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**To:** Friends of Democracy Corps

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## **RE: WINNING THE THIRD NATIONAL SECURITY ELECTION Results of the Democracy Corps Survey on Iraq and National Security**

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The 2006 congressional campaign, which formally kicks off this week, will revolve in many ways around national security. The on-going carnage in Iraq keeps the public focused on the war, the foiled airplane bombing plot in Britain adds new salience to the terror threat, and the Bush White House has made it clear, with a series of high-profile speeches and over-the-top attacks on Democrats, that this is the ground on which they choose to wage their political fight. As a result, this will be the third election in four years in which national security issues will be pivotal.

In 2002, this was precisely the moment when the administration timed the Iraq war resolution in order to get as much partisan polarization as possible on the war and to disfigure America's valuable post-9/11 unity into an ugly national divisiveness. They are trying to do the very same thing now, but the country and world are different and the Democrats are different.

Democrats want this debate. In 2006, Democrats win it – by double digits. It is part of how Democrats prevail in November. And it will help make America stronger and safer.

The latest Democracy Corps survey, echoing two previous surveys,<sup>1</sup> shows that Democrats can fend off Republican attacks on these issues and decisively win the national security debate, including the core issue of Iraq, with the audiences who will decide the November election. Democrats must not duck these issues, as some did in recent elections, and have no need to: unlike in previous years, there are few signs that Republicans come out ahead when Democrats contest them. At this point, the Bush focus on the war and national security is only pumping up his base rather than winning over contested voters or districts. By contrast, when Democrats join this debate and lay out their critique and plans, Democrats win across the broad electorate, particularly among Independents and other swing blocks.

For Democrats, the keys to winning this third national security election include:

- On Iraq, stress that “it is time to change course,” because Bush has mismanaged the war, has no real plan going forward, and has made America less secure through skewed priorities that deflect our focus and resources from other key priorities in the fight against terror.
- Lay out their own plan for protecting the nation’s security; voters want to know that in addition to the critique on Iraq, Democrats have a positive program to combat terror and make America safer.
- As part of that plan, highlight the steps Democrats can take to cut America’s dependence on foreign oil. This is the public’s number one national security concern, and the public sides with Democrats overwhelmingly when they lay out steps to improve America’s energy security.
- Describe how America can take stronger actions against the threat of Islamic extremism and terrorism, including implementing 100 percent of the 9/11 Commission’s recommendations.

### **Bush Trapped in a Limited Base Strategy**

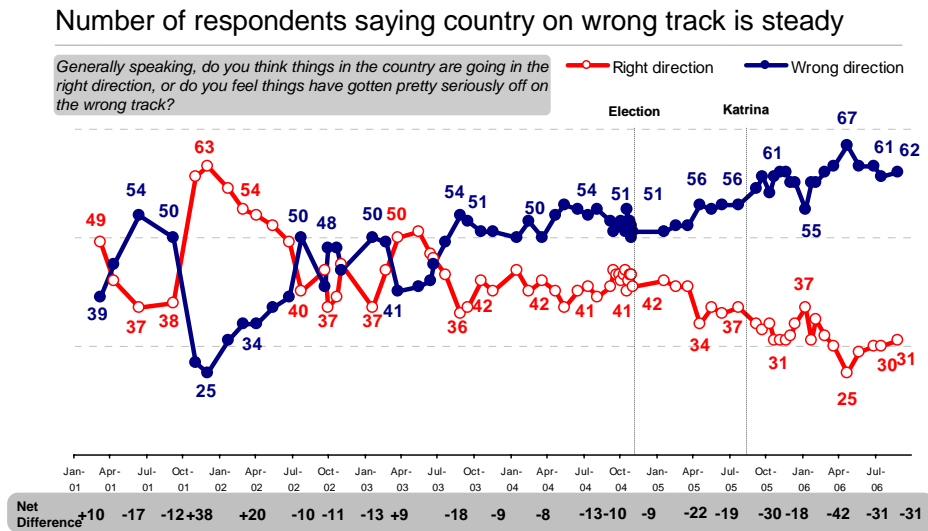
There is some evidence that the Democrats’ strong lead edged down at the end of summer; but as you will see, that change is very artificial and limited. Indeed, the nature of the Republican gains highlights the limits of the White House’s base strategy, which is focused on solidifying hard-GOP support by attacking Democrats on the Iraq war and elevating wedge issues such as immigration and gay marriage. The Democratic lead on a nationwide named congress-

