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The Energy Mandate

By *THOMAS L. FRIEDMAN*

James Carville, the legendary Clinton campaign adviser who coined the slogan, “It’s the economy, stupid,” knows a gut issue when he sees one. So when Mr. Carville contacted me the other day to tell me about the newest gut issue his polling was turning up for candidates in the 2006 elections, I was all ears.

“Energy independence,” he said. “It’s now the No. 1 national security issue. ... It’s become kind of a joke with us, because no matter how we ask the question, that’s what comes up.”

So, for instance, the Democracy Corps, a Democratic strategy group spearheaded by Mr. Carville and the former Clinton pollster Stan Greenberg, asked the following question in an Aug. 27 survey of likely voters: “Which of the following would you say should be the two most important national security priorities for the administration and Congress over the next few years?”

Coming in No. 1, with 42 percent, was “reducing dependence on foreign oil.” Coming in a distant second at 26 percent was “combating terrorism.” Coming in third at 25 percent was “the war in Iraq,” and tied at 21 percent were “securing our ports, nuclear plants and chemical factories” and “addressing dangerous countries like Iran and North Korea.” “Strengthening America’s military” drew 12 percent. Mr. Carville also noted that because their polls are of “likely voters,” they have a slight Republican bias — i.e., they aren’t just polling a bunch of liberal greens.

“When we lay out different plans for how to deal with Iraq, any plan that also includes energy independence tops any other plan that doesn’t,” said Mr. Greenberg, who added that people are not expressing this view because they are worried about price, but because they are starting to understand that our oil dependence is fueling a host of really bad national security problems. “There is frustration that leaders have not taken it up,” he added. “There is a sense that the public is ahead of the leaders, and there is actually a sense of relief when anyone talks about [energy independence] with any seriousness.”

Mr. Greenberg said he started noticing this during this year’s re-election campaign by Ed Rendell, the governor of Pennsylvania. When his Republican challenger, Lynn Swann, first jumped into the race, public polls showed the two candidates in a dead heat. Governor Rendell eventually pulled far ahead in the polls, though, and among the key issues that helped to separate him, said Mr. Greenberg, was the governor’s stressing of alternative energy, and his “PennSecurity Fuels Initiative” to lessen dependence on foreign oil and grow the state’s clean energy market.

What this means for Democratic Party candidates, argues Mr. Carville, is that it's no longer enough to have "energy security" as part of a 12-step plan for American renewal. No, it needs to become a defining issue of what Democrats are all about.

It should "not be part of an expanding litany, but rather a contracting narrative," explained Mr. Carville. "It can't just be that we are for a woman's right to choose, and education and energy independence. This is the thing we need to get done above and beyond everything else." People should associate "energy security" with Democrats the way they associate "tax cuts" with Republicans, he argued. "This is not something to add to the stew — this is the stock."

The best way for a party that is often viewed as weak on national security to overcome that deficit is to be for energy independence, he noted. Indeed, nothing would be more potent for Democrats now than to capture energy security and all the issues that surround it — from improving our trade deficit by not importing more oil to improving the climate to improving U.S. competitiveness by making us leaders in alternative fuels.

So does this mean the public would accept a gasoline or B.T.U. tax? No, said Mr. Greenberg. The public wants government to impose much higher auto mileage standards on Detroit and much more stringent energy codes on buildings and appliances. People want a tough regulatory response, à la California.

Remember, Mr. Carville and Mr. Greenberg are professional campaign advisers. They get paid to get people elected — not to offer feel-good nostrums. So when they tell you that their polling and focus groups around the country show that "reducing dependence on foreign oil" is voters' top national security priority, you know that this issue has finally arrived. The party that captures it most credibly will be rewarded.

Hello? Anybody listening?