

Tough and Smart

A Winning National Security Strategy

A Message Memo by the Third Way National Security Staff

The Message:

George Bush and his rubber-stamp Congress don't have an effective strategy for national security post 9-11. They have failed because of their incompetence, arrogance, and unrealistic, inflexible ideology. Bush and his allies may have talked tough - about 'Mission Accomplished'; about getting bin Laden 'Dead or Alive'; about the 'Axis of Evil' - but they haven't been smart. America needs a national security strategy that is tough enough to defeat our enemies and smart enough to get the job done right -- from fighting terrorism, to stopping the spread of weapons of mass destruction, to protecting America's borders.

A Problem and an Opportunity

For more than thirty years, progressives have struggled with the public and media perception that we are weak on national security. The legacy of Vietnam, along with progressives' deep-seated tendency to play to our strengths on domestic issues, have allowed voters and the news media to come to view us as ignorant of — and uninterested in — efforts to keep the nation secure in a dangerous world, uncomfortable with US power and the US military, unwilling to use force when necessary, and ultimately not to be trusted with defending the US, its people and its values. While this problem may have been manageable in the 1990s — when there seemed to be fewer pressing threats to the US — in the wake of 9-11 it is devastating. Voters will not trust progressives with positions of national authority if they believe that these leaders cannot keep them safe.

Recognizing our long-term deficit on national security, progressive candidates often steer clear of national security and stick to domestic subjects. But this not only ignores an issue of top concern to the public, it leaves our opponents with a broad opening to attack and to frame the debate around the existing stereotype. Indeed, Karl Rove has telegraphed this attack, saying in January: "The United States faces a ruthless enemy — and we need a Commander-in-Chief and a Congress who understand the nature of the threat and the gravity that America finds itself in. President Bush and the Republican Party do. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for many Democrats."

In addition to failing to come to grips with our vulnerabilities, avoiding national security also misses a critical opportunity. With their bungled efforts in Iraq and their many other national security failures, the President and the congressional majority have real problems of their own on national security. They are seen — correctly — as having made serious mistakes that have put our security at risk. The public's well-founded new doubts about their competence on national security provide us with a once-in-a-generation opportunity to make headway on this issue.

A recent round of focus groups by pollster Mark Mellman confirms this problem and opportunity. He found that voters "fear that Democrats are reticent to use force when it is necessary, don't have a clear vision for security and merely disagree with Republicans for partisan political purposes." But Mellman also found that participants "were unable to even discern the Bush Administration's strategy in the war on terror." Mellman noted that focus group participants viewed Democrats as indecisive, a party of protest, and without a plan to address national security, while they viewed Republicans as stronger, but also unrealistic and arrogant.¹

Recent quantitative polling by Cornell Belcher's firm Brilliant Corners found the same and underscored the importance of these issues in 2006. He noted that "Iraq, along with terrorism and homeland security, are dominating the issue environment for key cohorts of swing voters." He concluded that "without a strong message on security, the results in November will look all too familiar."²

To meet these challenges, progressives need a coherent, strategic message on national security. This message must do two things: first, it must restore progressive credibility — to convince voters that we are tough enough to lead the nation in a dangerous world; and second, it must show Americans that we would be smarter than our opponents about how we would protect the country.

That begins by labeling ourselves "tough and smart," and then proving it. This is the strategy that Bill Clinton used when faced with a similar problem and opportunity in 1992. Back then, Democrats were seen as economic liberals who wanted to raise taxes to give more to those who refused to work. But George H.W. Bush also had a problem — he was seen as out of touch with middle class concerns. Clinton first labeled himself a "New Democrat," and then he proved it, by promising to "change welfare as we know it" and pledging to help those who "work hard and play by the rules." George W. Bush used the same strategy in 2000, labeling himself a "compassionate conservative." And while that turned out to be a cynical (and later abandoned) ploy, it worked well enough to get him elected president.

Progressives labeling themselves "tough and smart" also works and it gives candidates a genuine and lasting framework for how to approach the issues. Geoff Garin recently polled for the DSCC and found that a security message from Democrats

¹ *Protecting America: A Study of American Attitudes Toward National Security*, The Mellman Group (6 focus groups among swing voters in Denver, CO, Augusta, GA and Columbus, OH, fall 2005).

² *Change and a Bolder Vision for Security*, Brilliant Corners (nationwide poll of 1,000 likely voters, conducted Feb. 11-14, 2006).

making the charge that Bush and his allies in Congress have talked tough but they haven't been smart and that Democrats understand that protecting America requires leadership that is both tough AND smart beats the standard Republican message ("Bush understands that 9/11 changed everything and Democrats have a pre-9/11 mentality") by 46-41%.³

Progressives can — and must — do the same now on national security.

An Eight-Step Strategy on National Security

1. Be tough and smart.

Build all of your national security appearances, statements and work around the theme of "tough and smart." This should be more than a narrative or slogan — it should be the litmus test for how you would approach every issue relating to national security. That means you will meet the nation's security challenges with maximum determination, but also by using all of the tools at your disposal and without being blinded by ideology.

