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To: Friends of Democracy Corps and Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research  
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## Opportunities and Challenges on National Security

### *Seven Imperatives for Democrats*

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Even as the mortgage meltdown, the credit crunch, and the threat of recession dominate the headlines, the 2008 race for the presidency continues to turn in important ways on Iraq and other national security issues. Indeed, Democracy Corps' fourth major poll focusing on national security<sup>1</sup> suggests that these issues will play a pivotal role in determining the outcome of the voting in November, just as they have over the past three election cycles. The new findings point to major challenges and opportunities for the Democrats in both the presidential and congressional contests as candidates present their case to the public.

The new survey suggests Democrats need to pursue seven imperatives as they wage the debate over national security in the coming months:

1. Go on offense on national security issues, because they can not only neutralize but also win support by using the strongest messages on these issues.
2. Show that Senator John McCain's national security policies would essentially be a continuation of the failed policies of President Bush.
3. Stress Iraq; most voters believe the Bush-McCain policies are a failure – specifically that the troop surge has not succeeded – and that we need a better course.
4. Stress the economic dimension of national security: With the economy in a tailspin Democrats must make the case that the Bush-McCain policies abroad are a key reason.
5. Stress energy: dependence on foreign oil has now moved up to the *number one* security threat in the eyes of most Americans.

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<sup>1</sup> The new survey is based on interviews with 1,000 likely voters, conducted March 25-27. Democracy Corps also conducted polls focusing on national security in August 2003, August 2006, and October 2007.



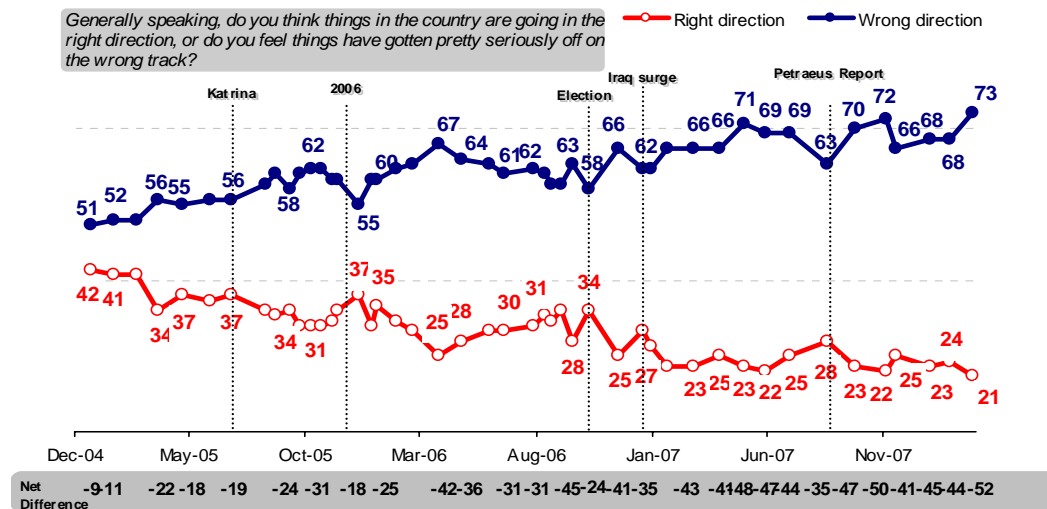
6. Construct the Democratic narrative around a goal of “strengthening America’s security” as a contrast to the “reckless” and “extreme” Bush-McCain policies.
7. Show a willingness to use force when necessary and demonstrate support for the U.S. military by building closer ties of affinity and advocacy.

### Bush Collapse Deepens

The starting point for understanding the role of national security in the current election is President Bush, whose waning days as president are increasingly defined by the three “i’s”: insolvency, Iraq, and irrelevance. The new survey shows the political environment and support for Bush collapsing even below the very low levels to which he already had sunk.

- The share of the public that feels the country is headed in the right direction dropped 3 points from February to 21 percent – the lowest level we have ever recorded in our firm’s 28 years of polling on American politics.

