

DEMOCRACY CORPS

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Date: September 14, 2006
To: Friends of Democracy Corps
From: Stanley Greenberg, Al Quinlan, Jeremy Rosner, and James Carville

RE: Winning the National Security Debate after Bush's "9/11 Political Defensive"

Democracy Corps with Greenberg Quinlan Rosner has conducted surveys before and at the very end of the president's political offensive, concluding with his very political 9/11 television address to the country.¹ This unprecedented effort by the White House produced only the most modest rise in support, concentrated among conservative Republicans. The race did not tighten; in fact, it marginally improved with the Democrats now winning the named (not generic) congressional ballot by 6 points. The image of the Congress and the Republicans declined noticeably. Most importantly, Democrats continue to win the debate on Iraq and national security, even with the president's current argument, and should speak out immediately and with confidence.

The structure of the race has not changed at all; indeed, the ingredients for a change election are even stronger. While we want to emphasize our recommendations on how to win the Iraq and security debate, it is important to keep in mind the context.

- Just 33 percent approve of the job Congress is doing and only 37 percent have a "warm" reaction to the "Republican Congress." There is a deepening contempt for the Republicans, whose thermometer rating has hit its lowest point in seven years.
- The current Bush strategy has improved the Republican position with conservatives – and thus, increased their support with Evangelicals, white rural, married, white high-school graduates and seniors.

¹ Survey of 1,000 likely voters conducted by Democracy Corps August 23-27, and September 6-10, 2006

- The current Bush strategy is pushing away moderates and independents. Democrats are poised to make major gains here, as 70 percent of independents (and moderates) say the country is on the wrong track, and 72 percent disapprove of Congress. By a two-to-one ratio, these voters want an election focused on economic issues. On the Iraq/war-on-terror debate, they choose the Democrats 68 to 29 percent.
- The president's efforts – which are pushing away moderates and independents – may be increasing the Democratic voters' commitment to vote. On almost every measure, Democrats are significantly more engaged: on highest level interest, 62 percent of Democratic voters, compared to 55 percent of Republican; and greater enthusiasm this year than usual, 56 to 45 percent.
- Don't forget that about as many voters want to vote on the financial pressures facing people, including gas prices and health care, as want to vote based on security and the war on terrorism. With growing advantages on the economy (14 points above the Republicans), high costs and financial pressures (26-point advantage), and Social Security (26-point advantage), Democrats' in-district advertising will want to press this advantage, even as Democrats stop their attempt to make this an election about the war on terror.

All of this is in a survey conducted at the end of an unprecedented effort to shape the election around Osama bin Laden, and in the lead up to 9/11. Republicans have slightly pushed up Bush's approval -- but at a price -- and without disturbing the dynamic for change.

Bush is trying to define the election around the war on terror. Democrats have a unique opportunity to challenge him and undermine the only tool the Republicans have in this election. They need to move to the offensive in real time.

We offer this advice drawing on the in-the-field experience of Al Quinlan, Mike Bocian, Ben Tulchin and Anna Greenberg of Greenberg Quinlan Rosner, but it is also based on surveys conducted at the end of August and in the last few days, incorporating Bush's strongest language. Understand that Bush's mismanagement of the Iraq war and security issues in general give Democrats standing.

In this survey, we presented Bush's current attempt to fold the Iraq war into the war on terror and frame the election as a choice on keeping the country safe.

Iraq is a test of our resolve in the war against the terrorists. If we "cut and run" before Iraq can defend itself, we will give al Qaeda a victory that will leave us vulnerable to terrorist attacks in America.

But that argument loses to a Democratic argument about being bogged down in a religious war and needing a new direction, getting Iraqis to take responsibility and the U.S. concentrating on terrorist threats (49 to 45 percent). It loses by 23 points (60 to 37 percent) to a Democratic argument that indicates what Democrats want to do – get Iraqis to take responsibility, rebuild our alliances and make America energy independent. In the survey, we engage in a full-fledged battle by a Democratic candidate with a Republican taking up Bush’s most robust statement on the “decisive ideological struggle of the 21st century against Islamic extremists,” yet the Democratic candidate wins the battle by 8 points (52 to 44 percent).

