

December 12, 2001

REGULAR MEDIA AVAILABILITY WITH SENATE MAJORITY LEADER
THOMAS DASCHLE (D-SD)

LOCATION: S-211, THE CAPITOL, WASHINGTON, D.C.

[EXCERPTS OF ALL ABM TREATY DISCUSSION]

SEN. DASCHLE: Sorry to keep everybody waiting. Well, the president had a breakfast again this morning with the four leaders and we talked about a number of things, the war in Afghanistan and our efforts to apprehend bin Laden. I think that you can say with some authority that our efforts are proving to be successful in many different ways, and I'm very pleased with what we've been able to do so far. He did indicate that we intend to pull out of the ABM Treaty. This was a confirmation, of course, of stories that were in the papers this morning. And I must say I was surprised that the articles appeared prior to the time members of Congress had been briefed. It does appear that the Russians knew about it prior to the time any of the leaders were told about it, or the members of Congress in general. And that isn't as it should be. I'm very concerned about the implications of pulling out of the ABM Treaty, in part because I think it undermines the fragile coalition that we have with our allies. It causes real concern, I think, as we look at the implications for future commitments in our defense strategy and what it may mean in many other contexts. I think that it's going to complicate as well our relations with Russia, with China, and I think we've got to be very concerned about that. I'm -- at this point, I'm hopeful that at some point the Congress can have a good debate about whether this is in our long-term best interest. And while it may not occur this year, I think you could be assured that there will be a very vigorous debate about whether or not this makes sense not only for our country but for our international relationships and the universe of nations. This is something that ought to have been more carefully deliberated, I think, between both the legislative and the executive branch before a commitment was made, but it appears that that commitment has been made, and we're going to have to work through all of the what I consider to be negative ramifications.

Q Senator Daschle, on the ABM treaty, is it your understanding that the president has to formally notify the Senate, can the Senate decline this order, this decision, thereby keeping the U.S. in the treaty?

SEN. DASCHLE: It's my understanding that the president has the unilateral authority to make this decision. But we are researching just what specific legal options the Congress has. And we'll have more to say about that later.

Q Also, senator, can you tell us, is there something that you can do to express your displeasure with the White House for putting this in the paper before letting you know?

SEN. DASCHLE: Well, I think that we are considering a number of different options in that regard as well. I think that it is unfortunate that the Russians knew before the leaders did. It's unfortunate that a matter of this import would not have been vetted more carefully, more completely, and with greater care for U.S. foreign policy than this was. But that is the president's choice, and we have to accept it for now.

Q What are your options?

Q With regard to the Senate, will this hurt the last couple weeks of any negotiating of the legislation or appropriations bills? When you say you're looking at options, is that what you're looking at?

SEN. DASCHLE: No, I think we have to compartmentalize these issues, and I'm prepared to do that. That's, obviously, a very important matter for a lot of us. But I don't think it ought to spill over and affect adversely other questions, other issues. We've got to get this work done, and we shouldn't hold one hostage to the other.

Q And on ABM, did Bush expand on his rationale for pulling out? And did he talk about letting the -- (off mike) -- Russians during the six-month withdrawal period on --

SEN. DASCHLE: He didn't elaborate, no. I don't think --

Q Senator, would you -- I'm not sure I understand. But what are your options, do you think, right now, on the ABM situation?

SEN. DASCHLE: Well, at this point we're very limited in what options we have legislatively, Bob. I don't see that there are many options, at least for the next few months. Ultimately, of course, funding for whatever it is we're doing comes into play, and we'll have to weigh whatever powers of the purse we have as leverage as we consider what options we might have down the road.

Q Senator, without getting into what the president may or may not have told you, were you given any explanations as to why you all were not informed about the ABM decision?

SEN. DASCHLE: We were not.

Q No, I mean any explanation as to why?

SEN. DASCHLE: No, we were not.

Q Because I gather also, and I don't know about your staff, but others were

trying to find out yesterday but got stonewalled by the White House as to whether there was a decision to do it. Did that happen to you?

SEN. DASCHLE: Well, the president indicated that he felt the information that you read -- that we read in the papers this morning had been leaked by the Russians. And if it had been leaked by the Russians, I have to assume that it was told to the Russians prior to the time it was told to the leaders. And so, you know, that speaks for itself.

Q (Inaudible) -- you've said several times that you were upset that the leaders were told after Russia. Is your assumption that the Russians knew based simply on the fact the president said he thought the -- (off mike) -- was leaked by the Russians, or you knew?

SEN. DASCHLE: No, that's all I know.

Q So you don't really know that the Russians had been told before you? You only know that the president suggested -- did he confirm this morning, in the process of explaining how -- (inaudible)?

SEN. DASCHLE: Well, again, I'm not -- the one rule we have about these breakfasts is that we don't get into details about what was discussed, because they are candid, and I'm not going to violate that understanding. I'll simply comment about what was in the papers. And I can acknowledge that no one called my office, no one talked to me or my staff about the administration's desire to pull out of the ABM treaty. And yet it was in the papers, it was reported, and I have to assume that that decision has been made. Now, whether it was leaked by the Russians or leaked to the press by the administration, it was leaked in some way prior to the time any leadership was informed.

Q You said the president said that it was leaked by the Russians. You have said that, right?

SEN. DASCHLE: I did acknowledge that that was what the president said.

Q When the president was talking about how the Russians leaked this, did he suggest how the Russians got the information? He wasn't suggesting there was some sort of intelligence --

SEN. DASCHLE: No.

Q Somebody just told them?

SEN. DASCHLE: Correct.