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To: Friends of Democracy Corps

From: Stan Greenberg
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RE: PASSING THE NATIONAL SECURITY THRESHOLD
Seven Keys for Democrats on National Security as Bush Slide Continues

With George Bush's political standing at the lowest point since 9/11, and on some measures, the lowest of his entire presidency, Democrats have a double opportunity this Fall. Democrats have an opening not only to capitalize on their growing lead on the economy and social issues, but also to strengthen their standing on national security – a prerequisite to real gains in 2004. The new Democracy Corps poll drills deep into the electorate's perceptions about foreign affairs two years after the 9/11 attacks, and finds support for Bush's foreign agenda is uneven, receding, and brittle.¹

The conventional wisdom – that this wartime president has a lock on foreign policy – is wrong. Americans always want their presidents to succeed against foreign perils, and Republicans and Democrats alike want this administration to succeed now in Iraq, North Korea, and the war on terrorism. Voters do have a bond with the president forged in the 9-11 experience. But voters are increasingly uneasy with Bush's handling of foreign affairs and uncertain of his administration. A growing share believes he is alienating friends and allies abroad, failing to level with the public, ignoring key sources of America's vulnerability, and setting the wrong priorities in balancing America's foreign and domestic challenges.

Voters are ready to listen to alternatives. When Democrats put out a clear message on national security, it now plays Bush's post-9/11, post-Iraq message to a draw.

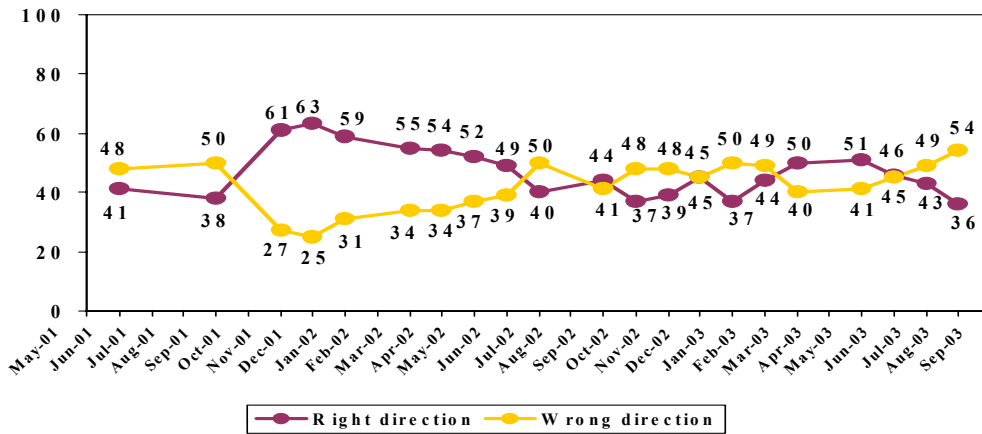
Bush Continues to Fall

The starting point for the Democrats is the dramatic fall in Bush's political standing, even since our last national poll in late July. His job approval, at 55 percent, is just

¹Democracy Corps conducted a national poll of 1,004 likely voters August 24-28, 2003.

one point above the lowest mark of his presidency. The ratio between those who strongly approve and strongly disapprove of his job performance is approaching parity (34-30 percent), after having been at a nearly 10:1 ratio just after 9/11, and about 2:1 through early 2003, during the run-up, conduct, and immediate aftermath of the Iraq war. Equally significant, more and more voters now see the country headed in the wrong direction, reflecting real pessimism about Bush's leadership for the country. Most Americans are now receptive to an alternative. In a match-up against an unnamed Democratic nominee, Bush falls to 46 percent, his lowest mark yet since 9/11, and below his 2000 vote.

Country Direction



Foreign Affairs: Bush's Helium Balloon, Democrats' Challenge

The mystery is not why Bush is falling, but why he has not fallen further. With 55 percent wanting a “significantly different direction” on the economy – and strong demands for change on health care, deficits, Social Security, and the environment – the only question is what is keeping Bush and the Republicans competitive.