#### Nearly three quarters think country headed in wrong direction



- Bush’s job approval fell 4 points to 31 percent; his personal favorability rating fell 3 points, also to 31 percent; both are the lowest marks of his presidency.
- While Bush’s declining support stems in large part from the domestic economic downturn, he is also paying a rising price for his failed policies in Iraq. Negative ratings on the Iraq war moved up 9 points since January, to 60 percent, close to record levels. This obviously has major implications for Republican presidential nominee



John McCain, as we discuss below, but for now it means that Bush's national security legacy is strongly negative in the public's mind.

The public's anger at Bush, the economy, and Iraq continue to shift the electoral landscape in the Democratic Party's favor. Democrats widened their lead in a generic presidential ballot to 12 points (53 to 41 percent). In a named test of congressional candidates, Democrats expanded their lead nationwide to 13 points (53 to 40 percent), the strongest margin we have seen in a year. The Bush presidency is a millstone around his party's neck that continues to gain weight by the day.

### **Despite Favorable Environment, Democratic Presidential Candidates Trail**

Despite this favorable political environment, the new survey shows both of the Democratic candidates for president, Senators Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama, trailing behind McCain. While a number of factors contribute to McCain's lead, this new survey shows that national security issues are playing a role in that due to the public's impressions of McCain's war-hero biography as well his policy positions.

The fact that McCain runs ahead even in this Democratic-leaning political environment sends a sobering message: this is a change election that Democrats could lose.

An analysis of the voters who are hanging back from the Democratic candidates at this point suggests the important role that national security issues may be playing. There is a bloc of 12 percent of the likely electorate, "Democratic Wanna-Ds," who say they would vote for a Democrat in a generic presidential ballot, but then do not pick either Senator Clinton or Senator Obama in the named ballot match-ups. Most of these Wanna-Ds, 57 percent, are moderate-conservative Democrats, while 29 percent are self-described independents; a fall-off in support from the moderate-conservative Democrats is a major reason both Clinton and Obama are now trailing.

Since these Wanna-Ds are mostly self-identified Democrats, they still lean toward the Democrats on almost every aspect of national security, especially when it comes to questions of which party would do the best job.

The Democratic candidates for president will need to reassure the Democratic Wanna-Ds and other parts of the attentive audience on national security issues if they are going to erase McCain's lead and win in November.

### **Democrats Gain on Many Measures of Security, But Trail on the Military**

The Democratic problem on national security is specific and narrow: it mostly relates to the public's confidence about how a Democratic president would handle the military, particularly in a crisis. What is remarkable, in many ways, is the number of areas on which the public *does*



*not* have serious doubts about the Democrats – or even trusts them more than the Republicans to protect the country.

Against the backdrop of the failed Bush foreign policy record, the public now trusts Democrats far more on what some call “soft power” – matters of diplomacy, the promotion of democracy and human rights (despite Bush’s efforts to claim this ground), and projecting a positive image for America in the world.

- By an 11 point margin (47 to 36 percent), voters now say the Democratic Party would do a better job on “foreign policy.” This is almost double the 6-point margin Democrats enjoyed in August 2006 and a complete reversal of their 6-point deficit in August 2003.
- Democrats completely dominate Republicans now, by a 21-point margin (53 to 32 percent), on the question of “striking the right balance between foreign and domestic issues,” after being even with Republicans on this in 2003.
- By 9 points (43 to 34 percent), voters see Democrats, more than Republicans, as the ones who “stand up for Americans in global trade and commerce.”
- By 30 points (57 to 27 percent), voters say that “work for democracy and human rights abroad” describes the Democrats better than the Republicans – an impressive finding, given earlier results showing Democratic ambivalence about “democracy promotion” in the wake of Bush’s militaristic redefinition of the concept.
- And Democrats have a huge 33-point advantage (58 to 25 percent) on “improving global respect for America.”

Equally impressive is the Democrats’ near-parity with the Republicans on a range of measures of “hard security.”

- Democrats trail by only about 6 points (39 to 45 percent) on “national security,” about the same margin as two years ago.<sup>2</sup>
- Democrats trail by only 6 points (38 to 44 percent) on “protecting America and its people,” which improves upon the 22–point deficit seen on this measure in August 2003.
- And Democrats trail by only 4 points (39 to 43 percent) on “the war on terrorism” – the domain on which Bush and McCain have staked their national security policy.

