



The Democrats and Defense

By Thomas Donnelly

To those who follow the politics of national security and defense, it came as no surprise recently when Senator Hillary Clinton (N.Y.) put herself in the vanguard of Democrats calling for a substantial increase in the size of the active-duty army. Hillary—the one-named superstar of Democratic politics—actually has been working hard over the past few years to burnish her credentials on these issues, particularly in regard to Iraq. She seems to grasp what many in her party still cannot: in the post-9/11 world, the job of an American president is to be a wartime commander in chief.

Despite John Kerry's charred hulk of a presidential campaign in 2004, the Democratic Party is still in denial about the primacy of security issues and military strength in American politics. In the immediate aftermath of the election, Democrats were oddly comforted by the idea that "values" issues—homosexual marriage, abortion, and so forth—cost their candidate his margin of defeat. For one, it buttressed the choice of Kerry, the Vietnam-era "war hero"; and secondly, the values excuse conveniently blamed right-wing, evangelical Christians, beloved by liberals as the all-powerful forces of darkness. George W. Bush won, on this account, by appealing to Americans' unreasoning fears. Kurt Campbell, a vice president at the Center for Strategic and International Studies and deputy assistant secretary of defense in the Clinton administration, and Michael O'Hanlon, the dean of Democratic defense analysts and a fellow at the Brookings Institution, captured the party's reaction to Kerry's defeat in a recent article:

How could a decorated war hero, experienced senator and outstanding debater lose a presidential race that turned largely on

national security issues to an incumbent who during his first term badly miscalculated both the urgency of the main war he pursued and the way to win the peace?¹

But as Campbell and O'Hanlon point out, there remains a "profound anxiety over how Democrats generally manage issues of war and peace. Party leaders' instincts [in 2004] were wrong. Americans did not want the politics of anti-war protest."² At the same time, Democrats reacted to their loss by naming Howard Dean—the candidate who embodied the spirit of protest and, arguably, even more than candidate Kerry himself lost the election for the Democrats—as party chairman. Clearly, the politics of defense and security are still divisive within the Democratic Party and estrange most Democrats from mainstream American opinion. Indeed, it seems the more Democrats try to wrestle with these issues, the more confused and fractured the party becomes; the underlying contradictions are still too great to resolve.

The Iraq Problem

Back in March, Senator Evan Bayh (Ind.), Representative Ellen Tauscher (Calif.), and more than a dozen other distinguished leaders sent an open

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letter to their fellow Democrats. “In recent decades,” they wrote, “the public has shown a consistent tendency to trust Republicans more on matters of defense and security. We believe the confidence gap on national security played a major, even decisive, role in the 2004 election, and now stands as a major obstacle to building a new Democratic majority.”³ The Bayh letter recognized that the central problem for the party was its antipathy to the campaign in Iraq. The letter came on the heels of the January 30 elections in Iraq, when it became undeniably clear that Iraqis themselves were committed to remaking their society. The election, these moderate Democrats argued, was “proof that our efforts in Iraq were neither doomed from the start nor doomed to failure today.”⁴ One of the central appeals of their letter was to rally Democratic support to this effort, and to urge Democrats to lay aside their objections to the initial invasion and the Bush administration’s failings in combating insurgents and terrorists in Iraq. The letter invoked the tough-minded traditions of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Harry Truman, and John F. Kennedy, urging Democrats “to oppose calls to withdraw troops from Iraq prematurely, before the new Iraqi government is able to consolidate its authority and defend itself against Sunni insurgents and foreign terrorists.” In contrast to the Dean wing of the party and indeed, of late, the isolationist Republican rump, the moderates argued that “[t]his is not the time for casting anxious glances toward the exits” in Iraq.⁵

The Democrats’ disagreements over Iraq were vividly displayed in the 2004 primary season. Those candidates who initially postured themselves in support of the invasion, the removal of Saddam Hussein, and the effort to democratize Iraqi politics, like Senator Joseph Lieberman (Conn.)—and initially John Kerry—sank like stones in the early primaries and caucuses. Kerry’s reversal on Iraq, typified by his vote against the \$87 billion supplemental appropriations bill to cover war and reconstruction costs, preserved his candidacy and nomination campaign but also cost him the election. Kerry’s claim to be a more competent commander in chief, a charge to which Bush was vulnerable, collapsed.

