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**RE: DEMOCRATS' OPPORTUNITY ON NATIONAL SECURITY**  
**Bush Strategy Produces Some Gains for Himself, Backfires for Republicans**

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Two new surveys<sup>1</sup> underscore the tremendous opportunity for Democrats seven weeks from the election to flatten the Bush terror-centered, base-pumping strategy and to create an open field for the Democrats on the domestic concerns that Democrats fully dominate. The new findings reinforce that Democrats win in November when they engage upfront and with confidence in the national security and Iraq debate.

**Bush Strategy Produces Some Gains and Backfires**

Over the last 10 days, as the country commemorated 9/11, Bush tried to nationalize the election, defining this as a contest over the war on terror. His wiretapping and military tribunal offensives were presumably intended to bolster support – particularly with his Republican base – by showing his strength in national security, his commitment to fight terrorism, and his desire to protect America.

The President's sustained focus on terrorism did nudge up his personal job approval ratings – up from 41 to 44 percent in the past two weeks. Yet, ironically, it actually hurt Republican chances for November, by elevating attention to Iraq and creating the sense that Republican are ignoring people's economic worries – both of which drive voters toward Democratic congressional candidates. As a result, the congressional ballot, tested on a named basis,<sup>2</sup> expands from a 6-point Democratic edge last week to a 10-point lead now. The Democratic' advantage expands on the named Senate ballot as well. Consistent

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<sup>1</sup> Democracy Corps poll of 1006 likely voters conducted September 17-19, 2006; and Democracy Corps poll of 966 likely voters in 55 most competitive GOP-held swing Congressional districts, September 12-14, 2006.

<sup>2</sup> That is, we test the names of the actual Democratic and Republican candidates in each district, as opposed to a "generic" ballot test between "the Democratic candidate" and "the Republican candidate."

with other published poll results, all this suggests the President's strategy has hit a wall.

The President's strategy is backfiring because it is driving independents to the Democrats, who now give Bush only a 36 percent approval rating and Democrats a big advantage in the congressional race. The strategy also seems to be energizing Democrats and de-energizing Republicans, giving Democrats a growing edge in enthusiasm for the election.

### The Democratic Opportunity on National Security

Against the backdrop of the Bush/GOP strategy having hit a wall, the new Democracy Corps surveys help refine the framework that Democrats can use to win the national security debate – even on the evolving issues of military tribunals and wiretapping/surveillance. There are four key elements, some of which we stressed in our last memo:

**1. Welcome the national security debate and engage in it.** All our recent research shows Democrats can win the current national security arguments – not only on Iraq, but also on fighting terror, military tribunals, and wiretapping. Democrats can even win these national security arguments by large margins in Republican-held swing districts.

**2. Start by showing Democrats take the threat seriously.** Virtually all of the effective messages start with statements that stress Democrats' commitment to protect America and prevent another terrorist attack. Democrats can stress the seriousness of the threat and Democrats' determination to address it using statements such as: "We need stronger tools to monitor, hunt down, and kill terrorists."

**3. On Iraq, stress Bush/GOP "mismanagement" and need for "a new direction."** Voters are convinced the war was not worth the cost, but conflicted about how to go forward. "Cut and run" charges are readily disposed of when Democrats stress that Bush and the Republicans "mismanaged" Iraq, leaving us "bogged down in a religious war"; and that the country needs a "new direction in Iraq," with the Democrat advancing a range of specific actions, starting with "the Iraqis taking more responsibility" and with "more accountability and oversight."

**4. Stress that Democrats offer "a better way to fight terrorism."** Voters are ready to reject Bush's course in Iraq, but with many voters doubting that Democrats have their own plans on security, they only really open up when Democrats lay out elements of "a better way to fight terrorism." Among other elements, the research shows this should include:

- **Implementing all of the recommendations of the 9/11 Commission (100 percent inspection of containers).**
- **Rebuilding ties with our allies.**
- **Energy independence.** Reducing dependence on foreign oil continues to be voters' top national security priority and Democrats' strongest national security proposal. It is powerful, credible, and forward-looking for Democrats.

Energy independence is the most important part of the overall message, both on Iraq and security, that says Democrats represent a new direction.

