

September 2008

TO: Interested Parties
FROM: Matt Bennett, Jeremy Rosner (Greenberg, Quinlan, Rosner), and Sean Barney
RE: Winning on National Security: Results of New Public Opinion Research

Summary

In 2008, Democrats have an opportunity to achieve a major and lasting shift in public attitudes about the two parties on national security for the first time in a generation. By doing so, Democrats could ease long-standing concerns about their party on national security, improve their political standing, and cut into one of the last issue areas in which Republicans hold a strong advantage. However, this outcome is far from certain, and Democrats must not be complacent based on the results in 2006, when public dissatisfaction with Iraq overwhelmed long-standing perceptions of Democratic weakness.

As Third Way's extensive new public opinion research¹ shows, voter doubts about the Democrats are returning. If Democrats fall into their old habits—and if they fail to cement the new doubts about Republicans—the parties will return to the pre-2006 status quo, with Republicans dominant on security issues and on the leadership attributes these issues connote. This memo outlines the findings of our research and consultation with an advisory panel of national security and political experts,² and offers guidance for Democrats in framing national security:

The national security credibility gap is returning. Old doubts about Democrats on security, after diminishing during 2006-2007, have begun to re-emerge: concerns that Democrats follow the polls rather than principle; that Democrats are indecisive and are afraid to use force; and that Democrats don't support the military. Because these weaknesses are longstanding and deeply ingrained, and because Republican weaknesses are newer and do not yet have a label associated with them, Republicans continue to win on many security issues.

Democrats can win on national security. Yet our research also indicates newly emerging and serious public doubts about Republicans on national security, mostly as a result of President Bush's mismanagement of Iraq. To connect these concerns into a cohesive and compelling story, Democrats should define and label the Republican approach to security as a ***reckless and out of touch*** continuation of Bush policies, pointing not only to the invasion of Iraq, but to their failures in Afghanistan and the battle with al Qaeda, the overstretched military, and the failure to deal with those aspects of world affairs that most touch Americans' daily lives and wallets, such as our dependence on foreign oil. By contrast, Democrats should define their own approach as ***tough and smart***, noting their plan to redeploy our

forces responsibly from Iraq to Afghanistan, their determination to take the fight to our enemies like al Qaeda, and their plans to restore our military strength and reduce our dependence on foreign oil. If Democrats make that case and avoid old traps, they can win the national security debate and move America's security policies in a more strategic direction.

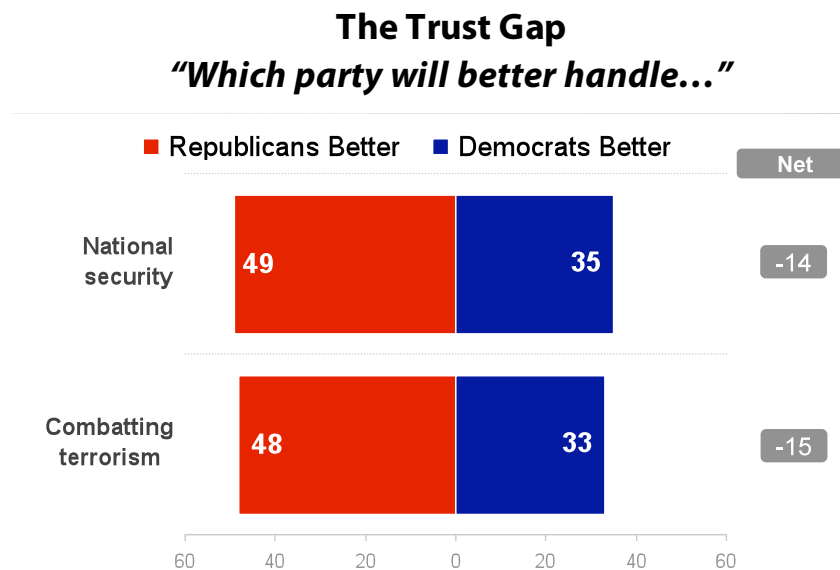
Of course, the first imperative in the national security debate is offering sound policy. Fortunately, many Democrats are advocating a robust, thoughtful national security agenda. But unless Democrats are able to articulate that agenda in a tough and compelling way and contrast it effectively with the Republican record, Democrats may not gain the public trust they need in order to advance their national security agenda. This memo seeks to provide that framework.

