



Truman National Security Project

Where We Went Wrong

How the Public Lost Faith in Democrats' Ability
to Protect Our National Security, and
How to Stage a Comeback

A Truman Paper

By: Loren Griffith

May
2005

Executive Summary

Democrats began losing public trust in national security after the Vietnam War, and the confidence gap has remained large and steady ever since. As security issues rise in public importance, the Democratic loss of the national security “issue” (a situation in which simply discussing national security, regardless of content, aids Republicans with voters) will hurt Democratic chances at the polls. For our country to have the debate and discussion that national security issues deserve, we need two parties with credibility and voter trust in issues of national security.

This Truman Paper analyzes what the Democrats did wrong, and Republicans did right, in three crucial areas: 1) policies, 2) political positioning and timing of those policies, and 3) the presentation, or narrative, which links policies into an overarching framework so that they resonate and make sense to the public. It ends with a case study of the Republican renaissance in education to provide a roadmap for how Democrats could regain credibility in the national security arena. This paper is about process, not content. It is the first step down a long road towards giving America a real national security debate once again.¹

Introduction

Recall a more hopeful day for the Democratic Party: the run-up to the 2000 election. Education, a Democratic issue, topped the public’s list of most important problems facing the country. No one seemed worried about national security. Only one percent of voters placed threats from abroad atop the agenda.²

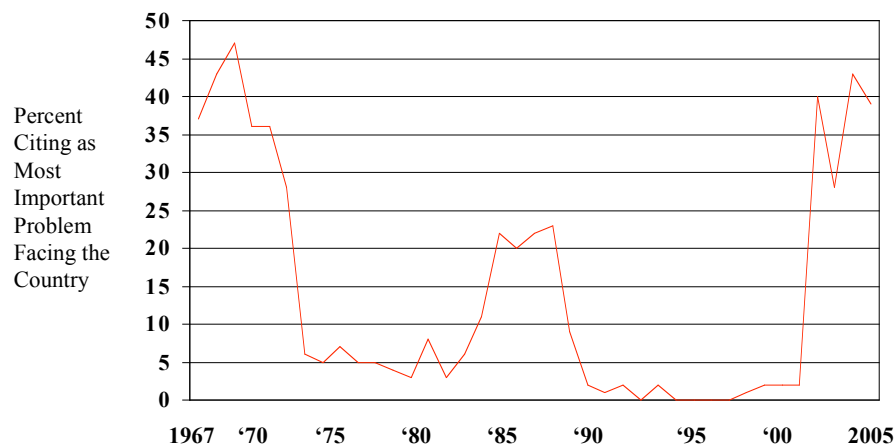
That, like so much else, has changed drastically since 9/11. More Americans now prioritize national security issues over domestic issues. Not since the Vietnam War has security been so prominent in the public mind.³ In last November’s election, Democrats could hardly afford to ignore security questions. With the terrorist threat here to stay, and the CIA warning that the question is not *whether* but *when* the next attack will occur, security issues seem likely to remain near the top of voters’ agendas for the foreseeable future.

¹ This paper received a great deal of assistance from Matthew Funk, a Principal Member of the Truman Project.

² Gallup Poll, October 2000, available at www.gallupbrain.com.

³ See Table 1.

Table 1: Prominence of National Security Issues on Public Agenda, 1967-2005



Source: Gallup Poll, responses to “What do you think is the most important problem facing this country today?”
Data gathered from Gallup Brain website.

Note: Responses included if coded as at least one of the following: “defense”, “fear of (nuclear) war”, “Iraq”, “Iran”, “national security”, “North Korea”, “Middle East situation”, “nuclear war”, “Soviet Union”, “terrorism”, “Vietnam”, or “war”. Responses coded only as “international problems”, “foreign affairs”, or “foreign aid” excluded.

This is bad news for Democrats. Every Democratic Presidential candidate since 1968 has been hurt by the party’s weak national security reputation. Accordingly, when security issues top the public agenda, Democrats seeking the White House face an uphill battle. If Democrats cannot reverse this longstanding pattern and end Republican dominance of security issues by 2008, the next Presidential election will likely bring another round of disappointment and soul-searching.

