

Democrats could blow 2008 over national security

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Not long ago, the President of one of America's flagship universities was sitting with its top government affairs staffer, musing, for a change, about something other than fundraising and faculty recruitment.

'Is it possible,' asked the President, a liberal of good standing, 'that Democrats might actually blow the 2008 election?' The staffer, a product of Washington's policy-making scene who often travels to the capital on university business, replied, 'I've been thinking that all along.'

Blow the 2008 election? Fail to win the Presidency? I hear the concern increasingly expressed in conversations with Democrats over breakfast or lunch and in e-mails that pop across my laptop.

The cause: the party's views about national security, particularly regarding the war in Iraq and tensions with Iran. The themes that pervade party orthodoxy include a distrust of the military, an aversion to the use of force, a minimizing (or ignoring) of recent military progress in Iraq, and a failure to clearly differentiate the United States from its enemies.

To be sure, most Democrats eagerly anticipate 2008. The dynamics of U.S. politics heavily favour them to win the White House and retain, if not broaden, their control of Congress. Most Americans are suffering 'Bush fatigue,' believe the country is moving in the wrong direction (a leading sign of trouble for the incumbent presidential party), are noticeably jittery about their economic prospects due to stagnant living standards, and favour Democrats in polls that ask which party would better handle most top-tier issues.

Besides, the notion that national security could sink Democrats seems not just wrong, but backwards. After all, Bush's mismanagement of the war in Iraq, which further fuels the controversy over whether the United States should have launched the war in the first place, is the issue that has most catapulted Democrats to their presumptive electoral position to begin with.

Democratiya 11 | Winter 2007

But, we are 11 months out from Election '08 – and a year is a veritable lifetime in U.S. politics. Michael Dukakis, the Democratic presidential nominee in 1988, held a 17-point edge over the elder George Bush in July that year and lost by eight points in November. The same Bush was so popular in early 1991, after the first Persian Gulf War, that Democrats joked about conceding re-election to him. But the economy sank and Bush lost a year later to Bill Clinton.

More to the point, public dismay over the current President's handling of a particular war will not necessarily generate greater trust in Democrats to manage national security in general. And of late, Democrats in Congress and on the presidential campaign trail have spoken and acted in ways that are reviving fears that the party just doesn't 'get it' when it comes to protecting the nation.

It's a problem from which Democrats have suffered since the immediate aftermath of Vietnam, when the party largely discarded its strong national security credentials to focus on domestic issues. For a generation thereafter, Americans consistently said they trusted Republicans more than Democrats to keep the nation safe. That gave Republicans a huge leg up at presidential election time.

And in that period, Democrats have won the White House only when national security was not a top public concern. Jimmy Carter won in 1976 when Americans punished Republicans over Richard Nixon's Watergate scandal; Bill Clinton won in 1992 (and 1996) when, after victory in the Cold War, Americans focused on the economy and domestic issues.

Today, Democrats have no such luxury. With global jihadists promising to attack the United States again, with U.S. troops engaged in Iraq and Afghanistan, and with tensions rising with Iran over its nuclear program, national security is never far from the minds of mainstream Americans.

The question is whether Democrats will be ready to answer the call for strong, reassuring leadership on national security. The answer, alas, is not clear. And doubts are mounting. Here's why:

Misreading America

Ever since Vietnam, Democrats, their grassroots allies, and their friends in the media establishment have invested in a story line – a narrative – about the United

HAAS | Will the Democrats Blow 2008?

States and national security that reflects neither reality nor the deep-seated feelings of most Americans.

It goes something like this: Republicans are subservient to a military-industrial complex that seeks war to make money, military force invariably leads to Vietnam-like quagmires, and America would gain more around the world by dropping its weapons and engaging its enemies.

That narrative shapes the thinking of Democratic officeholders and left-leaning opinion leaders whenever Washington debates the use of force, whether the President is a Republican or Democrat, whether it is Bush the elder seeking to remove Saddam Hussein from Kuwait or Clinton using airpower to force Serbian leader Slobodan Milošević to stop his genocide.

In recent years, the narrative has assumed even more prominence among Democrats, and not only due to controversies over Iraq – such as whether the current President skewed intelligence on weapons of mass destruction and why U.S. troops have faced so many problems in post-Saddam Iraq. Also elevating this narrative are changes in the structure of Democratic politics.