I. The National Security Credibility Gap Persists

Despite Bush's weakness, voters still distrust Democrats in key areas

Voters still view the Iraq war as a mistake and, partly as a result, President Bush is strikingly unpopular. Yet perhaps the most sobering finding is that these doubts about Bush and the Republicans have not fully altered the landscape on national security that has persisted for over three decades. Democrats have failed to translate voter unease about Bush into a lasting indictment of Republican leadership on national security or to rebuild their own reputation on security in this post-Cold War era.

Indeed, in a year that could not be more favorable to Democrats, the public still decisively favors Republicans to keep the country safe. The President's job approval rating is still just 34% among likely voters, and voters still say they oppose the war by 29 points.³ But on national security, it's a different story:

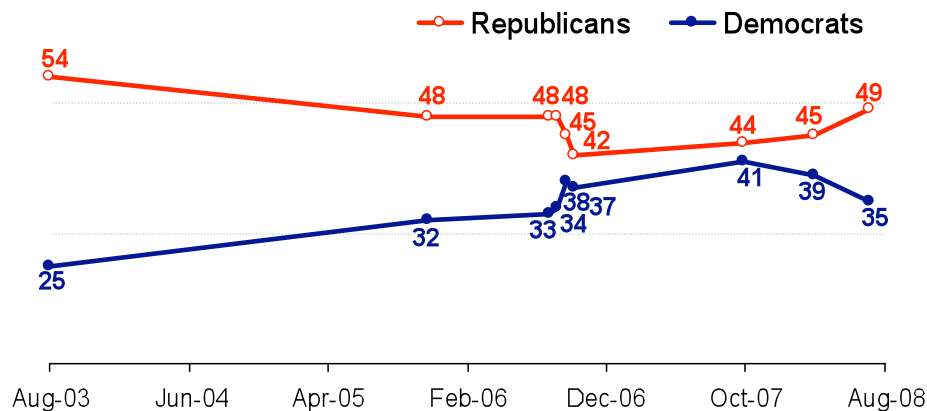


This finding is particularly startling because from 2006-2007, Democrats were approaching parity with Republicans on national security for the first time in a

generation. In 2005–2006, after Hurricane Katrina and mounting problems in Iraq, public faith in Bush and his administration plummeted, and the trust gap on national security between the political parties began to close. By early 2008, public trust in the two parties on national security was about equal, and Democrats had moved into the lead in terms of who voters trust on “Iraq” and “foreign policy.”

As the chart below shows, however, the gap is re-emerging. Among Independents, the trust-deficit on “national security” is back to its pre-Iraq high (30 points); among all voters it is 14 points. All this sends a warning to Democrats: *when it comes to national security, you cannot assume 2008 will be like 2006; you will need to contest national security more vigorously and effectively.*

Party Trusted More on National Security: 2003-2008



Some of this re-emerging gap on national security is about the Democratic standard-bearer, Sen. Barack Obama. Voters know Sen. John McCain is a military man, but are still learning about how Obama’s background has prepared him to be Commander-in-Chief.

But Democrats down the ballot would be seriously mistaken to believe that the security gap’s return is principally about Obama; it is not. Rather, it is mostly fueled by old ideas about the party, generated long before Obama came onto the scene. Consequently, Democrats still must demonstrate to voters that they are prepared and determined to defend America’s security.

Three perceptions driving doubt about Democrats

Our research finds three striking and prominent drivers behind the current security credibility gap—each a perception about Democrats that leads to public doubt:

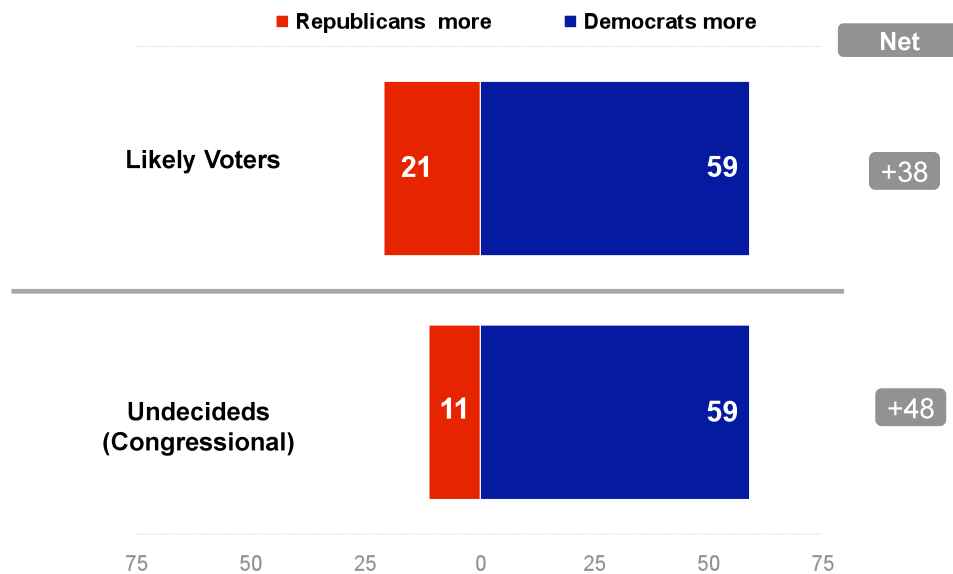
- Voters see Democrats as indecisive in the face of threats and afraid to use force to protect the nation;
- They see Democrats as insufficiently supportive of the military; and
- They see Democrats as following public opinion, rather than adhering to a consistent, principled view of the country’s best interests.