The answer, of course, is all about foreign affairs and national security. They are the helium balloons that hold this presidency aloft. The president enjoys 60 percent support or better on the direction he is headed on national security (65 percent), the war on terrorism (61 percent), and homeland security (60 percent), which leaves his Republicans with a strong, 29-point advantage on which Party voters trust more to handle national security.

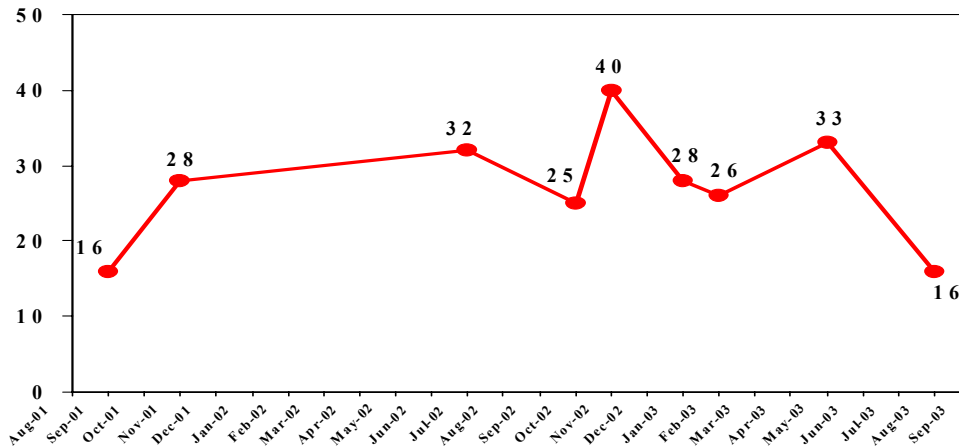
This gap, if unaddressed, could undercut Democratic gains in Congress and block the door to the White House in 2004. At a time when a majority of Americans remain highly worried about the country's security, the Democratic Party and its standard bearer

need to cross a threshold of credibility on national security. It is not enough to change the topic to the economy and other domestic issues. Democrats can ultimately win on those issues, but to do so they first need to reduce the advantage Bush and the Republicans hold on national security. Our new survey shows they can. Indeed, Democrats can contest national security with the confidence that Democratic policies may be the right ones for this period of challenge to our security.

Democrats Increasingly Able to Compete on National Security

The fact is, Democrats are already moving into competitive terrain with Bush on national security. This is partly because the deference voters gave to the President just after 9/11 and during the Iraq war has yielded to a more naturally skeptical attitude, particularly as doubts surface about Bush's WMD claims and his handling of Iraq's reconstruction. The Republican edge on which party does best at "keeping America strong" has already dropped from 40 to just 16 points, the same level as prior to 9/11. Democrats need to reduce the gap further, but the trend is decisively away from Bush and the Republicans on this essential attribute related to security and leadership.

Which Party Trust More on "Keeping America Strong" Net advantage of Republicans over Democrats



The impact of this shift comes into sharp focus when we test a strong national security for Bush head-to-head with national security messages from two different hypothetical Democratic presidential candidates – one who supported the decision to start the war against Iraq, and one who opposed it. In both cases, the Democratic messages pull to a statistical tie with the Bush message, although the statement stressing support for the Iraq war emerges as slightly stronger.² The biggest point: even on Bush’s strongest issue, national security, Democrats can now argue the President to a tie. Given this stunning result, it is worth reprinting the Bush message and both Democratic messages in full:

