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The **Democratic Strategist** is a web-based publication edited by three leading American political strategists and thinkers—political theorist William Galston, polling expert Stan Greenberg and political demographer Ruy Teixeira. It seeks to provide a forum and meeting ground for the serious, data-based discussion of Democratic political strategy.

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THE DEMOCRATIC STRATEGIST STRATEGY MEMO

OBAMA AND IRAQ: A GENERAL ELECTION STRATEGY

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His opposition to the Iraq war helped Barack Obama win the Democratic presidential nomination. Will it help him win the presidency? It could and should, but isn't necessarily helping him yet. Polls show Americans very strongly opposed to the Iraq war but not sure whether the anti-war Obama or pro-war John McCain will handle the issue better going forward. Conservative columnist Charles Krauthammer even issued a "bring it on" dare to "make the election about Iraq" (*Washington Post*, June 13).

Why this seeming paradox? And how can Obama translate opposition to the Iraq war to support for him?

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Iraq needs to be addressed as a three-dimensional issue: (1) the war itself and the need to shift emphasis from what Obama is against to what he is for, and not just the calendar for getting out but the alternative strategy for doing so; (2) Iraq as a measure of Obama's overall foreign policy capability, particularly passing the commander-in-chief test without getting trapped into the "I'll bomb, too" Democratic wannabe role; and (3) Iraq as a temperature-taker as to whether this is another anti-military Democrat or someone who genuinely respects the institution, its people and its culture.

INITIAL GENERAL ELECTION POLL DATA

Four main points: First, Iraq remains a crucial issue. The economy is now issue #1, with 33% saying in the [June ABC-Washington Post](#) poll that it would be the most important issue in their vote for president. But Iraq is issue #2 at 19%, with the next nearest issue being health care at 8%. While it's true that Iraq was the top issue a year ago, the fact that it is still as high as it is amidst the worst economic problems in at least a quarter century and despite the surge having reduced the sense of immediate crisis shows real political staying power.

Second, the public remains very opposed to the war. On whether going to war was the right or wrong decision, the numbers are 38% vs. 54%; phrased as "whether it was worth fighting," 34% yes – 63% no. Some credit is being given to the surge with the percentage saying we are winning up from 29% in [January 2007](#) to 38% in [June 2008](#) ([ABC-Washington Post](#)). But the same poll showed only 41% in support of keeping military forces in "until civil order is restored" and 55% opposing. The [Newsweek June 18-19](#) poll giving options for keeping "large numbers of U.S. military personnel in Iraq" had 45% saying bring them home now or in less than one year, 20% saying within 1-2 years, 4% 3-5 years and 26% as long as it takes to achieve U.S. goals.

Third, Democrats are faring well on party preference questions for both Iraq and foreign policy generally. When asked which party would handle Iraq better, Democrats have been pretty consistently getting a 10+ margin, e.g., 50% to 34% in an [April CBS-New York Times](#) poll. On who would do a better job generally on foreign policy, the gap in recent polls varies but favors Democrats, 51-31 the largest margin, 45-40 the narrowest. Even the narrowest contrasts quite favorably with the strongly pro-Republican pattern that largely held for many years, including 47-28 in the early Reagan years; 60-26 in October 1991 after the first Gulf War; 51-33 in March 1994 amidst the early Clinton administration failures in Somalia and elsewhere; and 53-36 at the beginning of George W. Bush's second term. Terrorism is the one issue on which Republicans still hold an advantage. Here the recent range goes from 47-40 to 31-30, although juxtaposed with disapproval of the Bush terrorism policy (57-38).

Fourth, though, is that when personalized to the presidential candidates, the assessments are more mixed. McCain was ahead 50-41 in an [April poll](#) on who would do a better job handling the Iraq war. This was down to 46-43 in a [May poll](#), and 47-46 in a [June poll](#) ([ABC-Washington Post](#)). Obama does better on the differently phrased question on confidence to "make the right decisions about the war in Iraq". When asked in February their overall confidence levels were comparable (58% McCain, 57% Obama) but within that those very confident in

McCain were 27% while only 20% were very confident in Obama. The following month the candidates remained even at 56% in the overall numbers but McCain's very confident number had fallen to 19% with Obama at 17%. Still, these are quite different from issue-based preferences on which the anti-Iraq margin is much more robust.