Perception 1: Democrats are indecisive and afraid to use force.

For decades, page one of the Republican playbook has read: “call your Democratic opponent weak on defense, no matter what.” This charge has been leveled up and down the ballot, with consistency and potency in nearly every election since Ronald Reagan used it against Jimmy Carter in 1980.

Our research finds that the impact of this concerted effort lingers even today, in an election year in which Democrats have the wind at their back, with real public anger over Republican mishandling of Iraq. When asked which party is “too hesitant to use force,” voters still point to Democrats by huge margins.

Which party do you associate more with the term “Too hesitant to use force”?



Our qualitative testing yields the same result. When asked to choose one phrase that most describes Democrats, the one most focus group participants pick is “afraid to use force.” Participants often return to the theme of the Democrats’ refusal to “draw a line in the sand” with our adversaries. And in the poll, likely voters associate the term “not decisive enough in a crisis” more with the Democrats by 21 points; the figure is 26 points among undecideds in a congressional ballot.

In the same way, voters see Republicans as much “tougher” than Democrats; likely voters associate the term “tough” with Republicans by 35 points; Independents do so by 43 points.

“Democrats don’t want to win. They don’t want to kick ass.”

- Democratic Man, Virginia Beach

“[[I]f there was a bully in the play yard that’s going to throw dirt in my face, I think the Democrats might let him go just to get along but the Republicans wouldn’t and they’ll stand up for this country a little bit better than Democrats will.”

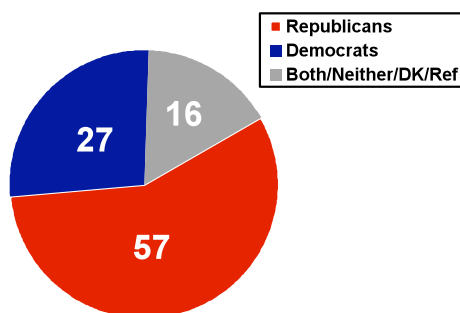
- Independent Woman, Virginia Beach

Perception 2: Democrats don’t support the military.

There are some new perceptions of the two parties regarding the military. Few voters still condemn Democrats for denigrating the US military during the Vietnam War (although a few do); far more say that both parties are mostly respecting the troops today. Moreover, many voters criticize the Republicans for putting enormous strain on the military, for high-profile scandals involving shabby treatment of wounded warriors, and for resisting the new GI Bill and other benefits for veterans.

But despite all of this, a huge majority of Americans still see the Democrats as less supportive of the military.

Do you think the Democrats or the Republicans would do a better job of ensuring a strong military?



Likely voters chose Republicans on “ensuring a strong military” by 34 points; Independents by 47 points; white men by 54 points.

When we test a Republican attack about Democrats not standing up for the troops, 57% of undecided voters in a congressional ballot say it raises “very serious” or “serious” doubts about Democrats, as do a majority of Independents.

Our qualitative testing suggests that there are two main ideas that voters have about Democrats that lead to this conclusion. The first is that Democrats aim to cut defense budgets and downsize the military. The second idea involves Democratic calls for withdrawal from Iraq, which many in the focus groups see as a matter of disrespecting or failing to support the troops. One Independent woman in Virginia

Beach says: “You've got the Democrats against the war, so in a sense that's saying they're against the troops ... [I]t's like you're downplaying what they're over there for.”

Perception 3: Democrats follow the polls, not principles.

Participants in Third Way's national security focus groups also strongly criticize Democrats for changing their positions on matters of national security based on public opinion. Participants say that Democrats “lack conviction” and care more about trying to “score points for the election” than doing what's right for the country.

“You are on a teeter totter [with the Democrats]. Okay, today the wind is blowing this way so I'm going to be able to go here. Tomorrow, the wind will change direction and I'll go over here.”

