lot more controversy than most members wanted to face.

**Martin:** After the budget goes through, almost immediately you have a shift of focus towards NAFTA [North American Free Trade Agreement] over the fall of 1993. How does the Senate move from Republicans completely voting against the economic stimulus package to now we have to rely mostly on Republicans to back this bill? It’s a miraculous shift and I’m guessing that there is an interesting story there that might tell us something about party politics in the Senate.

**Daschle:** Of course, the Republicans have been much more proactive on free trade than Democrats. But they haven’t been supportive of revenue-raising measures or spending overall. So it was sort of natural that they were going to oppose the omnibus, the economic stimulus package, but generally be supportive of trade. One of the things that people don’t fully appreciate is that NAFTA was a major reason why we didn’t take up healthcare when the President laid the bill down in October. That and, I think it was Somalia, at the time.

**Martin:** Yes, Somalia took over.

**Daschle:** So Somalia and NAFTA caused the President—even though we had momentum and we were really moving forward on healthcare, it caused them to sideline health, take up NAFTA, and take up Somalia and actions there. That kicked health into next year and it was some time in the next year, March or April, before we were able to get back and relaunch healthcare. By then, every employer in the country had come out in opposition to it, and faulted this 1300-page bill as an extreme piece of legislation. So it had the consequential repercussions that we’re still suffering through today as a result of the decision.

**Martin:** Whose decision is it to do NAFTA when NAFTA is done in fall of ’93, and to kick healthcare to the next year? Is that the Senate’s?
**Daschle:** The President felt NAFTA was in big trouble and that healthcare was not as much. If NAFTA hung out there, we’d never get it passed, because it was losing support and popularity. Because there seemed to be a groundswell of support for healthcare, it just seemed like the logical choice. If you could do only one, do the one in bigger trouble before it gets worse and then turn to the one that is not in as big a trouble, even though it was in trouble as well. Do that second. That’s what they decided to do.

**Martin:** I don’t think that story has been widely thought about. Usually what people think about is the decision to do healthcare and welfare, that pairing, in terms of the policy order.

**Daschle:** Right.

**Martin:** Let’s move to healthcare. How involved were you in negotiations and trying to usher this bill through or to try to come up with a bill?

**Daschle:** I was the co-chair of the Policy Committee and that was a new assignment for me, to try to see if we could come up with a strategy and a common purpose and unite as many people as possible. To that effort we did something that I don’t think has ever been done before or since. We had something we called the Healthcare University because it appeared that so many people were just not familiar enough with healthcare policy. We knew that this was going to take some real educating. We thought that the more people knew, the more committed they would be to reform. For a while that was true, but then as this bill became the target of so much criticism people got colder and colder feet about it.

Moynihan did not have a good relationship with the Clintons, and also felt that the committee chairs were left out in the early deliberations, and felt that before we could get it to the floor we really needed to work with Republicans. Because none of that was done, he wasn’t very inclined to be cooperative and to be supportive of moving their health bill, and he was chairman of the Finance Committee. So you couldn’t have had a worse set of legislative circumstances than a chairman who wasn’t very supportive and a bill that is becoming a real albatross.

But again, my goal was to see if we could keep working this thing, keep moving it. I had countless meetings with Moynihan and countless discussions with others in the White House, including Hillary. She was kind enough to come to South Dakota and talk about the plan. So we failed. But we failed in part because we just didn’t have a very good strategy more than because it was a rejection of the substance of what it was we were trying to do at the time. Ultimately it became a substantive debate, too. But people by then had sort of mythical notions about what this bill would do and how it would do it.

**Martin:** Were there things that you thought at the time would have changed Moynihan’s position and gotten him on board? Or was the damage done?

**Daschle:** The damage was done. It was done in part because of the way the bill was handled initially. It was done in part because—that was exacerbated then with the Clinton administration just deciding to go around Moynihan.
Martin: And publicly made a comment as well.

Daschle: Right, and that really just froze things in place.

Martin: The bill does get out of his committee, but it still faces trouble along the way.

Daschle: Well, it doesn’t get out until May, so we had very little time. By the time it got out, the Republicans who had been pretty forward-leaning on a lot of this—John Chafee, in particular, was wonderful in terms of trying to find common ground. Bob Dole, my colleague here, was, as I look back, surprisingly supportive. But Phil Gramm and a lot of others said, “You guys are nuts to support anything along this line. This is crazy. What are you doing?”

While they were in the minority initially, that sentiment continued to grow and grow, and more and more people came to the conclusion that Phil Gramm and others were right. That led even John Chafee at the end to give up hope that it could be passed.

Martin: Do you get a sense during this period that perceptions are shifting, that people are starting to look to 1994, to the election, and trying to imagine whether healthcare is better as a policy or better as an issue? I can imagine the Republicans thinking, We can beat the Democrats up pretty well over this issue, especially if it fails.

Daschle: No question, and they did. They beat us up and put us on the defensive and never really let us up off the mat. The degree to which they had such orchestrated help from the outside made a big difference too. They had insurers, hospitals, doctors, virtually every special interest, who orchestrated around their message that this is not something we should do. Ultimately that made a big difference, even in the Democratic caucus, because people started to get fearful and concerned that it was going to have huge political repercussions for everybody in ’94.