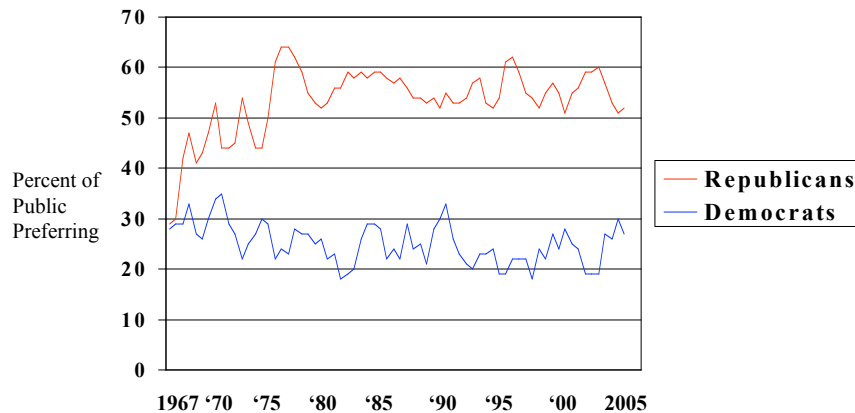
The Theory of Issue Ownership

The Democratic Party’s “fatal weakness on national security questions,” as Bob Woodward aptly put it, is well known.⁴ Asked to say which party they think will do a better job handling these issues, the public has preferred Republicans since the late 1960s—that is, for more than 35 years running.⁵ The Republicans’ advantage on national security has been continuous and substantial, and it shows no sign of flagging.

⁴ Bob Woodward, *The Agenda*, 21.

⁵ See *Table 2*.

Table 2: Party More Trusted on National Security Issues, 1967-2005



Source: National polls conducted by more than 10 organizations, chiefly Gallup, ABC News/Washington Post, CBS/New York Times, NBC/Wall St. Journal, Harris Poll, and Fox News. (No single organization provides a comprehensive picture.) Data gathered from three proprietary databases: Gallup Brain, iPoll, and Roper Center.

Note: Each data point depicts average of three most recent polls regarding perceived party competence to handle defense, military, national security and terrorism issues. (Moving average used to diminish effect of idiosyncratic poll results and varying question formats.) For 1967-72, poll results regarding Nixon, Humphrey, and McGovern's perceived competence to handle the war in Vietnam substituted (no polls results regarding party competence to handle security or defense are available).

Political scientists have a term for this pattern: “issue ownership.” The theory of issue ownership begins with the notion that voters, to the extent they are concerned about policy issues, are less influenced by the substance of candidates’ platforms than with their perceived competence (as representatives of their party) to “handle” issues of importance. When the public comes to trust a party’s competence on a given issue—as it has with the Republican Party on security issues—the party “owns” the issue.⁶

The real significance of issue ownership lies in the stubbornness of public perception. John Zaller, a groundbreaking theorist of public opinion, showed that once people form a political opinion, they are prone to interpret new information as corroborating evidence. Political messages tending to undermine an already-held opinion are ignored, while reinforcing messages are readily assimilated. Thus, once voters came to see Republicans as superior to Democrats on security issues, they became relatively impervious to evidence and messages tending to discredit that perception, and especially receptive to evidence and messages that tend to confirm it. When national security issues are prominent, people are more likely to vote Republican because the Republican Party is trusted on these issues. Thus, even when voters agree with Democratic criticism of Republican security policies, the mere fact that security is raised helps Republicans. Issue ownership is therefore self-reinforcing, and direct attempts to undermine a party’s issue ownership during a campaign often backfire.⁷

⁶ See, e.g., John R. Petrocik, “Issue Ownership in Presidential Elections, with a 1980 Case Study,” *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 40 No. 3 (Aug. 1996), 825-850.

⁷ See generally John Zaller, *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion* for a discussion of issue ownership. John Petrocik’s study of presidential elections between 1952 and 1992 concludes that when the campaign agenda plays to Republican strengths, Republicans win; and when it plays to Democratic strengths, Democrats win. *Id.*

Sen. John Kerry found this out the hard way in 2004. Kerry tried to make security and foreign policy issues the centerpiece of his campaign, emphasizing his credentials as a war hero in the hopes of overcoming the weak-on-security reputation that dogs all Democrats. But Kerry was unable to overcome entrenched views and convince the public that they would be safer under his command than President Bush's. Polls conducted the month before the election gave Bush, on average, a 15-point advantage over Kerry on the day's preeminent security issue: terrorism.⁸

How Did We Get Into This Mess?

