

THE DEMOCRATIC MOMENT?

Lawrence J. Haas

Today, the Democratic Party has a golden opportunity to reclaim the leadership role that it played on national security for most of the 20th Century. But, to do so, the party must discard a damaging mind-set that has clouded its thinking since Vietnam—defensive about American ideals and history, standoffish (if not hostile) toward the military, and reluctant to use force. It must then develop a new vision for national security that is appropriate for the dangers we face, and that reflects a determination to do whatever is needed to confront them.

For at least a generation, Americans have consistently put their trust in Republicans over Democrats on matters of national security. But President Bush's fumbling of the war in Iraq has dramatically altered the political landscape of national security. Suddenly, in polls asking Americans which party is likelier to keep them safe, Democrats have pulled even.

The polls, however, reflect far less a newfound trust in Democratic thinking than a deep-seated public disillusionment with the management of the war and its aftermath. Simply put, more Americans say they trust Democrats on matters of national security because, in this season of discontent, they would trust *anyone* more than the current administration.

Iraq, in other words, has given the Democrats an opening—but only an opening, not a guarantee of future political success. As the 2008 presidential campaign approaches, Democrats must embrace and successfully navigate



LAWRENCE J. HAAS is Vice President for Policy at the non-partisan Committee on the Present Danger. Previously, he served as Communications Director to Vice President Al Gore and, before that, as Communications Director to the Office of Management and Budget under President Clinton.

the new politics of national security. Gone, for the foreseeable future, are the days when Democrats could win, as they did in 1992, largely by shifting the national conversation to domestic issues on which they held a considerable advantage. Gone are the days when, also as in 1992, the GOP incumbent's greater comfort with foreign than domestic affairs (as President George H. W. Bush acknowledged about himself) could hurt him.

Iraq has given the Democrats an opening—but only an opening, not a guarantee of future political success. As the 2008 presidential campaign approaches, Democrats must embrace and successfully navigate the new politics of national security.

Today, at a time of terrorist threats and at the early stage of a generational war against militant Islam, Americans view national security in a new light. It is now an unavoidable political hurdle that a presidential candidate must clear. To win in 2008 and beyond, a candidate must convince Americans that he or she will keep them safe. Only then will the public seriously weigh the candidate's proposals to protect Social Security, expand health care, and improve education.

For Democrats, this is about something more basic than a strategy to confront militant Islam (a complex endeavor that will require an appropriate mix of military power, traditional diplomacy, grassroots outreach, covert operations, and economic and humanitarian assistance). Clearing the national security hurdle is about

a change of mind-set, about discarding 30 years of post-Vietnam discomfort with the military, reluctance to use and sustain force, and cynicism about American ideals. It also is about assuming and exuding an eagerness about national security, about welcoming the solemn opportunity to fulfill the President's most sacred obligation—to keep America safe.

Democrats must seize the opportunity and adopt a mind-set about national security that reflects three basic themes:

1. a firm belief in the superiority of U.S.-style freedom and democracy over all other alternatives,
2. a clear-eyed understanding of the dangers that our enemies pose to our safety and well being, and
3. an eagerness to grab the reins of national security and serve as America's commander in chief.

Trumpeting America

"Let every nation know," the new President proclaimed on January 20, 1961, "whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe, in order to assure the survival and the success of liberty." John F. Kennedy was strident on that bitterly cold day because he knew that our cause was just, that our system of freedom and democracy was far superior to the Soviet model we were confronting around the globe.

Forty-three years later, U.S. troops were engaged in Iraq when a prisoner abuse scandal erupted at Abu Ghraib. Ted Kennedy, the slain President's brother and one of Washington's most influential Democrats, walked to the Senate floor to offer

his take. “Shamefully,” he suggested, “we now learn that Saddam’s torture chambers reopened under new management—U.S. management.” Unlike his brother, this Kennedy could find no moral distinction between a regime that tortured its opponents as a matter of state policy and a nation that (notwithstanding the problems at Abu Ghraib) had sought to liberate its people.