- Independent Man, Columbus

Our poll starkly bears out this perception. When asked to choose why they think Democrats are weak on security, the number one reason—picked by 33% of all respondents—is that Democrats “change positions depending on public opinion.” Moreover, when we ask respondents to compare the two parties, likely voters choose Democrats over Republicans as the party “too focused on public opinion” by a 27-point margin. Even Democratic base voters agree: liberal Democrats point to their own party as the one “too focused on public opinion” by an 18-point margin, and moderate/conservative Democrats say this by 25 points.

This attitude undermines the public's confidence in Democrats regarding Iraq. Focus group participants see the Democrats' approach as poll-driven – changing from support to opposition in response to falling public support – which leads them to worry that Democrats lack a “realistic plan.” “They don't offer something laid out where you can look to see how it is they want this change to take place,” observed an Independent woman in Virginia Beach. “[I]f they pull the troops out then what? What happens next?”

II. Democrats Can Win on Security

The challenge for progressives and Democrats now is not simply to close the credibility gap on national security, but also to change their whole mind-set about security. For too long, many Democrats have tried to sidestep these issues, seeking to neutralize them and then shift the debate to the seemingly friendlier ground of domestic policy. But while the new research shows doubts about Democrats, it also shows an opportunity to raise confidence about Democrats while crystallizing new worries about Republicans. If Democrats take these issues head-on, they can gain ground politically, while steering the country's security debate in a better direction.

In order to do this, Democrats must do two things: define their opponents' approach as **"reckless and out of touch"** and define their own approach to national security as **"tough and smart."**

Defining the Republican approach as "reckless and out of touch"

For the first time in more than a generation, the broad public has begun to feel serious doubts about the Republican approach to national security. Driven mainly by the Bush administration's mismanagement of the war in Iraq, these doubts reached a high point around 2006 and remain potent today. They have not, however, been crystallized into a clear critique. Our research suggests a big part of the opportunity for progressives now – if they hope to both win elections and improve the country's policies abroad – is to develop an enduring narrative about the risks associated with Republican leadership on national security.

This effort would be the counterpoint to the decades-long campaign by Republicans to create the impression that Democrats are weak on national security. When Republicans began making this case, they pointed to Democratic actions on defense and foreign policy, but they also made a broader indictment about Democratic weakness that drew on the party's reaction to the riots on campuses and in inner cities (vs. Nixon's "law and order" promise) and the alleged coddling of welfare cheats and criminals. And they did not confine their indictment to a particular moment or leader—Republicans did not argue simply that Jimmy Carter was a weak *president*; they argued that Democrats were weak *as a party*.

The strategic imperative for the Democrats is to build a case about Republicans that begins with public doubts about Bush and Iraq but goes to more fundamental concerns about Republicans and their approach to governing. Third Way's research suggests that there are two qualities that stand out in the minds of voters, both of which can be expanded to a broader case against the Republicans' conservative philosophies of governance: that they have been "reckless and out of touch."

Reckless: This is a consistent theme when focus group participants talk, at the beginning of the sessions, for their unprompted impressions of the two parties. "Cowboys, cavalier, lack of patience," says one. "Attack first, think later," echoes another. This characterization also resonates with participants in the poll, who identify Republicans as the party that is "reckless" when it comes to national security by 16 points. Moderates pick Republicans as "reckless" by 27 points.

Moreover, of eight different critiques of Republicans in the poll, the two that raise the most serious doubts about Republicans on national security characterize them as "reckless."

"Democrats say: Republicans talk tough but are reckless. They invaded Iraq without a real plan, dangerously overstretched our military, and made us even more dependent on oil from hostile regimes. Now they plan on attacking Iran with no real plan there."

Raises very serious or serious doubts about the Republicans: 58%

“Democrats say: John McCain is committed to continuing the same reckless Bush policies in Iraq that cost us thousands of lives and over a trillion dollars. He even says he would be willing to keep our troops in Iraq for ‘another hundred years.’”

Raises very serious or serious doubts: 56%

Out of touch: The other theme that emerges consistently in the unprompted impressions of focus group participants is that Republicans are “out of touch.” This theme is powerful, in part, because it draws a connection between Republican failings at home and abroad. Voters see the Bush administration as out of touch in misreading the early intelligence on WMD in Iraq and then failing to see facts on the ground as the reconstruction process went awry. But they also see Republicans as out of touch in their indifference to the economic pain Americans are feeling at home—including pain caused by Republican foreign policies, such as on energy.

