



THE SHORT TELEGRAM

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T Our Progressive National Security Tradition: Brave Pioneers

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The 110th Congress stands at a historic moment. For the first time since 1968, Democrats are starting to pull even with Republicans on national security. After forty years of 20-40 point gaps, the public, having seen the debacles of Hurricane Katrina and Iraq, is willing to give the left a chance.¹

Progressives have a window of opportunity to redraw the lines on the national security playing field, and make the right fight on our terrain for decades to come. But we are not there yet.

While the right has lost this round, the left has not won. The public still says, overwhelmingly, that they do not know what we believe. (According to recent polling, only 31% of voters think Democrats “know what they stand for,” as opposed to 51% for Republicans.) The media has bombarded Americans with the story that progressives have no narrative, no policies, and no positive vision—in short, no worldview, particularly on national security and defense. Fair or unfair, the only way to fight that story is with something that looks a

lot like a unified narrative—a set of beliefs that tells America who we are, what we believe, and how we will act based on those beliefs.

HAVEN’T WE HEARD THE “NARRATIVE THING” BEFORE?

Sure. Since the George Lakoff moment, the left has been arguing about whether we needed better policies, or a new “frame”. Over the last two years, we have developed many strong policies—and many individuals have developed powerful stories about why those policies make sense. A narrative allows progressive leaders to integrate the two.

“Progressives ask America to be, once again, the home of the brave – a land where we face our enemies, while never allowing fear to make us less than who we are.”

A narrative is not a poll-tested, but essentially meaningless, “message”. It is a story that tells your audience who you are, and what you believe. It is about character. And just as a person would keep the same basic worldview and moral character whether at home or abroad, a good narrative creates a continuity of values across foreign and domestic policies, and builds a backdrop of basic principals that make sense out of a complex world. By referring back to a story frequently, you connect diverse policies, giving your audience a “tune” to help them understand how your policies--the

¹ See historic polling compiled by Loren Griffith, “What Went Wrong,” Truman Paper, May 2004; Greeberg Quinlan Rosner Research, November 14, 2006 showing a gap narrowed to 13 points; Los Angeles Times/Bloomberg Poll, Dec 8-11, 2006; Gary Hart Yang Research Group, March 24-28 2006.



words to your song—fit together.

A good narrative gives you a chance to remind Americans at every turn that our votes on obscure actions in obscure places are really about that crucial voter issue—character: who we are, and who we believe Americans are. When that vision is compelling enough, your audience identifies with the character you paint. Then your story becomes not about you—but about Americans.

THE CONSERVATIVE VISION

The conservative national security narrative since Ronald Reagan has been strong and compelling: it is the story of Gary Cooper in *High Noon*. Conservatives see America in the role of reluctant, upright sheriff, who stands alone to protect his town as the townspeople turn away from the fight. America, in this view, is a good, pure country, faced with evil people who want to hurt us. The best way to deal with enemies is through the decisive use of force. Allies cannot be counted on in the crunch, they lack moral courage, though they are willing to free ride off America's willingness to keep the world safe.

Neoconservatives took Gary Cooper and sent him out into the world. But in Iraq, they failed, and Americans hate failure. Searching for a new story, many turned reactive, and fell back into the isolationist narrative.

In the isolationist story, America's power is seen, at best, as morally questionable. To some, power itself is seen as corrupting, and returning to a more humble position retains our purity; to others, America power is seen as uniquely immoral and imperialistic. In this view, America has not only caused disaster in Iraq, but American overreach, arrogance, and bumbling is the

major cause of instability throughout the world. To create safety and stability, America must retreat to a humbler position of non-intervention. This is the story of David versus Goliath—except that America is the boastful giant, felled by great pride and a little stone.

Both the conservative story and the isolationist narrative have elements that ring true. But unlike Gary Cooper in his white hat, few voters want to identify with the arrogant, bumbling Goliath. Moreover, at their root, they are two sides of the same mistaken view of America: that we are a country apart, and that we are at our best when we remain a country apart. And both eschew our deepest progressive values: that we live in a community and are interdependent, that we have a responsibility towards others, that through our collective efforts, we can achieve greater progress, opportunity, and justice.

Public opinion expert Steve Kull notes that the public has held quite firmly onto twin, somewhat contradictory ideas that were shaped by the trauma of World War II: American military might is important—but so is building partnerships and maintaining the respect of other countries. The great majority of Americans believe that we cannot cut ourselves off from the world, even if we wanted to; that we do better partnering with others than acting alone; and that growing international fear harms our security. The public is also turning sharply away from the unilateral use of force. (Among many recent studies to this effect, see Steven Kull/Knowledge Networks poll, fielded Nov, 21-29, 2006, worldpublicopinion.org.)

