

September 22, 2006

**TO:** Interested Parties

**FROM:** Matt Bennett, VP for Public Affairs and Sharon Burke, Director of the National Security Project

**SUBJECT:** Addressing Iraq in a Charged Political Environment

## Overview

Conservatives are seeking to frame the progressive position on Iraq as “cut and run.” They are able to get traction on this message, despite the chaos in Iraq, because of the 30-year, 30-point hole that progressives face on issues of national security.

As a new Third Way poll makes clear, despite recent improvement in Americans’ views of progressives on national security, dangerous pre-conceptions about progressives lurk just below the surface. If left unanswered, they will be devastating to progressive candidates. Therefore, Third Way recommends that progressive leaders go on the *offensive* on security issues, particularly Iraq. They should raise the topic often in speeches, interviews, ads, town meetings, websites, and elsewhere. They should state clearly the gravity of the threats facing the United States in Iraq and charge that despite their failures, Bush and his team have stubbornly refused to change course. They should describe how conservatives have talked tough about Iraq—about “Mission Accomplished” and “Bring ‘em on”—but they haven’t been smart. And they should make clear that if they are sent to Washington, they will push the President to go in a new direction and fight the war more effectively.

To apply this overall framework on Iraq, Third Way recommends to progressive candidates that they:

- 1) Define their conservative opponents as **satisfied with the war in Iraq** and unwilling to stand up and force the President to change course, despite the obvious and severe deficiencies in the Bush Iraq strategy.
- 2) Define themselves as **wanting to move in a new direction** on Iraq, including a new military and political strategy that plans for getting our troops out in a responsible way and places pressure on the Iraqis to form a stable government and control their security.

Knowing that they are vulnerable on the war, conservatives are trying to shift the security debate to the broader topic of the war on terrorism. While progressives should be prepared to talk about terrorism—and to articulate a strong position in favor of doing what it takes to capture or kill terrorists—they must not let their opponent change the subject: they must hit conservatives on Iraq.

## Step One: Defining the Opposition

Our recommendation, drawn from our review of the substantive policy options and public opinion research, is to paint conservatives as “satisfied” with the progress of the war in Iraq and too stubborn to change course.

This strategy sets a trap for conservatives, because they face either the perception that they are satisfied with *all* aspects of the war, from its conception to the situation today, or they are forced to say that they are not satisfied and expose their hypocrisy, ineffectiveness or both.

Either way, they can be characterized as being nothing but a potted plant, a bump on a log, a say nothing, do nothing Senator/Member of Congress.

### ***Sample Messaging: If an Opponent Says He is Satisfied***

John Smith is satisfied with how things are going in Iraq:

- He is satisfied with Bush’s stubborn refusal to change course in Iraq, away from his plan for a permanent deployment of American forces to stay in the country and attempt to quell the violence and keep the peace.
- He is satisfied with the Bush strategy going into the war—with the number of troops sent, with the amount of armor and other vital equipment they received, and with the Bush plan to secure the peace.
- He is satisfied with the job performance of the same team of civilian leaders whose poor judgment got us into this situation and who now keep telling us that things are getting better, when clearly they are not.
- He is satisfied with the level of security we have for our own troops and civilians, Iraqi soldiers and police, and the Iraqi people.
- He is satisfied with the shaky Iraqi governing coalition, in which senior leaders are talking openly about the country descending into civil war.
- He is satisfied with the Iraqi police forces and military, which have been infiltrated by the insurgents and the militias.
- He is satisfied with the state of the American military. He is satisfied with sending troops again and again into Iraq, without proper rest and training and with stretching the National Guard and Reserves to the breaking point.
- He is satisfied with the no-bid contracts to Halliburton that have cost hundreds of billions of dollars. [Note: With the exception of some unofficial hearings by Democrats that were not attended by a single member of the majority party, Congress has done virtually no oversight of the massive no-bid contracts for Halliburton or how \$9 billion in US government cash went missing in Iraq. The recent Democratic hearings did reveal a bit of the massive waste, fraud and abuse by Halliburton.]
- He is satisfied that the war in Iraq has helped make Iran more powerful, with deep, new ties to extremists in Iraq.

Look, we just have a fundamental difference of views. John Smith is satisfied that the war in Iraq was well conceived and run by the Bush team and that things are going well over there. I think that there's been a lot of tough talk—from Bush, Smith and others, but they haven't been smart. Let me be clear: we need a strategy that is both tough *and* smart. I'm not satisfied with the situation in Iraq—we need a new direction:

***Sample Messaging: If an Opponent Says He is Not Satisfied***

- Why has John Smith kept it a secret that he's not satisfied with the war in Iraq?
- Why hasn't he called for a change of course? Why hasn't he demanded that someone be held accountable?
- What, exactly, has he been doing for 3 1/2 years if he says he isn't satisfied now?
- Is he so ineffective that he can't get anything done, despite being in the majority? Does he really have so little clout in his own party that he could not get the Republican Congress and the President to change course?

