

GOP Safety Valve

Can the Republicans' advantage on national security overcome their weakness on Iraq?

By W. James Antle III

STANDING IN THE EAST ROOM nearly five years after the 9/11 terrorist attacks before an audience that included some of the victims' family members, President Bush might have been expected to deliver the usual remarks about Iraq. Instead he claimed specific national-security gains from tough terror-suspect interrogation policies and called on Congress to give his administration the authority to try al-Qaeda operatives like Khalid Sheik Mohammed by military tribunal.

The next day in Atlanta, Bush continued to concentrate on tools for prosecuting the war on terror. He called for "additional authority" to continue the no-warrant national surveillance program, which he described as essential to stopping "terrorists who want to harm America."

Bush's change in focus just weeks before the congressional elections is no accident. Voters make a distinction between the war in Iraq and protecting the U.S. homeland from terrorism. They have turned sharply against the former but still trust Bush and the Republicans on the latter. This split was already apparent by 2004. Exit polls showed Bush winning 86 percent of those who voted on the issue of terrorism while Democrat John Kerry took 73 percent of voters who cast their ballots based on Iraq.

A late August *USA Today*/Gallup poll shows the bifurcation has continued. The president gets his highest marks on terrorism, where 55 percent approve of his performance, and his lowest on Iraq, where 61 percent disapprove. These

numbers suggest strategic opportunities for both parties. Republicans can mitigate the fallout from Iraq by playing to their strengths on national security more generally. But a majority now agrees with the Democrats that Iraq is not an integral part of the war on terror, opening the door for them to be an anti-war party without compromising their anti-terrorism commitment.

Yet candidates throughout the country are discovering that this delicate balance—dovish on Iraq, hawkish on terror—is easier to suggest than achieve. Consider Ned Lamont. He upset pro-war Sen. Joe Lieberman in Connecticut's Democratic primary. But now Lieberman is running as an independent and is proving difficult to finish off. No general-election poll has shown Lamont faring better than a tie and most find him trailing the incumbent.

It's not because Connecticut's broader electorate disagrees with Democratic primary voters on Iraq. Polls have shown over 70 percent disapproving of the war, with particularly strong antiwar margins among independents. But 55 percent say they trust Lieberman more than Lamont on terrorism.

"People may disagree with Lieberman on the war, but they have a comfort level with him on security," says one polling expert. Lieberman has not been reluctant to press this advantage. Days after the foiled London terror plot, the senator charged that the success of Lamont's antiwar views would "be taken as a tremendous victory by the same people who wanted to blow up these planes."

In response, Lamont has settled on an obvious strategy—trying to whittle away his opponent's national-security advantages by arguing that the Iraq War distracted America from the campaign against al-Qaeda. Appearing on "Fox News Sunday," he noted that the aborted terror attempt "originated in Pakistan, goes through London, and here we have 132,000 of our bravest troops in the middle of a civil war in Iraq." Instead of indicating a lack of resolve against terrorism, Lamont argued that his primary victory "showed ... a lot of people in Connecticut think the invasion of Iraq has nothing to do with our War on Terror."

Perhaps recognizing that this line of argument has potential, many war supporters are bypassing Iraq in their efforts to impugn the terror-fighting credentials of their opponents. In Ohio, Republican Sen. Mike DeWine is locked in a close race against Democratic Congressman Sherrod Brown. The two candidates disagree on Iraq, but DeWine has zeroed in on other aspects of his opponent's record.

In July, DeWine launched a television advertising campaign alleging that Brown voted to "slash" intelligence funding "more than a dozen times" during the 1990s. Against the backdrop of a smoldering World Trade Center, the ad accuses the Democrat of "weakening America's security."

Brown fired back with his own commercial, emphasizing his support for tighter port security and the death

penalty for terrorists. “It’s sad,” the response ad’s narrator intones. “Mike DeWine exploiting images of 9/11 to smear Sherrod Brown.”