In sum, Iraq is not yet McCain's issue, but it is much less Obama's than it could be given the issue preferences.

IRAQ: STRATEGIC SHIFT

In the Democratic primary it was enough to be against the Iraq war. Barack Obama's anti-war credential was stronger and purer than that of Hillary Clinton's early challengers like John Edwards and Joe Biden. But the general election requires making the case for what you're for, not just what you're against.

Sure, there's plenty of room to hit McCain on his Iraq weaknesses, including his "end in sight" prognostication over five years ago, the "100 year presence" remark, his various gaffes about Iraqi factions, and his vulnerability on this issue more than any other to the charge that he would offer a third Bush term. The most important challenge, though, is to explain the Obama strategy for getting out of Iraq—what might be called a "strategic shift"—as far better than the McCain position of staying on a costly and flawed course.

This starts with conveying the strategic understanding (as James Vega stressed in his *Democratic Strategist* [articles](#) on military strategy) that there is a mission still to be achieved. U.S. interests continue to be at stake in Iraq: anti-terrorism efforts against al Qaeda and any other transnational terrorist safe havens; regional containment to prevent the Iraqi conflict spreading to and further drawing in neighboring countries, and sufficient internal stabilization to at least avert ethnic bloodbaths. The Obama assessment should differentiate from the Bush-McCain overstatement of the threats without falling into an understatement.

From that baseline two sets of questions need to be convincingly answered: what the strategy is, and why it's the right one.

Defining the strategy:

Four key components define a strategic shift with respect to Iraq:

First and most fundamental is the core commitment to withdraw American military forces from Iraq within the first 16 months of his presidency. Obama must be unwavering in this commitment. It's not just the right Iraq policy but also central to the integrity of his candidacy.

Within it there is tactical flexibility in two respects. One is on the precise timing. This is a strategy, not just a calendar; the 16 months are a working timeframe not a fixed timeline. Obama's frequent statement that the military withdrawal must be done as carefully as the invasion was done carelessly gets it right. The key is to convey both sincerity in setting the 16-month timeline and judgment in acknowledging that it can only be an estimate.

The other is the military presence that may need to continue through residual and responsive forces for providing security for diplomatic presence and some civilian projects, anti-terrorism special operations forces, and some other capacities. These can be justified as prudent flexibility for a commander-in-chief, but only as necessary, not as a loophole in the overall strategic shift.

Second is a shift from the Bush token diplomacy that often has been little more than going through the motions to aggressive, high priority and systematic initiatives at three levels: globally, regionally, and within Iraq. This is about leveraging, not just talking: President Obama will bring to bear the leverage the United States does have, including the political capital that he will bring to the office. His strategy entails working at the global level with the other major global powers (Europe, Russia, China) and the United Nations to garner support for Iraqi stabilization and reconstruction; at the regional level with key parties including Iran, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Turkey for nonintervention and cooperative regional security initiatives; and within Iraq with Shi'a, Sunnis, and Kurds for greater political reconciliation. He goes into this well aware that some have gained and can continue to gain from an unstable Iraq. But there's also a lot to be lost if negotiated agreements are not reached, especially once the U.S. is gone, whether by global powers already squeezed on oil and concerned about the region's instability, regional parties worried about the gains others may make at their expense, and the Iraqi factions potentially facing intensified sectarian violence.

Third is making it clear that U.S. withdrawal from Iraq does not mean withdrawal from the Middle East. President Obama looks forward to working with General David Petraeus as he assumes command of CENTCOM to ensure a regional military posture that will deter adversaries and reassure allies. His pledges to deal more effectively with Iran, to meet threats as well as probe for opportunities, and to pursue greater progress towards Arab-Israeli peace also are crucial parts of his overall regional peace and security strategy. Withdrawing from Iraq will both help and be helped by progress on these and other regional fronts, with the net effect of strengthening the U.S. regional position.

Fourth is Afghanistan. The public doesn't need convincing that Iraq is not the central front against terrorism: when asked whether "America's safety from terrorism depends on success in Iraq," 60% didn't think so. Between the legacy of 9/11 and re-emerging threats, Americans do see Afghanistan as a major terrorism front. The correlation between the Bush build-up in Iraq and drawdown in Afghanistan, not only in troops but also in high-level attention and overall resources, was close to one-to-one. While an Obama administration would not make a reverse one-to-one correlation, it would be in a position and of a disposition to give Afghanistan the emphasis it needs militarily as well as in other crucial elements of the strategy.

