

Top Democrats Politick Through Rural Mexico

The New York Times

November 19, 2001 Monday, Late Edition - Final

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Section: Section A; Column 1; Foreign Desk; Pg. 12

Length: 790 words

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Dateline: PUEBLA, Mexico, Nov. 18

Body

Thousands of miles away from their own constituents, the two top Democrats from the United States took a morning ride today through a rural stretch of central Mexico that had all the trappings of a campaign.

Senator Tom Daschle, the majority leader from South Dakota, and Representative Richard A. Gephardt, the minority leader from Missouri, visited villages in Puebla State that are connected to the United States by the blood and money of immigrants. They stopped at an elementary school where teachers complained about soaring dropout rates as children move with their families to the United States. They toured a women's cooperative that produces canned kumquats and peach wine, led mostly by wives left behind by their husbands. They gushed over the work of local artisans and tasted homemade candies.

Although they never asked for votes here, Mr. Daschle and Mr. Gephardt made a series of stunning promises.

"We want to ensure that those people who have come from Puebla to the Northeast and want to stay in the United States as citizens can do so," Mr. Daschle said, to loud applause from the crowd.

Mr. Gephardt offered economic assistance to help develop more jobs for Mexicans who resist the lure of the United States and stay in their homeland.

"The United States and Mexico are best friends," he said, "and we always will be."

The visit to Puebla by Mr. Daschle and Mr. Gephardt came at the end of an official visit, which the legislators said was intended to re-energize talks between the United States and Mexico on immigration reform. Talks between high-level members of the Mexican government and the Bush administration are scheduled to begin again on Tuesday for the first time since the Sept. 11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.

President Vicente Fox of Mexico, advocating the freer flow of goods and people across the 2,000-mile border, had pushed the United States to adopt a series of immigration changes by the end of this year, including the legalization of about three million undocumented Mexicans working in the United States and the expansion of guest-worker programs. President Bush had promised to work toward that goal. But then the terrorist assaults on New York and Washington threw the talks into uncertainty.

Mr. Bush has said that he remains committed to negotiations with Mexico and Congress on changing immigration rules. However, Republicans are divided over the principal initiatives, especially programs that would legalize undocumented immigrants.

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Mr. Daschle and Mr. Gephardt's appearance in Mexico over the weekend seemed intended to demonstrate the Democrats' support for Mexico's proposals. Some political analysts pointed out that the visit was part of an effort by the Democrats to build support among the growing population of Latino voters in the United States.

"We wanted to make as strong a statement as we could that our mutual agenda has not been lost in the aftermath of the disaster of Sept. 11," Mr. Daschle said. "Our agenda regarding our mutual relationship is every bit as important, and our commitment every bit as strong."

Mr. Gephardt and Mr. Daschle said they came to Puebla, which has a population of about six million, to get a first-hand lesson on immigration. Even though it is a state with a large number of foreign-owned assembly plants, close to one million people from Puebla, called Poblanos, have abandoned Mexico since the 1970's and settled in a stretch from New York to Virginia. About 300,000 Poblanos live in the New York metropolitan area. The immigrants, who typically earn more in an hour than workers in Mexico earn in a day, send an estimated \$800 million a year back to the state.

"We are not trying to inadvertently encourage more people to migrate by talking about a regularization," Mr. Daschle said. "That is why we are also talking about ways to create jobs here. People want to stay home. They want to stay united with their families."

Although they were touring farming villages in Puebla, there were moments when the legislators could not have felt closer to home among families whose struggles after the terrorist assaults echo the turmoil and defiance felt north of the border.

The politicians were followed by crowds waving star-spangled banners. Men wearing Yankees caps and jerseys played baseball in dirt lots under brilliant skies. Mr. Daschle and Mr. Gephardt fielded questions about unemployment in the United States.

At the end of their visit, they met with four families whose relatives were killed in the attacks on the World Trade Center. Mr. Daschle said he was unable to answer one mother who asked him whether "any piece of her son would ever be recovered."

Listening in, Mr. Gephardt said, "I was moved to tears."

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Graphic

Photo: Representative Richard A. Gephardt, left, Linda Daschle and Senator Tom Daschle, with schoolchildren in Puebla State yesterday. (Henry Romero/Reuters) Map of Mexico highlighting Puebla: Puebla State has a population of about six million people.

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Publication-Type: Newspaper

Subject: POLITICAL PARTIES (90%); US DEMOCRATIC PARTY (90%); IMMIGRATION (89%); ILLEGAL

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IMMIGRANTS (89%); TALKS & MEETINGS (89%); IMMIGRATION REGULATION & POLICY (89%); LEGISLATIVE BODIES (89%); IMMIGRATION LAW (89%); US PRESIDENTS (89%); US REPUBLICAN PARTY (78%); US FEDERAL GOVERNMENT (78%); VOTERS & VOTING (78%); POLITICS (78%); HISPANIC AMERICANS (76%); MINORITY GROUPS (76%); FOREIGN LABOR (76%); PRIMARY SCHOOLS (75%); CHILDREN (75%); FAMILY (75%); SCHOOL DROP OUTS (75%); EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTION EMPLOYEES (75%); SCHOOL PERFORMANCE (75%); PRIMARY & SECONDARY SCHOOL TEACHERS (70%); SEPTEMBER 11 ATTACK (62%)

Industry: PRIMARY SCHOOLS (75%)

Person: TOM DASCHLE (79%); VICENTE FOX QUESADA (57%); GEORGE W BUSH (57%); THOMPSON, GINGER; DASCHLE, TOM (SEN); GEPHARDT, RICHARD A (REP)

Geographic: NEW YORK, USA (79%); MEXICO (99%); UNITED STATES (95%); NORTH AMERICA (92%); MEXICO; PUEBLA (MEX)

Load-Date: November 19, 2001