

Reid among group jockeying for top Senate job

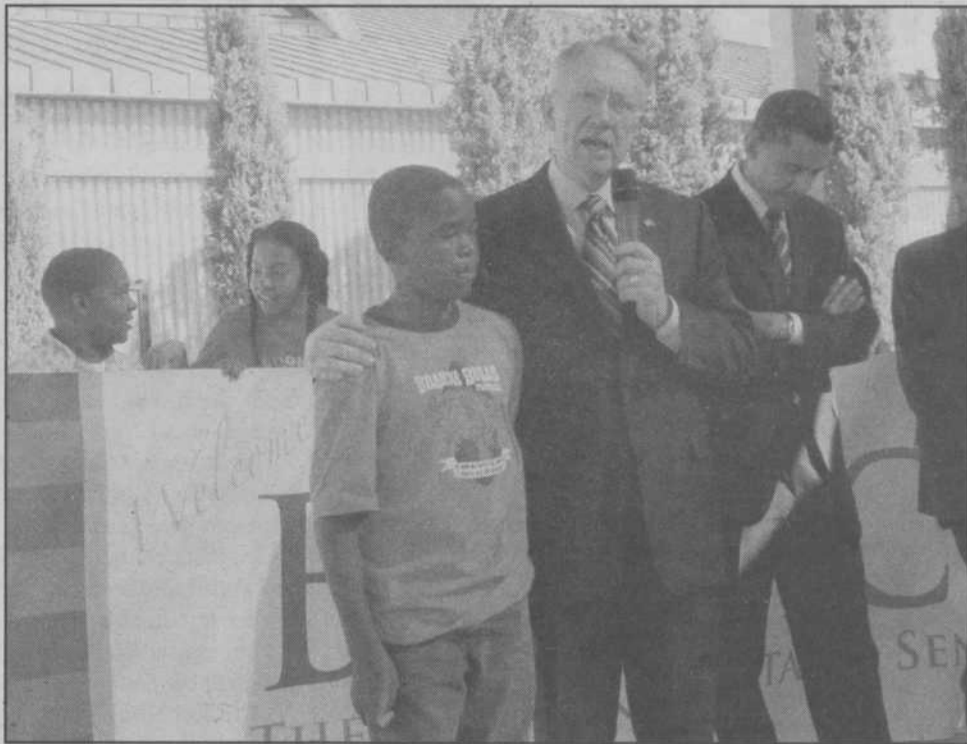
WASHINGTON (AP) - Democrat or Republican, whether for this fall or 2006, it's never too early to jockey for position in the Senate, especially if party leadership might be the prize.

Take Sen. Harry Reid of Nevada, the Democratic whip, and Kentucky Sen. Mitch McConnell, his GOP counterpart. Both are in commanding positions to become their party's next leader, whenever there's a vacancy.

Among Democrats, the topic of new leadership is rarely discussed openly, since it presumes that the incumbent minority leader, South Dakota Sen. Tom Daschle, will lose his race for re-election Nov. 2.

Still, a Daschle defeat at the polls would quickly make Reid, 64, and coasting to a fourth Senate term this fall in Nevada, the front-runner to succeed him. Sen. Christopher Dodd of Connecticut looms as his only potential rival at present, according to several party sources who spoke on condition of anonymity.

"We believe Sen. Daschle is going to be re-elected and are doing everything we can



Nevada Democratic Sen. Harry Reid is positioning himself to be the leader of the Senate.

to help him out," Susan McCue, Reid's chief of staff, said in a recent interview. "Not only win, but become leader of the Democratic majority," she added for emphasis. Democrats must gain two seats to be assured of a 51-seat majority.

"I'm counting on Tom winning," Dodd, 60, concurred in a brief interview.

"Any speculation beyond that I think is really misplaced," he said, adding that he also is concentrating on his own re-election campaign in Connecticut. Daschle's office declined comment.