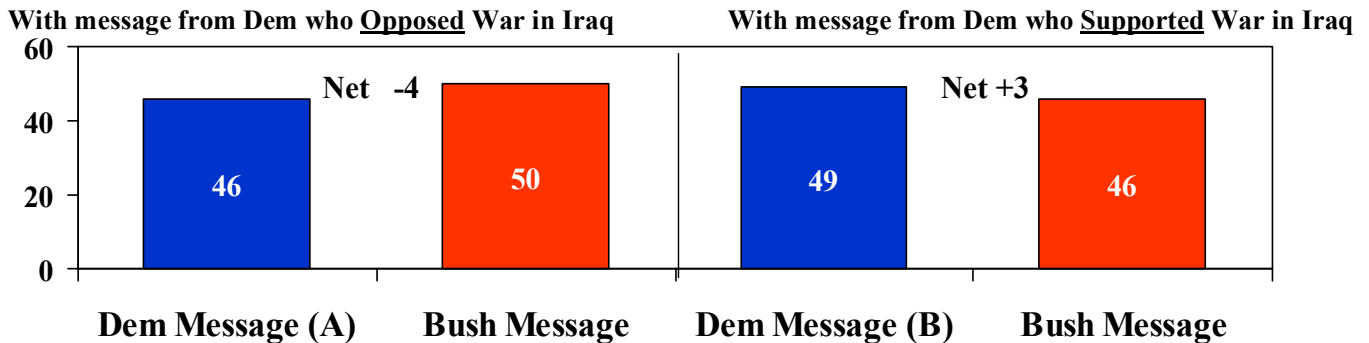
Democratic vs. Bush Messages on National Security

Bush Message: *President Bush says, since 9/11, my first priority has been a worldwide campaign against terrorists and tyrants with dangerous weapons. We created a new Homeland Security department, toppled the Taliban in Afghanistan, put al Qaeda on the run, and drove Saddam Hussein out of power, so he can never again brutalize his own people or endanger other countries. We cannot afford to go back to the days when we shortchanged our military, weakened our intelligence capabilities, and underestimated the threat of terrorism. I pledge a relentless effort to root out terrorism and protect the American people.*

vs.

Democratic Message (A) *The Democratic candidate says, I supported the military attack on al Qaeda in Afghanistan, but I opposed the Iraq war from the start because it was ill-advised, waged on false pretenses, and diverted us from the fight against terrorism, while it alienated our friends abroad. The fact is, Iraq did not pose an immediate threat, we did not have enough allies sharing the burden, and now we are stuck bearing 90 percent of the cost, the troops, and the casualties. I would renew our focus on immediate threats like al Qaeda and North Korea, get our allies to help more in Iraq, and focus more of our resources here at home - on homeland security, and also health care and jobs.*

Democratic Message (B) *The Democratic candidate says, I supported the President's attacks on al Qaeda in Afghanistan, and the war to get rid of Saddam Hussein. But the President has no clear plan for winning the peace in Iraq, he failed to stop North Korea's nuclear weapons program, and by constantly going it alone, he alienates our allies and leaves us bearing more of the burden. I would do more to protect America - by getting NATO to provide more troops in Iraq, working with our allies to ensure dangerous weapons materials from Russia or North Korea never get into terrorists' hands, and strengthening U.S. leadership on trade, so we can get our economy moving again.*



² Interestingly, the statement stressing support for the Iraq war performs stronger mostly due to greater support from Democrats and Independents – not primarily from strong Republican support. The differences in strength of the two statements, however, are not statistically significant, either overall, or among Democrats Independents, and Republicans (the two Democratic messages were each tested with half samples of 502 respondents, yielding a margin of sampling error on each message test of about plus or minus 4.4 percent, and larger margins for Democratic, Independent, and Republican sub-populations).

Obviously, much more than the words will determine Democrats' success in closing the national security gap – including the kind of national security agenda, experience, and passion the Party's candidates each bring to bear, as well as events abroad. Yet, at a minimum, the parity of these Democratic statements with the Bush position demonstrates that Democrats can now get a hearing on national security and hold their own.

Seven Keys to Making the Case that Democrats Will do More to Protect America

The survey results, including the strength of the Democratic message statements above, point to seven elements that need to be at the center of the Democratic argument on national security.

