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TO: Interested Parties

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Toward Renewal and Leadership

*The Second Democracy Corps-Third Way National Security Survey Shows
Democrats with Continuing Opportunities to Gain Ground on National Security*

As President Obama issues his new national security strategy, a new Democracy Corps-Third Way survey¹ shows the president continues to earn stronger marks on national security than on the economy or on his overall approval. Moreover, there are signs the president's recent efforts to address nuclear dangers and terrorism have improved the public's trust in Democrats on these issues, relative to the Republicans. Since our last joint survey in February, Democrats also slightly narrow the gap with Republicans on national security generally.

Yet the public's overall confidence in the administration on national security, in absolute terms, edges down since our last survey on these issues in February. Several factors may be at play, including continuing violence in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Times Square bombing attempt, concerns about the impact of America's economy on its standing abroad, and the continuing downdraft from the difficult political environment for Democrats.

Amid these pressures, the new survey – the second in a series of jointly conducted, in-depth analyses of national security attitudes by Democracy Corps and Third Way – finds continuing opportunities for Democrats and progressives to strengthen their messaging on national security. The public is relatively cool to a range of messages Republicans are currently using on these issues. By contrast, the public responds very strongly when Democrats stress key aspects of their record and vision on national security. Our data suggests that Democrats should:

- ***Speak in stronger terms about anti-terror efforts.*** The public responds to strongly framed information about how the Obama administration has sought to “disrupt, dismantle and defeat” terrorist networks abroad, through the use of Special Forces and Predator attacks, and its quick and successful efforts at home that led to the capture of the alleged Times Square bomber.
- ***Stress efforts to support and strengthen the military.*** Recent work by Democrats to strengthen America's armed forces are credible and compelling, and it can help reduce lingering doubts flagged in past surveys about Democrats' support for the military.

¹ This memo is based on a poll conducted by Greenberg Quinlan Rosner for Third Way, Democracy Corps, and Citizen Opinion. The survey was based on telephone interviews with 1,000 2008 voters, conducted between May 15-18, 2010. The survey included interviews with 875 respondents who are likely voters for the 2010 elections, and all figures in this report refer to the “likely voter” result unless otherwise noted. The margin of sampling error is approximately +/-3.1 percentage points for results from the full sample, and approximately +/-3.4 percentage points for results among likely voters. The survey fielded before the president unveiled his new national security strategy, his commencement speech at West Point that outlined this new strategy, the announcement that al Qaeda's number three, Mustafa Abu al-Yazid, was killed, and Israel's raid on the flotilla off Gaza.

- ***Emphasize successful attempts toward greater international cooperation.*** The public responds well to the emphasis in the president's new national security strategy on greater international cooperation, such as enlisting more help from NATO allies in Afghanistan, and progress toward tougher multilateral sanctions on Iran.
- ***Emphasize domestic and economic renewal as an element of national strength.*** The new survey continues to underscore that the public partly views the country's security through an economic lens. This suggests the emphasis on "renewal" at home in the new national security strategy as one component of national security and strength is well placed and likely to resonate with the public.
- ***Provide a contrast to the Bush-Cheney administration.*** Although every president must take ownership of his own record and not pass the buck, Obama and his progressive supporters should continue to highlight his accomplishments through a contrasting narrative. The public's unhappiness with the reckless and out-of-touch elements of the Bush-Cheney record lingers, and the Bush-era failures provide a powerful contrast to the progress the country is now making in Iraq, Afghanistan, and other key challenges.

KEY INSIGHTS AND TRENDS

A. A Fragile Economy and Tough Political Environment Color Views on Security

The Economy: A fragile economy continues to unsettle the political environment for Democrats and progressives – including public views of the president and Democrats on national security. With the economy still just regaining its strength, the new Greek and Euro crises abroad appear to undercut recent signs of reviving economic confidence. The share who express positive views of the economy – which had moved up sharply in last month's survey – now slips back 3 points, to 20 percent. There is a 5-point rise in the share who feel the worst is yet to come up to 32 percent, after improving in April. Partly as a result, 59 percent now say the country is headed in the wrong direction, 2 points over last month.

The Political Landscape: With economic worries still acute, the president's approval on the economy stays put at 44 percent, which in turn helps hold his overall approval at last month's 46 percent. And despite continuing unfavorable ratings for the Republican Party and Republicans in Congress, the GOP maintains a 3-point advantage in the named congressional ballot, 46 to 43 percent, and a larger 9-point lead (44 to 35 percent) among independents.