New Republic editor Peter Beinart dubbed this phenomenon the “Kerry Compromise.” Beinart has written extensively about the Democrats’ defense dilemma, and his December 2004 analysis of Kerry’s woes is trenchant. “Kerry’s opposition to the \$87 billion didn’t only change his image on the war in Iraq; it changed his image on the war on terrorism itself,” wrote Beinart. “His justification

for opposing the \$87 billion was essentially isolationist: ‘We shouldn’t be opening firehouses in Baghdad and closing them down in our own communities.’”⁶ From there Kerry moved quickly to calls for troop withdrawals from Iraq.

At the heart of the Kerry Compromise is the divide between Democratic moderates and policy elites, many of them veterans of the Clinton administration, and the more liberal grass-roots and populist organizations like MoveOn.org. The policy elites and moderates—think Senator Joseph Biden (Del.) or former UN ambassador Richard Holbrooke—are in danger of becoming an eternal minority in their party. MoveOn.org has been in business for the better part of a decade (remember that it was formed to oppose the Clinton impeachment) and, with 1.5 million members and the ability to raise tens of millions of dollars, has metastasized into a permanent fissure in the American political landscape. MoveOn.org’s oppositionist mentality has transformed its focus from domestic to international policy, and its agenda invariably has paralleled that of the Bush administration.

The durability and strength of this movement is measured not only in MoveOn.org or Howard Dean, but in its pull on organizations that have “mainstream” pretensions. Perhaps the best example in the defense and security sphere is the work of the Center for American Progress, the think tank founded and directed by former Clinton administration chief of staff John Podesta. The rhetorical vitriol of the Center’s just-published shadow national security strategy is a remarkable testament to the virulence of anti-Bush populism—this is the kind of document that is traditionally awash in gravitas and garlanded with complexity, nuance, and the qualities so prized by policy elites. By contrast, the Center’s pamphlet *Integrated Power: A National Security Strategy for the 21st Century* is in full-blown Michael Moore mode: “Every day the American people are witness to the terrible cost of [President Bush’s] simplistic world view and blind certainty that drives those around him. The situation the United States faces today in Iraq is what happens when ideology trumps the facts, when a country acts without a strategy.”⁷ Ouch.

Afghanistan and the Global War on Terrorism

But the problems for the Michael Moore–MoveOn.org wing of the Democratic Party go well beyond Iraq. Again in contrast to traditional Democratic elites, these “Softs,”

as Peter Beinart describes them, by analogy to the soft-on-communism Henry Wallace Democrats of the 1950s, have been almost equally oppositionist on Afghanistan. Even in the aftermath of 9/11, the Softs rejected the Bush administration's declaration of war on the Taliban and Osama bin Laden. The right reaction, MoveOn.org said, was to "utilize international law and judicial procedures, including due process" against bin Laden and that "it's possible that a tribunal could even have garnered cooperation from the Taliban."⁸ These Softs have never understood that Islamic terrorism is a form of war and that military action is an appropriate response—not the only response, to be sure, or a sufficient response in itself, but necessary and even primary for the foreseeable future.

The contrast with old-line Democrats could not be greater. Here is another excerpt from the Bayh letter:

The jihadist creed, in its bigotry and intolerance, its sanctification of murder, and its contempt for liberal democracy, bears a sinister resemblance to the totalitarian ideologies of 20th century Europe. Like fascism and communism, it poses a moral challenge to our liberal beliefs and values. Once again, our foes doubt that we will fight and sacrifice for the ideals we profess to live by. Once again, we must prove them wrong. Moral clarity in this fight is essential. The American people will not trust leaders who will not vigorously defend their ideals.⁹