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<sup>1</sup> Based on a survey of 1,000 likely voters, conducted August 23-27. We also refer in this memo to a survey of 1,023 likely voters conducted by Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research for the MoveOn PAC, July 11-16, 2006, and a survey of 650 likely voters conducted by Democracy Corps August 13-15, 2006 in the 5<sup>th</sup> District of Connecticut.

sional ballot<sup>2</sup> dropped from 7 points on Memorial Day to 5 points on Labor Day. Yet the gains come almost entirely from Republican base voters in areas that were already going to elect Republican candidates, with little or no Republican gain among contested voters or in swing House districts.

The Republicans' base strategy is doing nothing to change the underlying national mood, which remains locked down against them. The strong sense that the country is headed in the wrong direction (62 percent) has not changed. The resounding verdict against the President's job performance (only 41 percent approve, basically steady since Spring, with 55 percent now who disapprove) has, if anything, become slightly more negative in the past two months, with the share who strongly disapprove moving up 3 points to 45 percent, the highest level this year. Independents and moderates are moving away from the President.



The Republicans' small recent gains come almost entirely in ways that do not help them much. For example, the share who strongly approve of Bush's job performance moves up 4 points from May to 25 percent (note that this is 20 points below the share who strongly disapprove, a stunning gap), but the gains are mostly from Republican base voters – such as devout Evangelical Christians and white voters in the Deep South. But across the 50 most contested congressional districts there is actually a big jump in the share who strongly disapprove of Bush's job performance, up 11 points since April to 47 percent, the highest level yet in these districts.

<sup>2</sup> Named Congressional vote means that respondents are asked their vote choice using the names of the actual candidates in each respondent's district, rather than asking generically about preferences for "the Democratic/Republican" in their district.

As a result, the apparent Republican improvement in the national ballot is so far having little impact on the projected outcome for November. They are gaining in safe Republican congressional districts (moving up from 51 to 59 percent of the vote since April) and especially in the South (up from 42 to 50 percent), and among their evangelical hard-core believers. Yet in swing districts, the Democratic lead since April has actually quadrupled, from a 2-point margin to a bit over 8 points (Democrats now lead 51-43 in these areas, the first time they have topped 50 percent this year), and the Democratic margin among Independent voters has expanded from 8 points in April to 13 points (49-36 percent) now.

As disaffected Republicans return home, they benefit from increased party loyalty, with 88 percent of self-identified Republicans now saying they will vote for their party's congressional candidate (up from 81 percent in April). Yet Bush is trapped – he cannot do much better than this just by pumping up the base. And as he plays to divisive issues, it fires up Democrats, who continue to hold the edge on intensity this year. At this point, the share who strongly disapprove of Bush's job performance is 20 points higher than those who strongly approve; and the share of 2004 Kerry voters who say they will definitely vote (putting the likelihood at '10' on a 1-10 scale) is 64 percent – 8 points higher than for 2004 Bush voters.

The Republican base strategy may be helping them marginally more in the fight for the Senate. But even this is a holding action: to the extent Republicans have gained, it is concentrated in states where Republicans are struggling to hold onto their seats.

### **Democrats Can Win the National Security Debate**

As the campaign comes to its final two months, Democrats are moving to address some key issues and choices in the election, including the financial pressures on people, as well as Iraq, as we have stressed in recent memos. But one of the biggest keys for Democrats to retain their edge and win in November is to address Iraq on their own terms and in the right way, and to take the national security debate head on. Now that Bush and the Republicans have launched their campaign on these issues, Democrats can deny them the gains they achieved in 2002 and 2004 on security and, indeed, emerge as the leading force for keeping the country safe.

National security dominates the issue terrain now, with Iraq and terrorism vying for top concerns (30 percent cite the war in Iraq as one of their top two concerns, 29 percent cite terrorism and national security), along with the economy, jobs, and financial issues. The bleak situation on the ground in Iraq, and the foiled airplane bombing plot in Britain elevate the electorate's focus on both issues since late June (Iraq is up 3 points; terrorism and national security up 9 points).