National Security Ratings: Despite all of that, President Obama continues to get solid marks regarding international affairs. A 53 percent majority approve of Obama's handling of national security, which is 7 points more than his overall approval rating and 9 points better than approval of his handling of the economy.

The president's handling of the country's security challenges helps Democrats reduce the gap with Republicans on which party is trusted more on national security; the gap narrows from 17 points in February to 13 points now. The improvement is heavily concentrated among independents and moderates; moderates, for example, now trust Democrats more on national security by 6 points, after trusting the GOP more by 4 points in February. Additionally, after the successes of swiftly capturing the attempted Times Square bomber and the president's nuclear diplomacy, Democrats see slight gains in their standing relative to Republicans on combating terrorism and making America safer from nuclear threats.

But although the president's marks remain relatively strong on national security, a number of factors likely combine to reduce his job approval on these issues in absolute terms. The president's job approval on national security, at 53 percent, is down 4 points since February.

Although it is not possible to pinpoint the cause of the drop, it is likely that several factors play a role. The partisan environment seems part of the dynamic, given that the decline is highly concentrated among Republicans. Continuing violence in Afghanistan and Iraq may raise worries about America's war efforts in those countries. The attempted Times Square bombing may elevate concerns about terrorism. And with ample evidence in the survey that economic considerations color the public's assessment of America's standing in the world, as we explain below, it may well be that this month's rise in worries about the economy play a role as well. It is possible, although not tested in this survey, that the response to the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico has also affected views on the president's leadership, including on security issues.

B. Democrats Have Real Opportunities to Strengthen National Security Messages

While the survey offers mixed signals about President Obama's and Democrats' standing on national security, it clearly shows they have major opportunities to improve their messaging on these issues. Ultimately, this standing depends on sensible policy and good results; polling does not identify the actions that will make America safer. But when Democrats describe their national security plans and accomplishments in muscular terms, the public responds strongly. This is an area that progressives should be stressing loudly and consistently, and the survey shows Democrats can make real gains when they frame these issues in the right ways.

Democratic messages on national security as a group are now out-performing Republican messages. The strongest Democratic message in our survey tests 12 points higher than the best GOP message. This is notable, since the Republican messages are drawn directly from speeches and attacks that GOP leaders like Representatives John Boehner (OH) and Eric Cantor (VA) have been making recently. Old arguments that the Democrats are weak on national security produce only a tepid response. Voters are unimpressed by a GOP argument that the administration lacks a real anti-terrorism strategy and was simply lucky that recent terrorist attempts in the US, like the one in Times Square, ultimately failed.

In particular, the survey points to five specific messaging recommendations for progressives in order to further strengthen their standing with the public on national security issues:

#1: Talk about gains in combating, capturing, and killing terrorists

We know from our research that judgments about Obama's handling of national security are strongly driven by views of how he is doing on the terrorism front. After our February survey, we stressed that progressives should be willing to speak in strong, specific, military terms about how the Obama administration is taking the fight to terrorists abroad. The president has repeatedly talked of his strategy to "disrupt, dismantle and defeat" the enemy in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and that effort is achieving some real success, as the recent death of senior al Qaeda leader Mustafa Abu al-Yazid makes clear.

The new survey confirms the strength of such messaging, and it shows that progressives would gain by also doing more to stress the administration's accomplishments against terrorism here at home. For example, when Democrats tout the administration's effective response to the attempted Times Square bombing, a substantial majority of the public feels more confident about the party on national security:

<p><i>Democrats say: The arrest of the Times Square bomber after only about two days shows the intense focus the Obama administration is placing on combating terrorism. There is no guarantee of foiling every terrorist plot, but this case showed a high degree of cooperation across agencies and personal attention from the highest leaders in the administration.</i></p>	<p>59 percent more confident in Democrats on national security</p>
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This strong response stands in contrast to the weak reaction Republicans get when they assert, as Mr. Boehner has, that the administration has simply been “lucky” that recent terrorist attacks in the U.S. did not prove more successful; this message lags behind the Democratic message by 15 points – even as Republicans retain a nominal advantage on security issues overall:

<p><i>Republicans say: We live in a dangerous world with the constant threat of terrorism, but the Obama administration does not have a comprehensive plan to confront and defeat terrorists. We got lucky that the Christmas Day bomber and the attempted car bomb in Times Square failed. But luck is not an effective strategy for fighting terrorism.</i></p>	<p>44 percent more confident in Republicans on national security</p>
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It is notable that independents, in particular, are far more receptive to the Democratic argument than the Republican attack – by a 57 to 43 percent margin. These results suggest that Democrats should feel comfortable to engage in this debate and stand strong in talking about their record on combating terrorism.