In a sense, the rhetoric of the brothers Kennedy serves as book-ends to the transformation of Democratic thinking about America, its place in the world, and the justness of its cause. Of late, in their rhetoric and behavior, too many Democratic leaders, strategists, and activists have portrayed America more ambiguously than clearly, with more hesitation than pride, and with more confusion than certainty. In doing so, they have raised public doubts about their willingness to defend the United States with all vigor necessary.

In his moral confusion, Ted Kennedy was not alone. As Democratic anger over the particulars of the Bush administration’s war on terror and invasion of Iraq grew, some Democrats lost sight of the bigger picture. In mid-2005, the Senate Democratic Whip, Richard Durbin, compared the way American soldiers were treating captives in the War on Terror to the treatment meted out by “Nazis, Soviets in their gulags, or some mad regime—Pol Pot or others.”

Moreover, Democrats have cavorted a bit too closely with those willing to blame America for the hostility of its enemies. In 2004, the party’s congressional leaders attended the Washington opening of Michael Moore’s “Fahrenheit 9/11,” a docufantasy that painted Iraq as a happy playground that the United States ruined by overthrowing Saddam

Hussein. (Whatever one thinks of Bush’s decision to topple Saddam, or of America’s mismanagement of the aftermath, no serious person could portray Saddam’s Iraq in that way.) And, at the 2004 Democratic National Convention, former President Jimmy Carter invited Moore to sit with him for all the world to see.

Of late, in their rhetoric and behavior, too many Democratic leaders, strategists, and activists have portrayed America more ambiguously than clearly, with more hesitation than pride, and with more confusion than certainty. In doing so, they have raised public doubts about their willingness to defend the United States with all vigor necessary.

A year later, Democratic activists linked up with Cindy Sheehan, whose son died in Iraq and who, in her travels across the nation, said America “is not worth dying for,” called Bush “the biggest terrorist in the world,” and called the 2003 invasion of Iraq a secret plot to help Israel. Moveon.org, the on-line grassroots group on which Democrats have become so dependent, helped to coordinate her travels, while the Center for American Progress, a progressive think tank where many ex-Clinton administration officials work, publicized her exploits.¹

If Democrats seriously want to recapture the White House, this will not do. Americans know better. They live in the United States by choice, not by necessity. They see America with clear eyes—as the free-est, most democratic, most open society in the world, and the one offering the

widest set of opportunities. They take note of the millions across the globe who seek refuge in America and, as reflected in their anger after September 11th, they will come to America's defense when necessary.

A Democratic presidential candidate who seeks a new way to approach national security might consider the recent work of progressives in Europe. In early 2006, twenty-five writers and academics penned "The Euston Manifesto," a robust alternative to prevailing liberal orthodoxy in Europe. "The United States of America is a great country and nation," the manifesto states. "It is the home of a strong democracy with a noble tradition behind it and lasting constitutional and social achievements to its name. Its peoples have produced a vibrant culture that is the pleasure, the sourcebook and the envy of millions."²

Inspired by the effort, a smaller group of liberals in the United States built upon these sentiments with a statement of their own in late 2006: "American Liberalism and the Euston Manifesto." Arguing that "[t]he long era of Republican ascendancy may very well be coming to an end," they added that "[i]f and when it does, we seek a renewed and reinvigorated American liberalism, one that is up to the task of fighting and winning the struggle of free and democratic societies against Islamic extremism and the terror it produces."

Of liberals in general, they wrote, "the passions of too many liberals here and abroad, even in the aftermath of terrorist attacks all over the world, remain more focused on the misdeeds and errors of our own government in Iraq than on the terrorist outrages by Islamic extremists."³ Separately, centrist Democrats Will Marshall and Jeremy Rosner portrayed the thinking of the "non-

interventionist left" this way: "[O]ne assumes that because America is strong it must be wrong."⁴

The next successful Democratic presidential candidate will be one who neither suffers nor enunciates moral confusion about America. He or she will hold, and articulate, a firm belief in the superiority of U.S.-style freedom and democracy over the authoritarian systems of our enemies. Like Harry Truman at the outset of the Cold War or Kennedy at its most precarious moments, the next Democratic president will lay America and its enemies side by side, explain the superiority of American ideals, and outline a vision to guarantee America's long-term security.