DeWine’s strategy seems straight out of Dick Morris’s playbook. Writing in the *New York Post*, the veteran political strategist and former Clinton adviser urged the GOP to apply his triangulation tactics to terror. “Bush and the Republicans need to stop alienating voters by arguing that Iraq is an indispensable front in the War on Terror,” Morris wrote. “They should center their fall campaign to keep control of Congress on the national-security issue *sans* Iraq.”

There’s an apparent flaw in Morris’s advice, however. Triangulation worked for Bill Clinton because on several key issues he was to the right of congressional Democrats and to the left of the Republicans. The Bush administration does not represent the vital center that wishes to pursue a vigorous war on terrorism while being skeptical of Iraq. Instead Bush and the GOP advocate the more extreme position Morris counsels them to avoid.

A handful of Republicans seem willing to try a little triangulation by claiming that center. In his long-shot Senate race against socialist Congressman Bernie Sanders, Vermont GOP candidate Richard Tarrant is waging a DeWine-like ad campaign focusing on Sanders’s votes against intelligence funding. But there is one key difference: Tarrant actually favors withdrawal from Iraq.

In an interview with Vermont Public Radio last year, Tarrant resembled another Green Mountain State Republican, the late Sen. George Aiken, in his desire to declare victory and leave. “I think we need to get out fairly rapidly,” he said. “I don’t advocate cutting and running. But I think we’re successful. We have done some good things. We got rid of a terrible dictator.”

In Pennsylvania, Republican Congressman Michael Fitzpatrick faces a tough challenge from Democrat Patrick Murphy, an Iraq War veteran and Bronze Star winner. Murphy has a proposal to redeploy U.S. troops from Iraq within 12 months. Fitzpatrick decided to place himself in the center between his opponent and the White House.

“Congressman Fitzpatrick says NO to both extremes,” a mid-August mailing from the incumbent read. “No to President Bush’s ‘stay the course’ strategy ... and no to Patrick Murphy’s ‘cut and run’ approach.” Fitzpatrick’s move suggests that, *pace* Morris, the most effective way to triangulate might be to position Bush opposite the antiwar Left.

Another, more prominent Pennsylvania Republican has decided to defend ground on Iraq that even Bush has conceded. In June, Sen. Rick Santorum joined House Intelligence Committee Chairman Peter Hoekstra in proclaiming that the discovery of 500 degraded chemical munitions in Iraq since 2003 vindicated the administration’s pre-war claims about weapons of mass destruction. “This is an incredibly—in my mind—significant finding,” the senator told Fox News.

But even Santorum, in the fight of his life against Democrat Bob Casey Jr., has sought to fit his support for the war into the context of a fight against Islamic terrorism. Consider Santorum’s remarks in a debate with Casey on “Meet the Press”: “We need to go out there and fight this war on Islamic fascism. Not just, as my opponent likes to focus on, just the war in Iraq.” Santorum referred to Iraq as “simply a front” in the larger war on terror, less important than “principal stoker” Iran.

If Santorum’s parrying highlights the Republican problems on the war—out of Iraq, into Iran doesn’t sound like an inspiring slogan—Democrats have had similar difficulties overcoming the

public’s reluctance to trust them on national security. The Democratic Party’s reputation of being weak on defense has followed them from the Cold War to the war on terror. For years, the party was seen as hopelessly crippled by “Vietnam syndrome.” Older voters remember liberal Democrats advocating military-budget cuts and nuclear freeze.

One tactic Democrats have adopted to counteract their soft image is to rely on military veterans to make the case against Iraq for them. The emergence of hawkish Pennsylvania Congressman John Murtha as an antiwar voice was a major coup. Virginia Senate candidate James Webb—who, as his first ad reminds us, served as President Reagan’s Navy secretary—is another Democratic veteran well positioned to overcome his party’s national-security baggage.

Yet military service isn’t sufficient to save Democrats who are seen as liberal on national security. Ask Georgia Democrat Max Cleland, a Vietnam veteran and triple amputee who was defeated in 2002 due in part to Republican ads—complete with images of Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden—targeting him for his votes concerning the Department of Homeland Security.

This may explain why Bush has decided to come out with new proposals on wiretapping and military tribunals right before the elections. “This is a pretty transparent attempt at offering up bait to liberal Democrats to get in his way,” Democratic consultant Jim Jordan told the *Los Angeles Times*.

