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To: Friends of Democracy Corps and Greenberg Quinlan Rosner

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Obama Closes the Democrats' Historical National Security Gap

With National Security Center Stage, a Special Survey on the New Foreign Policy Landscape

Since the end of the Vietnam War, the American public has harbored doubts about the Democratic Party's vision and competence on national security. Now, after 100 days in office, President Barack Obama's management of a broad range of security challenges has effectively erased those doubts, at least for now. This change signals a possible generational shift in attitudes that could have broad electoral consequences, depriving Republicans of one of their last remaining advantages just when their image has dropped to a new low relative to the Democrats.

Democracy Corps' fourth major survey on national security¹ finds that the public gives Obama even higher ratings on these issues than on his overall job approval. And for the first time in our research, Democrats are now at full parity on perceptions of which party would best manage national security, while they have moved far ahead of the GOP on specific challenges such as Afghanistan, Iraq, working with our allies, and improving America's image abroad.

The public flatly rejects the claims from former Vice President Cheney and other Republicans that Obama's policies put America at risk. A strong majority says Obama's policies are *increasing* US security – compared to the majority who now say President George W. Bush's policies *undermined* America's security. Indeed, by a 2 to 1 margin, Americans say that President Obama is doing better, not worse, than his predecessor when it comes to national security.

President Obama and his administration do face hurdles if they hope to win even greater public confidence on national security. While there is strong, bipartisan approval of Obama's

¹ This memo is based on a national Democracy Corps survey of 1,000 2008 voters including 160 interviewed on cell phones (121 unweighted) and 852 likely 2010 voters (861 unweighted) conducted for Democracy Corps by Green-berg Quinlan Rosner, May 10-12, 2009. Margin of error is 3.1 percent among 2008 voters and 3.3 among percent likely 2010 voters.



strategies on Afghanistan and Iraq, voters remains unclear on the mission in Afghanistan and suspect the withdrawal of US troops from Iraq will bring more violence. Voters support Obama's effort to negotiate mutual nuclear arms reductions with the Russians, but question his stated goal of "a world without nuclear weapons." And they still harbor doubts about the Democratic Party's leadership of the military, and its decisiveness in a crisis.

Continued public support will no doubt depend above all on results – the success of the new administration's security policies on the ground. But the public's overall reaction to Obama's early stewardship of national security is impressively strong, and could be an early indicator of lasting and consequential shifts in national opinion.

Voters Give Obama Even Higher Marks on National Security than Overall Performance

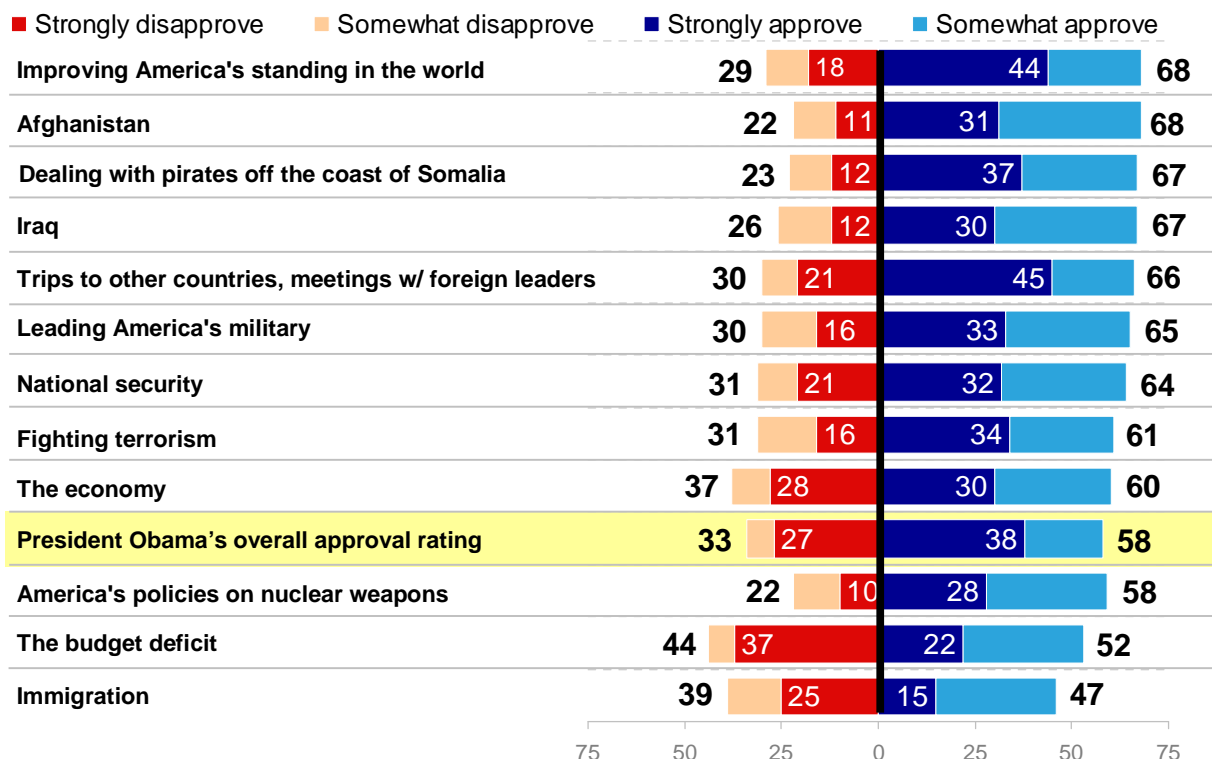
The shift in voters' perceptions reflects a strong, broad endorsement of President Obama's management of national security during his first three months in office. Nearly two-thirds of likely voters – 64 percent – approve of the job the president is doing on national security. That is 6 points higher than his already strong overall job approval rating (at 58 percent, unchanged from last month, and the highest we have seen), and 4 points higher than his approval on the economy, historically the stronger policy area for Democrats.

