



As election draws nearer, conservatives will no doubt return to the old playbook they have used to win elections time and time again.

With this series of issue briefs, the Democratic Leadership Council is addressing those tired arguments head on. By proposing concrete solutions—and suggesting how to talk about them—we hope to equip tomorrow’s leaders with an agenda that will address the nation’s most pressing challenges.

National Security

by Jim Arkedis & Mark Ribbing

The 2008 election gives progressives a once-in-a-generation opportunity to establish themselves as credible guardians of American national security. For the past four decades, conservatives have enjoyed a clear political advantage on this issue. The Bush administration’s failures in Iraq and elsewhere, however, have eroded this edge and offered an opening for progressive messages on security.

The good news is that progressives do not have to start from scratch. For much of the 20th century, progressives enjoyed a reputation for vision and fortitude in the stewardship of foreign relations and national defense. Franklin D. Roosevelt oversaw America's military triumph in World War II, and Harry S. Truman built the security infrastructure that would ultimately win the ensuing struggle against Soviet Communism. John F. Kennedy overcame early foreign-policy missteps and handled the most frightening chapter of the Cold War with singular adroitness.

The struggles within the Democratic Party over the Vietnam War, however, led to a long estrangement between the party and much of the public on security issues. Over the past four decades, the Democratic nominee for president has only managed to win the popular vote four times—once (barely) in the post-Watergate election of 1976, and in the three elections (1992, 1996, and 2000) that took place in the interlude between the end of the Cold War and the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks. In short, the post-Vietnam War liberal and progressive movement has yet to prove that it can win a presidential election when the nation's security interests are perceived to be at stake.

POTENTIAL VULNERABILITY

America's security interests are indeed at stake in 2008, in numerous ways. The nation's military remains deeply engaged in Iraq and Afghanistan, and its personnel and equipment resources have been stretched perilously thin. While there have been no terrorist attacks on the United States since Sept. 11 and the subsequent anthrax poisonings, a July 2007 National Intelligence Estimate and an April 2008 Government Accountability Office report indicated a wide consensus among security experts that Islamist terrorist networks have become more capable of such attacks, not less so.

Despite the Bush administration's national-security failures, conservatives are working hard to revive classic themes of liberal weakness and untrustworthiness on security issues. Given conservatives' stark disadvantages on one domestic issue after another, security is one of the few substantive lines of attack they can hope to use in this election.

Some of the allegations conservatives are likely to try to employ against progressives (more likely to be referred to as "liberals" in this context) include the following:

- **Liberals are incapable of ensuring that our military remains strong.** In a September 2008 poll by Greenberg Quinlan Rosner and Third Way, Republicans enjoyed a 30-percent advantage on the question, "Do you think the Democrats or the Republicans would do a better job of ensuring a strong military?"
- **Just as we are making progress in Iraq, liberals will "cut and run," turning their back on the sacrifices of brave servicemen who have been killed and wounded there, despite the gains made possible by the "surge."** This line of argument blends with longstanding conservative charges that liberals "stabbed the nation in the back" during the Vietnam War.

- **Liberals will make the country more vulnerable to terrorist attack.** The logic of this charge is simple: A conservative presidency kept America from being attacked again after the horrors of 2001, and progressives cannot be trusted to continue that security record.
- **Liberals are insufficiently patriotic.** This hoary criticism is directly linked to the national-security issue, but its true force lies in its gut-level cultural critique. At its root is the insinuation that post-1960s liberals do not love America enough to defend it. According to this narrative, so-called “liberal elites” are the products of a reflexively anti-American, anti-military university system, and are insufficiently certain of the merit and necessity of keeping this nation strong. A related right-wing critique is that liberals are too culturally estranged from the military and from the moral values that sustain it.