All of this would seem to place Democrats in a nasty fix. If security issues are likely to remain pivotal in national politics, and if Republican ownership of these issues renders Democratic Party efforts to persuade voters likely to backfire, how can Democrats win?

To answer that question, we have to understand how the Democrats got into this mess the first place. What is the source of public mistrust, and how did that mistrust solidify into a seemingly permanent feature of the political landscape? The answer lies in a potent combination of policy, politics, and narrative. While Democrats have floundered on all three fronts, Republicans have capitalized. Too often, Democratic administrations and members of Congress have supported policies that seem to reflect a knee-jerk, anti-military bias and a deep discomfort with the use of American power. Democrats have sometimes shown regrettable naiveté in their political timing when taking up foreign policy issues under their control, and in the political symbols they create around national security, while Republicans have introduced new policies in politically astute ways to emphasize strength and distract from failures. Finally, Democrats have never been able to weave a credible narrative, rooted in enduring values and effective strategies, about their commitment to protecting America, while Republicans—and the conservative think tanks and publications that support them—have used a compelling rhetoric of strength and values to build their security reputation.

Part of the lesson is that neither doing better nor talking better is enough. Policy, politics and narrative all matter. When they come together to the advantage of one party—as they have for the Republicans on national security—the result is more than three decades of dominance.

Where the Democrats Went Wrong

The roots of the Democrats' downfall lie, unsurprisingly, in the Vietnam era. Between 1968 and 1972, the public grew convinced that Democrats were less competent to wage the war and bring the troops home than Republicans. Since that time, the perception of Democrats as weak-kneed on security and ineffective on foreign policy in general has only broadened and grown more entrenched. As public opinion began to turn against the war in Vietnam in 1967-68, Democrats—who had occupied the White House for the war's duration—took the blame. More and more American soldiers came home in body bags, and the war began to look less and less winnable. As a result, President Johnson was vulnerable from

⁸ Gallup polls, October 2000, available at www.gallupbrain.com

both sides. His approval ratings on Vietnam fell from 58% in 1965 to 26% in early 1968,⁹ contributing to his decision to leave the Presidential race—and to Richard Nixon’s victory in November.

By 1972, both parties’ Presidential candidates, Nixon and George McGovern, promised to move toward an end to the war. But while Nixon talked about “peace with honor,”¹⁰ McGovern left the impression that if he were elected, America would put its tail between its legs and go home. He called the war in Vietnam “a policy of mass murder,” said he would “beg” Hanoi for the return of American POWs, and urged massive cuts in defense spending.¹¹ He then lost the election in dramatic fashion, coming up short more than 20% nationally and winning only Massachusetts and the District of Columbia.¹² It was not so much the fact of McGovern’s opposition to the war that doomed him and spawned the party’s Vietnam syndrome—Nixon also promised to end the war—but his military-bashing, defeatist rhetoric.¹³ Americans are highly resistant to the implication that American power is at its root imperialist and tyrannical rather than noble and benevolent. It is important to our national identity that we walk tall in the international arena, proud of our values and confident of democratizing influence.

The Democrats’ nomination of McGovern as their standard-bearer was a watershed event for the party, marking a sharp turn away from the effective and tough-minded internationalism of Harry Truman and John F. Kennedy and toward uncertainty in our actions abroad and loss of public faith at home. The hawkish wing of the party, led by Senator Scoop Jackson of Washington, was dismayed by its direction on national security and the resulting electoral disaster. Instead of massive cuts in the military, Jackson had advocated a new antiballistic missile; instead of a softening stance toward the Soviet threat, he successfully pushed for trade penalties for communist states restricting their citizens’ emigration.¹⁴ Jackson might have helped to reverse the Democrats’ slide on national security, but his bid for the nomination in 1976 never got off the ground, and the organization of hawkish Democrats he led, the Coalition for a Democratic Majority, was never able to wrest party control away from the doves.

Instead, the next Presidential contest brought the election of Jimmy Carter, who suffered through four years of well-intentioned misadventures in security policy, deepening the impression that Democrats were hostile to the military and deeply suspicious of American power, not the party you wanted in charge when an international emergency demanded tough action. From the start, Carter sent signals that he would pursue an excuse-me foreign policy. Carter picked Cyrus Vance, perceived by some as “the closest thing to a pacifist that the U.S. has ever had as

⁹ Gallup polls, available at www.gallupbrain.com

¹⁰ Lloyd C. Gardner, *The Great Nixon Turnaround*, 42.

