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TO: Interested Parties

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SUBJECT: Winning the National Security Debate—Lessons from a New Poll

Overview

Conservatives have used the same playbook to define progressives on national security for thirty-five years, painting progressives as weak and tentative. For their part, progressives often have fallen right into the trap, by avoiding the subject altogether, convincing themselves that support for veterans' benefits is the same as being tough on national security, or pivoting away to more favorable (domestic) terrain. Third Way believes that progressive leaders can alter this equation, but only if they take a different approach and stick to it.

Based on findings from our recent national poll, conducted by Pete Brodnitz of the Benenson Strategy Group,* this memo outlines four steps progressives must take to win on national security.

Step #1: Take the National Security Issue Head On: America is at war and progressives must spend substantial time and resources dealing with this signal fact. They must not duck it, pivot from it, or downplay it. They must define it lest they be defined (and become history).

Step #2: Communicate One Objective: Progressives must say they will focus intently on national security *and push the President to change course and fight terrorism more effectively.*

Step #3: Define Progressives as "Tough and Smart": Progressives must show that they recognize the grave threats that America faces from its enemies and that they will be both tough enough to defend the country and smart enough to do so effectively. They should use examples of specific policy ideas to demonstrate their "tough and smart" approach.

Step #4: Define Conservatives as "Satisfied" with the President's Strategy on Terrorism and Iraq: They must frame conservatives' unwillingness to question the President as satisfaction about our direction and progress. They should explain that conservatives "talk tough, but haven't been smart" on Iraq and on terrorism, and

* 600 likely voters, September 13–17, 2006, margin of error +/- 4.00. Poll results can be viewed on our website, www.third-way.com.

contrast that record of acquiescence with progressives' demand for accountability and progress. They should argue for the need for new leadership that will push the President to change course and fight terrorism more effectively.

While Democrats and Republicans in our poll seem fairly dug in, Independent voters* are up for grabs on this issue. They can be persuaded, but that won't happen without a consistent, strategic approach to terrorism, Iraq and other national security issues.

Step #1: Take National Security Head On

There is no question that progressives should continue to focus on jobs, the economy, and other issues that are their strength. But they ignore national security at their extreme peril. They must take on these issues directly, and they must not immediately pivot away to more comfortable terrain. To do so would be either a missed opportunity or a potentially lethal mistake.

On national security, both sides have ample reason to worry, but on balance, our poll carries good news for progressives. Indeed, Americans are prepared for the first time to shed decades of skepticism and accept progressive candidates as leaders on national security. They also seem ready to reject the conservative approach to security that has gotten this country into a terrible mess in the Middle East. But this is not a slam-dunk—conservative attacks still retain resonance, particularly if progressives do not confront national security head on.

Voters are of Two Minds When it Comes to the Parties and National Security

Our poll clearly demonstrates that the electorate goes into these issues rather torn. When asked to say if they were satisfied with the progress in the war on terror or if America is following the wrong strategy, Independents picked "wrong strategy" by 26-points. That is the good news for progressives. But on the question of "who do you trust more in the battle against terrorism," President Bush and Republicans in Congress hold a 1-point advantage among Independents (4-points overall).

Moreover, when left unanswered, the standard conservative attack¹ is still effective. By an 11-point margin, Independents say it makes them more likely to support a Republican candidate for Congress.

*This memo focuses heavily on Independent voters. Our polling shows that 48% of Independents have not made up their mind about the coming election, compared to 19% of Democrats and 19% of Republicans.

¹ The attack we tested was: *Republicans say that Democrats don't understand that we live in a dangerous post 9-11 world. Democrats care more about the rights of terrorist suspects than protecting Americans. They are weak and unwilling to use force. Iraq is the front line in the war on terror and we must not cut and run or we will only strengthen al Qaeda and Islamic extremists. President Bush has an offensive strategy to take the fight to the terrorists, and it has prevented attacks since 9/11 and made us safer.*

The lesson here is clear: there is a real opportunity to make headway on security, but to take advantage of it progressives cannot allow themselves to be defined by conservative attacks.