Indeed, the idea of Republicans as “out of touch” on national security taps into a powerful set of feelings at the intersection of domestic and foreign policies. Voters consistently feel that Republicans are out-of-touch with working Americans; as an Independent woman in the Virginia Beach focus group says: “I don’t think [Republicans] listen to what the common Joe is saying. I think the key example to that is when Bush is at a news conference and someone asked him about the \$4 gas and he was surprised.” That resentment against Republicans massively spills over into national security. Voters say Republican national security policies have hurt middle-class America in myriad ways: by failing to address foreign oil dependency; by running up a national debt increasingly held by China and other potentially unfriendly nations; and by failing to care adequately for our military personnel and veterans. By tagging Republicans as “out of touch” on national security, Democrats can tap into a much broader set of resentments.

The poll underscores this logic. Voters pick Republicans as more “out of touch” on national security than Democrats by 15 points. And despite McCain’s general edge over Obama on a range of national security issues, voters view McCain as more “out of touch” than Obama *on national security* by a 5-point margin.

This is why a critique centered on the Republicans as “out of touch” on both Iraq and the economy packs a real punch: 55 percent of all respondents say that it raises “very serious” or “serious” doubts about Republicans. Fully 64% of non-college women say this message raises serious doubts about the GOP.

“Democrats say: On national security, Republicans are out of touch. They didn’t see things going off course in Iraq, and they don’t realize how their foreign policies are taking a toll at home, in terms of gas prices, outsourcing and mounting debts.”

Raises very serious or serious doubts about the Republicans: 55%

Proof Points on Reckless and Out of Touch

To drive home that narrative, Democrats must cite specific evidence of Republicans being reckless and out of touch. Four points that resonate deeply with voters charge that the Republicans:

- Failed to finish the job in Afghanistan and capture bin Laden
- Overstretched the military
- Refused to admit mistakes in Iraq
- Failed to reduce foreign oil dependence

McCain and the Republicans as a Continuation of Bush on National Security

Another element that is crucial to the critique of the Republicans on national security is tying their agenda and their candidates to George W. Bush. While Democratic liabilities on national security reach back decades, Republican liabilities on these issues almost all trace to the current President and his administration. With his unfavorable ratings at historic highs, Democrats need to establish that the national security agendas now offered by Republican candidates—including Sen. John McCain—only represent more of the same.

Even though Sen. McCain has energetically sought to distance himself from President Bush in many ways, most voters still view them as pursuing a common agenda. A 56% majority have serious doubts about the Republicans in response to a statement that asserts Sen. McCain “is committed to continuing the same reckless Bush policies in Iraq.”

Thus, George W. Bush is the *ultimate* proof point that Republicans are “reckless and out-of-touch” on national security policy. Whether running for the presidency or for Congress, Democratic candidates need to tie their opponents to the disastrous national security record of the incumbent president and his administration.

Defining the Democratic approach as “tough and smart”

Democrats must address long-standing questions about their reputation by defining their own approach as “tough and smart.” To make this case, Democrats must avoid some dangerous traps into which many in the party continue to fall that reinforce perceptions of Democratic weakness on national security. They also must offer affirmative assurance that they are willing to go on the offensive to

protect the country, that they value the military as an instrument of national policy, and that they have a tough and smart agenda for keeping the country safe.

Here are the crucial DO’s and DON’T’s for Democrats:

DO NOT invoke public opinion as justification for national security policies: The perception that Democrats change their opinions based on public opinion is the

number one reason that poll respondents see Democrats as weak, and focus group participants lambast Democrats for basing security decisions on politics.

Democrats specifically should never say, for example, that the Bush administration has ignored the message voters sent in 2006 in calling for change in our national security policies. That simply reinforces the sense voters have that the pole star for Democrats is public opinion rather than national interest. When Third Way tests such an attack on the GOP, it tanks. A 58% majority of likely voters and 66% of undecided voters in a congressional ballot say this does not raise serious doubts about Republicans.

DO NOT make national security arguments solely on the basis of “guns versus butter”: At a time of economic distress at home, voters understandably are upset about the financial cost of the Bush administration’s misguided national security efforts. In our poll and others, they respond very strongly to an argument that says Democrats would redirect spending from Iraq to needs at home.

Yet our research suggests that a pure “guns versus butter” argument is fool’s gold for Democrats. While it may appeal to the broad public desire to address domestic needs, the research suggests such an argument may exacerbate deep perceptions of Democratic weakness on national security. The swing voters in our focus groups repeatedly come back to the idea that Democrats are too willing to pit national security against domestic priorities and cite Democratic cuts to defense spending as a key reason they doubt the party’s strength on national security.