1. The right critique of the Bush administration from Democrats in Congress and in the campaigns: Bush has failed to pull together a clear plan, enough allies, the right priorities, or the public's trust.
2. Democrats will do *more* than Bush to protect America and its people – with particular emphasis on a *positive case* on national security.
3. Democrats will do more to protect America by working more closely and effectively with friends and allies abroad – to increasing the effectiveness of our security efforts, while reducing the burden on the U.S.
4. Democrats will do more to protect America by applying a better set of priorities, aimed at ensuring strength both abroad and at home.
5. Democrats will stand up for America's troops, ensuring that U.S. national security policies and budget cuts do not come at the expense of the safety and well-being of our men and women in uniform.
6. Democrats will plug the specific gaps in homeland security that leave the country at risk – not simply more funding, but tangible solutions.
7. Democrats will act before danger strikes to reduce the sources of America's vulnerability, particularly with a serious energy program to reduce our dependence on the Mideast.

The first imperative is to get the critique right on the Bush record and vision on foreign affairs. We are entering a key period when Democrats and others in Congress, as part of their oversight role, will question the administration's foreign policy plans, while the Party's presidential candidates will continue laying out their critiques of the admini-

stration's record as they frame their own national security programs. It is important to understand that some critiques hit home more than others.

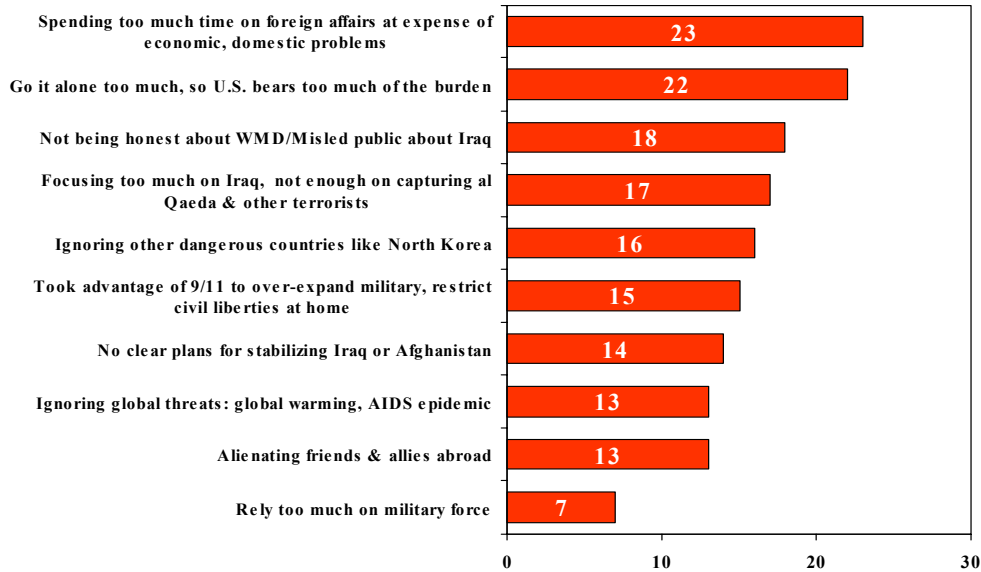
Voters respond coolly, for example, to the sweeping assertion that Bush has made America less safe. The argument simply does not ring true with a public that feels Bush has shown determination in seeking to protect the American people from the new terrorist threat – such as through the military actions in Afghanistan and Iraq, and creation of the new Department of Homeland Security. Only 41 percent believe America is less safe than three years ago, before Bush entered the White House (with 43 percent saying it is safer). Even more important, a strong 61-26 percent majority feels safer now than right after 9/11 – the more meaningful benchmark. This is the core of Bush's strength, not his vulnerability. Nor do most voters find it persuasive that Bush took advantage of 9/11 to pursue pre-existing ideological or partisan goals, such as increasing the defense budget or restricting civil liberties; this is the least powerful of a dozen criticisms tested.

Yet there are four specific doubts about the Bush approach to foreign affairs that resonate and account for the loss of his dominance in this area, as well as his declining political standing overall.