Seeing the enemy straight

In one sense, the global wars of the 20th century were easier for the United States to fight. Our people suffered far less confusion about the identity of our enemies (in World War I, Germany; in World War II, the Axis Powers; and in the Cold War, the Soviet Union) or what they sought (world domination). Today, we are confused about whom we are fighting, the source of their strength, the nature of their anger, and how to measure our progress.

Consider the progression of America's deeply polarized debate on foreign policy since 2001. From the days of broad support for the U.S. attack on Afghanistan to root out al-Qaeda, we moved to a bitterly partisan debate over whether to launch the 2003 invasion in Iraq, then to an even more bitter debate over whether to stay or retreat as we botched the post-Saddam stabilization effort. We have argued vociferously about Saddam's links to terror, the sources of

violence in Iraq, the military focus on Iraq as opposed to Iran and Syria, Iran and Syria's roles in stoking the fires of Iraq, and their potential to help us put them out.

Because confusion runs rampant, let us be clear. The United States and its allies face a global challenge from militant Islam (a.k.a. radical Islam or Islamic extremism) that openly asserts its plans to replace secular law with a strict interpretation of Islam, turn back the clock on modernity, reject pluralism, subjugate women, eradicate homosexuals, eliminate Israel, and impose this ideology of intolerance by all means necessary across the globe.

The challenge of militant Islam plays out on several levels. It provides the philosophical glue that binds terrorist groups across the world in a network of planning, cooperation, murder, and mayhem. It is the ideological engine that drove planes into the World Trade Center and Pentagon and destroyed buses in London, trains in Madrid, hotels in Bali, and cafés in Haifa. It also drives such important state sponsors of terrorism as the Islamic Republic of Iran, which provides funds, training, weapons, and other aid to Hezbollah, Hamas, and other groups.

Endangering the United States and its allies further are Iran's aggressive efforts to develop nuclear weapons, with which it could carry out threats of its president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, to "wipe" Israel "off the map" or create "a world without America." Now, the free world faces the frightening specter of a radical regime in Tehran using nuclear weapons itself or transferring them to a terrorist group, dedicated to death in service of Allah, that in turn would show no hesitation to use them.

To be sure, too many Americans of all political persuasions do not recognize the threat of militant Islam. Nor do they fully grasp the dangerous links between terrorists, their state sponsors, and the pursuit of nuclear weapons. But the problem is particularly acute in Democratic circles, where hatred of President Bush, reluctance to make value judgments about different cultures, and confidence in the rationality of man blinds Democrats to the reality of this danger.

The next successful Democratic candidate will be one who moves beyond Bush hatred and the niceties of political correctness to, in the words of the left, "speak truth to power." The candidate will articulate a clear-eyed view of the world, defining the nature of our enemies, their underlying ideology, and their long-term goals in words that ring true to average Americans.

In Washington and across the country, Democratic leaders, strategists, and activists are seized by an almost obsessive anger at the President, leading too many of them to discount, if not dismiss, everything with which he is associated. Rather than merely critique Bush's war on terror (as they would his economic policies), too many Democrats discount the very idea of such a war. Rather than see an enemy committed to our destruction, driven by a unifying ideology of hatred, too many Democrats view the war as a political tactic of Karl Rove and the

very idea of an enemy as a tool for whipping up fear.

In their confusion (or willful blindness), leading Democrats are aided mightily by the Bush-hating leftist bloggers to whom they pledge their allegiance by speaking at their national convention, meeting with them informally, and monitoring their writings. Even those who know better say privately that, politically speaking, they can't challenge the anti-Bush orthodoxy that blinds Democrats to the very real threats that America faces.

And when a Democrat tries to rise above partisanship in the interest of national security, to ensure (as Senator Arthur Vandenberg counseled in the late 1940s) that politics should stop "at the water's edge," the left reacts with fury. Enraged by Democratic Senator Joe Lieberman's support for the war in Iraq and his caution against weakening the President too much during wartime, the left rallied behind Ned Lamont, who upset Lieberman in Connecticut's Democratic primary. (Lieberman later won the general election by running as an independent.)

September 11th awoke us to the dangers that had been mounting for decades. Now, with a new reality must come a new political line, one that resonates with people in their living rooms and at their dinner tables, addressing their hopes and fears.