Explaining why this is the right strategy

There are three main reasons:

First, and most straightforwardly, a strategic shift is more likely to achieve the remaining mission in Iraq. Credit should be given to General Petraeus and the brave men and women—

soldiers, statesmen, aid workers—who serve for what the surge has achieved. But the record is still very mixed with recurring violence, limited political reconciliation, and other indications of the limited scope and sustainability of the surge or other follow-on major military operations. Little more can be gained and much is at risk by continued massive American military presence in Iraq.

Second is the gain in credibility. Yes, gain. Credibility too often gets equated with resolve. That's true in some situations, but not when staying a course shows stubbornness more than steadfastness. Judgment that makes for the capacity to make strategic adjustments rather than blindly stay a losing course or ending up having no choice but to cut and run is the better measure of credibility. Allies, especially in a region as in flux and uncertain as the Middle East, are more likely to be reassured by savvy strategic judgment than lumbering resolve.

Third is the overall benefit to the U.S. global position. By virtually every geopolitical measure—the squandering of American power, the overextension of the American military, the undermining of American prestige, the distraction from other crucial global issues, the self-inflicted economic weakening—the Iraq war has done profound damage. Ending it has the automatic benefit of stopping the bleeding. It also creates the opportunity, directly and indirectly, to re-strengthen America's global position in ways that the scope, pace and complexity of change in today's world make all the more critical.

In making this “what and why” case for his Iraq strategy, Obama needs be straight with the American people. He can and should argue that a strategic shift is better than McCain's stay-the-course position. But he should beware promises of a sure thing. That would be breaking faith with the American people. Besides, the American people are smarter than that.

THE COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF TEST: TWO TALONS OF THE EAGLE

Obama has not yet passed the commander-in-chief test. In a [May CBS](#) poll McCain got 77% saying he's likely to be effective in that role with 39% saying very effective, compared to 62% for Obama, of which only 25% are in the “very effective” category. In the [June NBC-Wall Street Journal](#) poll, McCain got 52% “very good” or “good” as commander-in-chief, Obama only 33%. Another poll asked whether McCain might be too willing to use force and Obama too reluctant, with 31% strongly agreeing with the McCain worry but 39% with the Obama worry; another poll, asked whether McCain would be “too tough” (25%) and Obama “not tough enough” (43%). With 77% of the public agreeing that “it is sometimes necessary to use military force to maintain order in the world,” the commander-in-chief test has to be passed.

But using military force is not as defining of foreign policy leadership as in 2004. One reason is the sense of threat, substantively and especially emotionally, is not as great as in the immediate aftermath of 9/11. The other is that having had an administration that boasted about being ready even eager to use force against anyone, anytime, anywhere, and having experienced the results, the American public is admirably prudent and pragmatic about the military option. According to an extensive [recent survey by Public Agenda](#), 64% of Americans

considered the criticism of the United States as too quick to resort to war as justified, while only 31% said it wasn't. On "initiating military force only when we have the support of our allies," the results were that 51% said it was very important, 33% somewhat important, 7% not very important, 7% not at all important. Even on terrorism 65% favored more emphasis on diplomatic efforts, only 28% on military efforts.

The public's pragmatism also is coming through on the issue of talking to adversaries. Two recent polls following on McCain-Obama exchanges as well as President Bush's semi-direct critique in a speech to the Israeli Knesset came out 77-20 (*Washington Post-ABC*) and 67-32 (*USA Today/Gallup*, May-19-21) in support of talks with adversaries. The Gallup poll was broken down by party identification and showed independents in favor 70-29 and even Republicans at 48-51. Another poll asking specifically about Iran got 10% favoring taking military action and 9% threatening it, but 35% favoring diplomacy.

Obama thus needs to stake out a position that balances force and diplomacy, between the Bush-McCain overestimation of the utility of military force and the stereotypic Democratic underestimation. One might call it the "two talons of the Eagle", the imagery on the back of the \$1 bill, with the American Eagle holding arrows in one talon and olive branches in the other at equal heights, with equal firmness, mutually reinforcing, in balance.

This means making clear that his opposition to the Iraq war does not mean he is inherently opposed to the use of force. Iraq was the wrong war, but we may still have to fight wars. One wishes it could be said otherwise but being realistic about the world we live in does not allow for that. Those arrows do sometimes need to be used.

