

ED KILGORE,
MANAGING EDITOR:

The Democratic Strategist has three editorial goals—(1) to provide an explicitly and unapologetically partisan platform for the discussion of Democratic political strategy, (2) to insist upon greater use of data and greater reliance on empirical evidence in strategic thinking and (3) to act as a neutral forum and center of discussion for all sectors of the Democratic community.

As The Democratic Strategists' editorial philosophy states, the publication will be "proudly partisan, firmly and insistently based on facts and data and emphatically open to all sectors and currents of opinion within the Democratic community".

A
DEMOCRATIC STRATEGIST
STRATEGY MEMO

**MEMO TO DEMOCRATS:
YOU'RE GOING TO HAVE TO TALK
ABOUT NATIONAL SECURITY THIS
ELECTION. HERE'S HOW.**

BY
JIM ARKEDIS

TDS STRATEGY MEMO: MEMO TO DEMOCRATS: YOU'RE GOING TO HAVE TO TALK ABOUT NATIONAL SECURITY THIS ELECTION. HERE'S HOW.

By JIM ARKEDIS

Fellow Democrats:

The world is a mess, and it's time to talk about it.

Syria and Iraq are in civil wars. Iran and the U.S. struggle to negotiate a nuclear deal. Hamas is firing rockets indiscriminately into Israel, which has moved ground forces into the Gaza Strip. Tensions between the U.S. and Russia are higher than they've been since the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the Kremlin continues to destabilize Ukraine by sponsoring separatist movements in the country's east. U.S. intelligence believes Moscow provided weaponry that downed a Malaysian Airlines flight full of civilians.

And that's just this week.

Now, I know what you're thinking: Elections are rarely decided by a candidate's position on foreign policy. The last time America had a serious debate about a major national security issue was over Iraq in 2008.

And you're right. Economic concerns and health care will continue to dominate much of the discussion throughout this cycle and beyond. But with so much of the world in trouble, there is no doubt that voters will have questions about these issues on the campaign trail.

As Democrats, we should relish talking about national security and foreign policy issues this cycle. There's a vast political space open right now, itching to be filled with a smart and strong approach to keeping America safe. Here's why:

First, many Americans aren't quite sure what to think. Where Iraq is concerned, an astounding **80 percent of Americans**¹ believe that what happens in Iraq is important to the interests of the United States. Yet 85 percent worry that further American involvement in Iraq will be lengthy, and 57 percent believe what happens in Iraq is beyond US control anyway. Almost no one wants to commit troops, though sending military advisors and drones receive majority approval.

Jim Arkedis is the president of 4D PAC, a political action committee that supports Democratic candidates with smart and strong national security platforms. Follow him @JimArkedis

¹ <http://www.pollingreport.com/iraq.htm>

On Russia and Ukraine, **67 percent believe**² that what happens there is important to American interests and clear majorities support imposing economic sanctions against Russia. But **a March poll**³ shows 61 percent of Americans don't believe we have a responsibility to do anything about it.

Seventy-five percent of Americans may support ending the war in Afghanistan, but 54 percent **disapprove**⁴ the Obama administration's decision to swap five Taliban prisoners for Sgt. Bowe Bergdahl.

Notice a pattern? Americans don't have clear priorities on foreign policy.

Second, Americans don't think Barack Obama is doing a good job of leading. Poll after poll shows significant majorities of Americans think the country is on the wrong track. Americans don't believe the Obama administration has made them safer from terrorism (despite killing Osama Bin Laden!). Only **23 percent**⁵ think he has clearly explained what America's goals are in Iraq today and **55 percent disapprove**⁶ of his policies there. Our country is **split**⁷ down the middle on his handling of Ukraine.

You'll have your own thoughts about each of these issues, of course, and there's a certain amount of "Obama fatigue" that drives public opinion to oppose anything that's attached to an incumbent. But if you're in a tough race, critiquing President Obama on national security is a good way to differentiate yourself from the administration.

And third, Democrats need to push back against reckless neo-conservatism on the right and a mounting sense of isolationism on the fringes of both parties. The neo-con Republican trio of Senators John McCain (AZ), Lindsey Graham (SC), and Kelly Ayotte (NH) too often and too quickly turn to our military to solve every foreign policy problem. Yet isolationism, vocally supported by folks like Senator Rand Paul (KY), is at an **all-time high**.⁸ A majority think the US is **less powerful**⁹ than it was a decade ago, a twenty percent increase since 2004. In 2011, 38 percent of Americans **thought**¹⁰ we had the greatest country in the world, now just 28 percent do.