Nor, in this age of rampant political correctness, are Democrats particularly anxious to explore the cultural or religious ideologies of our enemies. Rather than acknowledge the theological underpinnings

of anti-Western terrorism, too many Democrats explain terrorism as the logical response to legitimate grievances—e.g., American imperialism around the world, economic inequality in terrorist-producing nations, or Israeli settlements in the West Bank.

Such ill-informed explanations of terrorism lead, almost inexorably, to ill-suited solutions from a bygone era. Seeking a new national security strategy for today, some Democrats point proudly to the "containment" strategy that their party leaders devised after World War II and suggest that we merely need to reinvigorate the strategy and strengthen the machinery with which the United Nations, NATO, and the Western alliance implemented it.

But containment was rooted in the "rational actor" theory of international relations, a belief that leaders act rationally when making decisions about the use of force. Related to the "rational actor" theory was the theory of "mutual assured destruction," or MAD, the idea that neither the United States nor the Soviet Union would launch a nuclear attack against the other because each had the nuclear capacity to fully destroy the other with a counter-strike. As R. James Woolsey, Clinton's former CIA Director who now co-chairs the non-partisan Committee on the Present Danger, put it recently, MAD could work because Soviet leaders cared more about living the good life in their dachas than risking it all in a nuclear war.⁵

Unfortunately, this concept may not apply to our new enemies; those (like Ahmadinejad) who are driven by radical theology and who threaten to obliterate sovereign nations just may mean it (as Hitler meant it when he presaged his war against the Jews in *Mein Kampf* and elsewhere).

These enemies may be willing, even eager, to risk nuclear war, for they seek not just victory in a war with the West but death as a glorious end in itself. “Is there art that is more beautiful, more divine, and more eternal than the art of martyrdom?” Ahmadinejad has mused. “A nation with martyrdom knows no captivity. Those who wish to undermine this principle undermine the foundations of our independence and national security. They undermine the foundation of our eternity.”⁶

Confronted with such rhetoric, too many of us are quick to dismiss it as tactical, designed for a rational purpose. Ahmadinejad, we speculate, is seeking to strengthen his political hand at home by “playing to his base” or to build his profile in the region by thumbing his nose at the United States and Israel. And, inferring rationality, too many Democratic leaders suggest a strategy that reflects it, such as negotiations to convince Iran to end its pursuit of nuclear weapons or an updated version of “containment” to deal with a nuclear Iran.

But we infer rationality at our peril. Ahmadinejad subscribes to a radical strain of Islam that anticipates the return of the “12th Imam” or “Mahdi,” a messianic figure from the 9th century whose arrival supposedly will signal the end of the world. Ahmadinejad reportedly seeks a violent confrontation with the West to help speed the Mahdi’s return. His pursuit of nuclear weapons is consistent with such theology.

Do not scoff. Ahmadinejad is confident enough about the Mahdi’s return that, as Tehran’s mayor in 2004, he ordered an urban reconstruction project in anticipation of it. As Iran’s President, he has allocated nearly \$20 million to a mosque from which the Mahdi supposedly will

emerge. “Today,” he told religious leaders in late 2005, “we should define our economic, cultural and political policies based on the policy of Imam Mahdi’s return.”⁷

The next successful Democratic candidate will be one who moves beyond Bush hatred and the niceties of political correctness to, in the words of the left, “speak truth to power.” The candidate will articulate a clear-eyed view of the world, defining the nature of our enemies, their underlying ideology, and their long-term goals in words that ring true to average Americans.

Prioritizing national power

After the Bay of Pigs fiasco, President Kennedy invited former Vice President Richard Nixon—the titular leader of the Republican Party—to the White House for a briefing. Chatting in the Oval Office, Kennedy turned to his former adversary and mused about the importance of such matters. “It really is true that foreign affairs is the only important issue for a President to handle, isn’t it?” Kennedy asked. “I mean, who [cares] if the minimum wage is \$1.15 or \$1.25, in comparison to something like this?”⁸

Kennedy’s insight reflected a mind-set about national security that was shared by Democratic presidents as far back as Truman, if not FDR and Wilson. They viewed national security as central to their presidencies, recognizing that security abroad was a prerequisite for progress in domestic affairs, and that only a robust foreign policy would ensure safety.