The Democratic candidate says, we face a real threat from Islamic extremists who advocate violence and terrorism to create fundamentalist regimes. Still, the President's failed policies and lack of oversight are making America less safe than it could be. We must implement 100 percent of the 9/11 Commission's recommendations, cut our dependence on foreign oil and push for the responsible redeployment of our troops from Iraq. It is time for a new direction.

-OR-

The Republican candidate says, the war on terror is the decisive ideological struggle of the 21st century. We must fight against Islamic extremists that are driven by anti-American feelings and present a threat to our security. History shows we can defeat Islamic extremism just as we defeated the Communists and Nazis before. This war will be long and difficult; but we must stay the course to ensure freedom and moderation prevails over violence.

So, here is how Democrats win this argument – an argument that we want.

- **Start by showing we take the threat seriously.** Americans know the threat is real; as a starting point, they want to hear that Democrats know it too. Right at the outset, make clear: “we face a real threat from Islamic extremists who advocate violence and terrorism to create fundamentalist regimes”.
- **Hit Bush for “mismanaging” the war” and leaving us “bogged down in a religious war” and undermining our efforts against the terrorists.**

President Bush has made us less safe by mismanaging and becoming bogged down in Iraq, which is now sliding toward civil war, as we spend billions of dollars and lose thousands of American lives.

- **Stress we need a new direction in Iraq and a better way to wage the war on terrorism.** New direction says we need a change of policy but our goal is to fight the war on terrorism better.
- **A faster transition with Iraqis taking responsibility.** Do not get caught-up in the “cut-and-run” argument – a red herring. The real issue is whether we want more of the same or a new direction in Iraq, with a faster transition of responsibility to the Iraqis, and more accountability.

That starts with Iraq. It is time for a new direction in Iraq, with steps to accelerate the transfer of authority to the Iraqis.

- **Don't just attack; give people things you will do to accelerate change in Iraq, wage the war on terrorism better and make America safer.** Any mention of future ideas on security marginalizes Republicans saying the ‘stay the course’ message. People are desperate to hear that Democrats have important things to do. The most powerful ideas are –

Accelerate transition in Iraq by getting Iraqis take more responsibility

Rebuild our alliances with other countries

Make America energy independent²

The last is the most important, as it says Democrats are thinking about how to make America independent of these unstable forces. Another aspect effective in any plan is implementing 100 percent of the recommendations of the 9/11 Commission, specifically inspection of all containers entering the U.S.

- **Feel free to hit the Republicans for not holding Bush accountable for the wasted money, no-bid contracts and lack of body armor.** And remember, this Congress voted itself pay raises, even as it *blocked a pay raise for the troops in Iraq.*

As you know, the Republicans are mounting new attacks on the Democrats for not supporting the president on wire-tapping without warrants and insisting the 9/11 suspects be given special rights. These are serious attacks, and we are examining them with research currently in the field. The question wording is displayed at the end of this memo but there are a number of things we believe will be strong.

² Actual wording tested in Democracy Corps research refers to the energy independence debate as ‘investment in solar and other alternative energy sources so we can cut our dependence on foreign oil’.

- Begin by stressing that America must have more effective tools to monitor, hunt down and kill terrorists. Begin by showing that you get it.
- Attack Bush for reckless policies that makes us less safe or puts our troops at risk.
- Stress that Democrats support the policies favored by the Army, Navy, Marines, the Republican chairman of Armed Services and POW John McCain to strengthen our military position.
- Emphasize that Democrats want the president to have the flexibility to wage the war on terrorism.
- Conclude with our need to have the most effective tools possible to fight terrorism while protecting our democracy.

The actual questions being tested are presented below, but we are confident that Democrats can push back on these attacks, as they have on the president's initiatives of last week.

The Democratic candidate says, we must have more effective tools to monitor, hunt down and kill terrorists. But the current "cowboy approach" puts our own soldiers at risk if they become P.O.Ws, which is why it is opposed by the Army, Navy and Marines and the Republican Armed Services chairman and former P.O.W., John McCain. With them, I support credible courts to bring these terrorists to justice.

-OR-

The Republican candidate says, I am determined to bring the terrorists who killed 3 thousand Americans on nine-eleven to justice. The mastermind of the attack now sits at Guantanamo Bay and the Republicans voted to create the court to put him on trial, but the Democrats want to give him as many rights as our own soldiers have. We need a Congress that will put the 9/11 terrorists on trial.