¹¹ Lawrence F. Kaplan, “How the Democrats Became Hawks,” *The New Republic*, Oct. 23, 2000, 23.

¹² “[T]he issue that may have been McGovern’s trump card in winning the nomination could only do him harm [when] it remained salient in the general election... [T]he voters’ verdict was to approve overwhelmingly Nixon’s handling of foreign affairs.” Stephen Hess and Michael Nelson, “Dominance and Decisiveness in Presidential Elections,” in *The Elections of 1984*, Michael Nelson, ed., 134.

¹³ *The Democratic Party might instead have embraced a moderate and principled opposition to the war in Vietnam. No one embodied this approach better than Daniel Patrick Moynihan. In a confidential memorandum to President Nixon (then his boss), Moynihan contended that “It has become obvious that we cannot ‘win’ the war.” As a rhetorical strategy, Moynihan ventured, the President could argue that “the troops were worn out. They had taken too many casualties.” Quoted in Godfrey Hodgson, *The Gentleman from New York*, p. 152.*

¹⁴ *The policy was embodied in the Jackson-Vanik amendment, adopted in 1972.*

Secretary of State” as his lead diplomat, and Andrew Young, who once suggested, “it may take the destruction of Western civilization to allow the rest of the world to really emerge as a free and brotherly society,” as Ambassador to the United Nations.¹⁵

The new president’s first foreign policy act, taken within 24 hours of his inauguration, was to order the removal of all nuclear weapons from the Korean peninsula. A few days later he followed up by announcing his intention to withdraw all American ground troops from Korea. A host of defense-minded Democratic Senators, including Sam Nunn, Scoop Jackson, John Glenn, and Hubert Humphrey, joined virtually unanimous Republican opposition to the plan to pull the troops out of Korea, and Carter was forced to rescind the idea. Carter then proceeded to cut the seven-year defense budget he inherited from Ford by \$57 billion.¹⁶ Later he abruptly canceled the B-1 bomber program shortly before production. As one observer put it, “If the President had only done something to soften the impact of his announcement on congressional and public attitudes, the troubles and criticism he received probably would not have been so great.”¹⁷ By the spring of 1979, 62% of Americans thought the U.S.’s position in the world was “becoming weaker.”¹⁸

Carter’s initial missteps poisoned public perception of his fitness to handle America’s security, particularly in the midst of a crisis abroad. After initially rallying around the President in the wake of the Iranian hostage crisis, the public quickly grew impatient with his inability to bring the hostages home safely. When a daring rescue attempt ended in failure, public mistrust of Carter only grew.¹⁹ Similarly, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan was blamed on Carter’s conciliatory stance toward the Soviet Union.²⁰ By the end of his four years in office, the American public “felt bullied by OPEC, humiliated by the Ayatollah Khomeini, tricked by Castro, out-traded by Japan and out-gunned by the Russians.”²¹ The narrative of Democratic incompetence spoiled Carter’s foreign policy successes, most notably the Camp David Accords.

To be sure, Carter was wise to recognize the security relevance of “soft” foreign policy tools such as human rights promotion (the Bush Administration has lately come around to this view itself). But whatever the wisdom of Carter’s *policies*, their political *symbolism* was disastrous, feeding into the perception that Democrats shy away from projecting American power and leave our security vulnerable. Because Carter’s policies were seen as weak, his symbols began to seem weak as well. Concepts like peace, cooperation, and human rights came under Carter to imply weakness. Together, these fueled a negative narrative. Without intending it, Jimmy Carter drove home the notion that Democrats were skeptical of American strength, determined to scale back the military, and too timid to stand up to our enemies’ acts of aggression.

The 1980s did little to counter the now entrenched notion that Democrats had little idea of how to protect America and its interests. With no control of the White House, Democrats could not use executive policies to bolster our foreign policy credentials. Instead of offering a compelling

¹⁵ Steven F. Hayward, *The Age of Reagan: The Fall of the Old Liberal Order, 1964-1980*, 542.

¹⁶ *Id.*, 541.

¹⁷ Stephanie A. Slocum-Schaffer, *America in the Seventies*, 81.

¹⁸ *Id.*

¹⁹ See, e.g., Slocum-Schaffer, *supra* note 17, 83.

