

Deliberating on Daschle

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Tom Daschle's withdrawal from his nomination as Secretary of Health and Human Services due to his failure to pay taxes on, among other things, the car and driver which a wealthy friend let him use while in Washington, while appropriate, is troubling not only because Daschle may well have been a good HHS Secretary, but also, for those of us who support our new president and his agenda, it is not a helpful development. The details of the circumstances which forced Daschle to withdraw are particularly unfortunate because they simply reek of elite, affluent, Washington insider. For most Americans, failure to pay thousands of dollars of taxes on the limousine lent to you by your friend is even more difficult to understand or relate to than the more common affluent foible of failing to pay taxes on housekeepers, gardeners and the like.

Critics of President Obama will use this incident to claim that Obama is not really about change, and is captive of the same politicians and lobbyists who have always run Washington. More serious is the criticism of Obama on similar charges, which has already begun, from people and places that have been sympathetic to the President. Obama himself has taken responsibility for the Daschle debacle, which in of itself represents a pleasant break from previous administrations. However, more thoughtful observers, including supporters of the president, can use the Daschle affair as an opportunity to explore some of the human side of trying to bring change to Washington.

The notion of the outsider itself is a strange one in presidential politics. It is usually bestowed on politicians who, by any normal measure are consummate insiders, but who have somehow lived in Washington for less than a decade. Ronald Reagan, after serving eight years as governor of California, being a major media figure for several decades and a prominent leader of his party for well over a decade, was viewed as an outsider when he ran for president, not for the first time either, in 1980. Similarly, when he began his campaign Barack Obama had been a national figure for a few years, albeit fewer than most presidential candidates, with a network of relationships due to his education and political service, at the highest levels of his country and his party, but was been viewed as something of an outsider. Having said that, Obama certainly was not a typical presidential candidate. He seemed grounded in reality with a sense of the issues facing real Americans that many of the other candidates obviously did not have. In reality, of course, all major presidential candidates are, almost axiomatically, insiders.

Nonetheless, most presidents promise to change Washington and govern it differently. The difficulty of crafting such a government is two-fold. First, it is impractical. The mechanics of passing laws, effective governance, and getting things done in Washington is difficult and those who have been able to do it successfully over the years can be an important asset to any administration. The second point is less obvious, but more central. Many people with long experience working in government, even at high levels, are decent, smart, hard-working and able people. Precisely the kind of people a president would want in an administration. In my view

Tom Daschle, along with other people in Obama's government such as Hillary Clinton, Eric Holder and numerous others fit that description. Moreover, Obama is not alone in being opposed to the Washington insider culture but having respect, and probably broadly warm feelings, for a number of insiders.

Many ordinary Americans have mixed feeling about our leaders as well. While we complain and criticize the culture of Washington, we all can think media figures, elected representatives and other insiders who we like and respect. For years, political scientists have observed a similar phenomenon, that Americans hate congress, but like their congressmember. Individual insiders, therefore, are not the problem. Rather it is the insider approach and even mentality that creates resentment from the rest of America. Daschle may well have honestly forgotten to pay taxes on the limousine because he works in a world where powerful people exchange favors all the time and where most people have a car to take them where they want to go. This is not the world in which most of you, or I, live, but over the time it became the only world in which Daschle, a member in good standing of the Washington insider class, lived.

While failing to pay taxes is a serious issue, the core problem are not the individual mistakes, but that the insider culture and mentality that facilitates those mistakes also contributes to a style of governance that frequently does not look much beyond the beltway. The dangers of this insider culture go beyond unpaid taxes and botched nominations but can lead to larger problems of groupthink and closed policy loops. Already, the Obama administration has sought to combat the miasma of the insider Washington culture in their administration by continuing to mobilize, and seek input from activists and other supporters around the country. Balancing the need to have experienced hands such as Eric Holder, Rahm Emmanuel, Hillary Clinton, and Joe Biden while avoiding having his administration dominated by insider culture, will only happen with constant vision and leadership from the top. Getting this balance right may very well determine the success or failure of Obama's presidency.