Martin: What about the coalition that was backing healthcare? Why didn’t they put up more of a fight?

Daschle: I think it was a combination of resources and differences of opinion on what that fight should look like.

Martin: One of the arguments we’ve heard is that the coalition backing healthcare didn’t back a comprehensive healthcare; they backed their individual portion of healthcare.

Daschle: Right.

Martin: All they really cared about was that their little part worked. There was no umbrella organization to back an overall policy.

Daschle: I think that’s fair. There was a lot of interest—you had special interests on both sides.
Martin: Interesting. One of the things that is tough to understand is why does healthcare stay on the Democratic agenda for most of 1994? Why not pull it earlier? Why keep at it for as long as you did?

Daschle: Because people felt, first of all, that this was one of the most important things we could be working on—I certainly felt that way—and that the need was so great. And because we had put so much effort into getting to this point, we’ve got to try to see it through. So it was a combination of the investment already made, the importance of the issue, and the belief that somehow there’s got to be enough common ground here where we could do something. All those things were motivating in the eyes and minds of most of the Senators.

Martin: When it finally gets laid to rest—I guess it’s August or maybe even September—do you remember at the time thinking, *We’ll just pick this up next year,* or did you know at the time that was it?

Daschle: It was a heart-versus-head thing. My heart—we were just dumbfounded that we had to acknowledge defeat here. The heart said, “It’s going to come back.” The head said, “We’ve had our moment and we’re going to have to wait a while.” There has been an ongoing debate about whether to do health reform incrementally or comprehensively. So that internal debate was going on. Is it just impossible to have comprehensive health reform, or are we going to have to continue to rely on incremental changes? Well, the incrementalists won out. Then we went right to portability in the next Congress. We went to SCHIP [State Children’s Health Insurance Program] and eventually to drugs. Those are all viewed as significant incremental steps, but nothing compared to what the comprehensive approach could have done.

Martin: Did that experience through 1993 and 1994 tell you something about the possibility of comprehensive reform? Did you at that point think, *This is just not a good idea. We’re never going to get something like this through?*

Daschle: We knew that ultimately we would see some success. Ultimately could be 50 years from now. Nonetheless, we just knew in our hearts and minds that we couldn’t sustain the problems that we were having. That real conviction has come home. In fact, I just finished writing a book that is coming out in March on this whole thing, and other efforts we’ve made over history to reform our healthcare system. What are the lessons to be learned? There is a great deal of confidence that one day our country will have a universal healthcare system.

Martin: To what extent during this period do you have confirmation that the mass public is on board with healthcare being an important issue? Are you doing tracking polls?

Daschle: Oh, yes, we did a lot of polling. It’s interesting. They were overwhelmingly supportive in the fall of ’93 and generally supportive through the winter. Then, as the ads started, and as the administration became preoccupied with other things, we could see a fairly significant decline in the level of support from Americans. “Harry and Louise” had contributed some, and a number of efforts made by the opposition to undermine confidence led people to think, *Maybe this really isn’t a very good idea in its current form.*
**Martin:** Were these White House polls that you were looking at?

**Daschle:** Yes.

**Martin:** That’s interesting. This is probably too much detail, but were people turned off to your solutions, or did they simply decide healthcare is not that big a deal any more?

**Daschle:** No, they were turned off by our solutions more than acknowledging that healthcare was not a big deal.

**Martin:** So there’s still a sense that healthcare is a problem. They just don’t like the actual solutions.

**Daschle:** No question.

**Martin:** Healthcare falls apart late summer, and the election is right around the corner. One of the arguments that people have about what happened in 1994 is that Democrats didn’t have enough time to go home and campaign, or that the Democratic base was unenthused and stayed home. Does either of those arguments find resonance with you?

**Daschle:** It’s a combination of a number of things. The check scandal, more than anything else, hurt the Congress. I don’t think there’s even a close second. To the extent that there is a second and a third, I think the lack of ability to go home, preoccupation with things in Washington, a rejection of the healthcare system, and just a sense that Democrats didn’t have their act together, led to the Republican victory in 1994, and of course the firebrand Speaker of the House and a change of direction in Congress of some magnitude.

**Martin:** You have sort of a mix of good things and bad things happening in your political career at this point. You become leader, but you lose the majority.

**Daschle:** Right.

**Martin:** What’s the sense in the Senate in terms of interpreting and understanding 1994? Do they think it’s Clinton’s fault?

**Daschle:** Everyone contributed. To a certain extent it was the fault of the Clinton administration. To a certain extent it was our own incompetence, our arrogance. To a certain extent it was the check scandal. A lot of mid-term years are not kind to the incumbent party. There were just a lot of different pieces to it. I don’t think there is one thing in particular that one could cite.

**Martin:** The shift in the Senate—it’s not as many seats or the ratio is not nearly as high as what happened in the House. In the House it is considered a huge blow. I guess in the Senate you lose and gain that many seats on a regular basis, and even within your experience on the Hill you’ve probably been vacillating between minority and majority for a long time.

**Daschle:** Absolutely. I had both positions, minority and majority, twice.
Martin: We should probably close up for today. I appreciate your time here. It’s a fascinating period of history.