

# How to Talk About National Security

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## The Politics of Security

In 2012, Democrats have an historic opportunity to turn around a negative stereotype of the Party as weak on national security. For the first time in decades, Democrats are running with a president at the top of the ticket who receives his strongest ratings on security. But the politics of these issues remain challenging for Democrats, and it is crucial that they get the message right if they want to overcome the long-established stereotype that they are weaker than Republicans on security.

The good news for Democrats: President Obama's national security policies have been successful, and he has reaped the political reward from that success. From the bin Laden raid to the wind-down of the Iraq War, the public believes the President has been strong, decisive, and has kept his promises on these issues. In polling and focus groups conducted by Third Way and others, voters consistently approve of President Obama's handling of security affairs.

The challenge is the broader Democratic Party is still seen by voters as they have been for nearly four decades: weak, reluctant to use force when necessary, and prone to making security decisions based on politics. To turn this around—and to take advantage of the President's strength—Democrats should highlight the Obama record on national security (whether or not they choose to name him), engage on these issues regularly and confidently, and pledge to remain tough, smart, and vigilant.

In this memo, we offer some broad themes for Democrats to highlight, along with a summary of some specific security topics and recommended approaches to security issues. For each, we provide examples of how they should be handled.

## Making the Case

- The first priority for any federal elected official is to ensure the security and well-being of Americans. We have worked hard to keep America safe, but we need to be smart about how we do so.
- We have come a long way in the last 3 years. We have kept up relentless pressure against our main enemy, al Qaeda. We eliminated Osama bin Laden and most of the terrorist group's senior leaders and operatives, leaving the organization nearly destroyed. We ended the war in Iraq and have a clear path to withdrawing our troops from Afghanistan. And America's reputation in the world is being restored.
- As we close out this decade of war, we are transforming our military with new technologies and ways of operating that allow us to become more targeted and precise. We will always invest our people and equipment to ensure America's military remains the best in the world.
- In this new era of security challenges, we simply cannot stick to a bigger-is-always-better mindset. We must evaluate the threats America faces, pick the smartest approach for the situation—and act decisively.

## **Hot Issues**

### **Defense Spending**

Democrats are still viewed with suspicion on security in part because they are seen as champions of defense cuts. But voters' gut reaction against cutting military budgets is reversed when they are given context for the reductions. They understand that we must get our fiscal house in order to maintain our national strength, and military efficiencies will play a part in doing so.

*We must do everything necessary to maintain the greatest fighting force in the history of the world, and we must keep faith with the men and women who have sacrificed so much for our security. But budgets are tight, and we must look at all of our military spending to ensure that it makes sense in a 21st century world. These days,*

*national might is measured both by the size of a country's military and by the strength of its economy.*

## **Iran**

The public is deeply concerned about the prospects of Iran obtaining a bomb, but they have no appetite for an American intervention.

*It is unacceptable for Iran to obtain a nuclear weapon. But for now, military strikes are not the right answer to stop them. The President and Congress have imposed tough sanctions that are beginning to bite, forcing Iran to the negotiating table. And premature military strikes could actually make it harder to stop Iran in the long run and put our economy at risk by disrupting oil shipments in the Persian Gulf.*

## **Syria**

The nation is rapidly devolving into civil war, as President Bashar al-Assad's forces have been targeting civilians. However, in the absence of a united opposition to Assad within the country, and a lack of regional and international consensus about what to do, U.S. military intervention at this time is ill-advised.

*As the President has made clear, Assad is a murderous tyrant, and his regime cannot stand. But America should be careful about rushing into a military intervention without the support of our regional allies, understanding what we're getting into, and knowing who the rebels are and what they want.*

## **Afghanistan**

The U.S. is transitioning to give the Afghans responsibility for their own security, and has a plan for ending the combat mission and withdrawing U.S. troops. While some may criticize this plan, they do not offer an alternative beyond remaining indefinitely. And there is a strong public consensus that it is time to end our mission there.

*President Obama is keeping his promise to have the U.S. out of Afghanistan by 2014. After more than a decade of war, that's the*

*right thing to do. We are training Afghan forces to secure their own country, and we will keep up the pressure on al Qaeda wherever they are.*

## **Recommendations**

**1. Be Specific.** When talking about our security gains, cite specific examples of the gains we have made. The public gives credit to the President for his record of accomplishment. Even conservative foreign policy experts can offer little substantive criticism of the President's approach.

*President Obama has kept his promises: we got bin Laden, got out of Iraq, we're winding down in Afghanistan, all while smashing al Qaeda. This kind of policy is both tough and smart, and that's what I support.*

**2. Be Open to New Ways of Operating.** After a decade of costly and bitter ground wars, the public has become very supportive of new ways of fighting. They like new technology (such as drones), which are seen as effective war fighting tools that save American lives. And they support Special Operations missions, showing a preference for limited, targeted engagements rather than massive interventions.

*In the last three years, we've moved to a new kind of war, with expanded use of precision tools and tactics like drones and Special Operations missions. That has meant fewer Americans on the front lines and even more pressure on al Qaeda.*

**3. Be Clear about Goals.** The public is concerned about recklessly entering into new conflicts. When talking about a foreign crisis, it is important to be thoughtful and specific about what America's goals are, how they would be accomplished, and how the other countries might react.

*What we've learned after a decade of war is that the United States has to be both tough and smart. We can't just go headlong into new wars—we should fight only when we must to protect the U.S. or our interests, and we must know why we are fighting and where we think it will lead us.*

**4. Be Local.** Make sure you know your local military bases, VA and veterans organizations, defense industries, and related interests. Understand their role in our military security and involve them in your thinking and your efforts.

*For more national security message framing and foundational information, read our [2012 National Security Debate Book](#).*