2. Meet the challenge head on.

Voters *want* to hear how you would handle national security issues. In December 2005, Americans named Iraq as their highest-priority problem for Congress to deal with in 2006.⁴ Rather than trying to avoid talking about national security, you must have a critique and a positive alternative ready for use, you must possess both confidence and conviction on the topic, and you must find a few ways to extensively weave national security into your campaign. Voters are specifically concerned about "hard security" issues — war-fighting, national defense. They will not be satisfied only by rhetoric about veterans' benefits or improving military health care (though those topics are important). Nor is it enough to focus on homeland security issues to the exclusion of broader issues of national defense. Voters do not like the suggestion that progressives are more interested in the aftermath of an attack (providing for first responders) than on preventing one in the first place (killing terrorists).

3. Take fear seriously.

Everywhere Americans turn, the media — and our political opponents — remind them that we are confronting an increasingly dangerous world. Since 9-11, between 30 and 40% of the population consistently tell pollsters that they worry

³ *The Politics of National Security*, Garin Hart Yang Research Group (national survey of 808 voters, March 24-28, 2006 for the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee).

⁴ *Washington Post/ABC News* poll, December 2005, results online at http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/polls/121905_monthly_trendfinal.pdf

someone in their family could be a victim of terrorism.⁵ Mark Mellman's focus groups found the same. As one voter noted of 9-11: "We recognize now that the threat exists. Our attention has been gotten." Voters will not respond to approaches that ignore fear, mock it or try to intellectualize it away, like calling Bush a "fear-monger." They need to know that you understand the dangers we face and that you have a tough, hard-headed focus on keeping them safe.

4. Provide a positive alternative.

While many voters harbor doubts about Bush and the rubber-stamp Congress, Americans also are looking for real alternatives, and they worry that progressives don't have any. As one Mellman focus group participant said: "They have some goals that are attractive, but they don't have a plan." Therefore, you must be prepared to offer a handful of concrete ideas — specific things that you would do to make the country safer. (The Message Memos in this notebook provide a number of potential ideas.) You should also talk about the values that underlie them. Remember that this isn't about being a national security specialist. Rather you must communicate a common-sense idea of how the world works and show that you can lead — generating confidence that you can do a better job of keeping America safe.

5. Criticize the Bush/congressional record.

Don't pretend that Bush and his allies aren't tough — after all, they started an elective war. Instead, make the case that they have talked tough, but they haven't been smart. Remind your audiences that it is the civilians who run the government — not the uniformed commanders — who are responsible for the current situation in Iraq, the strain on our nation's armed forces, the disastrous relations with our traditional allies, and the slow progress in the war on terror. Moreover, Bush and the congressional leadership have so thoroughly squandered their claim of competence on national security — their mistakes have been so big and so glaring — that hyperbole or harping on their alleged lies and deceptions only serves to weaken your case against them in the eyes of most Americans. Focus on their tough but empty talk, as well as their incompetence, arrogance, and ideological blinders, not on breathless claims about misleading us into a war. Geoff Garin's polling found that by a small margin, voters believe that Bush's approach to national security is "strong" (4%), but a large margin believe that he has not been smart (23%).⁶

⁵ *USA Today/CNN Gallup* poll, December 19 2005 and previous — online at <http://www.usatoday.com/news/polls/2005-12-19-poll.htm>

⁶ Garin Polling : Among the most apt/least apt descriptions of Bush's approach/record on national security: "Strong" (most apt 23%/least apt 19%) and "Smart" (apt 7%/least apt 33%).

6. Fight back.

Don't allow your opponent to define the national security debate. If attacked, take affirmative steps to counter the inevitable effort to slap the old "weak liberal" label on you. A few examples:

Attack:

Liberals are afraid to use force to protect America.

Response:

I believe America always has the right to use force in our own defense, and we don't need a permission slip from the UN or anyone else to do so. But we need to be both tough and smart. When I vote to use force, I'll demand that we give our military leaders the forces they need to get the job done right. It's an outrage that our uniformed leaders were mocked by the Bush Administration for telling the truth about the level of forces that we would need to rebuild Iraq — that must never happen again.

Attack:

Liberals always blame America first.

Response:

I'm running because I believe in America. And I also know that being powerful — and being right — doesn't always make you popular. I believe we can do better — and be safer — if we are tough and smart — if we follow our own moral compass. I will always do that.

Attack:

Liberals criticize, but they have no plan to protect America.

Response:

Democrats have a proud tradition of toughness on national security, from FDR to Harry Truman to JFK. In modern times, we have decorated veterans like Senator Jack Reed and Wesley Clark. These guys were Army Rangers — they're tough. But they're also smart. That's what we need from our leaders on national security. And that's why I have a plan for national security that's both tough and smart. (See attached Message Memos.)