Party Preconceptions Still Favor Republicans but Offer Clues to Democrats:

We read voters a series of national security statements and asked whether they represented Republican or Democratic attributes. We found skepticism about both parties, but Republicans are exploiting these doubts while Democrats are not.

Democrats are seen as not tough enough to win the war on terror. Only 25% of voters felt that the statement “they are tough enough to do what is needed to win the war on terror” applied to Democrats, compared to 52% for Republicans—a 27-point deficit. Among Independents the margin was 21-points, moderates 20-points, Whites² 29-points, and among a group of voters we call the “unaligned” (the 18% of the electorate who is undecided about which party they should trust on terror), the margin is 16-points.

Democrats are seen as unwilling to use military force. 51% said the statement “they are not willing to use military force even when America’s vital interests are at stake” applied to Democrats, compared to 12% for Republicans—a 39-point deficit. Among independents the margin was 36-points, moderates 27-points, Whites 44-points, and the unaligned 22-points.

Republicans are seen as stubborn. 65% said the statement “they are stubborn and unwilling to change direction” applied to Republicans, compared to 37% for Democrats—a 28-point deficit for Republicans. Among Independents the margin was 26-points, moderates 53-points, Whites 26-points, and the unaligned 41-points.

Voter preconceptions about progressives are neither new nor accidental. Conservatives have spent the last three decades convincing Americans that progressives are weak and unwilling to use force. Their playbook is old and well-thumbed, and it is being used again today, in ads and rhetoric that plainly make that charge. (They also are attempting to revive this charge with a package of terrorism-related legislation that they are attempting to push in Congress. We tested those as well—see Appendix One.) By contrast, conservative preconceptions are less than two years old, and progressives do not have experience amplifying them.

Whether national security is the number one issue on the minds of voters or comes in second or third, we are indisputably in a national security environment. Conservatives will pour tens of millions of dollars into a message that defines them as strong and progressives as weak. When progressives do not invest substantial time and resources in framing the debate accurately, it amplifies the conservatives’ attacks. Therefore, progressives must engage—and do so repeatedly—on national security turf.

² We looked at white voters because Democrats have been losing this demographic by ever-increasing margins in recent elections.

Step #2: Communicate One Objective—Pushing the President to Change Course and Fight Terrorism and the War in Iraq More Effectively

It is clear that voters believe that conservatives have cornered the market on stubbornness in the face of evidence of failure.

Therefore, if progressives frame their arguments in the right way—pushing the president to change course to wage a more effective battle against terrorism, expressing dissatisfaction with our current course, reminding voters that we need new leaders to set a new and more effective direction—they are ready to support change.

A new direction on terrorism works. We asked voters what they thought it meant if Democrats won a majority in Congress—would Democrats “weaken the President’s ability to fight the war on terror,” or “push the President to change course and to fight terrorism more effectively?” By a 52–39% margin, voters thought a Democratic majority would push the President to change course for the better on terror. The margin was 21-points among Independents, 32-points for moderates, 7-points for Whites, and 53-points among the unaligned.

The same formula works for Iraq.

To be sure, voters have complicated views on the war, and they are divided over which party would handle Iraq better. When presented with the attacks that the parties level at each other on Iraq,³ Democrats hold an 8-point edge. But 23% of Independents, 20% of liberals and 29% of moderates volunteered that they were unsure about which party would do a better job. And amazingly, so were 30% of *Democrats*. These numbers are very soft.

However, if voters believe that progressives can take America responsibly in a new direction on Iraq, they are ready to follow.

A new direction for Iraq works. By a 70–26% margin, voters favored the following statement made by a Democrat: *We need a new direction, including a new military and political strategy. We need to place real pressure on the Iraqis to form a stable government and control their security, and begin planning to get our troops out of Iraq in a responsible way.* Independents favored this statement by 50-points, moderates 63-points, Whites 40-points, and the unaligned by 65-points.