COMMON MISTAKES

Progressives have made some serious mistakes when talking about national-security issues. Here are a few:

- **Trying to avoid the subject.** Some (not all) progressives simply try to avoid security issues and seek instead to bring the debate back to issues where they may feel more comfortable, such as the economy or health care. National security is too important to be ignored, even in a year of acute economic crisis. Progressives must learn not only to defend themselves on this issue, but also to go on the offensive with a compelling national-security vision of their own.
- **Ignoring the emotional component of the security issue.** Progressives sometimes express bewilderment at the conservative advantage on security issues: Do we not have well-argued, thorough policy memoranda on every security topic from force restructuring to unconventional warfare? Indeed, the Dukakis, Gore, and Kerry campaigns all crafted security policies that looked great on paper. Security, however, is an issue that is felt viscerally, and conservatives have been much better at relating security to America’s national identity as a fundamentally good nation, one that is worthy of its citizens’ service and sacrifice. Progressives must understand this and respond in kind.
- **Treating servicemen as an identity group or victim class.** Progressives will frequently emphasize the poor treatment of veterans and servicemen and assume that these displays of sympathy will somehow win over the security-minded voter. Service personnel, however, dislike being treated as victims or as merely another identity group. Progressives should instead speak of the sacrifice and heroism of men and women who choose to serve in an all-volunteer force.

OPPORTUNITY

The American people recognize the decline of the nation’s strategic position, and they are open to progressive ideas on national security. Here is how to begin:

- **Exploit conservative weakness on the security issue.** The Bush administration’s handling of the war and occupation in Iraq has been woefully misguided, and its policies have allowed al Qaeda to regroup in Afghanistan and Pakistan. When called to react to Hurricane Katrina, the first major

domestic calamity since 9/11, the administration was unable to respond effectively. In short, the administration has failed the most important tests of its commitment to protect and defend the people of this country. Progressives should note the recent conservative track record on security issues and should assert the superiority of their own national-security vision for the 21st century.

- **Emphasize that conservative failings on security go beyond George W. Bush.** While John McCain is seeking, for obvious reasons, to distance himself from the historically unpopular Bush administration, progressives should point out that McCain was even more aggressive than Bush in calling for war in Iraq—and just as quick to predict that our forces would be welcomed there with open arms. McCain’s distinguished record of service to his country in the Vietnam War does not change the fact that, like Bush, McCain has sought to fight the new wars of this century using the outdated assumptions of the last century.
- **Outline a new vision of national security.** As the Greenberg Quinlan Rosner/Third Way study found, progressives can win on national security if they outline a national-security vision that is “tough and smart,” in contrast to the “reckless and out-of-touch” approach that has characterized Republican security policies. The true advantage that progressives must assert is their ability to see the 21st century world for what it is: a challenging, ever-shifting landscape in which strong, innovative combinations of military force, diplomatic suasion, economic development, and resourceful intelligence are necessary to address the emerging threats of our age. Officers who have served in Iraq or Afghanistan will be quick to tell you that military force alone cannot secure a vulnerable town or region; we must give occupied populations a fair opportunity to seek a path away from extremism and tyranny. Conservatives have routinely failed to make this vital connection. Progressives, by contrast, see what it takes to achieve real security in a new era.
- **Bolster progressive credibility on the use of force.** According to an April 2008 Greenberg Quinlan Rosner/Democracy Corps poll, Democrats had apparently caught up to or surpassed Republicans on several measures of national-security credibility, whether on “hard power” or “soft power” issues. For example, Democrats trailed by only four points on the hard-power issue of which party is better suited to led the “war on terrorism,” and led by a whopping 33 points on the classic soft-power question of which party can better advance “global respect for America.” Democrats were still far behind, however, on “fire power” questions: In addition to the aforementioned 29-point gap on “ensuring a strong military,” Democrats trailed Republicans by 27 points on which party “respects the military” and by 21 points on which party is “decisive enough in a crisis.” In an era when the need to use force can arise urgently and unexpectedly, it is imperative that Democrats become more credible on these basic questions of military leadership.