In fact, Reid and Dodd both signaled interest in succeeding the South Dakotan nearly two years ago.

The two men began a

quick, competing round of calls to fellow Democrats when it appeared Daschle might run for president. Several party sources, speaking on condition of anonymity, said Reid at the time appeared to have enough commitments to guarantee victory.

Since then, Reid, who worked as a Capitol Hill policeman in the early 1960s

while attending law school, has used his position as second-ranking party leader to cement ties with fellow Democratic senators.

Both he and Dodd have worked to help Democrats regain the majority they lost in 2002, Reid particularly so.

Besides donations to several Democratic candidates — Daschle among them — Reid's political action committee made a \$1 million contribution to the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee. He also has hosted fund-raisers in Las Vegas for several Democratic candidates.

Dodd's PAC has given \$100,000 to the DSCC, according to one official who spoke on condition of anonymity because the contribution was made recently and has not yet shown up on federal reporting documents.

While Democrats are jockeying quietly to fill a vacancy that may not occur, Republicans seem to have all but counted the votes for a contest that is more than two years distant. That's when Majority Leader Bill Frist of Tennessee has said he intends to retire from the Senate.

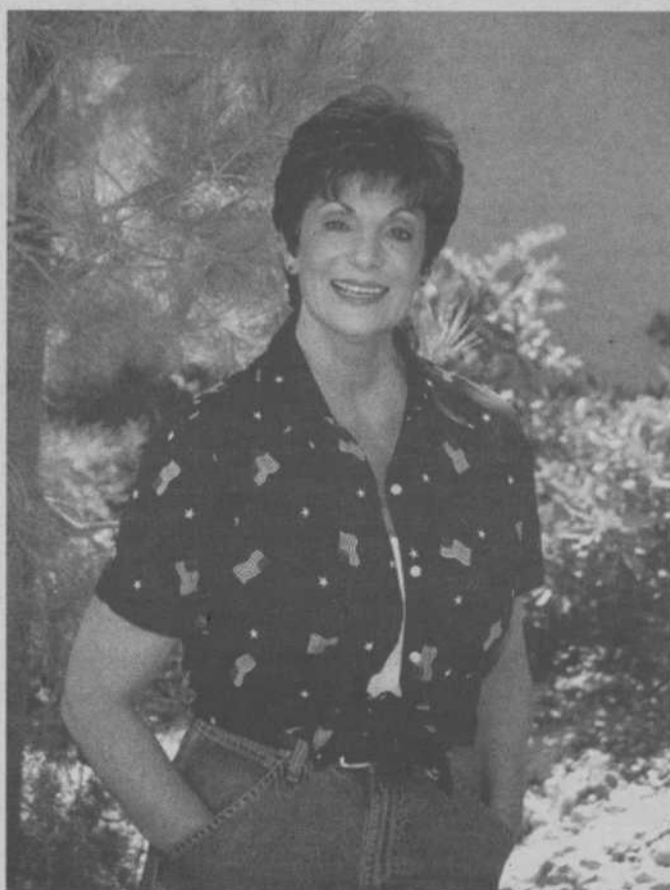
As is the case among Democrats, the second-in-command, McConnell, 62, serving his fourth term, appears to have the votes to ascend.

Sen. Rick Santorum of Pennsylvania, who ranks third in the leadership, found out as much recently when he sounded out fellow GOP senators about supporting a challenge to McConnell. Santorum, 46, quickly concluded McConnell had the votes he needed, and said he would run for whip instead.

Neither McConnell nor Santorum has been coy about leadership ambitions.

McConnell, who led the opposition to the campaign finance law changes enacted two years ago, served two terms as chairman of the Republicans' senatorial campaign committee before moving up the leadership ladder.

Party sources, speaking on condition of anonymity, said that in the moment of party tumult two years ago that toppled Sen. Trent Lott of Mississippi, Santorum was still considering becoming a candidate to replace Lott when McConnell had thrown his support to Frist.



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