In the aftermath of the recent bombings—executed and attempted—in London, the ideological and martial nature of the jihadi challenge has been brought to the fore again. The timing of the July 7 attacks, meant to capture the attention of the world media assembled for the G8 summit, also underscored the inadequacy of the Soft response—massive, no-strings-attached foreign aid of the sort proposed for Africa by the likes of pop singer Bono prior to the G-8 meetings—to political and strategic problems. The Center for American Progress seems to see the Global War on Terrorism as an international version of the Johnson-era "War on Poverty":

The ranks of terrorist networks are rapidly increasing due to the absence of opportunity in societies hungry for hope. The exponential growth in the youth population in many Muslim-majority countries has not been matched by economic opportunities or the provision of basic services to their populations.¹⁰

Thus, one of the Center's primary recommendations for American strategy in the twenty-first century—and its sole recommendation for making the U.S. government more responsive to the challenges of the moment and for the future—is to pass a new Foreign Assistance Act and create a new cabinet-level Department for International Development.

The Softs' other main concern is that the measures needed to combat the threat of terrorist attacks put American domestic liberties at risk. The primary focus of concern has been the USA Patriot Act. During the recent House debate over renewing the "sunset" provisions of the law, many Democrats backed a measure sponsored by Representative Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.) to limit government searches of library records. "There is no need to short-circuit our normal processes," said Representative Rick Boucher (D-Va.). "The protection of our freedoms does not require the abridgement of our civil liberties."¹¹ The London terrorist attacks of July 7 undoubtedly moderated the Soft rhetoric on the Patriot Act; MoveOn.org had originally charged that the Patriot Act had "nullified large portions of the Bill of Rights." Was the war on terror enough of a "threat to the United States' existence . . . to justify the evisceration of our most treasured principles?"¹² John Ashcroft and now Alberto Gonzales inspire greater fear in the Soft mind than Osama bin Laden.

The Meta-Problem: American Power and the Use of Force

But the underlying problem for Democrats, the "meta-problem" linking the policy disputes over Iraq, Afghanistan, and the larger war in the Islamic world, is that Democrats retain their deep ambiguity about the exercise of American power and, in particular, the use of military force. As Campbell and O'Hanlon note, neither candidates Al Gore nor John Kerry set forth a broad or comprehensive vision on these issues in either the 2000 or 2004 campaign. Indeed,

When Democrats thought they had a chance of winning the recent presidential elections, they got much more excited about the topic of who should be secretary of state than secretary of defense. . . . As a military officer told one of us, "Don't you find it surprising that at a time of war the Democratic Party spends no time thinking about who the secretary of defense should be?"¹³

The Center for American Progress's idea of national security strategy has as much to say about intelligence, law enforcement, economic policies, "and a long-term commitment to public diplomacy and foreign assistance" as it does about military power.¹⁴ The report's policy prescriptions begin with the hoary favorite of Softs, nuclear nonproliferation. There could hardly be a greater contrast to the Bush administration's recent decision to welcome India as a great power partner, legitimatizing India's possession of nuclear weapons and promising to aid India's civilian nuclear program, than the Center's call to "implement a global prohibition on the export of sensitive nuclear equipment to countries that are not in full compliance with international inspection regimes."¹⁵ India, which is not a signatory to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons and has been unwilling—quite sensibly—to permit the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to inspect its nuclear weaponry, holds no other interest for the Softs. The difference between this Soft strategy and that of traditional geopolitics is pronounced.

But the truth is that military and use-of-force issues are as problematic for moderate Democrats like Campbell and O'Hanlon as they are for the Softs. Look closely, for example, at what the two propose by way of a policy to deal with "post-conflict reconstruction"—itself a seemingly less martial euphemism for the hard and violent counterinsurgency warfare of post-invasion Iraq and Afghanistan. Rather than emphasizing the need to expand the U.S. armed forces, and ground forces in particular, to meet the challenges of this sort of mission, Campbell and O'Hanlon see the solution in organizational reforms:

This post-conflict resolution role requires revisiting the Goldwater-Nichols reforms of the 1980s, extending beyond the Department of Defense to the rest of government. Among other things, a cadre of reconstruction specialists should be created, with mechanisms to rapidly expand their ranks in times of crisis.¹⁶

While it would be nice to have a corps of "reconstruction specialists"—though to what degree they would differ from the civil affairs specialists that the army already has is not clear—it is a far from sufficient response to today's "time of crisis," otherwise known as war. It would also be nice if any other agency of the U.S. government could bear a larger role in Iraq or Afghanistan, but

building that capacity will take decades. It is not clear that duplicating the capacities of the military is a better bet than simply expanding the capacities the services already have.

