

Interview

The Future of the U.S.



The Hon. Tom Daschle

EDITORS' NOTE Tom Daschle is a former U.S. Senator from South Dakota and former U.S. Senate Majority Leader, as well as a member of the Democratic Party. He earned a B.A. in political science from South Dakota State University in 1969 and served in the United States Air Force as an intelligence officer with the Strategic Air Command. He was elected to the United States House of Representatives in 1978 and served four terms, and in 1986, he was elected to the Senate, becoming Minority Leader in 1994. Following his defeat in 2004, he took a position as a policy advisor with the law firm, Alston + Bird and also became a senior fellow at the Center for American Progress. Daschle is the author of Like No Other Time: The 107th Congress and the Two Years That Changed America Forever.; Critical: What We Can Do About the Health-Care Crisis; and his latest book, GETTING IT DONE: How Obama and Congress Finally Broke the Stalemate to Make Way for Health Care Reform. He is currently a Senior Policy Advisor to the global law firm DLA Piper.

With so many issues the U.S. is facing, is the conversation about fiscal responsibility the right one? How is the U.S. going to tackle this critical issue?

I see indications of increased will, but I still see a great deal of ideological screening that goes into this discussion, which is unfortunate. I hear my Republican friends say that revenue has to be off the table – it's a "non-starter." There are some Democrats who don't want to look at entitlement programs seriously. As long as those screens exist, despite the fact that there is an increase in evidence of real will, we're still not where we need to be to accomplish what we must.

Is the U.S. in danger of losing its position as the global leader and is that leadership moving to other countries?

We are already beginning to see that

An Interview with The Honorable Tom Daschle, Senior Policy Advisor, DLA Piper

happening. We see it in manufacturing, in economic terms on many different levels, and especially in the developing world where China is becoming much more prominent. So there is a serious threat to our international perception and the reality that our leadership position in the world is eroding as a result of this intransigence.

Are you optimistic that the right issues were addressed in the health care reform bill and that true reform will be created?

We put the initial foundation in place for accomplishment in three areas having to do with health: insurance reform, meaningful payment reform, and improved quality-through-delivery reform – those are promising.

If this were a football field, we'd be on the 30-yard-line with 70 yards to go to get to the goal line. So we have a long way to go, but we're on the field, and the players and strategy are there if we choose to embrace it.

What needs to be done to truly reform the K through 12 educational system in the U.S.?

It should actually begin before the K through 12 experience. I would go all the way back to the pregnancy experience and the challenges we face in delivering good health for women and children.

We have societal issues, pressures, and challenges that dramatically complicate our challenge in education. Until we begin to address the extraordinary obstacles and challenges that exist today for pre-K children, we're never going to succeed.

Part of it is that we also don't reward teachers to the extent that we should and we are still stuck in 19th and 20th century mindsets with regard to education. Technology and the rapid change in the way children see the world have to be acknowledged and incorporated if we're going to succeed in education going forward.

Most believe that true economic recovery is going to come from private sector growth, but entrepreneurs are concerned about the regulatory environment. Is there merit to that concern?

There is merit to the concern over burdensome regulatory environments. I also think there is ample merit to the concern that many have with regard to lax regulation. Many problems have become evident in recent years, especially in the financial world, as a result of lax regulation and, in many respects, questionable national policy.

So the trick has always been to find the balance between regulatory and policy decision-making on one hand and the need to spur innovation and entrepreneurship on the other. Sometimes we get that balance right; oftentimes, we don't. However, it's a journey, not a destination, and that journey will continue to be part of our economic environment in perpetuity.

Some suggest financial reform didn't address much of what went on with Wall Street. Did it address the systemic problems?

Did we accomplish all we needed to? Hardly. But much like health care, we put new mechanisms in place that created the foundation.

Whether or not we're successful as we go forward depends on the enforcement and implementation of this new legislative framework, as well as the constant oversight and evaluation of its effects.

We will never have completed our job here, in part because the world continues to change, and in part because we know that while you strive for perfection, you always fall far short in the legislative and policy process.

You were known as someone who could reach across the aisle and bring people together. How challenging is that?

There is more effort and progress beneath the surface than most people realize.

Unfortunately, I don't think that the political climate is such that we see enough encouragement of it. The more we can encourage it and the more we can create occasions to make it an even more conducive experience to further development of common ground, the better off this country will be.

It's always going to be healthy to have a good, vigorous political debate and process, but it's also just as healthy and important to allow that process to ultimately bring about consensus and common ground, and that has been far too limited in reality in recent years.

How optimistic are you that the U.S. will retain its leadership position?

We have three qualities in great reserve: we're resilient; we're probably the most innovative of any society today, and I'm confident that innovative spirit will continue in so many ways as this country's future plays itself out. And throughout history, we have shown in the private and public sectors that we've had remarkable leadership at the times when we've needed it the most. I think we're going to continue to be capable of demonstrating that leadership and that is what makes me optimistic. ●