On every aspect of national security we test – from Iraq, to Afghanistan, to terrorism, to the president's foreign diplomacy, to dealing with pirates off the coast of Somalia – the same is true: higher job approval ratings than on the President's overall job approval. The only partial exception is on immigration, which is as much a domestic issue as a foreign issue.

On each of these foreign challenges, national security opinion formers – the most attentive audience on these issues, college educated and closely following international affairs – give the president even more favorable marks than likely voters as a whole.

Strong approval for Obama's handling of the issues

Now I'm going to read you a list of issues. For each one, I would like you to tell me if you approve or disapprove of the job being done by President Obama on that issue.



Public Flatly Rejects Cheney Claim that Obama Undermines US Security

Given their approval of the new President's performance on foreign affairs, voters flatly reject the claim Dick Cheney and other Republicans have leveled that Obama's policies have increased security risks for the American people. By a 55 to 37 percent margin, likely voters agree that, "all told, Obama's foreign and national security policies are increasing America's security" (rejecting the alternative statement that his policies "are undermining America's security").

In the public's opinion, more risk to America's security came, instead, from the previous administration. A 51 to 44 percent majority believes "President Bush's foreign and national security policies undermined America's security." As a result, by a strong 48 to 26 percent margin, likely voters believe that President Obama is doing better, rather than worse, than President George W. Bush when it comes to national security policy. In a survey that shows likely voters identifying with the Democratic Party more than the Republicans by a 6-point margin, it is stunning that likely voters see President Obama handling national security better than his predecessor by a full 22 points.



Obama Strength Effectively Erases Democratic Gap on National Security at this Point

President Obama's performance on national security has been perceived as so strong that, for now, it has effectively erased the deficit on national security that has shadowed the Democratic Party since the Vietnam War. For the first time in our polling, the public sees the Democratic and Republican parties as statistically tied on both "national security" (41 percent trust Democrats more, 43 percent trust Republicans more) and "the war on terrorism" (41 to 41 percent).

The change in perceptions of the two parties on "national security" is particularly dramatic and consequential. Less than six years ago, in August 2003, Democrats lagged by 29 points on this key metric, effectively ruling them out as a credible alternative on national security for many voters. The shift has been especially dramatic for key likely voter segments:

- **Moderates.** Self-described moderates favored the GOP on national security by 25 points in 2003, but now favor Democrats by a decisive 23 points, 54 to 31 percent.
- **Women, especially unmarried women.** Women trusted the GOP more on national security by 20 points in 2003; now they trust the Democrats more by 17 points. The shift is the strongest among unmarried women.
- **Younger voters.** Voters under age 30 trusted Republicans more on national security by a 27 point margin in 2003; now they trust Democrats more by 18 points, 50 to 32 percent. This strong margin of trust among younger voters could signal the start of a lasting generational shift on this set of issues.