At least Campbell and O'Hanlon understand that the military's war-fighting role still matters. "Democrats," they argue, "must not become so transfixed by engagement strategies for difficult countries"—such as North Korea, Iran or, most important of all, China—"that we forget to prepare militarily for the possibility that such well-advised strategies may fail."¹⁷ True enough, but

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proper military preparation means spending a lot more on defense budgets—something like \$100 billion per year. There is no realistic strategy for deterring China, for example, without building a national missile defense system; as Chinese People's Liberation Army Major General Zhu Chenghu recently reminded us, "If the Americans draw their missiles and precision-guided ammunition into the target zone on China's territory [in the defense of Taiwan, for example], I think we will have to respond with nuclear weapons."¹⁸ Dissuading China from action against Taiwan is very difficult when Beijing can deter the United States with its microscopic and ancient nuclear arsenal.

Finally, Campbell and O'Hanlon both share the Democratic fetish for homeland defense. Because this has been the one issue where Democrats have made a salient contribution to American security since 9/11—Senator Lieberman was the early and ultimately influential advocate for creating the Department of Homeland Security—even muscular Democrats like Campbell and O'Hanlon tend to overvalue the importance of homeland defense. They lament that during the "last several years . . . the country [has been] focused largely on offensive military operations," as though this were an unbalanced strategy for a war that is, in essence, a civil war within the Islamic world.¹⁹

At the end of the day, even the most politically sophisticated and assertive Democrats, like Beinart, Campbell, and O'Hanlon, have a hard time saying

directly that they agree with the fundamental tenets of the Bush Doctrine—that the vigorous exercise of American power in the service of American universal political principles is the best guarantee of stability, peace, and prosperity. They cannot fully grasp that Republicans are vulnerable from the “Right,” from the perspective of Harry Truman: that the problem with Bush policy is not the Bush Doctrine per se, which is a set of goals entirely consistent with American strategic culture, but in this administration’s failure to match ends with means, especially, in a time of war, with military means. Until the “hard” Democrats can reestablish their own link to the muscular party of the past, they will remain in the shadow of the Softs, and America will remain the poorer, as Campbell and O’Hanlon admit: “Only when two serious and confident participants consistently lock swords on critical foreign policy debates will the nation engage in the analysis and in-depth discussion necessary for the development of successful policies.”²⁰

Notes

1. Kurt M. Campbell and Michael O’Hanlon, “The Democrat Armed,” *The National Interest*, Summer 2005, 93.
2. Ibid.
3. Evan Bayh, Ellen Tauscher, et al., “Our National Security Challenge: An Open Letter to Democrats,” March 16, 2005.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Peter Beinart, “A Fighting Faith,” *The New Republic*, December 13, 2004.
7. Lawrence J. Korb and Robert O. Boorstin, *Integrated Power: A National Security Strategy for the 21st Century* (Washington, D.C.: Center for American Progress, 2005).
8. Quoted in Beinart, “A Fighting Faith.”
9. Bayh et al, “Our National Security Challenge.”
10. Korb and Boorstin, *Integrated Power*, 5.
11. Rick Klein, “House Votes to Bolster Patriot Act,” *Boston Globe*, July 22, 2005.
12. Quoted in Beinart, “A Fighting Faith.”
13. Campbell and O’Hanlon, “The Democrat Armed,” 93–94.
14. See Korb and Boorstin, *Integrated Power*, 27–31.
15. Ibid., 36.
16. Campbell and O’Hanlon, “The Democrat Armed,” 100.
17. Ibid.
18. Associated Press, “Chinese General Threatens U.S. over Taiwan,” July 15, 2005.
19. Campbell and O’Hanlon, “The Democrat Armed,” 100.
20. Ibid., 101.