²⁰ See, e.g., *id.*, 123.

²¹ David Yankelovich and Larry Kaagan, “Assertive America,” in *The Reagan Foreign Policy*, William G. Hyland, ed., 1

counter-narrative, however, our talking heads simply bashed Reagan with as much enthusiasm as they now use in going after Bush. But Reagan was a master of political symbolism, and had used potent rhetoric and bold action to regain the initiative in foreign policy. Democratic negativity in such a situation reflected badly not on the President, but on us. Without an equally bold plan of our own, Democrats painted ourselves into opposing a policy that many Americans would credit (rightly or wrongly) with ending the Cold War. Michael Dukakis' much ridiculed tank photo-op became the touchstone for the entire Democratic narrative. "Dukakis has faithfully represented the views of post-Vietnam Democrats," one observer summed up, "who are skittish about the use of American force, opposed to much of the decade's military build-up, strongly inclined to multilateral rather than unilateral action abroad, eager to strike new arms-control agreements with the Soviets, and dedicated to the neo-Wilsonian promotion of global human rights. . ."22 Congressional Democrats left a similar impression, lining up in overwhelming opposition to the popular Gulf War in 1991. Even pro-security Senator Bob Kerrey argued that "rather than threatening war. . .we should tell Iraq and the world we believe the wholesale loss of American and Arab lives is too great a price to pay to liberate Kuwait."23

After twelve years without the White House bully pulpit, the 1992 election of Bill Clinton gave Democrats a major opportunity to banish their national security demons. But domestic policies crowded out international affairs for virtually the whole of Clinton's eight years in office. This stemmed in part from the end of the Cold War, which inevitably re-focused national attention on problems at home. But the Clinton Administration might have made more headway on the foreign policy front, even while emphasizing domestic issues. The President largely abandoned the strong security stance he had adopted during the campaign. Most visibly, Clinton replaced his hawkish campaign foreign policy advisors with those identified with the Carter administration, such as Warren Christopher as Secretary of State and Anthony Lake as National Security Advisor.²⁴ Clinton also presided over substantial cuts in the size and strength of the military. Though the cuts had begun under the first Bush Administration, they unrolled under Clinton, and it was the symbolism and narrative that mattered: they were seen as further evidence of Democrats' inclination to rollback the military at the first opportunity.

Clinton also failed to use his magic political ear in foreign policy. His first major national security foray, integrating homosexuals into the military, earned him the enmity of soldiers and reinforced the public sense that Democrats were estranged from the military. The unfortunate timing of his retaliatory missile launch against al-Qaeda in the Sudan, while driven by events beyond his control, fit the Republican political spin of a "wag the dog" moment to distract from impeachment. Clinton's halting and *ad hoc* approach to taking the security initiative allowed political moments to slip away, making security "one damn thing after another," rather than asserting some degree of politically astute policy control.

To reverse the Democratic freefall in national security, the Administration would have had to take on the Democratic narrative head on, crafting a bold foreign policy agenda, studding it with symbolism, and setting it in a strong storyline. Instead, the Administration failed to establish a strong international or security agenda in the minds of voters. For Clinton, foreign policy was a series of problems to be dealt with when they hit the boiling point and couldn't be ignored. This

²² *Id.*, 17-18.

²³ "How the Democrats Became Hawks," *supra* note 11.

²⁴ See, e.g., *id.*.

reactive approach contrasts sharply with the proactive and principled approach to foreign policy taken by Reagan and the two Presidents Bush—and by Clinton himself on domestic policy. When the Administration did act, it seemed timid and hesitant. Clinton hemmed and hawed about Bosnia for many months before directing a successful intervention. The delayed and half-hearted occupation of Haiti to restore the Democratic government there proved, from a political standpoint, similarly fruitless. Instead, the best-remembered security and military events of Clinton’s presidency—the slaughter of U.S. servicemen in Somalia, the inaction in the face of genocide in Rwanda, and the bombing of the USS Cole—fed the notion that Democrats make shaky commanders-in-chief. And the Administration’s preoccupation with minimizing the risk to U.S. soldiers at any cost lent credence into the already thriving notion that Bill Clinton was a man without honor. As a result, Clinton’s prescient focus on rooting out international terrorism was little noticed at the time or since.