***Sample Messaging: Responding to the "Cut and Run" Attack***

There he goes again—talking tough. John Smith talks tough about Iraq, but he hasn't been smart. He hasn't lifted a finger to demand that the Bush administration give up their stubborn refusal to change course and put the US on a path to success in Iraq. He has stood by, totally satisfied with the way things have gone, satisfied with Bush's stubborn refusal to change course.

We need a new direction, and that starts with a policy in Iraq that is both tough and smart. George Bush and John Smith's failures have hurt American national security interests, and they have endangered our troops. Unlike John Smith, I'm not satisfied with the way things are going in Iraq, and I would demand some answers and some accountability. Apparently John Smith is satisfied, so he sees fit to do nothing.

**Step Two: Defining a Progressive Approach to Iraq**

We believe that progressive candidates should define themselves as not satisfied with the course of the war in Iraq. They should state repeatedly that they believe we need a new direction in Iraq, including a new military and political strategy. That strategy must place real pressure on the Iraqis to form a stable government and control their security, and it must offer a plan for getting our troops out in a responsible way.

The progressive message should emphasize that the war in Iraq cannot be resolved by the same people whose poor judgment got us into this situation and who repeatedly assert that things are getting better when they clearly are not—we need new leaders who are going to look for smart alternatives to the situation.

On the specific question of withdrawing troops (see appendix), whatever one's view on withdrawal from Iraq, two things are crucial:

First, any plan must be put in terms of America's national security interests. This must be the case *regardless* of the position on withdrawal.

- ***If a candidate supports immediate timetable for withdrawal:*** Their support for leaving Iraq quickly should not be based solely on the fact that Americans are dying or that we are spending too much money or that the Iraqis hate us or that our presence is making things worse. Rather, it should be based on the belief that America will be safer—that our national security will be strengthened—by leaving Iraq.
- ***If a candidate supports staying in Iraq until conditions permit withdrawal:*** Their support for staying in Iraq should not be just because Iraqis would be slaughtered if we left. Rather, it should be based on the belief that America will be safer—our national security will be strengthened—if we stay and ensure that a regional war doesn't break out.

For those who are not calling for immediate withdrawal, Third Way recommends a plan for a new direction in Iraq that includes:

- Demanding that the President present a plan to Congress for how the US will achieve its strategic objectives in Iraq and protect US national security interests in the region.
- Transitioning more US troops to training of Iraqi forces.
- Putting real pressure on our allies and others in the region to commit troops and substantial resources to stabilizing Iraq and protecting its borders.
- Taking real steps to revitalize the US military by increasing the size of the Army and fully funding the repair and replacement of equipment. Ensuring that US troops always have the personnel, equipment and training they need to win.
- Rejecting any plans for the permanent deployment of American troops in Iraq.

## Conclusion

Events on the ground in Iraq change daily, and the political implications of the war change almost as rapidly. But there is no doubt that conservatives have coalesced around a strategy of demonizing their opponents, blaming their own failures on others, and redirecting attention away from Iraq. If they are true to form—and there is every reason to expect that they will be—progressives can anticipate their attack.

But if progressive leaders and candidates are firm and aggressive—if they make the charge that their opponent is satisfied with a situation that deeply concerns most Americans—they can demonstrate that they are the ones who are both tough and smart when it comes to the war in Iraq. They can also demonstrate that they are the ones truly concerned about protecting America's national security interests.

## **Appendix: The Two Progressive Positions on Iraq**

The debate about what to do in Iraq has focused largely on the question of whether or when American forces should be removed from the country (“redeployed”). While most conservatives continue to cling to the Bush view—that we must stay until Iraq has a stable democratic government—most progressives fall into one of two camps:

### ***On a Timetable***

Protect US Vital Interests -- Redeploy all US Troops by July 2007

(Senators Kerry, Feingold, and Boxer):

Remove all US troops from Iraq by July 2007 and redeploy them around the world to “refocus on al Qaeda” and other terrorist networks. The underlying logic of this approach is that at this point, US troops are an obstruction to political progress in Iraq, they are increasingly sitting ducks in the middle of a civil war that they are powerless to prevent, and there are high opportunity costs when it comes to defeating al Qaeda and dealing with other threats. In June 2006, Senators Kerry, Feingold, and Boxer proposed this as an amendment to the FY07 Defense Authorization Bill; the amendment garnered only 13 yeas. 31 Democrats voted against this measure.

### ***No Timetable, But Change Course***

Redeploy American Troops as the Situation on the Ground Permits

(Senators Levin and Reed)

Begin redeploying American troops from Iraq to other locations in the region by the end of the year and proceed as the situation on the ground allows, in consultation with military leaders and the Iraqis. The underlying logic is that Iraq cannot move forward as long as the US remains as an occupying power; we need to demonstrate that we intend to leave. At the same time, we have to make sure that the Iraqi government and security forces are capable of standing on their own before we go, given vital US strategic concerns in the region. We cannot afford to abandon Iraq to our enemies, including al Qaeda and Iran. Senators Levin and Reed proposed this language in a June amendment to the FY07 Defense Authorization Bill, and it garnered 39 yeas - 38 Democrats united behind the measure. This amendment has subsequently been incorporated in to the Iraq section of Senator Minority Leader Harry Reid’s Real Security Act of 2006.