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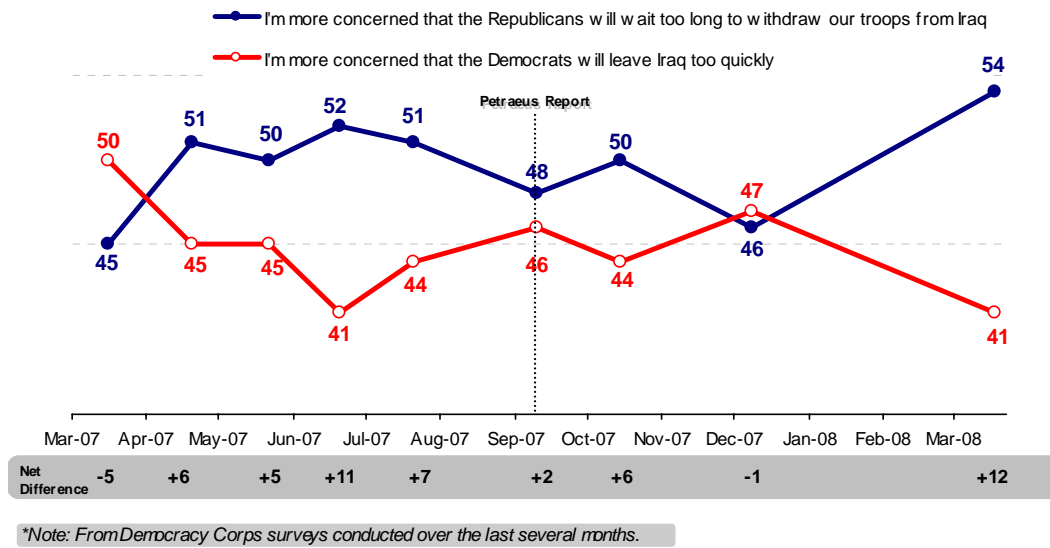
<sup>2</sup> Based on Democracy Corps Poll conducted by Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research of 1,000 likely voters nationwide October 1-3, 2006.



In many ways, however, the ultimate focus of “hard security” these days is Iraq: the larger of two major wars in which our country and our armed forces are now engaged. On this measure of hard security, the voters trust Democrats more, as they have for many months. For the first time, a full 50 percent majority of the public now trusts Democrats more on “the situation in Iraq” compared to just 38 percent trusting the Republicans. Even more striking, by a 54-41 percent margin, a majority say, “I’m more worried that the Republicans will wait too long to withdraw our troops from Iraq,” rather than the alternative statement, “I’m more concerned that the Democrats will leave Iraq too quickly.” This is the largest margin we have seen on this question.

### Worry Republicans will stay too long in Iraq

Now I'm going to read you some statements. Please tell me whether the FIRST statement or the SECOND statement comes closer to your own views, even if neither is exactly right.



Indeed, the area where Democrats are having a problem is relatively limited; it is not on “soft power” or “hard power,” it is mostly just on “fire power” – perceptions of how a Democratic president would handle the military, particularly in a crisis.

- Democrats now trail by 29 points (28 to 57 percent) on the question of which party would do the better job “ensuring a strong military.” Last October, this deficit was only 22 points.
- Similarly, by a 27-point margin (54 to 26 percent), voters see Republicans, more than Democrats, as the party that “respects the military.”
- And by 21 points (50 to 29 percent), voters say that “not decisive enough in a crisis” describes the Democrats more than the Republicans.



Regression analysis shows that these are, for the most part, not as strong drivers of the presidential vote as are measures of hard power and soft power, but these elements are still important and are likely playing a role in holding down the vote for the two Democratic candidates at this point.

## **The Importance of Going on Offense on the National Security Debate**

The new survey points to seven key things the Democratic Party and its presidential candidates must do if they are to overcome such remaining doubts, further strengthen their standing on national security, and win in November.

The first, and in many ways the most important, is that Democrats need to go on offense on the national security debate. We have been making this point for over a year, since Democrats first approached parity on key measures of hard security and started to open big advantages on Iraq and measures of soft security; but the new survey underscores the lesson in dramatic ways.