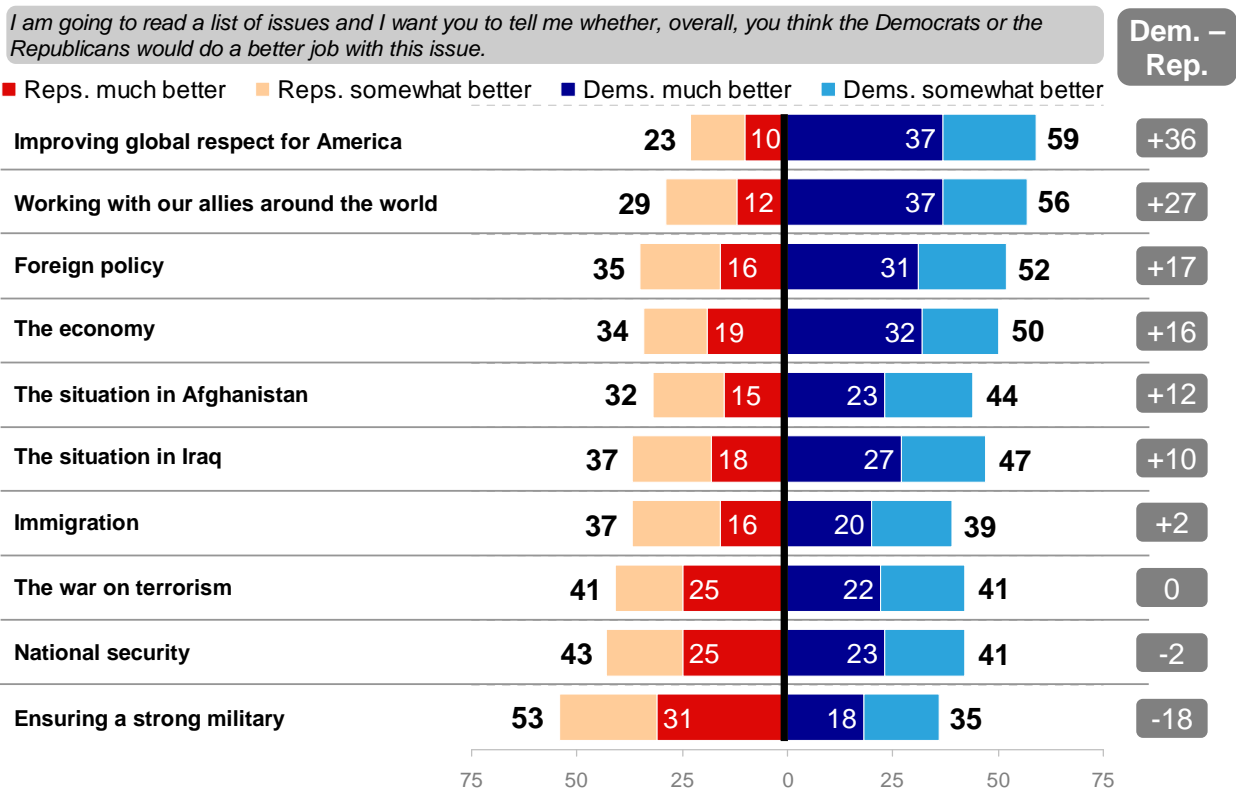
As the Obama presidency has helped pull Democrats to parity on perceptions about national security and the war on terrorism, it has helped them surge ahead of the GOP on many other areas of foreign affairs. The public now trusts Democrats more than Republicans on:

- Improving global respect for America (by +36 points)
- Working with our allies around the world (+27 points)
- Foreign policy (+17 points)
- The situation in Afghanistan (+12 points, after a 1-point GOP edge in July 2008).
- The situation in Iraq (+10 points)

Democrats still trail significantly on the question of "ensuring a strong military"; there, Republicans lead by 18 points, 53 to 35 percent. Even on this long-standing area of Republican advantage, Democrats have cut deeply into the GOP's lead, which was nearly twice as large, 34 points, in a survey of likely voters that Greenberg Quinlan Rosner conducted for Third Way in July 2008.² As we discuss below, Obama has real opportunities to move the public further by talking about the steps he is taking to strengthen the military and help America's veterans.

² From a national survey of 734 likely voters for Third Way, conducted by Greenberg Quinlan Rosner, July 21-24, 2008. To read the full memo, 'Winning on National Security,' see: <http://www.gqrr.com/index.php?ID=2241>

Democrats favored on diplomacy, foreign policy, Afghanistan, Iraq



The public retains other doubts, as well, regarding Democrats’ ability to manage national security. A 50 to 26 percent majority of likely voters – including even a plurality of Democrats – are more likely to see Democrats as the party that is “not decisive enough in a crisis.” Yet the Bush presidency and its management of the war in Iraq have left the Republican Party saddled with an offsetting series of public doubts. Pluralities are more likely to see the Republicans as “reckless” on national security (by 42 to 38 percent) and extreme (by 44 to 31 percent). And by a 48 to 32 percent margin, likely voters see the GOP as “out of touch” on national security. Recent Greenberg Quinlan Rosner research for Third Way suggests this concept touches on a range of recent GOP failings in foreign affairs, from indifference to available intelligence in Iraq, to a disregard for how US foreign policies affect average Americans on such bread-and-butter issues as fuel prices and job outsourcing.³