- ***Lacks a clear plan.*** At this point, fully 50 percent of voters do not believe Bush has a plan to win the peace in Iraq. The sense of an administration that no longer has a clear plan of action may carry over to other hot spots as well, including North Korea and the Mideast peace process.
- ***Lacks enough allies.*** One of the top two doubts about Bush and the Republicans on national security is that they “go it alone too much, so the U.S. bears too much of the burden (selected by 22 percent as one of their top two doubts from a list of ten). The critique goes well beyond Iraq to strained ties with NATO, Latin America, and other key friends abroad.
- ***Lacks the right priorities.*** The top doubt, selected by 23 percent, is that the President spends too much time on foreign affairs at the expense of economic and domestic problems. The criticism here is that he has failed to find a way to pursue both in a balanced, mutually reinforcing way.
- ***Lacks the public's trust.*** In the wake of doubts about the administration's claims about the Iraqi weapons of mass destruction program, only 50 percent of voters feel they can trust what Bush is saying regarding WMD in Iraq. It is the third biggest doubt about Bush and the Republicans on national security. Constantly changing estimates of costs and troop needs in Iraq may further deepen the administration's credibility problems.

Doubts about Republicans on National Security

Selecting TWO from list



Stressing the Positive Case: Democrats Will do More to Protect America

The second key is to find ways to draw more attention to the Democrats' own positive agenda on security. Although Bush now has real vulnerabilities on foreign affairs, there is a danger for Democrats if voters only hear criticisms. There may be a natural division of labor here, with Congress taking the lead (as is its role) in asking the hardest questions about the administration's policies. But the presidential candidates need to show some creativity in drawing more attention to the solutions.

Two of the top reservations the public has about Democrats on national security are that they have not provided their own plans and ideas, and that they criticize Bush too much; this is particularly true for Independents. Moreover, the survey generally suggests a much stronger response to positive statements on national security from Democratic presidential candidates than potential attacks on Bush on these issues.

Democrats, and especially their candidates, need to highlight their positive agenda on national security, and frame it in a way that addresses the country's sense of vulnerability – arguing that they can do *more* to protect America and its people. The survey shows the argument can be convincing, if Democrats present it correctly.

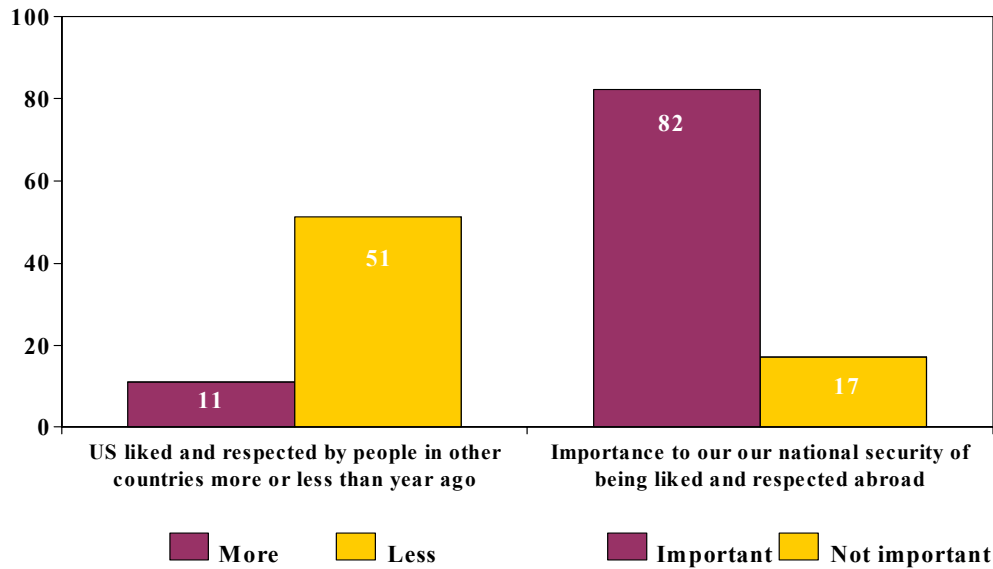
Doing More to Protect America by Working Better with Other Countries

A third point: one of the most important ways for Democrats to make the positive case is by arguing that they will do a better job of working with other countries in ways

that make our security efforts both more effective and more affordable. This is Bush’s greatest vulnerability on foreign affairs.