The Bush/Cheney/Rove team knows what they are doing by drawing their battle lines on these issues: national security is the only important issue area on which the Republicans hold any advantage. Moreover, the public is conflicted about Iraq: they have reached a clear judgment that the war was not worth the costs, but they are not sure what to do about it; uneasy about pull-

ing out, and bothered, at the very least, by Republican hyperventilation about Democratic plans to ‘cut and run’ from Iraq. Democrats cannot leave these issues unaddressed, and need to show they have the better answers for them.

The good news, and the main conclusion of the new survey, is that Democrats can fend off Republican attacks and win the national security debate, especially with the key audiences Democrats will need for victory in November. Democrats should not only join this debate, but welcome it.

National security is winnable this cycle for Democrats because:

***The Republican advantage on national security has dropped sharply.*** Democrats enter this election in a very different position on national security issues relative to previous cycles. The Republican advantage on national security is significant, but no longer insurmountable; it has dropped by half since 2003; voters trusted Republicans to do a better job than Democrats on national security by a 29-point margin, 54-25 majority in August 2003, but only by a 48-33 percent plurality now. On other related measures, Democrats have reached parity or even pulled ahead; for example, Democrats now have a 6-point advantage on “foreign policy,” compared to a 6-point deficit three years ago.

***Democrats increase their lead when they engage on Iraq and national security.*** After working through a survey focused almost exclusively on the Democratic and Republican arguments on Iraq and national security, the Democratic margin in the congressional ballot improves from 5 to 8 points. Democrats gain even more ground with Independents – moving from a 13-point advantage to 19-point advantage. The gains are less pronounced in the swing congressional districts and states with close Senate races, but Democrats do not lose any ground here. This is now the third survey we have conducted that shows Democrats *increase their lead* when they engage the debate on Iraq and national security; earlier surveys for both MoveOn and Democracy Corps showed the same result. Democrats should not be reluctant in taking on these issues.

***The more voters hear, the more they move toward the Democrats on national security and terrorism.*** As voters hear Democratic plans and arguments on these issues, their view of the party changes in a very particular way. Their view about which party would do the better job on Iraq does not move – this is already polarized and pretty locked-in, with Democrats holding a narrow 2-point advantage at both the start and end of the survey. But as voters hear Democrats addressing these issues, they feel much more positively about the party on terrorism and national security, with the Republican advantage on both issues falling by half (on terrorism from a 15-point disadvantage for Democrats to a 6-point disadvantage; national security from down 15 points to down 7 points), and even more dramatic gains for Democrats among the voters who will decide this election. As Table 1 shows, Democrats roughly neutralize these issues with Independents and in swing House districts.

Table 1: Which party would do a better job on national security issues?  
 Cell values are percentage of who say Democrats minus percentage who say Republicans.

	Iraq			National Security			Terrorism		
	Total	Swing CDs	Indeps.	Total	Swing CDs	Indeps.	Total	Swing CDs	Indeps.
Start of survey	+2	+2	+10	-15	-13	-19	-15	-11	-14
End of survey	+2	+4	+8	-7	-1	-6	-6	0	-4
Change in margin	0	+2	-2	+8	+12	+13	+9	+11	+10

**Democrats decisively win against the current Bush rhetoric.** When voters are offered the choice of the Democratic vision on Iraq and national security, they flatly reject the kind of arguments the President and his party are using this month against Democrats on these issues, including ‘cut and run,’ opposing the tools needed for terrorist surveillance, and encouraging more terrorist attacks. We test a very strong distillation of the President’s current language against three different Democratic messages. The results for the three Democratic approaches vary; but the overall result is a rout: aggregating the three Democratic responses, Democrats win the argument by 15 points, with all three arguments winning by double digits. The strongest results come from this Democratic message, which largely reflects the current position of congressional Democrats (we discuss below some of the components that make this message effective). Voters opt for the Democratic security message by an enormous 17-point margin:

### Democratic narrative wins over Republican narrative by large margin

Cell values are percentage of respondents who agree with each statement.