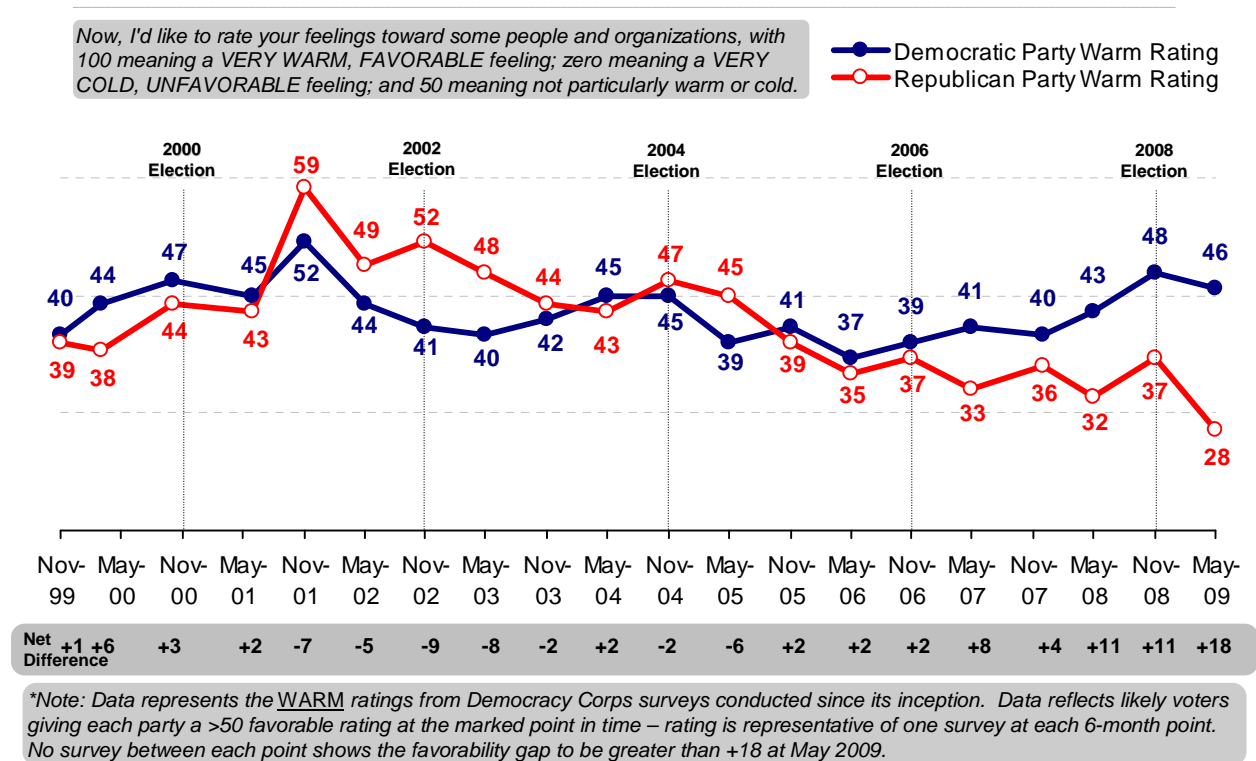
These shifts in voters’ perceptions of the two parties regarding international affairs have enormous potential electoral significance. Ever since the end of the Vietnam War, Republicans have habitually politicized national security issues in their campaigns for national office, seeking to translate a perceived edge on these issues into electoral gains. In recent years, as the public

³ Greenberg Quinlan Rosner conducted six focus groups with swing voters for Third Way on June 2-4, 2009 in Virginia Beach, Virginia; Denver, Colorado; and Columbus, Ohio.



turned against the GOP on both social and economic issues, the Republican edge on national security was one of the last things propping up their image. Now, however, voters see a Democratic administration dramatically increasing America’s security and doing a better job than its Republican predecessor on most aspects of foreign affairs. That shift adds to the Republican Party’s growing problems, and helps explain the 18-point gap in likely voters’ favorable ratings for the two parties – the largest we have seen since Democracy Corps began polling in 1999.