The space is yours, Democrats, now here's how to own it:

1. Don't avoid the topic, embrace it

The country is clearly sick of foreign policy adventurism. That's understandable. But because our leaders did the wrong thing in Iraq doesn't mean we should do nothing anywhere else.

² <http://www.pollingreport.com/russia.htm>

³ <http://www.pollingreport.com/russia.htm>

⁴ <http://www.pollingreport.com/afghan.htm>

⁵ <http://www.pollingreport.com/iraq.htm>

⁶ http://www.pollingreport.com/obama_ad.htm

⁷ <http://www.pollingreport.com/russia.htm>

⁸ <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/worldviews/wp/2013/12/04/american-isolationism-just-hit-a-50-year-high-why-that-matters/>

⁹ <http://www.people-press.org/2013/12/03/public-sees-u-s-power-declining-as-support-for-global-engagement-slips/>

¹⁰ <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/07/02/most-americans-think-the-u-s-is-great-but-fewer-say-its-the-greatest/>

Many Democrats prefer to focus on domestic priorities while shying away from national security problems. In a budget conscious environment, it's tempting to ask why we're still spending so much abroad when we should be spending our resources for education or infrastructure.

Don't fall into this trap. The simple fact is that there is little trade off between domestic and foreign concerns, and the decision to resource smart investments in both areas is not binary. America can and should spend what is necessary to keep America safe as well as what is necessary to educate our children and keep our economy moving.

2. Connect on Values

Staying safe is one of the most fundamental in Maslow's psychological hierarchy of needs. It is a basic demand of all people, and a core responsibility of government. It's important to acknowledge voters' feelings of insecurity, connecting with them on the idea that the world is a dangerous place with evil people would like to harm them.

Acknowledge that the world is an uncertain, dangerous place, particularly these last few months. Further, ensure them that while in office, your fundamental responsibility is to keep them safe.

Then pivot to...

3. Leadership

One of Republicans' favorite activities is to chide President Obama for a lack of leadership on foreign policy, yet they constantly fail to offer much in the way of what they'd do differently.

You should affirm that America is the world's leader and that you will do everything to keep it that way. But don't just talk about leadership, lead by example.

Keeping the country safe may mean going against popular opinion. Voters always respect—and are willing to listen to—principled positions, even if they're different. Americans believe we are an exceptional nation because we choose to hold ourselves to the highest standards when presented with tough choices.

America has gotten away from that recently. Some running for office will argue that short-term security needs can trump long-term values. Republicans will say that we can't close Guantanamo Bay prison or try terrorism suspects on American soil because it puts American security at risk.

They are wrong. No one **has ever escaped**¹¹ from the one "supermax" prison facility in Colorado, and of the 200 highest profile terrorism cases, **178**¹² have ended in convictions.

¹¹ <http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/statements/2009/may/21/barack-obama/obama-correct-no-inmate-has-ever-escaped-supermax/>

¹² http://m.idahopress.com/news/national/terror-conviction-rate-high-in-us-with-questions/article_d9fb0025-102f-5ac2-a91e-6a279f54874f.html?mode=jqm

When America fails to grant terrorism suspects a fair and swift trial, it weakens itself. When we fail to lead by example, we alienate our allies and enemies alike who point to our hypocrisy.

4. 21st Century Problems Demand 21st Century Solutions

Despite Russia's recently belligerent posturing, the Cold War is over. No longer can the United States guarantee world peace on the back of its nuclear arsenal.

America is more secure when we stay involved in world affairs. Today, the world is kept safe through dogged, tough-nosed diplomacy, robust developmental aid, and the expansion of democratic institutions the world over. Yet these approaches take time and persistence – two things that voters in a media market that demands instant responses and immediate results, may seem to have a hard time swallowing.

But it's okay. Voters respect an approach that's grounded in values and executed through thoughtful policy. Advocating for expanding democracy-building programs or providing (efficient) developmental assistance may not sway many votes on the campaign trail, but explaining them in the context of expanding American values like free speech and economic opportunity will certainly garner respect.

Yet on the rare occasions when America must deploy its military after all other avenues are exhausted, its armed forces must be without peer.

5. Apologize for Mistakes But Don't Bush-Bash

Invading Iraq was a horrible mistake. Yes, the Bush administration manipulated facts to gin up an invasion on faulty premises. If you were in office at the time, you may have voted for it.

If you voted for Iraq and now believe it was a mistake, acknowledge it and move on. The world is a much different place than it was six years ago, let alone ten. And voters don't care about George W. Bush any more.

In sum, Democrats have a great opportunity to make a great case for themselves when it comes to national security in 2014. We have the right values, the right worldview, and the right policies to keep America safe and strong. It's time we let the American people know that.