#2: Stress efforts to strengthen and support the military

We have repeatedly stressed that progressives need to show they are focused on supporting, strengthening, and leading America’s military. Our surveys have consistently highlighted this as an area where the public lacks confidence in Democrats. Despite these doubts, this survey shows that when Democrats speak directly and confidently about the steps they are taking to strengthen the military, the public responds strongly. By showing a real focus and concern about military strength, Democrats can begin to close the long-term gap on which party is trusted more to ensure a strong military.

<p><i>Democrats say: We have strengthened America's military by increasing pay for troops in the field, providing our troops more time between deployments, and putting new and better weapons, like more unmanned aerial drones, into the battlefield to support our troops and military objectives.</i></p>	<p>69 percent more confident in Democrats on national security</p>
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This message moves over two-thirds of respondents, as well as an equal share of independents, to feel more confident in Democrats’ handling of national security. Nearly half of all Republicans, 49 percent, become more confident about Democrats after hearing this message.

One reason this message works is that it talks about the Democrats’ efforts to improve military effectiveness – not simply efforts to improve the treatment of veterans, important as those efforts are. It is a message that talks about our troops as warriors, not victims. When Democrats stress the steps they are taking to improve the equipment, training, and battlefield effectiveness of our men and women in uniform, they make real gains in the public’s readiness to trust them with America’s security.

#3: Emphasize successful steps to foster international cooperation

The president's new national security strategy stresses the importance of exploiting opportunities for "collective action to confront common challenges," and particularly to strengthen America's alliances, which can act as "force multipliers." Our research shows that the public responds strongly to this emphasis, and continues to reject the go-it-alone approach that characterized the Bush-Cheney years.

In the new survey, nearly two-thirds of all likely voters, 62 percent, feel more confident about the Democrats on national security when they hear a message along these lines, emphasizing the administration's cooperation with our friends and allies abroad on challenges such as Afghanistan and Iran.

<p><i>Democrats say: The Obama administration is strengthening our security by working with allies. President Obama got our NATO allies to send more troops to the war in Afghanistan, and got support from Germany and France for sanctions against Iran. All this makes America safer while getting our allies to bear more of our shared security burden.</i></p>	<p>62 percent more confident in Democrats on national security</p>
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#4: Rebuild the economy to repair strength and standing in the world

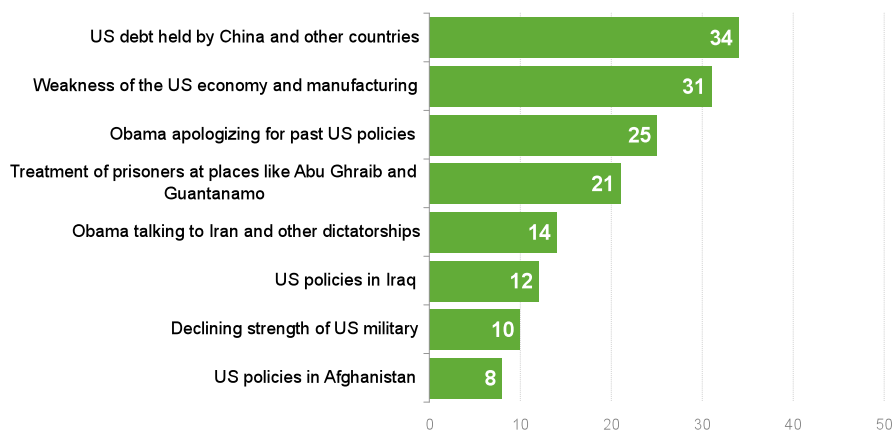
The new national security strategy heavily emphasizes the need for "national renewal" in the country's economic and other domestic policies as a precondition for American strength and security in the world. The new survey shows that this emphasis closely tracks the public's own thinking and underscores the extent to which voters partly view the country's security these days through an economic lens. The point is not that they see a focus on the economy as a substitute for a strong national security agenda; rather, they feel that a weak economy and high foreign indebtedness limit our freedom of action and undermine our standing in the world.