Consider this, although both Senators Clinton and Obama start the survey trailing Senator McCain on test ballots, when we model a national security debate between each pair, the voters prefer the positions of both Clinton and Obama. It is important to stress that we put the Democratic candidates to a tough test here, using McCain's strongest and most quoted national security lines from his recent statements:

*John McCain says: I have been involved in every national security issue over the past 20 years, and having served this country, I know how important our security is. [Hillary Clinton has flip-flopped on Iraq]/[Barack Obama is hesitant to stand up for America], and would run up the white flag of surrender in Iraq, pulling out our troops, handing al Qaeda a victory, and endangering our vital interests. I was the leading supporter of the surge, which is now succeeding, and I will press for victory in Iraq. I will also strengthen our military, restructure our intelligence system, and build missile defenses to protect us from rogue regimes like Iran.*

Yet a set of counter-statements by Senators Clinton and Obama<sup>3</sup> beat this McCain argument by an average of 8 points – which means that the two Democrats' national security positions out-poll their current electoral standing by more than 10 points.

By the end of the survey, after a long discussion of nothing but national security policy and with an evenly balanced set of questions that attack the Democrats as much as they attack

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<sup>3</sup> Against this McCain statement, we test 2 different national security messages for Clinton and 2 for Obama, with each of these four Democratic positions tested independently with a randomly-selected quarter sample of all respondents. We explore the differences between them below. But all four of them beat the McCain statement, with 3 of the 4 out-polling the McCain statement by more than the margin of error for these quarter-samples.



McCain and Bush, there is no sign of erosion in the standing of the Democratic candidates but there are some signs of Democratic gains. Democrats ought to want to battle on this terrain.

### **John McBush: Tying McCain to Bush on National Security**

The second imperative is to strengthen the existing perception that John McCain as president would mostly represent just a continuation of President Bush's failed national security policies.

By a strong 56-39 percent margin, voters believe that, "As president, John McCain would mostly continue the national security and foreign policies of President Bush," rejecting the idea that he would "mostly bring a different approach than President Bush" to these issues. The margin here does not come from Republicans, who might view continuity as a good thing (a 49-44 plurality of Republicans actually thinks McCain will bring change), but rather from Democrats and independents, who are highly critical of the Bush direction on national security.

Significantly, however, a 46-49 percent plurality of the Democratic Wanna-Ds believes that McCain *would* bring a change of direction on national security and foreign policy. A major objective for the Democrats must be demonstrating to this audience that on Iraq, Afghanistan, Iran, international economics, energy, and a host of other areas, McCain simply means more of the same.

### **Iraq: McCain Means Endless War**

The third key in winning the national security debate is Iraq. Although Democrats may hold varying views on the best policy going forward, there is a clear opportunity to make the case that the McCain-Bush policy is a failure, and furthering it means a future of a continuing loss of American blood and treasure in a civil war, with no end in sight.

Senator McCain has candidly and rightly said that if he fails to persuade the public about his policy on Iraq and the troop surge there, then he loses. The new survey says that, so far, he loses. The McCain surge policy loses. The McCain Iraq policy loses.

By a significant 52-44 percent margin, a majority of voters say, "the decision in 2006 to have a surge in American troops in Iraq was a mistake, because it cost us more money and lives, produced no real Iraqi political progress, and leaves us there indefinitely" (rejecting the alternative choice, "the decision in 2006 to have a surge in American troops in Iraq produced positive results, like setbacks for the terrorists, fewer US casualties, and Iraqi progress on solving their political issues"). It is notable that this strong verdict against the surge comes in a survey that fielded *before* the recent increase in violence in Basra and elsewhere in Iraq.



Beyond the surge and at a fundamental level, by a 57-42 percent margin, Americans say, “we need to start reducing the number of U.S. troops in Iraq,” rather than, “we must stay the course to achieve stability and finish the job in Iraq.”

### **Stressing the Economic Dimension of National Security**

The fourth imperative for Democrats is to stress the connection between national security and domestic economics. At a time when the economy is in a tailspin, Democrats need to make a forceful case that the Bush-McCain policies abroad are a key reason.

There are two main elements to this. One is about trade and international economics. As noted, the public sees the Democrats as more likely, by a 9-point margin, to “stand up for Americans in global trade and commerce.” On trade, but also on diplomatic issues, Democrats need to explain – as President Clinton often did so effectively – how better policies abroad can mean more jobs and prosperity at home.