More than ever, the party is controlled by a new and stridently anti-military ‘iron triangle’ of multi-million-dollar donors, grassroots groups led by *moveon.org*, and leftist bloggers led by the *Daily Kos*. They provide the funds, the grassroots activists, and the messages that fuel Democratic politics, and they subscribe fully to the narrative.

Meanwhile, the narrative is echoed by the media establishment – the major newspapers, magazines, and TV and radio networks. Of particular note is the hugely influential editorial page of the *New York Times*, which has called for the United States to withdraw from Iraq and for the White House to change its tone toward Iran from confrontation to conciliation.

With this narrative emanating from the halls of a Democrat-controlled Congress, mouthed by Democratic presidential candidates, and echoed by a Democrat-leaning media establishment, you might get the impression that it dominates all American thinking outside of Bush’s insulated White House. The reality, however, is far more complicated.

Democratiya 11 | Winter 2007

On Iraq, polls show that Americans increasingly recognize that a new general (David Petraeus), a new strategy, and a 'surge' in U.S. troops are making a real difference on the ground, enabling U.S. forces to greatly reduce violence, bring Iraqi factions together, rout al-Qaeda from major cities and provinces, and turn their attention to Iranian-backed militias.

By November 2007, even reluctant media establishments, each invested in the narrative, had taken notice. *The New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and CNN reported that U.S. forces are defeating their enemies, greatly reducing violence, and enabling cities and towns to spring back to life. (In Europe, the philosophically similar *Guardian* and BBC reported the same thing.)

But leading Democrats continued to ignore the evidence. 'We can't win militarily,' Rep. John Murtha, who runs the House panel that funds the Pentagon, declared in mid-November. Days earlier, the Senate's top-ranking Democrat, Harry Reid, said, 'It's not getting better, it's getting worse' – all evidence to the contrary. (Reid's pronouncement, by the way, came seven months after he determined that 'this war is lost' and the surge of troops was having no effect, even though the 'surge' troops had not yet arrived in full.)

On the presidential campaign trail, Democrats are a jumble of contradictions – sometimes explaining the violence in Iraq as sectarian, other times acknowledging that Sunnis and Shia are joining forces to fight al-Qaeda and the militias but giving U.S. troops no credit for making that happen; sometimes recognizing that U.S. troops (and the tribes with which they are working) are making progress against al-Qaeda and the militias, other times insisting we must end the war if we hope to restore order.

What Democrats want is a 'change in direction,' (fewer troops and more limited goals), even though it was Petraeus' 'change in direction' – a new strategy and more troops – that turned things around. Rather than seek victory over al-Qaeda, just as U.S. forces had it on the run, Democrats sought to transfer major combat to Iraqi forces whether or not they're ready to assume it.

Indeed, Democrats hope to translate their narrative into national policy. Backed by their presidential candidates, congressional Democrats in late 2007 refused to provide needed funds for U.S. operations in Iraq unless Bush agreed to specific

HAAS | Will the Democrats Blow 2008?

deadlines for troop withdrawals. In response, the Pentagon said it would have to borrow from non-Iraq accounts to support the Iraq operation.

Simply put, the Iraq debate has opened a gap between Democrats and reality and, more important politically, between Democrats and the public. As Americans increasingly recognize the progress, they will grow increasingly distrustful of a political party that refuses to do so, and that refuses to consider the consequences of allowing al-Qaeda to escape defeat, reconstitute itself in Iraq, and, with Iran's help, turn Iraq into a safe haven for terrorism.

Moral clarity

In the increasingly vitriolic world of American politics and media, where more politicians compete for airtime on more media outlets that, in turn, compete for market share with one another, the outrageous trumps the thoughtful. The more extreme is the rhetoric, the more outrageous is the behaviour, the more likely that the actor becomes the media's new protagonist.

Politically, such incidents are not cost-free. Each incident of extreme rhetoric or outrageous behaviour leaves a negative impression about not only the actor but his or her political party. Each incident strikes a blow to the party's overall image. The opposing party is only too happy to remind Americans of such incidents in order to reinforce the image.

Subscribing to the post-Vietnam narrative, competing for air time, some Democrats of late have done the party potentially great harm when it comes to convincing the public that it's ready to protect the nation. That some of these Democrats are the party's leading figures only exacerbates the harm.