7. Make it personal.

The best way to communicate your passion for keeping America safe is by telling personal stories. If you or a friend or family member has been impacted by 9-11, the wars in Iraq or Afghanistan, or other aspects of the fight against terrorism, weave those stories into your narrative about national security. This is obvious for military veterans — tales of military service make for powerful campaign material. But *everyone* has some connection to American security, even if it is just our

personal reaction to watching the towers fall. Make sure to communicate those feelings to voters, and let them know how they underscore your commitment to tough and smart national security policy.

8. Show comfort with the military.

The disconnect between progressives and the military, which dates back to the Vietnam era, contributes greatly to progressive credibility problems on national security. There are some steps you can take — and some pitfalls to avoid — in engaging with the military.

DO:

- Visit bases, commands, military schools, VA hospitals, American Legion posts, VFW halls, etc. in your state or district.
- Attend deployment and return ceremonies.
- Meet with Guard and Reserve commanders.
- Include in your campaign staff and advisors retired military personnel.

DON'T:

- Pity or patronize the troops when criticizing the war. Remember that they are serving their country and proud of it. (Progressives have always been surprised that the morale among troops deployed in Iraq is quite high — they are doing their mission.)
- Focus on military social service issues — medical care, benefits, etc. — or on military supply issues — armor and equipment shortages — as a *substitute* for engaging with the military as a fighting force.

According to Geoff Garin's DSCC poll, voters are most likely to express confidence in Democratic candidates who voice "full support for the military."⁷

A New Message on National Security

Pulling those eight steps together, here is the kind of overall messaging on national security that you could carry:

George Bush and his rubber-stamp Congress do not have an effective strategy for national security in the post-9-11 world. They have failed because of their incompetence, their arrogance and their unrealistic, inflexible ideology. We live in a dangerous world, and Bush and his allies in Congress may have talked tough about securing America and defeating terrorism, but they haven't been smart:

- » *Bush was talking tough when he said "Mission Accomplished" in Iraq, but he wasn't smart — he didn't listen to military leaders about what it would take to succeed in Iraq, and now he has no real strategy for victory there.*

⁷ Garin Poll (top two were 58% , who cited support the military; 57% cited greater support for vets/National Guard).

- » *Bush was talking tough when he said the insurgents should “Bring it on”, but he wasn’t smart — the chaos in Iraq is getting worse, and our troops are the only thing standing in the way of a catastrophic civil war there.*
- » *Bush was talking tough when he said “Axis of Evil,” but he wasn’t smart — he walked away from negotiations with Iran and North Korea, and now both are much closer to having nuclear weapons.*
- » *Bush was talking tough when he said “You’re with us or you’re against us,” but he wasn’t smart — his go-it-alone strategy has left America to pay the entire price in Iraq, in both American lives and dollars.*

I believe that the only way we can protect our national security interests and preserve our preeminent place in the world is to be not only tough, but smart. We are the mightiest nation on earth — we must use our strength to protect our people and defend our interests. That means using our strength wisely:

- » *We need a new strategy for Iraq, one that changes course away from the failed Bush policies and puts us on a path to success by turning up the pressure on the Iraqi leadership to come to a political solution.*
- » *We need a new strategy for the fight against terrorism, one that focuses more attention on hunting, capturing or killing bin Laden and the rest of al Qaeda’s leadership, and on working with our allies to shut down the terrorists and their ideology of hate.*
- » *We need a new strategy to fight the spread of weapons of mass destruction, one that works more closely with Russia and our allies to keep chemical, biological and nuclear weapons out of the hands of terrorists and rogue states.*
- » *We need a new strategy to protect America, one that prevents threats from reaching our shores and finally implements the recommendations of the 9-11 Commission.*

Message Memos

In the tabs that follow, we provide basic Message Memos on the four biggest security challenges you should be prepared to talk about as a candidate: the war in Iraq, terrorism, weapons of mass destruction, and homeland security. Unlike material from other groups, Third Way’s Message Memos are not intended to provide exhaustive information. Rather, these briefs integrate policy, message and politics to help you communicate most effectively with voters on the most pressing national security issues of our times.

Each Message Memo has four parts:

Message Box: Framing the top-line message in terms of tough and smart.

Offering a New Plan: A few policy ideas, with talking points on the Problem and a proposed Solution. We also provide (in italics) a specific *Policy* for your own background or that you could point to if asked, but these are probably more than you will need to respond to most questions on the topic.

Criticizing Bush and the Congressional Majority: The most effective points to make about your opponent and his political allies.

Responding to Attacks: The lines of attack to expect from your opponent and some proposed responses.

Conclusion

Third Way provides this notebook as a basic blueprint for progressive office-holders and candidates to first label and then prove themselves to be “tough and smart” on national security issues. You may not agree with our guidance on the nuances of every issue. But we hope that you will share our commitment to getting out in front on national security issues, getting comfortable with American power, and above all, fighting to put an end to our opponents’ ability to define the terms of America’s national security debate.