It is also a question of priorities. When we test a debate (this time between McCain and a hypothetical Clinton position) on the question of domestic vs. foreign spending priorities, the Democratic position wins by a strong 14 point, 56-42 percent margin:

*Hillary Clinton says: America’s security depends on strength at home as well as abroad. We cannot go on spending billions on a failed policy in Iraq when our economy is floundering; I will set our priorities straight and redirect more of our foreign spending on education and health care.*

*-OR-*

*John McCain says: America is at war in two countries and waging a long-term fight against violent extremists who despise us and our values; as president, I will never short-change our security – I will do whatever it takes to win this struggle and protect our people.*

Similarly, the strongest attack we test against McCain is one that accuses him of giving “Bush a blank check for Iraq, where we are spending over \$2 billion a week.”

We do have qualms about the “priorities” message frame, and do not believe Democrats should argue for a simple “butter rather than guns” trade off at a time of real dangers for our country. However, the strength of the Democratic position above, even against a very strong McCain position, underscores the potent concern voters have about the costs of the Bush-McCain Iraq policy at a time when many families are facing real hardship at home.

### **Stressing the Need to Reduce Dependence on Foreign Oil**

The fifth imperative for Democrats is to stress energy policy as a crucial part of their national security platform – even more than they already have.

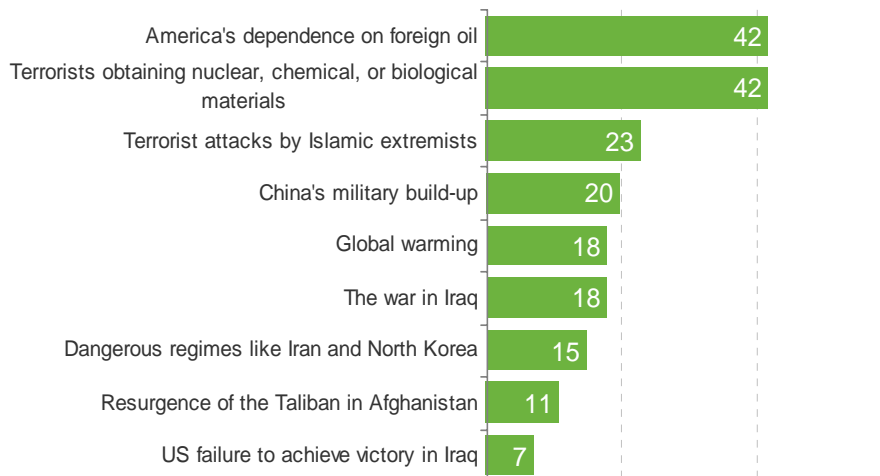


It is impossible to overstate how much voters now see our dependence on foreign oil as a real security threat. Indeed, when asked to name the biggest threat America faces today, the number one choice is “America’s dependence on foreign oil.” In all, 42 percent pick this as one of the top two threats to America – about the same as “terrorists obtaining nuclear, chemical, or biological materials,” and significantly above “terrorist attacks by Islamic extremists,” “the war in Iraq,” or “dangerous regimes like Iran and North Korea.”

As we will see, stressing a serious plan for reducing America’s foreign oil dependence and combating global warming emerges as a key element of the Democratic narratives that prove stronger than the McCain narrative.

### Top National Security Concerns

*Now I am going to read you a list of threats that some people say America faces. Please tell me which TWO of these you personally consider to be the biggest threats to America's security?*



### The Narrative: American Strength versus “Reckless, Extreme” Republican Policies

A sixth imperative is for the Democratic candidates to build their national security narrative as a contrast between Democratic policies that “strengthen America’s security” and Republican policies that are “reckless and extreme.”

We know the Republican playbook on national security. It revolves around implying that Democrats are weak, cowardly, and surrender-prone. McCain’s accusations that Obama and Clinton would “run up the white flag” in Iraq is page one in that old text. But the new survey shows that, against the backdrop of Iraq and \$100-a-barrel-oil, Democrats can beat this tired attack narrative.



As noted, we counter the McCain “white flag of surrender” narrative with two different narratives for both Clinton and Obama. One narrative is built around the idea that “we need a change of priorities in our policies abroad.” The other vows to “strengthen America’s security” rather than having “more of the reckless, extreme national security policies of the Bush years.”