The Democratic candidate for Congress says: the failed policies of the Bush administration and Republicans have made us less safe. Iraq continues to slip into civil war, despite billions spent and thousands of American lives lost. Osama bin Laden is still on the loose, the Taliban is gaining ground in Afghanistan, and al Qaeda has set up shop in Pakistan. Democrats will implement 100 percent of the 9/11 Commission recommendations, strengthen protections for our ports and nuclear plants, cut our dependence on foreign oil, and push for the responsible redeployment of our troops from Iraq

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-OR-

The Republican candidate for Congress says: Our War on Terror is producing results, like killing terrorist leader Zarqawi, and foiling the terrorist plot in Britain to blow up airplanes bound for the U.S. Democrats would put America at risk. They opposed a stronger Patriot Act and new tools for terrorist surveillance, and they want to 'cut and run' in Iraq, which would turn Iraq into a safe haven for terrorists, signal that we've abandoned the War on Terror, and inspire our enemies to launch new attacks against America. Republicans will ensure we continue to fight terrorists abroad so we don't have to fight them here

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***Democrats' national security messages particularly persuade Independents and voters in swing districts.*** The Democrats beat back this Republican security rhetoric by especially impressive margins where it will matter most in November – with Independents and voters in swing districts<sup>3</sup>:

- Democrats win the argument by 14 points in swing congressional districts, nearly double the 8-point margin they hold on the congressional ballot at the start of the survey.
- Democrats win the argument by an overwhelming 23 points with Independents, who favor Democrats by 13 points in the initial congressional vote.
- Democrats win the argument by a 44-point margin with “winnable” voters – the 9 percent of likely voters who are not voting for the Democratic congressional candidate now but show strong signs of doing so. By definition, *none* of these voters votes for the Democrat initially; but they opt for the Democratic arguments on national security by a lopsided 66-22 percent majority; and by the end of this security-focused survey, 27 percent of them are voting for the Democratic candidate in their district.

***Republicans' attacks on Democrats are weaker than Democrats' attacks on Republicans.*** When the Republicans attack Democrats on Iraq and terrorism, as they have increasingly

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<sup>3</sup> Result obtained by aggregating all three Democratic arguments.

done, the charges generate serious doubts about the Democrats with only around half the electorate, between 49 and 52 percent, depending on the argument. By contrast, Democratic critiques of the Bush national security record produce a far stronger reaction, with the strongest charge leading 62 percent of all voters (and equal or higher shares of Independents and voters in swing districts) to have serious doubts about the Republicans.

*When Democrats make their case on national security, they strengthen their voice on other issues as well.* We test a series of Democratic proposals on Iraq, terrorism, and national security. Not only do they all generate strong support, as we discuss below, there are also signs that as voters hear Democrats addressing these issues, they become more receptive to the rest of the Democratic agenda. Mid-survey, we test a Democratic-Republican debate on economics; half the respondents hear the slate of Democratic national security proposals before this, the other half after. Among the half who hear the Democrats' national security ideas first, the Democrats win the economic argument by a 25-point margin, 60-35 percent; among the half who have not yet heard the Democratic national security proposals, Democrats still win the economic argument later in the survey, but by a 19-point margin, 56-37 percent.<sup>4</sup>

### **Making the Case for a Change of Course in Iraq**

To win the national security debate, Democrats need to get the argument right. That starts with Iraq, the central focus of voter concern, and where Bush has chosen to plant his flag.

The public remains deeply conflicted on Iraq. By 60-37 percent (unchanged since April), voters have decided that the war was not worth the cost. But many surveys, including our own, show they are unsure what to do about this misdirected war. And the Republicans are able to at least muddy the issue, and possibly make small gains with some groups, when they manipulate the debate into a partisan caricature, charging Democrats with "cut and run." By a narrow 48-46 percent margin, Republicans succeed in charging that, "calls by liberal Democrats to cut and run from Iraq encourage the terrorists" (over the alternative statement, "the Bush-Cheney Iraq policy, with an ineffective, open-ended presence, undermines our security").

But Bush is not winning the political battle because, underneath, voters are more worried about the Republicans staying in Iraq too long than about the Democrats withdrawing too soon (by a 52-44 percent margin). And the Republican cut-and-run attack simply fails to persuade the swing voters who will decide the key contests in November (another sign that the White House is pursuing a dead-end base strategy). In the statement pair cited in the previous paragraph, Inde-

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<sup>4</sup> The comparison is not totally fair in some ways, since this one half of the respondents have heard a set of Democratic proposals at this point but none from the Republicans; yet the test does show that starting with national security produces a net gain in the economic debate. Interestingly, in an earlier survey, when we preceded the economic debate with a series of Democratic *criticisms* of Bush on national security, we did not find the same boost for the Democrats in the economic debate. That is, national security proposals appear to help more than criticisms as a predicate.

pendents side with Democrats and reject the cut-and-run critique by 50-42 percent. While voters in swing congressional districts split more evenly, they still worry marginally more about the Republicans’ ineffective Iraq policy hurting America’s security, 46-45 percent, with an even more pronounced 41-34 percent advantage for the Democrats among those voters who support either statement strongly.