New leadership in the war works. By a 59–37% margin, voters favored this statement made by a Democrat: *The war in Iraq cannot be resolved by the same people whose poor judgment got us into this situation and who repeatedly assert that things are getting better when they clearly are not. We need new leaders who are going to look for smart*

³ Which is of greater concern to you when it comes to the war in Iraq? That Democrats will cut and run from Iraq, handing a victory to the terrorists, or that Republicans are satisfied with the situation in Iraq and will stay the current course no matter what.

alternatives to the current situation. Independents favored this statement by 33-points, moderates 52-points, Whites 17-points, and the unaligned by 66-points.

Rehashing our entry into the war and attacking Bush or Rumsfeld by name do not work as well as the frame of stubbornness and satisfaction. Statements that re-litigated the reasons we went to war, that argued that the war made things worse, that Bush made a mess in Iraq, or that called for the resignation of Donald Rumsfeld on their own fared significantly worse than broader thematic critiques. We believe that is because such attacks are not seen as solutions-oriented—they do not *push the President to wage a more effective campaign in Iraq.*

(For more details on Iraq, see Appendix Two.)

Step #3: Define Progressives as Tough and Smart

As noted earlier, voters hold a preconception of Democrats as not tough enough to do what is necessary to win the war on terror and unwilling to use military force.

Progressives must address this deficiency, and they can use language and ideas to do so. Thus, progressives must label themselves “tough and smart,” and they must prove it, in a number of ways.

When talking about a way forward, focus on hard power. Progressives must not shift the subject solely to “soft” issues like body armor, health care for our troops and providing for veterans. By a margin of 68–27%, voters favored this statement made by a Democrat: *We need a new anti-terror strategy that uses America’s might more effectively. We need to get it right and get out of Iraq, refocus our military and intelligence on defeating global terrorist networks, finish destroying the Taliban in Afghanistan, pressure Pakistan to stop giving safe haven to al-Qaeda, and sharply increase funding to prevent terrorists from getting nuclear weapons.* Independents favored this statement by 44-points, moderates by 61-points, Whites 38-points, and the unaligned by 61-points.

When talking about “alliances,” talk about “military alliances” to combat terrorism. Progressives must focus on soldiers, not vague descriptions of diplomacy or cooperation. By a margin of 72–23%, voters favored the following statement made by a Democrat: *In the 20th Century we beat the Nazi’s and the Soviet Union, not alone but by joining military alliances like NATO. In the 21st Century, we must form new military and intelligence alliances to combat terrorists, because al-Qaeda knows no borders.* Independents favored this statement by 56-points, moderates by 72-points, Whites 48-points, and the unaligned by 71-points.

Both of these statements fall easily within the principles that most progressives hold about national security, but they also easily cross the toughness threshold that voters fear that progressives will hang behind. Indeed, progressives must be explicit and clear about the grave dangers facing the United States, who the enemy is, and

how ruthless and dangerous they are. Voters need to know that progressives have a tough, hard-headed focus on keeping America safe.

While voters do believe that American foreign policies should be designed to win the “hearts and minds” of moderate Muslims⁴ (and it should), they appear to be less in need of reassurances from progressives that this is part of their plan. They know already that progressives value economic opportunity, tolerance, respect and moral suasion. What they don’t know is if they are tough enough to kick in the teeth of America’s enemies.

In addition to tough language, progressives must have ideas to take the fight against terrorism in a new direction. (See Appendix Three for a sampling of ideas that would constitute a tough, effective new direction in winning the war on terror.)

Step #4: Define Conservatives as Satisfied with the President’s Strategy and Progress in Iraq and the War on Terror

Voters are broadly dissatisfied “with the progress the President is making in the war on terror.” Among Independents, the margin is 26-points.

Progressives have a golden opportunity to put conservatives on the wrong side of the satisfaction divide. They should use conservatives’ unwillingness to do the fundamental work of Congress—to hold hearings, ask tough questions, conduct oversight investigations, draft letters of concern, and generally critique the President—as evidence of their satisfaction and of their belief that no course correction is necessary. It is this total abdication of their oversight responsibilities that provides the greatest evidence of conservative satisfaction and unwillingness to change direction.