Voters are receptive to this argument, with real misgivings about how Bush is managing relations with other countries. By a lopsided 51-11 percent margin, Americans feel we are less liked and respected by people in other countries compared to one year ago, and nearly all of the public, 82 percent, feels that being liked and respected abroad is important for America’s national security (47 percent very important, 35 percent somewhat important). Even a plurality of *Republicans*, who show tremendous loyalty to Bush on most national security issues, feel the U.S. is now less liked and respected abroad. As noted earlier, Bush’s go-it-alone approach stands as one of the top two doubts voters have about the Republican approach on national security.

America’s Standing Abroad



This is why, despite the sizeable advantage Bush and the Republicans hold on some aspects of national security, Democrats already have reached parity with when the issue is “foreign policy” (44-44 percent, between continuing in Bush’s direction or going in a significantly different direction), “respect for the United States in the world” (45-46 percent), or “relations with countries around the world” (45-48 percent).

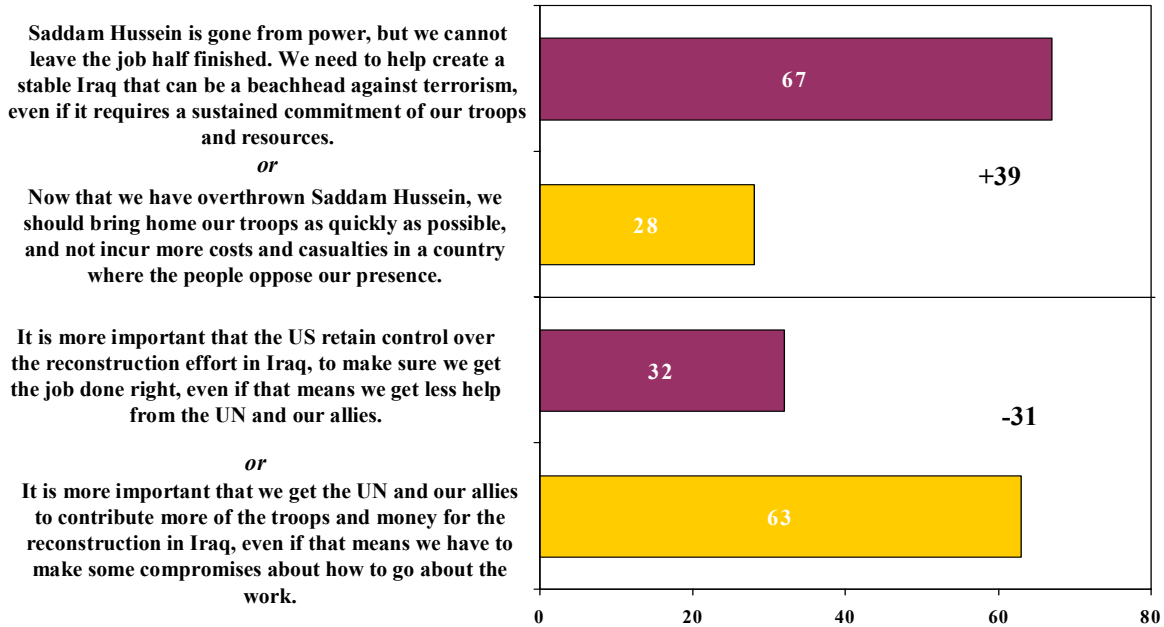
The strongest way to talk about the importance of working with other countries is not by invoking the abstract objective of multilateralism, versus Bush’s unilateralism.

Nor do voters respond with great strength to an attack on Bush for skewering a range of international treaties (only 46 percent express serious doubts about Bush with this attack).

Rather, Democrats need to stress that, by working more cooperatively with friends and allies abroad, we can make our security efforts more *effective*. A statement along these lines is convincing for 70 percent of likely voters, including 32 percent who find it *very convincing*. (“I will follow the strong foreign policy tradition of Roosevelt, Truman and Kennedy. I will not hesitate to use force when necessary, but I believe we can achieve more by building support from other countries than by constantly going it alone. I will build strong alliances and work cooperatively with other countries to resolve deadly conflicts, reduce global suffering, and protect our country from terrorism.”)