Party favorability gap at all-time high



Challenges and Opportunities for Further Gains on National Security

Going forward, public support for the Obama administration’s national security policies will depend above all on results – especially on the course of the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the administration’s success in combating potential attacks by terrorists or rogue regimes against the US and our allies. But the new survey also provides insights for how the administration might frame its policies in several areas in ways that can respond to public expectations and sustain or even further increase public backing.

Iraq. More than any other national security issue, the war in Iraq shaped the negative public verdict on the Bush presidency, as well as the Democratic Party’s debates over who would succeed him. After 100 days in office, there is strong and bipartisan support for the new strategy President Obama fashioned regarding that conflict. Fully 73 percent of likely voters approve of



his plan to withdraw US combat troops from Iraq by August 2010, while leaving up to 50,000 troops for functions such as training, logistics, and support.

Support for this new strategy is bipartisan, with solid majority backing from Democrats (86 percent), independents (72 percent) and Republicans (59 percent). At least on this previously contentious issue, Obama has genuinely managed to unite the country across partisan lines.

Yet the survey provides some warning signs. While a 60 to 33 percent majority feels the current strategy in Iraq is achieving results, a 53 to 31 percent majority of likely voters anticipate that the pending withdrawal in American combat troops from Iraq will result in greater violence there, rather than greater peace. That verdict crosses partisan lines as well, and it may be that if this expectation bears out, the public could revise its positive view on the Obama strategy.

Afghanistan. Obama campaigned on a pledge to shift more attention and firepower to the conflict in Afghanistan, and the public strongly supports this strategy shift as well. A 73 percent majority supports the Obama strategy of sending an additional 17,000 US combat troops, combined with NATO allies sending more support personnel. Once again, the majority support crosses party lines, with even two-thirds of Republican likely voters supporting the president's plan.

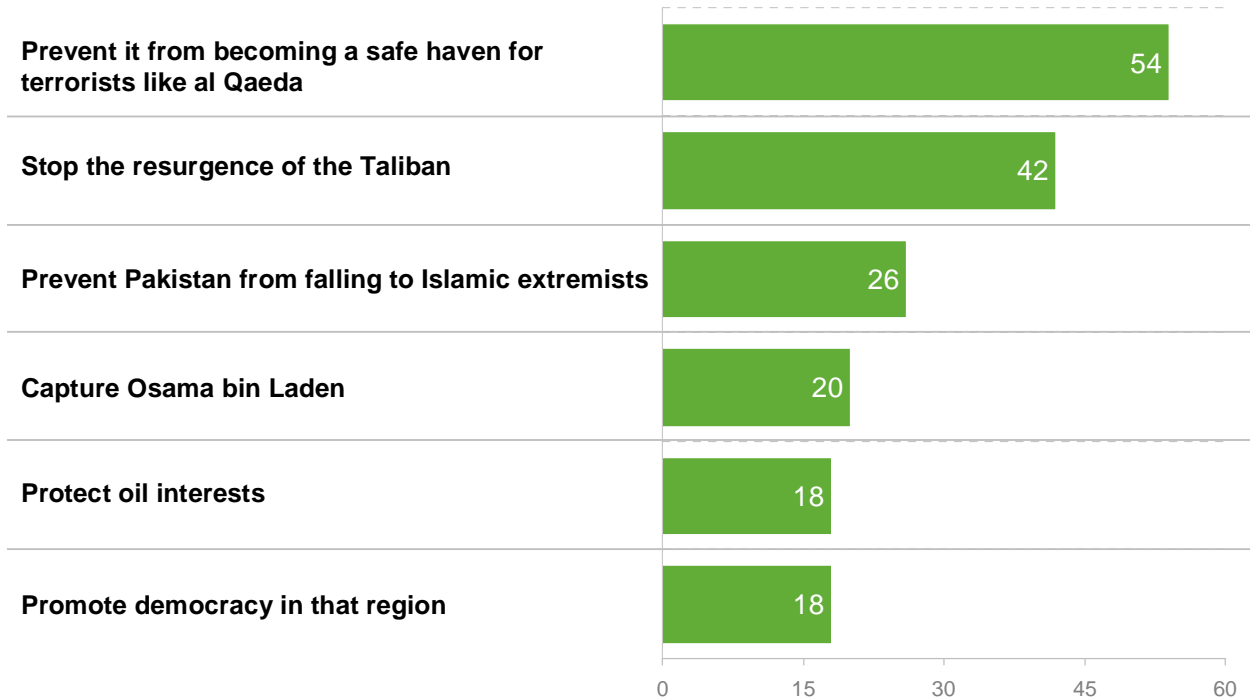
Yet there are some signs of public doubt about the administration's prosecution of the Afghan conflict. Likely voters are split, 48 to 46 percent, on whether the US has a clear military mission in Afghanistan, with slightly more believing the mission is not clear. Among the president's own party, a strong 54 to 40 percent majority doubts there is a clear military mission. Not surprisingly, support for the president's policy is significantly greater – 20 points higher – among those who feel the military mission is clear.