This also dovetails with voters’ general perception of America’s direction under President Bush as a whole. By a margin of 30–59%, voters believe the country is “off on the wrong track.” For Independents, the margin is 24–66%.

Conservatives should be defined as “talking tough, but not being smart” when it comes to Iraq, fighting the Taliban, hunting down bin Laden, securing loose nukes, pressuring North Korea, and capitulating to Pakistan. And the fact that they have held no hearings or brooked almost no dissent, allows progressives to say that they will not be potted plants when they come to Washington. The recent McCain compromise on torture only highlights how infrequently this happens and how much it could have changed the direction of this Administration if it had happened more often. Progressives should commit to asking the tough questions of any President, Democrat or Republican, so that we can fight the most effective war possible.

⁴ *While we must use our military to defeat terrorists, we must also win the hearts and minds of moderate Muslims. That means helping provide them economic opportunity, showing respect for their religion and setting a moral example. If they support us, they will deny a base to terrorists and cooperate with us to destroy terror groups.* That statement made by a Democrat was favored by 68-points by all voters and by Independents.

The “talk tough, but not smart” critique works best. By a 62–32% margin, voters favored the following statement made by a Democrat: *President Bush and Congress have talked tough but they have not been smart. They declared ‘mission accomplished’ but had no plan for victory in Iraq. They said ‘dead or alive’ but Osama bin Laden is still at large. They called North Korea and Iran the ‘axis of evil’ but both countries are becoming nuclear powers. It’s time to be both tough and smart.* Independents favored this statement by 43-points, moderates by 54-points, Whites 28-points, and the unaligned by 53-points.

The “incompetence” argument does not work as well. No other critical statement came close to “tough, but not smart,” including messages based on the failure to find bin Laden, the Pakistani safe haven for al Qaeda, and a claim that we are not safer since 9/11.

Even a claim based on Bush “incompetence” failed to move voters the way the tough and smart message did. By only a 52–41% margin, voters favored the incompetence message from a Democrat: *The Bush Administration has been incompetent on national security. We are bogged down in a mess in Iraq. The number of al Qaeda members has grown in force from 20,000 to 50,000 since 9-11. Terror attacks are up worldwide. Our military is stretched thin. Our ports are unprotected. And North Korea and Iran are becoming nuclear powers.* The margins of support from Independents, moderates, Whites, and the unaligned were about half as strong as the “tough, but not smart” frame.

We think there are three reasons that the incompetence message fell flatter than the others: first, it strikes some voters as too partisan; second, it may suggest that progressives support the Bush strategy but question only the execution of that strategy; and third, it does not make clear that progressives want to change course and take the country in a new direction.

That is not to say that incompetence, the failure to find bin Laden, firing Rumsfeld and other similar critiques do not work at all; most of them do. But the evidence is clear that broader thematic arguments—framing the issue around the finding a new direction to more effectively fight the war on terror rather than backward-looking, highly specific or intensely partisan messaging—are in tune with more swing voters.

Appendix One: Handling the Bush Terror Amendments

We tested the three terror amendments that are currently being debated in Congress: warrantless wiretapping, military tribunals, and immunity for CIA and other civilian interrogators. On all of these proposals, we were surprised about how mixed the support is among voters.

This is not to say that progressives don't have vulnerabilities on these amendments or that there aren't responses that appeal to voters. They do, and there are.

The vulnerability is that reflexive opposition to these amendments plays into the preconceptions that some voters have about progressives and their unwillingness to do what is necessary to defeat the terrorists. To counter that, we argue that opposition to these amendments be framed in the same manner we recommend above: taking the issue head on, arguing for a change in course in order to fight a more effective war on terror, standing up for tough solutions, and reminding voters that conservatives have not been smart about this.