Democrats also need to stress that, by working better with other countries, we reduce the costs and risks America bears as from its security agenda. The public’s strong support for this sentiment helps explain why the administration has abruptly reversed course and decided to pursue a new UN resolution for the Iraq reconstruction effort. While two-thirds (67 percent) of voters support a sustained commitment of troops and resources for the reconstruction effort and reject the idea of simply bringing the troops home, voters have overwhelmingly sided with Democratic arguments over recent weeks on the need to internationalize the reconstruction effort by bringing in more help from the UN and our allies. By a 63-32 percent margin, they reject the argument the administration put forward through the summer, that “it is more important that the US retain control over the reconstruction effort in Iraq, to make sure we get the job done right, even if that means we get less help from the UN and our allies.” Even a 43 percent minority of Republicans agree on the need to seek more help from the UN and our allies – and this was before the administration announced it would do so.

Iraq Reconstruction: Support, but Need More from Allies



One factor linked to the desire for internationalizing the reconstruction effort is some rebound in support for the UN since the onset of the war in Iraq. But the emphasis here should not be on the UN; a fifth of voters see an over-reliance on the UN as one of the chief problems with Democrats on national security. Rather, the case for strengthening our efforts with other countries should rest on more direct benefits – greater effectiveness, and a more equitable distribution of the security burden.

Doing More to Protect America through Better Priorities

A fourth key for Democrats: stressing that they will do more to protect America because they operate by a better set of priorities – specifically, ensuring that America’s security efforts abroad are joined with steps to ensure strength and prosperity at home. With jobs disappearing, health care costs climbing, and the deficit out of control, voters increasingly feel that Bush – like his father – has lost sight of domestic problems.

Whenever Democrats connect national security with domestic prosperity, they tap into their strong and growing advantage over the Republicans on the economy – a net 15-

point edge on which party voters trust more, the strongest margin since the Clinton era, and up 12 points just since mid-June.

Although we reiterate the need for Democrats to stress their positive national security agenda, it is revealing that one of the strongest attacks tested on the Bush foreign policy record is that its agenda reflects unbalanced priorities: “President Bush has the wrong priorities, spending a billion dollars a week in Iraq, rebuilding schools and hospitals over there, but cutting education and health care in our own country; if we can afford to build schools and hospitals in Baghdad, we can also afford to do more to improve our schools and hospitals here at home” (raises serious doubts about the Bush administration with 51 percent, including 28 percent who have *very* serious doubts).

Doing More to Protect America by Standing Up for the Troops

A fifth key for Democrats is stressing the actions they would take to stand up for the men and women in the armed forces. There is a danger that Democrats’ strong record on strengthening the military and standing up for the troops too can get lost in the debates over how to use the military. One of the top doubts voters have about the Democrats is that they cut the military budget too much – even more than the notion that they might be too hesitant to use military force – and even though Democrats have supported recent increases in military spending.

Yet voters are beginning to doubt the Bush administration’s commitment to the troops as well, especially given the chorus of recent complaints from military personnel and their families. The single strongest attack on the Bush record among a dozen tested in this survey is that “President Bush is not keeping faith with our soldiers and their families. His new tax cut failed to extend the increased child tax credit to low income military families. His new budget cuts billions in veterans benefits. And now he is leaving our troops in Iraq with an unclear mission, basically sitting ducks for guerilla attacks, with broken promises about when they can return home.” It leads 57 percent of voters to have serious doubts about the Bush administration. Despite the Republican advantage on many aspects of national security, this is stronger than *any* of the potential attacks by President Bush against the Democrats tested in this survey (including a potential attack on Democrats for cutting military spending, which tests 9 points less powerfully).

As Democratic candidates put out a positive agenda on security, they need to stress the Party’s leadership in trying to extend the increased child tax credit to low income military (and other) families, strong support for veterans health benefits, and the range of steps that can ensure improved quality of life for service personnel and their families. They can also stress that by bringing more allied forces into Iraq, we can improve the security environment and lower risk levels for our own troops.