Americans simply do not need proof that Democrats will do a better job of tending to domestic priorities; they already feel this. The imperative is rather to reassure swing voters that Democrats will do enough to protect the country’s security, and a guns-versus-butter argument does just the opposite for many of these voters.

Democrats SHOULD tap into the economic dimension of the public’s resentments against the Republicans on national security. But the way to do this is by tagging the GOP’s national security policies as “out of touch,” and by stressing Democratic alternatives that will help average Americans at home, such as investing more in alternative energy sources, so the US can reduce its dependence on foreign oil.

DO show a willingness to go on the offensive against our enemies: The strongest frame for discussing Iraq, out of a half dozen we test in the poll, talks about redeploying US forces out of Iraq and into Afghanistan “so we can track down bin Laden and destroy al Qaeda once and for all.” This result shows how important it is for Democrats to emphasize that they want to take the fight to our enemies. Sen. Obama appears to understand this. When he first announced his opposition to the war in Iraq (at an anti-war rally), he made it clear that he supported the US-led war in Afghanistan. He has underscored his willingness to strike al Qaeda targets in Pakistan if there is actionable intelligence about terrorist targets and Pakistan is unwilling to act. And his acceptance speech in Denver was forceful in showing a willingness to go after Osama bin Laden. Given public doubts about the

willingness of Democrats to ever use force, other Democratic leaders would be wise to follow Obama's example in this regard.

DO have a plan to keep the American military strong: By far the widest gap in the national security debate is the 30-point chasm that separates the parties when it comes to "ensuring a strong military." To address this mistaken public perception, Democrats should offer and aggressively highlight a plan to:

- Return our land forces to a sustainable operational tempo
- Restore Army recruitment and retention by properly rewarding military service
- Grow the Army and Marine Corps (we suggest doing so by 100,000 troops) to reduce current stress and improve future readiness

Restoring military readiness scores well with all voters in our survey: 54% said that a Democratic statement about our readiness and fighting power would make them more confident about Democrats on national security.

DO offer a tough and smart agenda: Democrats have a muscular agenda of their own to protect the country, but often they do not communicate it in a way that brings that agenda to life for the public. In addition to articulating a positive plan for the end-game in Iraq, our research highlights four Democratic agenda items that help convince voters that Democrats are serious about keeping America safe:

- Take the fight to our real enemies: Osama bin Laden and al Qaeda;
- Stop terrorists from getting their hands on nuclear material;
- Rebuild America's military strength; and
- Reduce America's dependence on foreign oil.

Strong Democratic gains from an effective narrative

When we put all these elements together for voters, the impact is impressive, with Democrats winning a head-to-head national security debate by a strong margin—even stronger than their initial lead in the horse-race. In our poll, we read voters a pair of realistic, balanced statements from a Democratic and a Republican candidate for Congress and ask which comes closer to the respondent's own view:

"The Democratic candidate says: We cannot afford to continue the reckless and out of touch national security policies of the Bush years that left us stuck in a civil war in Iraq, with Osama bin Laden still at large, an overextended military, and soaring gas prices. It is time for a national security agenda that is tough and smart. I will support redeploying combat forces from Iraq to Afghanistan to take the fight to the terrorists where they live, expanding the US Army, Marines and Special Forces by 100,000 troops, and pursuing new energy policy, including alternative sources, to reduce our dependence on foreign oil."

"The Republican candidate says: With terrorists still threatening America, we cannot afford weak and indecisive national security policies. Democrats have opposed giving our security officials the surveillance tools they need to fight terrorists, and they would run up the white flag of surrender in Iraq, pulling out our troops, handing al Qaeda a victory, and endangering our vital interests. Along with other Republicans, I will press for victory in Iraq, support budgets that strengthen our military, and support missile defense to protect us from rogue regimes like Iran."

The power of the Democratic message is clear. First, it beats the Republican message soundly:

- Among both registered and likely voters, the Democratic message prevails by a 16-point percent margin (54-38). This represents *more than a double* the 7-point margin by which the Democratic House candidate leads their Republican opponent in a named⁴ ballot test at the start of the survey.
- Among Independents, Democrats win the head-to-head national security debate by a staggering 29 points, even though Democrats initially trail the GOP by 3 points among Independents in the named congressional ballot test.