Wiretapping: First, it cannot be overstated—progressives MUST explicitly state their support for wiretapping suspected terrorists. Those should be the first and last words out of their mouths on this issue.

But voters are divided 49–47% on whether Congress should approve President Bush's proposal "to conduct wiretapping without approval of a court on Americans suspected of involvement in terrorism." Independents oppose the proposal by 13-points. Even when Republicans made their best argument, support only grew to 11-points, and Independents were evenly split.

Yet not all arguments against warrantless wiretapping work equally. For example, attacks based upon distrust of President Bush seem to turn off voters. By a margin of 46–47% (45–47% among Independents) voters opposed the argument: *I am for wiretapping of suspected terrorists, but without some approval from a court, you just can't trust the Bush Administration with this unchecked power.*

The same argument without the partisan attack fares far better. By a margin of 57–37% (61–31% among Independents) voters supported the argument: *I am for wiretapping of suspected terrorists, but I believe that any President should be required to get approval of a court before listening in on Americans.*

Military Tribunals: By a slight margin (51–43%), voters support the President's proposal on tribunals.⁵ Independents opposed the proposal by 2-points. When Republicans made their best argument against Democrats on this issue,⁶ support

⁵ Respondents were asked if they support or oppose Congress passing the following: *President Bush has proposed setting up a special trial system at Guantanamo Bay for suspected terrorists. While they would get a military judge and jury they would not have the right to hear classified evidence against them.*

⁶ *Democrats don't want to bring the masterminds of 9-11 to justice. They want to give these terrorists the same rights and privileges as we give American soldiers. I want to make sure that these monsters are put away for good without compromising US intelligence.*

swelled to 22-points (and 10 among Independents)—strong, but not overwhelming support.

The best argument for Democrats is to state the issue clearly and put it in terms of American values: *In America, anyone on trial should be able to see the evidence against them, even terrorists. We can bring them to justice without changing 230 years of American tradition, values, and constitutional law.* This argument was supported by a margin of 59–35%, and by 58–33% among Independents.

Technical arguments about protecting our soldiers (should they be captured by other countries) or about the Supreme Court striking down the Bush plan did not work as well among all voters or among Independents.

Immunity: Voters were decidedly against the Bush proposal “granting immunity from prosecution to CIA agents and contractors whose terrorist interrogation tactics may include torture.” By a margin of 36–59% they opposed it, and Independents opposed it by a two to one margin.

The best Democratic critique of the immunity proposal involved standing up for John McCain.⁷ This argument was supported by a margin of 62–34%, including 66–30% among Independents.

⁷ *Senator John McCain, who spent 5 years being tortured as a prisoner of war in Vietnam, opposes the Bush Administration’s position on torture. Like Senator McCain, I believe we do not need to resort to torture to win the War on Terror.”*

Appendix Two: Iraq

Dissatisfaction with the situation in Iraq is very strong. But not all of the news is that clear cut:

The President's argument about Iraq and terror has resonance. By a margin of 54–43%, voters believe that “Iraq is the central front in the war on terror.” Among Independents, the margin is 51–46%. It is possible that voters feel that Iraq has become the central front because of missteps by the Bush Administration, or because of the public relations campaign by Bush and the conservatives to define it as such. We do not know. We do know that voters have complex views on the subject.

Timetables are not popular. Only 21% of voters and 23% of Independents believe we “should set a timetable to remove all American troops from Iraq within one year”—a position widely associated with progressives. 44% of voters, including 48% of Democrats and 43% of Independents, believe “we should remove our troops as quickly as possible, but we cannot leave entirely until Iraq has achieved a basic level of security and stability.” 32% of voters, but only 29% of Independents want to “keep our troops in Iraq until we get the job done.”

Carping fairs worse. From these and a series of other questions we asked on Iraq, we sense a degree of “bicker fatigue.” When arguments seemed designed to score political points, they performed worse than those designed to move us in a new direction.