Doing More to Protect America by Plugging the Gaps in Homeland Security

A sixth key for Democrats is to show how they would do more to plug the gaps in current homeland security efforts. It is not enough – in fact, it is currently a losing effort – simply to argue that the Bush administration is not spending enough on homeland security. The public gives Bush marginally stronger marks on “*fully funding* homeland security” than on “homeland security” itself. Our past research shows that voters are simply skeptical that Bush, who talks so much about homeland security, would be shortchanging it in practice, even if that is demonstrably the case.

Democrats do better by putting this in more tangible and positive terms – highlighting the specific gaps that still exist in the country’s homeland security efforts, and explaining what they would do to plug those gaps, including:

- ***Tougher monitoring of shipping.*** The public is particularly troubled that the government is still inspecting only about four percent of the shipping containers entering the country; the threat of terrorists using these containers to smuggle in dangerous weapons is clear to voters. For that reason, 76 percent respond positively to a Democratic candidate who stresses this problem, pledges to insist on monitoring far more of the shipping entering the country, and to fully equip and train police and fire fighters to help prevent or respond to terrorist attacks. It is the strongest positive Democratic statement among voters who would not currently vote for a Democratic candidate, but are open to doing so.
- ***Tougher security at American chemical factories.*** Similarly, voters respond strongly by Democratic proposals to require tougher security measures at major chemical plants in the U.S. Over two-thirds of voters are moved by a Democratic candidate stressing the need for tighter security regulations at America’s major chemical plants – a move the Bush administration has resisted (“A terrorist attack on any of America’s biggest chemical plants could cause tens of thousands of casualties, yet the Bush administration is opposing legislation to improve their security. I would support a new law to require far tougher security at all vulnerable chemical plants in the U.S.” – 68 percent very or somewhat convincing).

Doing More to Protect America by Reducing our Vulnerabilities: Energy and WMD

The final key for Democrats is to show how they will reduce America’s vulnerability before danger strikes. The President has recently argued that he is taking the fight to terrorists in the Mideast to prevent them from striking again in the U.S. Leaving aside his strained logic – there is no evidence, for example, that Saddam Hussein was planning on launching terrorist attacks in the U.S. – there is also no reason to cede the ground of

preventive action to this administration. It can and should be a central element of the Democratic national security agenda.

Energy policy provides the strongest illustration. The single strongest proposal for Democrats tested in the current survey is a commitment to a new energy policy: “The war in Iraq proves that we need an energy policy that makes us less dependent on the unstable regimes of the Mideast and their oil. We must invest in American technology to develop new, affordable sources of renewable energy, like solar power and fuel cells.” Fully 75 percent of voters find this convincing, including nearly half of the entire electorate, 47 percent, who find it *very* convincing.

Another illustration of this idea is Democratic support to expand efforts, such as the Nunn-Lugar program, designed to prevent materials for WMD from falling into terrorists’ hands. Three-fourths (75 percent) find this statement by a Democratic candidate convincing: “Right now two-thirds of all nuclear sites in Russia lack basic security protections, and millions of chemical weapons shells there remain poorly secured, yet Congress is blocking efforts to help safeguard such materials in Russia and other countries. I would immediately create a global effort to secure chemical, biological, and nuclear materials to keep them from falling into terrorists' hands.”

Conclusion

This is a moment of opportunity for Democrats to establish that they have a better plan for protecting America from the dangers of the post-9/11 world. Voters have left behind the wartime instinct to rally around the president on security matters, and are increasingly open to questions about Bush’s vision, unilateralism, priorities, and truthfulness on foreign affairs. Events themselves – in Iraq, the Mideast peace process, North Korea, and other hot spots – will clearly do the most to influence perceptions of Bush’s national security leadership. But Democrats should not – need not – be passive here. By laying out a strong case on national security, Democrats could neutralize Bush’s advantages on the one set of issues still holding his presidency aloft, and create more space for voters’ strong and growing doubts about Bush’s domestic and economic leadership.