For at least the last three decades, however, Democrats mostly have held a far different view. What began as perhaps an understandable reac-

tion to the debacle in Vietnam grew into a far broader, and more insidious, discomfort with all things military. Rather than embrace foreign policy, Democrats sought to avoid it. They viewed it as a necessary but unpleasant part of any presidency, almost as a policy-making cross to bear.

The historical evolution is striking. In 1960, Kennedy ran to the right of Nixon, charging (inaccurately) that the Eisenhower administration had allowed a “missile gap” to develop with the Soviets. In his inaugural address, he spoke barely a word of domestic policy, instead making clear why the nation must “pay any price [and] bear any burden” in its fight against the Soviets. Sixteen years later, in the shadow of Vietnam, America elected Democratic Jimmy Carter, who scolded Americans for their “irrational fear of Communism.” Sixteen years after that, they elected Democrat Bill Clinton, who had promised to focus “like a laser beam” on the economy.

Clinton’s domestic focus was understandable, reflecting the times in which America was living. The Soviet Union had collapsed, a noted scholar suggested the world had reached the “end of history,” the “Washington Consensus” envisioned that spreading free market capitalism would spread peace with it, and the United States wondered who would emerge as its next major threat.

Then, September 11th awoke us to the dangers that had been mounting for decades. Now, with a new reality must come a new political line, one that resonates with people in their living rooms and at their dinner tables, addressing their hopes and fears.

For Democrats, that means a wholly new mind-set, one that elevates national security rather than changes

the subject and that eagerly tackles issues that touch upon America’s role in the world, its responsibilities as (in the words of former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright) the world’s “indispensable nation,” and the threats and challenges that it faces.

This is no small thing. It requires not just a change in rhetoric, but in gut feeling. Politicians joke that their key to success is “sincerity—if you can fake that, you’ve got it made.” Amusing, but recent history has shown that, in political terms, you can’t “fake it” on national security.

You can’t, for instance, run successfully for President on the basis of biography rather than vision. Desperate to offset President Bush’s wartime leadership, Democratic insiders in 2004 rallied in great numbers behind former NATO Commander Wesley Clark. Once he flamed out, activists moved in enough numbers to help secure the nomination for Vietnam veteran John Kerry.

In 2004 and after, Democrats complained bitterly that the “Swift Boat Veterans for Truth” deliberately distorted Kerry’s Vietnam experience and legislative record. Fine. But, as I wrote shortly after his defeat, “they didn’t put words in Kerry’s mouth. They didn’t vow to convert terrorism into a public ‘nuisance’ that’s akin to prostitution, talk of a ‘global test’ for the U.S. to pass before it takes military action, vow to do what it takes to win in Iraq while setting timetables for withdrawal, promise to respect the views of allies while terming those who sent troops to Iraq as the ‘coerced and bribed,’ or talk about the war as a colossal mistake while vowing to bring more nations to the effort.”⁹

Having nominated a decorated veteran and orchestrated a political convention in which he was sur-

rounded by other veterans, party leaders figured they had cleverly “checked the box” on national security. When that didn’t work, they blamed the war rather than themselves, as Pennsylvania’s Democratic governor, Ed Rendell, did right after the election when he suggested that, if not for September 11th, Kerry would have won.

If you can’t “fake it,” neither can you avoid the issue of national security, as party leaders also have sought to do. For too long, Democrats have tried to turn the focus of national political debate to what Democratic activists call “the issues we want to talk about”—the economy, health care, and education. In a sense, they have tried almost to avoid reality; to insist, as their national chairman did in early 2004, that even with the nation at war the “bread-and-butter” issues of domestic policy would determine the election.

Moving forward, Democrats must discard their “either/or” approach to politics—either the public focuses on domestic issues, where Democrats are strong, or on national security, where Democrats are less comfortable. The next successful Democratic presidential candidate will be one who views both foreign and domestic issues as integral to his or her presidency because, more and more, foreign and domestic issues are two sides of the same coin.