One example, which surprised us, was an anti-Rumsfeld message. This statement performed less well with voters: *Republicans in Congress talk tough but insist on staying the course, even as Iraq heads towards civil war. They have no plan for success, refuse to demand accountability and will not remove Defense Secretary Rumsfeld, even though his strategy failed.*

Looking through other questions, we see a pattern. Voters want to look ahead, not behind.

These results do not alter our advice on handling Iraq and terror at all—in fact, they underscore them. As we noted earlier, if voters believe that progressives can take America responsibly in a new direction on Iraq, they will listen and they will follow.

(Note: For more on the war, see our Message Memo *Addressing Iraq in a Charged Political Environment*, available on our website www.third-way.com.)

Appendix Three: Policy Ideas for a More Effective War on Terror

- **Special Ops:** Double the size of the Special Operations Command, with particular emphasis on building the counter-terrorism units (Delta Force, Navy Special Warfare Development Group). [The Bush Administration has started to increase the size of this force, but there are important shortfalls in the support elements needed to make this happen, according to the Government Accountability Office. Shortfalls are most noticeable in headquarters personnel, which are important for training and keeping track of these troops.]
- **OBL Unit of CIA:** Restore the CIA's unit (codenamed "Alec Station") that was charged with killing or capturing Osama bin Laden and his top deputies. [The unit was closed in 2005 on the theory that al Qaeda's leadership was less of a threat.]
- **National Counterterrorism Center:** Fully fund the NCTC to ensure that all agencies of government are working together smoothly and integrating intelligence gathering, war-fighting and law enforcement.
- **Post-Soviet WMD:** Spend whatever it takes to secure or destroy the tens of thousands of nuclear, biological and chemical weapons from the decaying Cold War arsenal of the Soviet Union immediately. [Fully fund and accelerate the Cooperative Threat Reduction Program, which the Bush Administration has put on a timetable to secure old Soviet stocks no sooner than 2020.]
- **Army Size:** Increase the size of the Army by 100,000 troops to ensure that we have the manpower we need to wage war against terrorism around the world, relieve pressure on our troops and be prepared for contingencies outside of Iraq and Afghanistan. [As *The New York Times* reported on Sept. 22, the Army is facing a crisis. "The continuing frequent deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan have stretched the U.S. Army so thin that there are few brigades ready to respond to crises elsewhere," said Lynn Davis, a senior analyst in the Arroyo Center, a division of the RAND Corporation that does research for the Army.]
- **Military Reform:** Reform our military and NATO, shift priorities to ensure that our premier alliance is prepared for 21st Century warfare against terrorism and stateless networks and for stability operations. Speed up the shift of the Army and Marine Corps toward smaller, more maneuverable units trained for irregular warfare.
- **Pakistan:** Pressure Pakistan to cancel its truce with the tribes harboring Osama bin Laden and other al Qaeda leaders and to remove their safe-haven protection so they can be killed or captured.
- **Human Intelligence:** Develop a truly global capacity to infiltrate terrorist cells in dozens of countries by building up our human intelligence collection capacity and recruiting more intelligence operatives who speak Middle Eastern and Central Asian languages. [The bi-partisan Robb-Silberman Commission on

the Intelligence Capabilities of the US Regarding WMDs found massive and dangerous shortcomings in our nation's human intelligence capabilities. See <http://www.wmd.gov/report/report.html>]

- **Wiretapping:** Devise a sensible, workable system to wiretap suspected terrorists inside the US that uses our limited intelligence resources wisely and does a better job of targeting suspected terrorists, rather than ordinary Americans.
- **Harden Our Defenses at Home:** Fully Implement the 9/11 Commission reform recommendations. [In the Final Report of the Commission, they handed out grades for the implementation of their recommended reforms. The Bush administration got mostly Ds and Fs. See http://www.9-11pdp.org/press/2005-12-05_report.pdf#search=%22implement%209-11%20commission%20reforms%22.]
- **Energy:** Stop funding states that are hostile to the US by sharply reducing our consumption of oil. That starts by making the US the world leader in the development of alternative energy technologies.