Although the public questions whether the administration has defined clear goals in Afghanistan, they have a pretty clear sense of what those goals should be. They envision America seeking to prevent al Qaeda, the Taliban, and others who back terrorism from once again turning Afghanistan into a safe haven. Choosing two options from a list of possible objectives, 54 percent of likely voters say the US objective in Afghanistan is to “prevent it from becoming a safe haven for terrorists like al Qaeda, and another 42 percent say it is to “stop the resurgence of the Taliban.” These two responses dominate other alternatives, including capturing Osama bin Laden.



Why the U.S. is fighting in Afghanistan

Now I am going to read you a list of reasons some people give for why the U.S. is fighting in Afghanistan. Which TWO do you think are main reasons the US is fighting in Afghanistan?



Nuclear Weapons Strategy. On April 5, in a major speech in Prague, President Obama outlined a new nuclear weapons policy and strategy for combating nuclear proliferation, as part of a broader objective of moving toward “a world without nuclear weapons.” Voters strongly back this initiative as well, with 58 percent of likely voters saying they approve of Obama’s job performance on “America’s policies on nuclear weapons,” and an even higher 68 percent supporting the new Obama nuclear policy once it is described in the survey.

Yet voters have real reservations about the president’s over-arching goal of “a world without nuclear weapons,” and the survey suggests that Obama actually depresses public support for his policy somewhat by invoking that idealistic goal. A strong 63 to 32 percent majority of likely voters say that “eliminating all nuclear weapons in the world is not realistic or good for America’s security” (rejecting the alternative statement, “it should be America’s goal to eliminate all nuclear weapons in the world”). Most of those who doubt this goal do so strongly (43 out of the 63 percent). Opposition to the president’s long-term vision crosses party lines, with even a 59 to 39 percent majority of Democrats objecting to this goal.

A controlled experiment suggests that invoking the “zero option” actually undermines support for the president’s strategy – even among his own supporters. A 66 percent majority supports the president’s nuclear policy when it is described as pursuing “the goal of a world without nuclear weapons;” but an even stronger 71 percent backs the policy when that phrase is