The key here is that Democrats must wage this battle on different terrain, still security, but not the distorted place Bush is trying to create. The survey points to several imperatives for framing a winning message on Iraq that apply to virtually all the proposals leading Democrats have put forward:

***Bush has “mismanaged Iraq.”*** As Table 2 shows, the single strongest doubt voters have about the Bush/Republican national security record is that he is mismanaging Iraq. This is true, as well, for Independents and voters in swing districts, who also worry that Bush and the Republicans are too quick to go to war. This is why voters are so responsive to calls for greater accountability and oversights, as our previous surveys have found.

Table 2: Top two doubts about President Bush and GOP on national security

	Total	Swing CDs	Independents
Mismanaging the war in Iraq	29	32	32
Too much using terrorism and Iraq for political purposes	28	25	30
Spend too much time on foreign aid and foreign problems	26	22	21
Too quick to go to war	25	22	27
Don't protect American jobs in global trade	21	22	18
Get too little help from friends and allies abroad	21	16	23
Too quick to use the military	15	18	12
Abuses of civil liberties and human rights	15	18	22
Ineffective plans from protecting us from terrorism	10	9	9

***Bush has “no real plan” going forward.*** The strongest criticism of Bush and the Republicans tested in the survey is: “Bush and the Republicans in Washington have no real plan for achieving success in Iraq; we are taking more casualties every day and spending one billion dol-

lars a week there with no end in sight”; it leads 62 percent of all voters to have serious doubts about Bush and the GOP on national security.

***Iraq is part of GOP wrong priorities in the war on terror.*** A number of other surveys show public skepticism about Bush’s equation of Iraq and the war on terror. The public is receptive to the argument that the war has made the country less secure, while the administration cuts funds for crucial elements of the war on terror, such as fire departments and emergency response teams. The sense of skewed priorities gains strength from noting that the Republican Congress voted itself a pay raise at the same time it was making such cuts and opposing a pay raise for the troops in Iraq.

***It is time to change course on Iraq.*** A 53 percent majority agrees with a Democratic argument that “it is time to change course in Iraq,” however that is defined. (The survey shows about equal results from one statement stressing a gradual phased withdrawal based on progress made on the ground, plus holding the administration accountable by requiring reporting to Congress every three months; and another calling for a “responsible timetable” for withdrawal).

### **A Democratic Strategy for Winning on National Security**

The survey shows the power of the Democrats’ critique on Iraq, stressing the administration’s mismanagement of the war, but Democrats don’t win the argument by double digit margins until they put forward their own positive ideas on protecting the country’s security. Given how badly the administration has performed, Democrats should not miss the chance to move up their standing on security, which then adds strength to their substantial advantages on key domestic issues.

The key is to establish that Democrats have their own strong plan for protecting the nation’s security – focused on a change of course in Iraq, less dependence on foreign oil, stronger steps on terrorism, and stronger cooperation with allies in order to make us safe and improve standing in the world. Every one of the half dozen Democratic national security proposals tested in this survey generates strong support, earning majorities between 53 and 66 support who say these ideas make them more likely to support the Democratic congressional candidate.

Setting out such plans knocks out the pillar of the Bush argument that Democratic criticisms equate to weakness. One of the top doubts about Democrats on national security (and particularly among Independents and some other target blocks) is that they lack their own ideas on national security (cited by 23 percent overall as one of their top two doubts about the party on national security). The survey shows Democrats can readily refute this doubt.

Beyond making the case for a change of course in Iraq, a winning Democratic strategy includes:

***Set out a plan to cut dependence on foreign oil.*** We’ve stressed the potency of this issue all year, and we can’t overstate how powerfully it drives the national security debate. Dependence on foreign oil is by far the country’s top national security concern; 42 percent cite it as

one of their top two national security concerns, at least 15 points stronger than either combating terrorism (26 percent) or the war in Iraq (25 percent). That is partly because concern over energy dependence cuts across party lines, and so Democrats pick up the support of Independents and even some Republicans when they stress this. The strongest Democratic proposal tested here focuses on “cutting dependence on foreign oil”; it leads 66 percent of all voters to be much or somewhat more likely to support the Democratic congressional candidate, including 43 percent who say they would be *much* more likely.