America is certainly going through a moment of reassessment. But it would be unwise to bet that the isolationist mood will last—particularly as new threats, such as North Korea, Iran, or a new terrorist



attack, rise on the horizon. At that moment, the passive story of isolation—even if couched in multilateral terms—will not seem up to the task at hand. We will need an answer for how to address real threats.

The public is seeking a new narrative, one that shows then America’s place in this new world. Whichever party is able to identify itself with such explanatory power will “own” national security for some time into the future.

So How Do We Do That?

The progressive national security tradition that helped us win WWII and the Cold War has two parts: American national security requires both retaining the force to deter threats and turn back active aggression, while building opportunity and hope to create stability. It was this twin view of national security that made Harry Truman back containment, arming Greece and Turkey, and building NATO with one hand; while sponsoring the Berlin Airlift and the Marshall Plan with the other. John F. Kennedy did the same, staring down the Soviet Union in the Cuban Missile Crisis, while building the Alliance for Peace and the Peace Corps to fight communism by showing the world a better path forward. Even Jimmy Carter pursued the Camp David Accords and a human rights agenda while authorizing a significant military expansion towards the end of his term.

Our story today is one whose core ideas are as valid as ever, based on principles that most progressives share. We live interconnected with others, not in a vacuum. America is based on great values embodied in our Constitution and Bill of Rights, and is a great country when it lives up to these values, striving to make itself better at home while spurring progress abroad. We should act pragmatically, not ideologically. And our

national security requires both forcefully facing current threats, while inspiring hope, supporting opportunity, and promoting justice overseas. Our military power must remain great—but the attraction of our values and institutions, when at their finest, should be even greater.

Our narrative is the classic story of the American pioneer. We are entering a new frontier of great opportunity. We face real dangers, from many directions—but we must face them with courage, not remain paralyzed with fear and stop our journey. And we aren’t out there alone. We carry with us the values we were raised on—our constitution, our deep love of individual liberty, as well as our profound commitment to each other. And we are bound together with the countries traveling with us. Security from danger at times requires circling the wagons: which only works if you have more than one wagon. It also requires our pragmatism, creativity, and resourcefulness—working with everyone we can, and using every tool we have, to survive across tough terrain. Progressives ask America to be, once again, the home of the brave – a land where we ask them to step up and give more. We face our enemies, while never allowing fear to make us less than who we are.

This story can admit that America is not always an angel. But it also leaves us room, as progressives, to ask of America that it remain a force for progress in the world. It allows us to laud the stability that American brings by keeping the peace, providing humanitarian aid, ending genocide, and pushing other states to confront real threats and humanitarian disasters in the world, instead of retreating into hopeful isolationism. Rather than asking less of our countrymen, we ask them to step up and give more.

So What’s This Story Good For?

There's nothing very exceptional about this story, and that's exactly the point. It brings together ideas Americans already have about who we are, and who we want to be: pragmatic, values-oriented, resourceful, strong, creative, helpful – and ties them to the great stories of our past, the challenges ahead, and to the progressive movement itself.

You will likely never use it the way it's written here—conservatives rarely refer to Gary Cooper, and may never have thought of *High Noon* as their story line. But it can do two things. First, pull us away from the losing Goliath story line, which criticism of the current Administration sometimes leads us dangerously close to. Second, serve as tropes that we collectively refer back to, to explain to America the different security tradition that we believe will let us prevail against enemies, and build progress in the world.

HOW CAN WE REINFORCE OUR STORY?

- Give national security prominence in speeches-- even speeches on otherwise domestic matters--so that America knows that their security is as important to us as our domestic policies.
- Show a deep understanding of the military, and gain the military's trust--they will stand with us when we claim they cannot solve all problems.
- Reinforce our commitment to the Constitution and our founding values. We stand for something positive, and something our military has taken an oath to defend, when we defend the constitution in foreign and domestic policy.
- Reclaim our values: despite the debacle of Iraq, we remain committed to standing up for democracy for the disenfranchised, human rights, and economic op-

portunity--abroad as well as at home. Consistency in our values shows character, and tells America what we stand for. Abandoning these values in the hopes that it will make us look "tough" will just make us sound characterless, and without a moral rudder. Instead, make them a virtue, the values Americans carry with us into the new world.

- Ground policy speeches in the underlying character that we see in America: Resourceful, pragmatic, strong, creative, helpful, values-oriented, and brave; NOT ideological, scared, backwards-looking, and tired.
- Use the metaphor to help make sense of obscure policy issues: why do we work to bring multiple countries on board for an anti-terrorist action? Because it helps us build the "wagon train" we need to prevail in a long war against radical jihadists.
- Use humor to attack the conservative story—laughter is far more devastating and memorable than logic alone.

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