Our surveys show that Democrats win the national security debate and set up their opportunity to win domestically when they step in to this issue, which we think leaders and campaigns should do now. Our survey of 55 Republican-held seats, tests what is emerging as the core Republican argument in this cycle – starting with domestic concerns of taxes and immigration, and then closing on pledges to defend America against terrorism. The Democratic candidate counters by opening on national security, pledging a new direction in Iraq and a better fight against terror; and then pivoting to the domestic agenda, and vowing to relieve the financial pressures on people from gas prices, health care costs, and local taxes. Even in these *Republican districts*, where the ballots currently tilt Republican by over 2 points, the debate produces a 5-point shift to the Democrats, winning the choice by 3 points. The opportunity could not be clearer.

45%

*The Republican candidate says: My priorities are to cut taxes for all taxpayers and get immigration under control. And I'm determined that we will not 'cut and run' in Iraq and give the terrorists a victory when we have so much to do to keep America safe.*

**-OR-**

48%

*The Democratic candidate says, my priorities are a new direction in Iraq and a better way to fight the war on terrorism. And I'm determined that we address the financial pressures that average Americans are facing, with gas prices, health care costs and local taxes skyrocketing.*

### **Pushing Back when Republicans Attack on Military Tribunals and Wiretapping**

When Republicans attack on denying the president the tools for fighting terrorism – military tribunals and wiretapping/surveillance – Democrats should push back and can come out on top. Some Republican candidates are already turning these issues into divisive ads, and others will surely follow, particularly if Republicans force last-minute floor votes on these issues over the coming week. Our latest Democracy Corps polls suggest some effective approaches for addressing these issues.

On the NSA wiretapping and surveillance program, the strongest approach is to a) stress that Democrats are committed to the goal of preventing terrorist attacks; b) criticize the Republicans for trying to politicize the issue and divide Americans over something on which they are actually united; and c) stress support for a bipartisan solution that permits wiretapping ahead of judicial review where needed (e.g., hot pursuit). Even against a statement that captures

the very tough language Republicans are using in current ads and will likely use in coming weeks (premised on House passage of such a bill), this Democratic approach wins by a stunning 18 point margin, 57-39 percent:

<b>39%</b>	<i>The Republican candidate says: This month the House approved a new law to help monitor terrorists' phone calls. I supported that bill, but the Democrats opposed it. When terrorists are willing to die to hurt us, we must do whatever it takes to stop them before they strike. When a known-terrorist is placing a phone call to someone in the US, I want to make sure we can intercept that call and act immediately. We can't wait for the right paperwork to be filed, as the Democrats propose</i>
<b>-OR-</b>	
<b>57%</b>	<i>The Democratic candidate says: We must use every tool at our disposal to prevent terrorist attacks against the United States, and these false Republican attacks do nothing but try to divide our country for political purposes on an issue where America is united. Instead of the same old political bickering that dominates today's Congress, I will work on a bipartisan basis to ensure we can immediately tap terrorists' phones and submit it for judicial approval afterwards</i>

Even on Republican turf, this kind of Democratic argument prevails. In the Democracy Corps survey of likely voters in the 55 most competitive Republican-held congressional districts, a very similar Democratic argument,<sup>3</sup> prevails over the Republican attack on the Democrats by a 51-41 percent margin.

The debate over military tribunals is more in flux. Our surveys showed a decisive advantage for Democratic messages citing the opposition to Bush's military tribunals bill by leading Republicans such as Senator John McCain and Colin Powell – on the grounds that, as these Republicans argued, the Bush proposal could put American troops at risk. Depending on the nature of the compromise that now appears likely between the White House and the Senate Republicans on this issue, it may still be possible to cite Republican divisions on this issue, but further testing will be necessary. At a minimum, however, Democrats should stress that “we need stronger tools to monitor, hunt down, and kill terrorists”; and then stress the need for rules that enable us to interrogate and try suspected terrorists in a way that does not hurt our troops, our rights, or our security.

Overall, the new research paints a compelling picture. Bush's core strategy for this election has hit a wall. By narrowing the entire debate down to the war on terror, he actually focused voters on his own failure in Iraq, which energized Democrats and dispirited Republicans. Moreover, his failures on Iraq have so eroded earlier Republican leads on national

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<sup>3</sup> The Democratic argument read: “The Democratic candidate says, we must have more effective tools to monitor, hunt down and kill terrorists. I want the president to have the flexibility to move fast and obtain warrants after the fact in special courts. But both parties and the Supreme Court say the president can't just make up his own laws. We need the most effective tools possible to fight terrorism while protecting our democracy.”

## **Democrats' Opportunity to Prevail on National Security**

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security that voters are now fully open to Democratic arguments that their party has the better policies for a new course in Iraq, a better fight against terrorism, and stronger ways to protect America.