We find virtually the same result when we deploy these arguments in the context of the presidential race, in a hypothetical debate between Obama and Sen. McCain.⁵

The strong preference for the Democratic narrative on national security is particularly impressive given that Democrats lag by 14 points at the start of the survey on the question of which party is stronger on national security. The conclusion is clear: Democrats can do more than avoid or neutralize their current

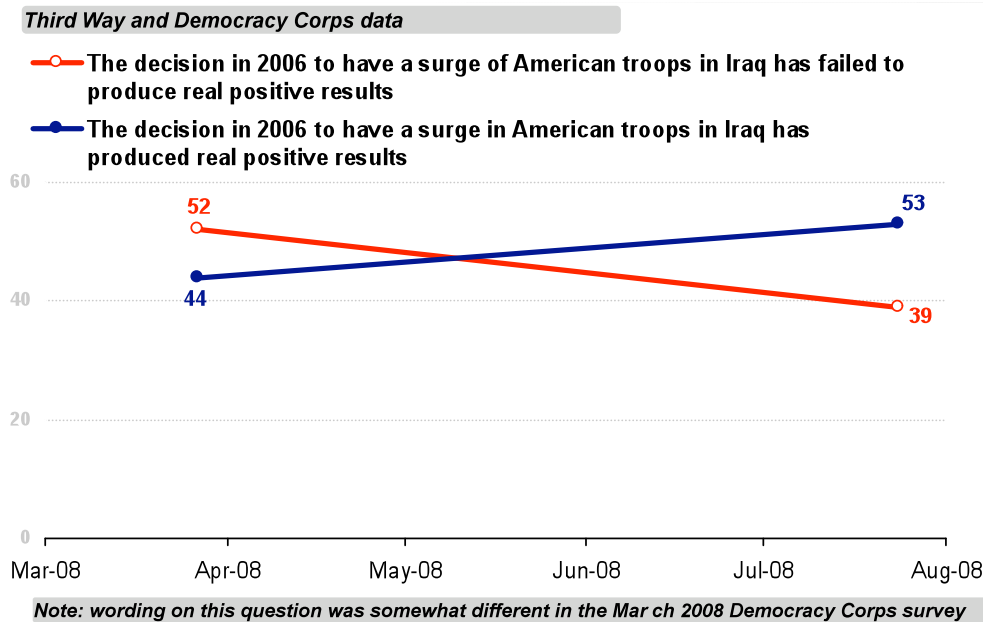
liabilities on national security; if they use the right narrative, they can win this debate, gain ground, and cut deeply into one of the only issue pillars still standing under the Republicans.

III. Iraq: A Case Study

For the third straight election, the war in Iraq is dominating the national security debate, and thus it is critical that Democrats aggressively apply the framework outlined in this memo as they address that conflict. The public overwhelmingly disapproves of President Bush's initial decision to invade, and Democracy Corps data show that a 15-point majority still favors a reduction in US troop levels there.

Yet opinion has changed recently in important ways. As little as five months ago, the public saw the surge as doubling-down on a failed strategy, not as a strategic success. In the ensuing months, however, the ground has begun to shift. Today the public sees the surge as having produced real results:

Has the surge produced real, positive results?



As the level of violence in Iraq has fallen, public attitudes have changed about the parties' overall approaches to Iraq: likely voters are near evenly divided over whether the greater risk in Iraq is that Republicans would stay too long or that Democrats would pull out too quickly. In the spring, by double-digit margins, voters were more concerned about Republican staying too long.

Despite the changing terrain, Democrats still have a significant opportunity to show the public that they offer the better policy going forward in Iraq and the broader region. Likely voters believe Democrats would do the better job of

handling the situation in Iraq by 9 points. Democrats need to crystallize the public's doubts about the Bush and Republican record in Iraq by consistently describing that record as Exhibit A for the proposition that Republicans are "reckless and out of touch" on national security. They must also avoid falling into old traps and make clear that they have a tough and smart *positive* approach to enhancing our security in the region.

The Republican approach to Iraq is reckless and out of touch

Democrats should drive all critiques of Republican policies on Iraq, both past and present, through the "reckless and out of touch" frame. Thus, the Republican approach to Iraq:

- Recklessly diverted our focus and resources from the fight against our real enemies—Osama bin Laden, al Qaeda, and their Taliban allies in Afghanistan—allowing them to escape and regroup.
- Recklessly short-circuited the weapons inspections process and launched an unnecessary war when there were no WMDs in Iraq.
- Recklessly invaded a sectarian country in the heart of the Middle East without a plan for the post-war occupation.
- Were so out of touch that they did not understand or admit their obvious mistakes and change course in Iraq.
- Were so out of touch that they refused to plan for the postwar occupation, putting an enormous strain on our military and degrading the Army's warfighting capacity.
- Were so out of touch that they allowed our dependence on foreign oil from hostile regimes to increase, making it more likely that we will fight future wars in the Middle East.