Both the “priorities” and “strengthen America’s security” narratives beat the McCain narrative by about 8 points, and this at a time when both Democratic candidates are trailing McCain on the vote. Each of these narratives were embraced by more than 60 percent of the Democratic Wanna-Ds, even though *none* began the survey voting for Clinton or Obama.<sup>4</sup>

But among the key bloc of independents, the “strengthen America’s security” is much stronger. The priorities narrative beats the McCain narrative by an average of 5 points, but the “strengthen America’s security” narrative beats McCain by a whopping 26 points.

One factor that helps power this message is the characterization of the Bush-McCain Republican national security policies as “reckless” and “extreme.” By a 10-point margin (40 to 30 percent), voters believe Republicans are more “extreme” on national security; by a 41-35 margin, they believe Republicans are more “reckless.”

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<sup>4</sup> Democratic narratives: a). Barack Obama says: We need a change of priorities in our policies abroad. George Bush failed to stand up for American workers on trade and oil, and his failed policies in Iraq cost us trillions of dollars and thousands of lives. John McCain was the biggest supporter of the Bush Iraq policies, and says he would keep our troops there for 100 years. As president, I will bring our troops home from Iraq during 2009, direct more of that spending to our needs at home, insist on labor protections in our trade agreements, and support alternative energy to reduce our dependence on oil from dangerous regimes.

b). Barack Obama says: We cannot afford more of the reckless, extreme national security policies of the Bush years that lost us trillions of dollars and thousands of lives in Iraq. But John McCain was Bush's biggest supporter on Iraq and says he is willing to keep our troops there for 100 years. I would strengthen America's security by bringing home our troops from Iraq during 2009, doing what we need to win in Afghanistan, rebuilding our alliances, and pursuing a new alternative energy policy, including alternative sources, to reduce our dependence on oil from dangerous regimes.

c). Hillary Clinton says: We need a change of priorities in our policies abroad. George Bush failed to stand up for American workers on trade and oil, and his failed policies in Iraq cost us trillions of dollars and thousands of lives. John McCain was Bush's biggest supporter on Iraq, and would keep our troops there for 100 years. As president, I will start bringing our troops home from Iraq during my first 60 days, direct more of that spending to our needs at home, insist on labor protections in our trade agreements, and support alternative energy to reduce our dependence on oil from dangerous regimes.

d). Hillary Clinton says: We cannot afford more of the reckless, extreme national security policies of the Bush years that lost us trillions of dollars and thousands of lives in Iraq. But John McCain was Bush's biggest supporter on Iraq and says he is willing to keep our troops there for 100 years. I would strengthen America's security by starting to bring our troops home from Iraq during my first 60 days, doing what we need to win in Afghanistan, rebuilding our alliances, and pursuing a new alternative energy policy, including alternative sources, to reduce our dependence on oil from dangerous regimes.



## **Building a Stronger Link to the Military**

The seventh and final imperative for Democrats is to work steadily to build closer links to the American military and to repair the trust deficit the electorate has regarding Democrats when it comes to their use of the military instrument.

It is important to understand the nature of this challenge clearly. It is partly about the willingness to use force. Likely voters as a whole split only narrowly (by about 4 points, averaging across the two Democratic candidates) toward McCain when presented with the choice: “I would be more worried about Hillary Clinton/Barack Obama as president being too reluctant to use military force abroad,” or, “I would be more worried about John McCain as president being too willing to use military force abroad.”

The Democratic Wanna-Ds, however, are much more worried about the Democrats’ reluctance to use military force. Among the Wanna-D voters the two Democratic candidates lose this choice to McCain by an average of 33 points.

But the other part of the problem, the new survey suggests, is simply about Democrats’ familiarity and affinity with the military. The Democratic Wanna-Ds, by 5 points, associate “respects the military” with the Republicans.

Democrats need to pursue a host of steps to overcome this deficit, from meeting more often with members of the armed forces and their families where they live and work; to taking more time to master the substance of military affairs; to gaining more appreciation for the soldier’s outlook toward duty and mission; to recruiting more veterans to be Democratic candidates; to taking a leading role in advocating better policies toward veterans. A large number of Democratic leaders inside and outside Congress have begun addressing these tasks with increased intensity in recent years, and those efforts must continue if Democrats are to reduce this worrisome deficit in the years ahead.