Where the Republicans Went Right

In 1964, it was the Republicans who had a national security problem. Republicans were viewed as isolationists, while Democrats had led the country through two successful world wars and the early Cold War. Lyndon Johnson played effectively on Barry Goldwater’s reputation to discredit Goldwater’s ability to lead the country safely through a crisis, asking in a memorable ad, “Who do you want to be sittin’ beside that hot line when the telephone goes ting-a-ling and the voice on the other end says ‘Moscow calling’?”²⁵

Richard Nixon’s years in the White House did much to rehabilitate Republican national security credentials. First, he crafted a message of honor and optimism. After Nixon won the Presidency in 1968, the deepening quagmire in Vietnam might have swallowed the Republicans instead of the Democrats. Nixon seemed an unlikely President to withdraw us smoothly from Vietnam (just as he seemed unlikely to achieve rapprochement with China, before he did it). But Nixon had handled the situation with subtle effectiveness during the campaign, assuring the country that the war would be brought to a close with America holding its head high.²⁶ “I pledge to you,” Nixon repeated time and again, “we will have an honorable end to the war in Vietnam.” Over the course of his first term, Nixon managed to blunt the anti-war movement by announcing small troop withdrawals.²⁷ Nixon never abandoned his rhetoric of American confidence and optimism. Speaking in Texas in April 1972, he said, “[I]n the final analysis, what is really on the line here, of course, is the position of the United States of America as the strongest free-world power, as a constructive force for peace in the world.” Nixon’s invocation of high American ideals, in the midst of an embarrassing military pullback, struck a chord with the public: 77% of Americans judged Nixon’s Vietnam policy a success in 1973.²⁸

Nixon also began the successful political strategy of deflecting defeats, and publicizing success. He blunted the potentially damaging effects of bad news from Vietnam (and later, Cambodia and

²⁵ The Elections of 1984, *supra* note 12, 133.

²⁶ New York Times columnist James Reston commented: “Nixon is exploiting [the war] very shrewdly. He is simply saying it’s a mess, which it obviously is, and holding . . . the Democrats responsible for it.” *Id.*

²⁷ When Nixon took office there were 520,000 troops in Vietnam, a number he reduced to 400,000 by early 1970. Slocum-Schaffer, *supra* note 17, 99.

²⁸ Gallup Poll, Jan. 1973, available at www.gallupbrain.com.

Laos) by going to China. The Administration's success in thawing relations with the Chinese represented a major foreign policy success, generating two years of positive news from Asia and shifting public opinion somewhat away from Vietnam. Perfectly planned and staged, détente with China helped reassure the public that America was again moving forward and succeeding in our efforts to contain the Communist threat. It was also a bold, important policy move—not just a political gimmick.

In 1980 Jimmy Carter and the Democrats were still suffering from Vietnam syndrome, but the American people were largely ready to declare the country healthy again and ready to assert its strength free of hand-wringing ambivalence. Ronald Reagan capitalized on the mood perfectly. Reagan hammered Carter on the campaign trail for allowing US military capabilities to wither in the face of a Soviet drive for world domination, asking, “Do you feel that your security is as safe, that we’re as strong as we were four years ago?”²⁹ Reagan promised a tougher stance against the Soviet Union, a more muscular military, and a willingness to aid our allies, with force if necessary.³⁰

Reagan, like Nixon, also found way to deflect attention from anything that might have dampened the public's trust in him on security issues. The October 1983 bombing of the U.S. embassy in Beirut killed more than 200, prompting the withdrawal of all the Marines stationed there. Reagan responded to the crisis by announcing just two days later that the US would invade Grenada. In a classic “splendid little war,” the Reagan Administration overthrew the government and rescued the American medical school students trapped there. For a crucial couple of weeks, the invasion focused American attention on its will and capacity to squelch developments inimical to US security interests. Reagan's job approval rating soon cleared 50% for the first time in two years.³¹

Reagan understood the importance of weaving a proud foreign policy narrative. He spoke of America as a beacon of hope and freedom for the whole world. At the 1984 Convention he declared:

In four years before we took office, country after country fell under the Soviet yoke. Since January 20, 1981, not one inch of soil has fallen to the communists. But worst of all, Americans were losing the confidence and optimism about the future that had made us unique in the world. Parents were beginning to doubt that their children would have the better life that has been the dream of every American generation. We can all be proud that pessimism is ended. America is coming back and is more confident than ever about the future.”³²

²⁹ Quoted in Jules Witcover, *Party of the People*, 143. See also Slocum-Schaffer, *supra* note 17, 86.