THEMES

For progressives to reap the rewards of national security, they must first do the following:

Explain that the Bush administration has been reckless with American security and that John McCain would represent a continuation of this administration’s outdated approaches to the challenges of the 21st century

- Following the Sept. 11 attacks, George Bush squandered a rare opportunity to focus the nation and the world on the task of rooting out radical Islamist terrorism. Instead, conservatives opted for policies that alienated our allies, emboldened our enemies, divided our own people, and undercut our constitutional values.
- George Bush and his administration egregiously mismanaged the occupation of Iraq. At the same time, Bush and his conservative allies largely neglected the war against al Qaeda's leadership in the Afghanistan-Pakistan borderlands. The Afghanistan war has taken a serious turn for the worse as the Taliban has regrouped.
- The Congressional Budget Office and most other experts put the long-term price tag for the Iraq war at \$1 trillion or \$2 trillion; the Nobel Prize-winning economist Joseph E. Stiglitz has written that the cost of the war could reach \$4 trillion or even higher. While the precise figure is in some dispute, what cannot be disputed is that the costs of the war have far outrun the administration's predictions. As a result, our ability to meet a wide range of other national needs—including necessary funding for military readiness, homeland security, and our crucial struggle against al Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan will be compromised.
- George W. Bush's unilateralist approach to diplomacy, his reversal of America's traditional opposition to torture, and his indifference to what Jefferson called "a decent respect to the opinions of mankind" have left the United States more isolated and more vulnerable than before. All too often, his fellow conservatives—including John McCain—have abetted and approved these shortsighted policies.
- The administration has mishandled our Armed Forces, which have been stretched thin by constant deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan. Should our military be needed to counter a significant threat at home or in another part of the world, it would not have sufficient manpower or equipment to do so.

Support progress in Iraq

- In 2008, we have seen a decrease in violence throughout much of Iraq. Progressives should applaud those advances, and should openly welcome any good news that emerges from that country. Such stabilization is a tribute to the excellence of our troops and is a blessing for them and for the Iraqi people. The ultimate object of the "surge" strategy—a meaningful level of political reconciliation among the various Iraqi factions—has still not been fully achieved, however, and may not be possible before troop-rotation schedules mandate a withdrawal of the additional forces. A reduction in violence in Iraq is the very mechanism through which we can bring our soldiers home.
- Commentators may opine about how Republicans stand to gain, and Democrats to lose, from any advances in Iraq, but that is true only if Democrats somehow come across as insufficiently supportive of our forces in the field—and that is a perception progressives must forcefully rebut at every opportunity. Remember that the progress we have seen in Iraq does not change the simple fact that the administration's mismanagement has cost our nation dearly in lives, dollars, and international standing; the most important of those losses are truly irreversible, and most of the others will take years to reconcile.
- The recent decreases in violence are a product of a number of factors, of which the surge is only one. These factors include the rise of the Sunni Awakening movement; the Shiite cease-fire of late 2007 and

early 2008; the American embrace of a new counterinsurgency strategy (a development that preceded the surge policy); and the simple reality that the years of violence following the U.S. invasion resulted in sufficient ethnic separation and war-weariness in the Iraqi public to foster the conditions for a fragile peace.

- The decrease in violence is tenuous and must be carefully consolidated. In many cases, the decline in fighting is simply the result of insurgents being allowed to negotiate a cease-fire, keep their weapons, and melt back into the public. The Middle East is a region of long memories, and there is no guarantee that a few months of abated violence represent a lasting peace or stability.
- Conservatives are once again offering a sunny take on the situation in Iraq. Progressives should be cautiously optimistic. However, conservatives have repeatedly shown an estrangement from the reality of the situation in Iraq, as represented by President Bush's "Mission Accomplished" speech in May 2003 or Vice President Cheney's "the insurgency is in its last throes" remarks in June 2005.
- Progressives should strive for "sustainable stability" in Iraq and the Middle East, which builds on security gains by working with the Iraqi government to make important political accommodations. Even if the next president decides to withdraw troops from Iraq, our involvement is not going to end in the immediate future. Progressives must acknowledge that this is not "Bush's war" or "the Republicans' war." It is, unavoidably, America's war. America's sons and daughters are dying on foreign soil, and American security will be either threatened or enhanced by the circumstances of our withdrawal.
- Some progressives seem to think that acknowledging any security progress in Iraq is tantamount to endorsing the Bush administration's failed policies. It is not. The president's mismanagement of the occupation is well documented, and progress at this late stage is unlikely to change the widespread negative assessment of Bush's performance.
- A simple framework for discussing the Iraq war should include the following five points:
 1. The improvements in the security situation represent a victory for our superb Armed Forces, and all Americans should be proud of this achievement.
 2. The reductions in violence will make it easier for the United States to conduct a military withdrawal—a withdrawal that will allow our troops to be redeployed to meet other threats in Afghanistan and elsewhere.
 3. Progressives want to begin a genuine transition in Iraq—with a responsible, phased withdrawal of combat forces.
 4. We have a strategic and moral responsibility, however, to depart Iraq with greater care and caution than the administration showed when it led the nation into that country in the first place.
 5. Progressives must move beyond 2003. We cannot undo the decision to go to war. We must deal with the situation as it is—and progressives are much likelier than conservatives to think in constructive new ways about where we should go from here.