As a successful Democratic candidate will make clear, America must gain control over the exploding costs of domestic entitlements (basically Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid) not only because they will crowd out other domestic spending but because they threaten funds for defense and diplomacy. As the scholar Michael Mandelbaum writes in *The Case for Goliath*, a fis-

cally-strapped America will lack the resources to play its current role as a kind of “world government,” with a frightening potential for global chaos as the result.¹⁰

The successful Democrat will recognize not just the economic but also the national security dangers presented by our soaring budget deficit. As our debt grows, its purchasers enjoy the leverage over us that any creditor holds over its debtors. They can wreak havoc with our economy merely by threatening to dump their dollar holdings, sending interest rates higher and possibly even generating a “run” on the currency. The growing debt held by foreign central banks, such as that of China, present a particular problem for America, for their economic leverage could force the United States to back away from a national security challenge, such as a confrontation with China over the fate of Taiwan.

Moving forward, Democrats must discard their “either/or” approach to politics. The next successful Democratic presidential candidate will be one who views both foreign and domestic issues as integral to his or her presidency because, more and more, foreign and domestic issues are two sides of the same coin.

The merging of domestic and foreign policy, however, is less a burden than an opportunity for a Democratic candidate—a way to differentiate oneself from the incumbent Republican president. The fact is, this melding of national and economic security apparently has escaped Bush’s notice.

Indeed, when historians write about the Bush presidency, they will criticize nothing more harshly than his failure to bring these issues, and the country, together after September 11th. With Manhattan and the Pentagon still smoldering, Bush could have sought a national effort to wean America from foreign oil (and stop underwriting hostile regimes in the Middle East) and ensure our long-term fiscal health (and stop sacrificing our sovereignty to an emerging and increasingly bold China). In such an effort, he could have attracted not just Republicans and Democrats but subsets of both—environmentalists on the left, fiscal conservatives on the right, and everyone in the middle who wanted to contribute to a true national war effort, to play a role on the home front while our young men and women went to war. The next successful Democratic candidate for President will need to see both sides of the security coin.

Seizing the initiative

Iraq continues to deteriorate, with the triumph of 2003 becoming the tragedy of 2007 and beyond. Americans are increasingly angry at this turn of events, and are laying the blame squarely at President Bush's doorstep. For Democrats, who desperately want to regain the White House, the political opportunity is obvious.

But the path to victory lies in seizing the issue of national security, not avoiding it. It also rests in articulating a coherent and convincing vision, not simply putting forth a biography. The next successful Democratic president will proudly trumpet the superiority of U.S.-style freedom and democracy, clearly define the challenge of militant Islam, and convince the American people that he or she is eager to

grab the reins of power in order to protect their safety and security.



1. Lawrence J. Haas, "Caution to Democrats: Sheehan May Be Hazardous to Your Political Health," *Public Affairs Perspective*, September 9, 2005, www.larryhaasonline.com.
2. "The Euston Manifesto," www.eustonmanifesto.org.
3. "New American Liberalism," www.newamericanliberalism.org.
4. Will Marshall and Jeremy Rosner, "Introduction: A Progressive Answer to Jihadist Terror," in Will Marshall, ed., *With All Our Might: A Progressive Strategy for Defeating Jihadism and Defending Liberty* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006).
5. R. James Woolsey, Remarks at the American Foreign Policy Council conference on "Understanding the Iranian Threat," Washington, D.C., November 15, 2006.
6. Newt Gingrich, "Lessons from the First Five Years of War: Where Do We Go from Here," Speech before the American Enterprise Institute, September 12, 2006, http://www.aei.org/publications/pubID.24891,filter.all/pub_detail.asp.
7. Ilan Berman, "Understanding Ahmadinejad," American Foreign Policy Council *Iran Strategy Brief* no. 1, (June 2006), <http://www.afpc.org/IFI/UnderstandingAhmadinejad.pdf>.
8. Richard Reeves, *President Kennedy: Profile of Power* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993), 100.
9. Lawrence J. Haas, "Election '04 and the Democrats: Let the Bloodletting Begin," *Public Affairs Perspective*, November 5, 2004, www.larryhaasonline.com.
10. Michael Mandelbaum, *The Case for Goliath: How America Acts as the World's Government in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2005).