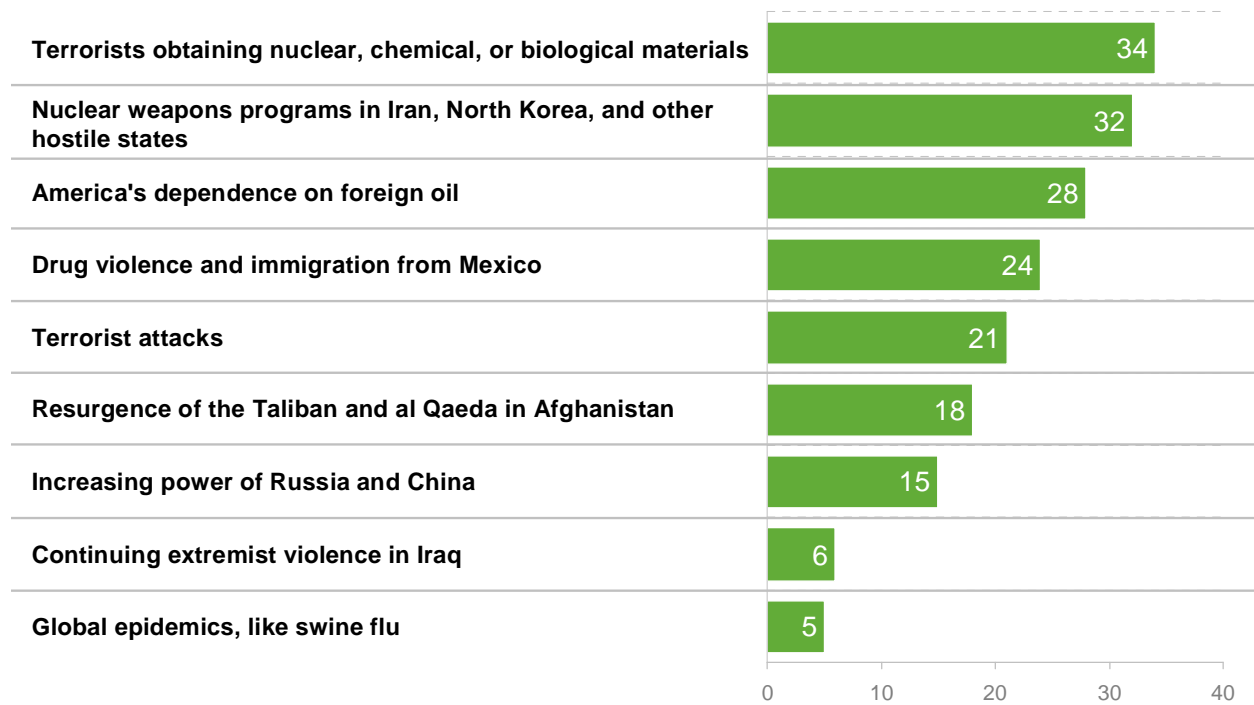


omitted. Interestingly, support drops among both Democrats and Republicans when the “world without nuclear weapons” goal is invoked (although support from independents rises). In 2008 swing states, the net approval margin for the policy is 21 points higher when framed without the call for “a world without nuclear weapons.” Thus, the “zero option” emphasis garners no extra net support, while – as the survey reveals – it provides fodder for relatively potent Republican attacks.

The survey suggests that Obama may generate much stronger support with the kind of messages he used on this issue during the presidential campaign, when he said his goal was, “to keep nuclear weapons and nuclear materials away from terrorists.”⁴ Voters sees such a possibility as the number one threat facing America at this point – and that priority is shared by Democrats, Republicans and independents – while opinion formers and younger voters see a related dynamic as the biggest threat, the nuclear weapons programs in states like North Korea and Iran.

WMD terrorism, hostile states with nukes biggest threats to U.S. security

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?



Torture and Investigation of Past Practices. Amid a heated debate over the use of harsh interrogation techniques, such as waterboarding, voters are strikingly ambivalent over the

⁴ Speech by Barack Obama at DePaul University; Chicago, Illinois; October 2, 2007.



permissibility of torture and the value of investigating the past use of such techniques. By a narrow 50 to 45 percent margin, likely voters say, “it is sometimes justified for US officials to torture detainees, such as to prevent terrorist attacks” (rather than the alternative statement, “it is never justified for American officials to use torture to get information from detainees”).

This conflicted response may help explain why voters, at this point, oppose the idea of a bipartisan inquiry into the past use of such interrogation techniques. A 55 to 32 percent majority of likely voters believes that a “bipartisan inquiry into the Bush administration’s use of harsh interrogation techniques such as waterboarding” would be “not useful” rather than “important.” Even Democrats are tepid about this idea, with only a 47 to 39 percent plurality supporting it, while independents are solidly opposed, 33 to 57 percent.

Leadership of the Military. The one area in which Obama has not overcome public doubts about his party’s stewardship of national security involves the leadership of the military. As noted, likely voters continue to trust Republicans more on these issues, by a strong margin. And the strongest criticism of the Obama national security record tested in the new survey stresses that “Obama is proposing to cut the defense budget by more than \$18 billion,”⁵ leading 53 percent of likely voters to have serious doubts about the president and his national security policies.

Yet the survey demonstrates that even on this area of traditional Republican strength, the door is open for the new President, and the Democrats in Congress, to gain the public’s confidence. Already, a strong 65 percent majority of likely voters approve of the job the president is doing “leading America’s military,” including a 59 percent majority among independents.

Moreover, the public responds very positively to potential messages from the president that stress the actions his administration is taking to support the country’s servicemen and women. It is also helpful for the president to stress the reality – that the new defense budget he has proposed represents an increase in spending over the previous year, not a cut. In what proves to be the survey’s strongest potential national security message for Obama, this message leads 69 percent of likely voters to feel more favorable about the president:

*President Obama says: I believe the foundation of our national security is our men and women in uniform. That is why I proposed a \$17 billion increase in defense spending, including the largest increase in benefits for veterans in history, with quality health care for 500,000 low-income veterans who were previously ineligible.*⁶