The Democratic approach to Iraq is tough and smart

Democrats should characterize their own plans for Iraq as tough and smart—a positive agenda that takes the offensive against our enemies, but also an agenda that is practical and focused on the interests of average Americans. Democrats must argue that we must make the right choices in Iraq so that we can turn our attention to fighting terrorists and ensure that we have a military that is sized and ready for 21st century threats.

- Continue the drawdown in Iraq so that we can redeploy more U.S. forces from Iraq to Afghanistan to track down bin Laden and destroy al Qaeda and the Taliban once and for all.
- Continue the drawdown in Iraq in a responsible manner that preserves stability in Iraq as we reduce our military presence there, pushes Iraqi factions to reconcile, and maintains a sufficient U.S. troop presence to train Iraqi forces and pursue terrorists like al Qaeda.

- Continue the drawdown in Iraq so that we can restore our military readiness and fighting power.
- Invest more in alternative energy sources so we can reduce our dependence on foreign oil and reduce our need to fight Mideast wars in the future.

Conclusion

As in America's three preceding national elections, national security issues will play a commanding role in this year's political contests. The stakes could not be higher for America. The outcome of the national security debate will not only help decide the election; it will also decide whether the United States changes course from the disastrous national security policies of the past eight years and pursues an agenda that more effectively combats terrorism, reduces the threat of weapons of mass destruction, strengthens our military and regional alliances, and improves the economic well-being of Americans at home.

If Democrats are to prevail in that debate, the first imperative is to offer strong, sound proposals for the country's security. But they must also improve their communications on these issues. As suggested by the most effective political ads from the past—from the "daisy ad" against Barry Goldwater, to the ads showing images of Michael Dukakis in a tank—the central question when it comes to national security is usually "which party represents the greater risk?" To change the historic perceptions about Democrats and Republicans for the first time since Vietnam, Democrats must win that argument. They must prove that they are just as tough as Republicans—unblinking in their willingness to use every tool at their disposal, including force, to protect the country. But now Democrats also have an opportunity to prove that Republicans pose a greater risk on security by defining their own approach as smart and contrasting the approach of Bush-era Republicans as reckless and out of touch.

Endnotes

¹ Greenberg, Quinlan Rosner conducted six focus groups with Independents and moderate-conservative Democrats in Denver, CO, Columbus, OH, and Virginia Beach, VA, in June 2008; we identified these two voter segments as the swing audience in national security debates, based on earlier survey findings by Democracy Corps. We also conducted a national telephone survey of 800 registered voters, July 21-24, 2008. The poll fielded during Barack Obama's trip abroad, although we do not have reason to believe this significantly affected the results. The research was conducted before the outbreak of hostilities between Russia and Georgia, and before the naming of Sen. Joe Biden and Gov. Sarah Palin as the two running mates, so it does not reflect any impact those events may have had on voter perceptions of the national security debate between the two parties.

² We are grateful to the members of our advisory panel, who reviewed our focus group and polling findings and offered valuable input. They include: Rand Beers, Mark Brzezinski, Derek Chollet, Ivo Daalder, Heather Hurlburt, Brian Katulis, Rachel Kleinfeld, Susan McCue, Jamal Simmons, Rich Verma, Christine Wormuth, and Doug Wilson.

³ CNN/Opinion Research Corporation Poll (August 29-31, 2008): *"Do you favor or oppose the war in Iraq?"* (Favor:35% Oppose: 64%) (<http://www.pollingreport.com/iraq.htm>).

⁴ The initial ballot test is "named" in that each respondent is asked to select between the names of the actual candidates running in their congressional district – an approach that enhances the accuracy of the response.

⁵ *"Barack Obama says: We cannot afford to continue the reckless and out of touch national security policies of the Bush years that left us stuck in Iraq, with our military overextended, and gas prices soaring. John McCain was Bush's biggest supporter on Iraq and says he's willing to keep our troops there for 100 years. It is time for a national security agenda that is tough and smart. I will redeploy our combat troops out of Iraq so we can strengthen our efforts against bin Laden and al Qaeda in Afghanistan, rebuild our military, and pursue a new energy policy to reduce our dependence on foreign oil."*

"John McCain says: Having served this country, I know how important security is. Barack Obama seems hesitant to stand up for America. He would embrace dictators in Iran and North Korea and run up the white flag of surrender in Iraq, pulling out our troops, handing al Qaeda a victory, and endangering our vital interests. I was the leading supporter of the surge, which is now succeeding, and I will press for victory in Iraq. I will also strengthen our military, restructure our intelligence agencies, and build missile defenses to protect us from rogue regimes like Iran."