Demonstrate a national-security vision that extends beyond Iraq

- Attacks on the Bush record will not suffice. Progressives must offer their own ideas on national security and must do so in a way that is both assertive and credible. They must show that their national-security vision consists of more than simply denouncing the administration's conduct of the war in Iraq. If Democrats are seen as simply the anti-war party, voters will not trust them with stewardship of the nation's security in a dangerous world.
- It is imperative that progressives offer a plan for preparing our Armed Forces to face 21st century threats. We must develop the right mix of assets to face an enormous range of potential challenges to the national interest. This will entail improving our capacity to handle small-scale insurgencies, contain rogue states, and win traditional military engagements. The vast manpower and equipment needs of the Iraq war require us to reorganize and reassess our National Guard and Reserve units. Meanwhile, our uniquely global security responsibilities demand that we modernize our Navy to ensure that it can continue to be an unmatched military and intelligence asset worldwide.
- We must recognize that protecting our nation is not solely a military undertaking. All too often, conservatives underestimate the vital importance of diplomacy, effective intelligence gathering, and other traditional tools of national-security policy. As a result, the United States is increasingly isolated from potential allies, while potential rivals like China and Russia have become more assertive in their diplomatic outreach to the rest of the world. This is not a "soft" perspective on security—any officer who has served in Iraq or Afghanistan will quickly vouch for the importance of diplomacy, intelligence, and economic development in improving the prospects of military success.
- Voters clearly trust Democrats more than Republicans to enhance America's standing in the world, and progressives should emphasize the economic and military importance of our nation's global reputation. To regain our authority, we must fundamentally address the many ways in which the Bush administration has weakened it. We must close the Guantanamo detainee camps and make clear that we once again stand in the ranks of nations that renounce and condemn the practice of torture.
- In particular, we must rebuild our credibility in the strategically vital Muslim Middle East: Our government must become much more sophisticated in its ability to distinguish mainstream and extremist varieties of political Islam and in dealing with groups that have a genuine interest in democratic reform. To isolate extremists and cultivate democracy in the region, America must enter into this complex dialogue with an open mind. In the near term, the development of democracy may entail stronger relationships with those Islamic parties that renounce terrorism.
- Progressives must stress the central importance of homeland security, an area that the current administration has often neglected. The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) is an unwieldy behemoth that has so far shown only limited capability to carry out its vital missions. The next administration should look carefully at DHS to determine how this organization can better achieve its aims. In addition, the new president should seek to do a far better job of recruiting the ingenuity and optimism of the American people in establishing a "freedom from fear" strategy against the threats of terrorism and natural disaster. This would entail improving and clarifying the government's public communications, so that our people will know what to do in the case of catastrophe. Such an initiative would deprive terrorists of their most important weapons: fear and panic. More importantly, it will help enhance public safety and give our people a stronger sense of control over their individual and community well-being.

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Jim Arkedis is director of the Progressive Policy Institute's Progressive Security Project and writer and editor of PPI's national security blog *AllOurMight.com*. He was an intelligence analyst at the Naval Criminal Investigative Service from 2002 to 2007.

Mark Ribbing is director of policy development for PPI.

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**600 Pennsylvania Ave., SE, Suite 400
Washington DC, 20003**

p. 202.546.0007 • www.dlc.org