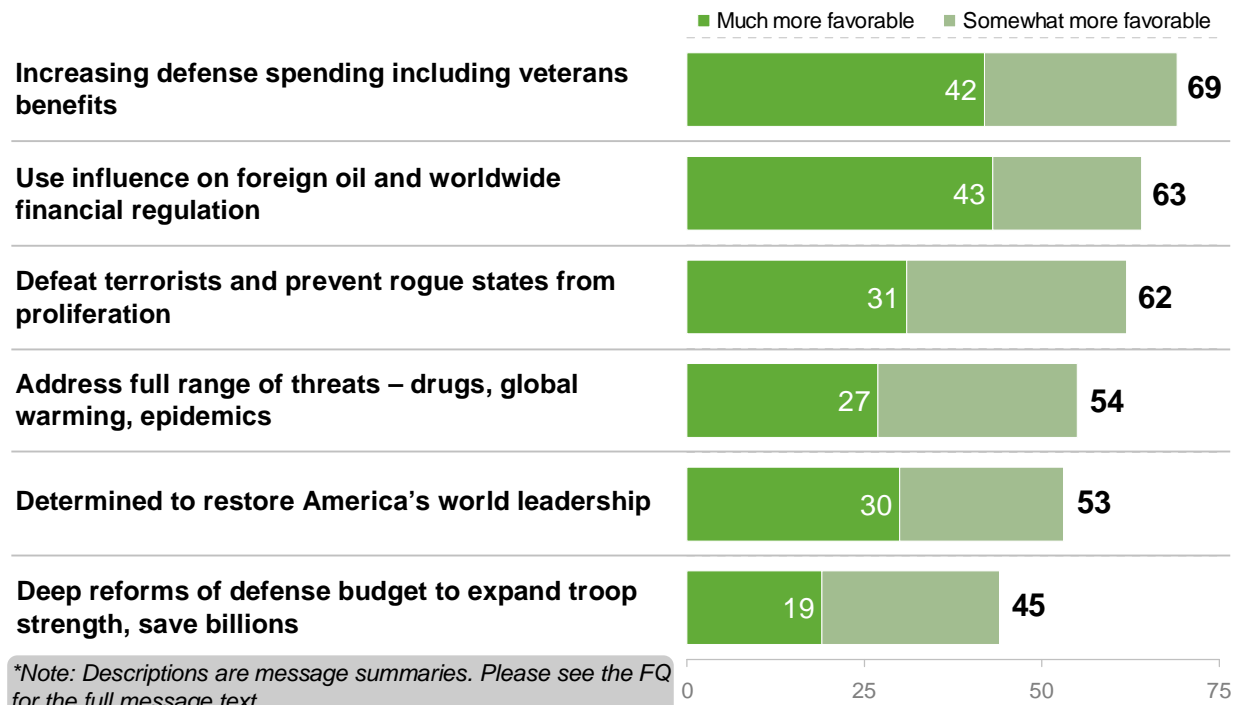
⁵ The \$18 billion in cuts to the defense budget cited in the criticism of Obama’s national security policy comes from a calculation by Republican Oklahoma Senator James Inhofe based on the difference between Obama’s proposed overall total defense spending, including emergency supplementals, in fiscal year 2009 and the overall total defense spending in fiscal year 2008.

⁶ The \$17 billion increase in defense spending cited in Obama’s potential national security message comes from calculations by the Obama Administration based on the difference between last year’s defense budget and Obama’s proposed defense budget for this year. The Administration is now quoting a \$21 billion increase in defense spending.



Obama’s national security policy arguments

Now, I am going to read you some things President Obama might do or say. For each one, please tell me whether it would make you feel much more favorable about President Obama, somewhat more favorable, just a little more favorable, no more favorable, or less favorable about President Obama.



This strong result suggests that President Obama has a big opportunity to rise above the lingering doubts the public may have about the Democratic Party on military issues – and perhaps to erase those doubts over time, as he already has on virtually all other aspects of national security. Furthermore, it suggests that Democrats in Congress could also help themselves by showing a deeper understanding and appreciation of military.

The Domestic Connection. Finally, the new survey underscores how important it is for the president to explain how his policies abroad are helping to bolster his efforts to revive the domestic economy. As noted above, one of the public’s criticisms of Republicans on national security, especially after the Bush years, is that they are “out of touch” and pay too little attention to the domestic consequences of America’s foreign policies. Obama has the opportunity to show that the economic well-being of average Americans is at the heart of his strategic decisions abroad.

In the survey, the second strongest national security message for Obama, among six tested, focuses on this foreign-domestic connection:

President Obama says: I am determined to use our influence in the world to improve life for Americans. That is why I am working to reduce our dependence



on foreign oil, working with foreign leaders on ways to regulate the financial sector worldwide, and closing down tax loopholes that allow companies to send American jobs abroad.

This message leads 63 percent of likely voters to feel more favorable about President Obama, including a very strong 43 percent who feel much more favorable. This is a particularly powerful message for younger voters and especially unmarried women – as noted, two of the key blocks with the most dramatically improved views of Democrats on national security over the past few years.

With these voters and many others, the door is open for President Obama to build on the strong start he has made on addressing the country's global challenges, and to continue building broad support for the national security agenda he began to build during his first 100 days.