In the February survey, we found that a strong majority of the public – and especially of Republicans – rejects the argument that "America remains the strongest and most influential country," and instead feel that "America is losing its global leadership" as China and other countries grow economically and hold more of our debt. This survey confirms that finding (although the strength of the sentiment drops somewhat, from 64 percent down to 58 percent), and it demonstrates how much the public sees America's standing in the world as shaped by economic factors.

The two biggest reasons that the public cites as undermining America's standing in the world are "US debt held by China and other countries" (cited as one of the top two factors by 34 percent of likely voters), and "weakness of the American economy and manufacturing" (31 percent). These economic factors – which are particularly cited by independents – rank well ahead of factors the left and right typically cite as culprits for diminishing America's standing abroad – such as "Obama apologizing for past US policies" (25 percent), or "treatment of prisoners at places like Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo" (21 percent).

Stress need to rebuild economy to repair strength in the world

Here is a list of things that some people say undermine America's standing in the world; tell me which TWO you believe do the most to UNDERMINE America's standing in the world.



Energy policy is an important part of this economic focus. The second biggest concern likely voters continue to have about the Bush administration's national security policies (after starting the war in Iraq based on false claims of having weapons of mass destruction) is that Bush "let the US become more dependent on foreign oil." That even ranks ahead of "declaring 'mission accomplished' in Iraq before the job was done," or his failure to capture or kill Osama bin Laden.

It would be dangerous for Democrats to cede this terrain to Republicans. While most of the Republican national security messages in the survey fall flat, the strongest of these potential arguments that we test is one that plays on the public's economic fears. A 57 percent majority say they are more confident about Republicans on national security in response to a GOP argument that Democrats have made the country weaker by running up big debts with China, and that Republicans will strengthen America's economy and achieve energy independence.

As President Obama has in the new national security strategy, progressives need to integrate their plans for economic revival into their narrative on national security. When talking about national security, they need to stress the domestic roots of America's strength, and remind the public of steps they are taking to revive employment, lower the deficit, and reduce America's dependence on foreign oil.

#5: Draw a contrast with the Bush-Cheney national security approach

As Democrats and progressives prepare for November, they can add power to their messaging on national security by drawing a sharp contrast with the disastrous policies of the Bush-Cheney era. While Obama and Democrats will obviously need to take responsibility and own the record of the past two years, the new survey shows that their messaging is stronger when posed in contrast to the policies of the previous administration.

This contrast emerges as particularly effective with independent voters. When given the same Democratic argument about the Obama administration's efforts in Afghanistan, with or without a Bush contrast, independents feel more confident about Democrats by 12 points when framed in a context of where we were then versus where we are now.

Among independent voters:	
[WITH CONTRAST] <i>Democrats say: Just three years ago, our war effort in Afghanistan was adrift, with no clear strategy and too few troops to defeat the Taliban and other terrorists there. Now, the Obama administration has sent the troops we need, got our allies to provide more forces, and put in place a clear plan for disrupting, dismantling, and defeating the Taliban and al Qaeda and getting Afghanistan to take care of its own security. There are still challenges, but we finally have a strategy for victory.</i>	56 percent more confident in Democrats on national security
[NO CONTRAST] <i>Democrats say: The Obama administration has sent the troops we need in Afghanistan, got our allies to provide more forces, and put in place a clear plan for disrupting, dismantling, and defeating the Taliban and al Qaeda and getting Afghanistan to take care of its own security. There are still challenges, but we finally have a strategy for victory.</i>	44 percent more confident in Democrats on national security

The new survey shows that the negative terms voters most strongly associate with the Bush national security record are “arrogant,” “short-sighted,” “reckless,” and “out-of-touch.” The Bush national security record was a major factor in driving the American electorate toward a desire for change in 2008. In 2010, it will be important for Democrats to remind voters how the Obama administration has made that change a reality and moved the country in a different and better course on a range of national security challenges, including Iraq, Afghanistan, nuclear weapons, energy security, and maintenance of America’s alliances.

CONCLUSION

At this point, many Democrats seem relatively silent about the accomplishments of the Obama administration and their party on national security. Though a few are stressing the administration’s efforts on the new START treaty and nuclear proliferation, fewer still seem to be stressing the administration’s accomplishments regarding the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, efforts to strengthen the military, and steps to combat terrorism. The survey strongly suggests progressives should speak out forcefully on these issues, and remind voters of the contrasts between those relative successes and the failures the country witnessed under eight years of Bush-Cheney.