If Democrats can avoid taking the bait—or better yet, come up with credible alternatives to Bush policy—2006 could be their year. Down in the polls in almost every other category, toughness on terror is the Republicans’ last major source of strength. If the GOP loses that, it’s hard to see how any amount of triangulation can save them. ■

Cartoon Castro

The reality of the Cuban dictator bears little resemblance to his admirers' fantasies.

By Peter Hitchens

IN SOME COUNTRIES the visitor wishes for a mighty hand to reach down from the clouds and take away the tyranny and squalor he sees around him. Cuba is one such place. Havana is one of the loveliest cities on the planet, or would be if it had not been turned into the mother of all shanty towns by decades of deliberate neglect.

And the Cuban people seem to have a special talent for the arts of life, ignoring as far as they can the restrictions and the privations of a mad, dogmatic regime that sometimes expropriates ice-cream stands and sometimes launches schemes to feed the poor on rodents. It also keeps them under close observation through squads of inquisitive busybodies on every block. Nowhere on earth is speech less free or the home less private, except possibly North Korea. Nobody would wish their fate upon them.

I wonder what the generally heedless western tourists, for whom Cuba is now a fashionable destination, would do if they were expelled from their privileged foreigners' beach reservations, deprived of their special tourist banknotes, and set loose with ordinary Cuban money and ration cards to forage for food and shelter in the collapsing, ill-smelling, intrusively-watched, fly-infested streets of central Havana.

I doubt if they would accept the diet of rice and black beans, the cloudy rum that looks like nasty medicine. Nor would they spend very many nights in the tottering, smelly, crammed rookeries in which the victims of Castro's

dream must live, with their broken sewage pipes and their moody, expensive electricity supplied through ancient, fizzing cables.

But would it change their minds? Probably not. They would congratulate themselves on their fortitude and buy their Che Guevara souvenirs at the airport on their way home. They would continue to refer to the national dictator as "Fidel," as if they knew him, as if he were a friend or perhaps a rock star whose personality is so large that it belongs to the world. They are the latest victims of a strange delusion about this island, which has been far more important than the place or the people, for almost 50 years.

It is tempting to sympathize with the Cuban exiles of Miami, who cheerfully yearn for the death of Castro, describing this as the "biological solution" to the tragedy of the island to which they yearn to return. It is tempting to hope for an intervention, either by fate or by someone else.

But that is not really the point about Cuba. Mighty hands do not, in these prosaic times, stretch forth and pluck despots from their thrones. They do not even write upon the walls of their banqueting chambers that they have been weighed in the balance and found wanting. This sort of wishfulness, the blasphemous desire to stand in for an apparently absent and presumably wrathful deity, is the road to Baghdad and Fallujah and brings hell into the world. Indeed, it is American interventions in Cuba, from the Bay of Pigs to the crass

embargo, which many—including this writer—believe to have rescued and then sustained Castro. And America's lawless prison at Guantanamo Bay, part of another such idealistic enterprise, has disastrously drawn attention away from Castro's own grotesque repressions. Our assaults on our own freedom obscure the view of his far worse ones.

The regrettable truth is that Cuba's future—seen as a medium-sized island state in the Caribbean rather than as a playground for grandiose ideas—may not be all that much better than its past. The choice may not be as blunt as the Castro-worshippers would have you believe. They suggest it lies between Meyer Lansky and their tropical Stalin, between the casino and the commissar, which is an oversimplification. But it certainly lies between being a client of the U.S. or a client of somebody else, with that somebody else almost certainly hoping to use the territory to tease or annoy. China—which recently and rather cheekily sent a detachment of peacekeepers to Haiti—and Venezuela are currently bidding for the patronage, one with credits, the other with oil.

So let us not invest too much emotion here. Castro, at the time of writing, was being displayed, still living and still oppressing his people, garbed in strange red pajamas instead of his usual military dictator's outfit. He was presumably filmed in his personal hospital at Punto Cero, Siboney, a few miles outside Havana where he is recovering from an operation on what is described as an "intestinal crisis."