The public has no doubt Democrats are the ones to produce results here; by a 12-point margin, the public believes Democrats would do a better job on “improving America’s energy security,” and that number stretches to a 20-point margin for Independents and 39 points among undecided voters. Moreover, accusing the Republicans of not investing in alternative energy because of ties to Big Oil raises serious doubts for 56 percent of voters and nearly two-thirds of Independents.

***Pledging stronger actions against terror.*** A 55 percent majority is more likely to support the Democratic candidate who says: “We face a real threat from Islamic extremists who advocate violence and terrorism to create fundamentalist regimes across the Middle East and even in parts of Europe. We need to work with our allies to marginalize these extremists and block their access to dangerous weapons.” Both overall and in swing districts, this is the second-strongest Democratic proposal tested, and it resonates particularly with opinion elites (66 percent more likely to support the Democrat). All three of the Democratic messages that we test – all of which dominate the current Bush/GOP national security message – draw strength from a pledge to strengthen that country’s efforts to combat terror, such as implementing 100 percent of the 9/11 Commission’s recommendations (an idea we have tested separately in previous surveys).

***Strengthening ties with allies and America’s standing in the world.*** The fourth highest national security priority nationwide – after the dominant top three of energy dependence, Iraq, and terrorism – is the need to strengthen ties with our allies, cited by 21 percent as one of their top two concerns. Support for working cooperatively with other countries remains a majority sentiment (53-43 percent say “America’s security depends on building strong ties with other nations,” rather than, “bottom line, America’s security depends on its own military strength; largely stable over the past two years).

Democrats at this point totally dominate on the questions of which party would do a better job “strengthening relations with our allies (a 26-point advantage) and “building respect for America in the world” (19-point advantage). A major part of the Democratic plan needs to focus on strengthening our alliances and improving our security cooperation abroad.

***Framing national security attacks on Republicans in terms of accountability.*** Given that Bush and the Republicans claim they will do whatever it takes to keep America safe, voters – and particularly swing voters – react harshly when they hear evidence of the Administration subordinating security imperatives to short-term political interests or financial self-interest. Democrats need to highlight these cases and stress the need for stronger accountability to ensure security comes first. Case in point: a message delineating how Republicans have cut funding from emergency response teams while giving themselves a pay raise and the wealthy a tax cut

raises serious doubts for 60 percent of likely voters. The frame also works when talking about Iraq and terrorism: a message stating that “Republicans have put the interests of big business ahead of our national security” by trying to sell our ports to a company owned by the United Arab Emirates, giving no-bid contracts to Halliburton, even while blocking a pay raise for our troops, raises serious doubts for 56 percent of voters, and 64 percent of Independents.

***Forget the “guns vs. butter” framing.*** The survey shows that the strongest proposals are not based on a guns-versus-butter argument to redirect the spending on national security to domestic priorities. Although this trade-off has been tested many ways in various surveys, when asked in a balanced way, the proposition loses by a 46-51 percent margin.<sup>5</sup> The argument works somewhat better with Independents (50-46 percent), but loses badly in swing districts (41-57 percent). Although voters trust Democrats more than Republicans to strike the right balance between foreign and domestic issues (by a 46-39 percent margin), this is not the way to win the overall battle on national security.

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Five years after 9/11, the electorate has developed deep doubts that George Bush, Dick Cheney, and the Republican Congress are doing what is necessary to make America and the world it inhabits safer. This is a moment for Democrats to lay out their own proposals and vision on Iraq and national security. Democrats should welcome this debate. We win the argument with voters. And by doing so, we can bring the change that will lead to a more secure America.

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<sup>5</sup> The statement pair tested in the survey is: “The government is spending too much time and money on diplomatic and military efforts abroad and needs to redirect more resources to needs at home, like health care and education”; or, “Given the threats from terrorism and dangerous regimes like North Korea, it would be a mistake to make significant cuts in the resources we are devoting to military and diplomatic efforts abroad.”