Let us count the ways:

- When the scandal broke at Abu Ghraib, where U.S. soldiers mistreated Iraqi prisoners, top Democrats lost their capacity for perspective. Ted Kennedy, perhaps the Senate's most influential Democrat, told his colleagues, 'Shamefully, we now learn that Saddam's torture chambers reopened under new management – U.S. management.' Richard Durbin, the Senate's second-ranking Democrat, said, '[American soldiers treatment of captives at Abu Ghraib compares to the treatment

Democratiya 11 | Winter 2007

performed by] Nazis, Soviets in their gulags, or some mad regime – Poll Pot or others.’

- When General Petraeus prepared to testify to Congress in September 2007 about progress in Iraq, moveon.org labelled him ‘General Betray Us’ in a controversial ad in the *New York Times*. After listening to his testimony about military progress, Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton, the party’s presidential front-runner, said she did not believe him (‘the reports that you provide us really require a willing suspension of disbelief.’).

- When, more recently, the House of Representatives debated a bill to expand health insurance for children, California Democrat Pete Stark took GOP lawmakers to task by drawing a connection to Iraq: ‘You don’t have money to fund the war or children. But you’re going to spend it to blow up innocent people if we can get enough kids to grow old enough for you to send to Iraq to get their heads blown off for the president’s amusement...’

With these anecdotes (and others), here’s the picture that Democrats managed to paint of themselves:

- They equate America with history’s worst villains.
- They question the integrity of our military leaders.
- They believe America’s most dangerous enemy is George W. Bush.

Anti-militarism

These incidents and the larger narrative help explain the debate among Democrats about how, and how not, to address the dangers presented by Iran’s progress on the nuclear front, its sponsorship of terrorism, and its efforts to undermine U.S. progress in Iraq and Afghanistan.

In the fall, with Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and the Rig’s Quads Force increasingly funding, training, equipping, and directing attacks by Shiite militia groups against U.S. forces in Iraq, the Senate voted 76-22 to urge the Bush Administration to designate the IRGC a terrorist organization, paving the way for economic sanctions. Among the 76 was Hillary Clinton.

HAAS | Will the Democrats Blow 2008?

Encouraged by outraged left-wing bloggers, other Democratic presidential candidates pounced, complaining that, as when she voted to authorize the use of force against Iraq, Clinton was giving Bush the green light to attack Iran. The problem here, Clinton's opponents argued, was not Iran's murder of U.S. soldiers but the chance that Bush might use force to retaliate.

Observing the debate with dismay (and surely some empathy for Clinton) was Senator Joe Lieberman, a co-sponsor of the Senate measure. Seeking a fourth term in 2006, he lost the Democratic primary over his steadfast support for the Iraq war, forcing him to run, and win, as a self-styled 'Independent Democrat.'

A year later, in a November 2007 speech that received far too little attention, Lieberman said, 'I understand that President Bush is a divisive figure. I recognize the distrust that many Americans feel toward his Administration. I recognize the anger and outrage that exists out there about the war in Iraq. But there is something profoundly wrong – something that should trouble us all – when we have elected Democratic officials who seem more worried about how the Bush Administration might respond to Iran's murder of our troops, than about the fact that Iran is murdering our troops.'

Democratic concerns about the IRGC measure extend beyond distrust of Bush, however. They tap into a deep-seated discomfort with, if not an aversion to, the use of force to accomplish geopolitical goals. The United States may be multiple wars and revolutions in military technology and strategy beyond Vietnam but, in some Democratic circles, it remains 1975.

'[Iraq is] not a war to be won but a problem to be solved,' House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said shortly after the 2006 elections gave Democrats control of Congress. With troops in the field, the nation's most powerful elected Democrat – third in line to the Presidency – was saying America should eschew hope of victory over a terrorist enemy that is sworn to its destruction.

A final note

In a post-9/11 world, national security is the hurdle that presidential candidates must clear, a kind of litmus test of seriousness. No longer can would-be Democratic presidents merely shift the debate to domestic issues, on which the party traditionally

Democratiya 11 | Winter 2007

holds sway. Now, Democrats must assure Americans that they will do whatever it takes to keep them safe.

Can they do so? Prospects are murky, due to the narrative and the rhetoric that it breeds. Thus, a party that should win the White House in a cakewalk in 2008 could find itself again on the outside.

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