Obama needs to credibly convey commitment to maintain the military strength necessary to deter wars and other aggression, win those wars and other military operations that need to be fought, and provide reassurance to friends and allies. This comes through somewhat in prior statements and position papers from the primaries; it needs to be driven home in the new context of the McCain comparison.

But this does not mean becoming an "I'll bomb, too" Democratic "wannabe." Numerous other polls beyond the ones cited above show that the public gets the desirability of diplomacy. It's the do-ability that tends to be questioned. Obama needs to articulate an approach to diplomacy as not just process but as strategy, geared not just to conflict avoidance but to security enhancement and capable of achieving its own strategic objectives. Talk but talk tough. Ready to make deals, but hard-headed about the terms. Understanding that diplomacy is not an end in itself but a means to the ends of peace and security.

Plenty of validating cases can be cited: John Kennedy and the Cuban missile crisis; Henry Kissinger and China; George H.W. Bush and the re-unification of Germany; Bill Clinton and Bosnia. You could even include George W. Bush in one of his few foreign policy successes, the 2003 agreement with Libya ending its weapons of mass destruction programs and support for terrorism.

None of these initiatives were purely about diplomacy. All were backed to some extent by American military power. It's the two together, both talons of the Eagle, that make for

foreign policy success. It can't just be the olive branches: Obama does have to pass the commander-in-chief test. If the public has to choose, it may still go with the arrows. But it's also not just the arrows. What the American people really want is a leader who gets the balance right.

There's also a measure of toughness from the broader political combat that plays in to foreign policy leadership. Obama is polling even with McCain on the generic question of "stronger leader" (46-46, [ABC -Washington Post, June](#)). What David Brooks [calls](#) "the whole Chicago package", liberal idealist but also sharp-elbowed politico, may pose some problems for some aspects of the campaign, but it does buttress confidence in him being across the table from the likes of Putin.

AFFINITY WITH THE MILITARY

The Obama [website](#) has its "plan to keep our sacred trust with veterans." It details support for health care, tuition and other educational assistance, and numerous other benefits for soldiers, veterans and their families. McCain is the one having to explain why he doesn't support a new GI bill.

Obama also has a number of retired military officers as advisors and endorsements from even more. Indeed, beyond the Obama campaign, various think tanks, government commissions and other projects have been bringing together Democratic national security policy wonks and military officers, serving and retired, for many years now. Views get exchanged. More commonalities are discovered than may have been expected. Relationships get built that allow for disagreement within respectful relationships. And in the formal meetings and in the bars, it's often the neo-conservative armchair warriors who are the targets of shared disdain.

Still, pollsters and focus groups pick up on widespread doubts about Obama among what James Vega calls the "pro-military but anti-Bush's war" voters. As Vega stresses these doubts are more about values, class and culture than policy per se, what a Democracy Corps [analysis](#) termed "affinity with the military."

Obama says he wants to help us, soldiers and veterans and their families can see, but do we feel like he really understands us? Do we get the sense that he respects us? Does he look down on us and what we hold dear? Yes, could we have a beer with him?

Policy positions help but won't do it on their own. The [promo](#) for the new season of the television series "Army Wives" helps. So too does the flag lapel pin Obama has started to wear including in the "Country I Love" [television spot](#) being shown in 18 states.

But these are the usual strategies that still may be seen as standard token gestures. There has to be a human connection, a cultural bridging, an affinity that shows respect and can gain it in return. There still needs to be something, perhaps even an unplanned moment or interaction, which really establishes an authenticity that resonates within the military culture. This is the part of politics that is more about the music than the words.

WINNING ON IRAQ

Candidate preferences and issue preferences do not always line up. That's been a problem for Democrats before. We can't let it be one again, especially on an issue like Iraq where the issue preferences so strongly tilt our way.

While other foreign policy and national security issues will play in, it's crucial to get Iraq right on all three of its dimensions. The public wants out of Iraq but with a strategy, not just a calendar. A "Strategic Shift" can provide that. Americans need confidence in their next president especially as commander-in-chief but also in his broader foreign policy savvy—the two talons of the Eagle. Even those who are not of the military and its culture value and respect it, especially for the sacrifices made for all of us. As we end the war in Iraq Americans will expect the next President to do so in ways that honor and embrace those who serve and have served.