³⁰ See, e.g., *The Reagan Foreign Policy*, *supra* note 21, 10.

³¹ See *The Elections of 1984*, *supra* note 12, 148-49. *From a policy perspective, our failure to respond directly to the attack on the Marines was seen by the growing Islamist movement as one of the early roadsigns that we were too weak to face terrorism.*

³² Quoted in *id.*, 149.

He also employed a compelling rhetoric of moral certainty, branding the Soviet Union “the Evil Empire” and describing it as “the focus of evil in the modern world.”³³ Reagan’s foreign policy was driven by a strong unifying vision, with a clear goal, a clear enemy, and clear prescriptions. Most Americans could still articulate that vision in a few sentences. Nothing of the sort is possible with Clinton’s foreign policy.

The Reagan era also marked a coming-out party for the conservative intellectual movement. Public sentiment and Reagan himself were deeply influenced—including on national security issues—by the ideology and policy prescriptions pushed by think tanks like the American Enterprise Institute and the Heritage Foundation and publications like *Commentary* and *The Public Interest*. The movement had been gathering strength since the 1950s (the *National Review* was founded in 1955), but previously had focused largely on domestic issues. By Reagan’s election in 1980, however, these organs of idea development and dissemination began to make their mark on foreign policy as well, aiming to craft a master narrative that would frame Republican “successes” and Democratic “failures.” Norman Podhoretz’s 1980 book, *The Present Danger*, had a particularly deep impact. Podhoretz argued against the Democrats’ “incessant harping on the danger of confrontation and nuclear war,” claiming “all of this is part of a culture of appeasement,” whose principal thrust is “anti-American.”³⁴ The book was read widely within Reagan’s campaign team, and Reagan himself urged “all Americans to read this critically important book.”

In the 1980s, conservatives used these groups to develop a national security story in keeping with conservative ideology. In the inaugural issue of another highly influential publication, *The National Interest*, in 1985, William Kristol wrote that “liberal internationalism . . . is naïve and utopian.” Instead he proposed a “new conservatism,” based on the premise that the Soviet conflict is one “we should aim to win . . . instead of pursuing a defensive policy that sees stalemate as the goal.”³⁵ A second set of organizations, such as the Center for Security Policy (founded in 1988) and funded by overlapping donor sets, made sure that these ideas were translated into talking points, messages, and politically saleable policies. These groups offered new faces for the burgeoning talk show and talk radio scene. Together, this self-organized set of independent but interlocking organizations worked to show Reagan’s efforts in the best light, provide intellectual backbone to his policy ideas, and discredit past Democratic success while pushing progressive naysayers onto the defensive.

The two Presidents Bush have largely been the beneficiaries and not the architects of Republican national security ownership. George H.W. Bush was in the right place to get credit for the end of the Cold War, but he mishandled the transition by failing to promote democratization, taking a particularly weak stance on Russia and the former Soviet Union. Bush responded swiftly to drive Saddam Hussein out of Kuwait, but he did not finish the job. He failed to prevent the subsequent massacre of Iraqi Shiites and Kurds, and by declining to march to Baghdad, allowed a dangerous rogue regime to stay in power for another twelve years. The Republicans’ ironclad national security reputation, and the lack of organized Democratic and nonpartisan opposition

³³ See, e.g., Witcover, *supra* note 29. Late in his presidency, Reagan gracefully pivoted from fighting the Cold War to partnering with Mikhail Gorbachev to end it. Like Nixon going to China, Reagan’s hard-line credentials inoculated him against the charges of weakness that might otherwise have ensued.

³⁴ Sidney Blumenthal, *The Rise of the Counter-Establishment*, 142-43.

³⁵ *Id.*, at 159-60.

with strong security bona fides, helped ensure that these missteps were perceived not as evidence of incompetence or weakness on his part, but instead were largely ignored.³⁶

George W. Bush's resilience has been more remarkable. On his watch, the nation suffered the most devastating attack on its soil since Pearl Harbor, and a nonpartisan commission blamed it on government communication failures. The President then invaded Iraq on a rationale that has been exposed as chimerical and failed to plan adequately for an unexpectedly bloody and expensive occupation. Had these events happened to a Democratic President, they would likely have been cast as further evidence of Democrats' neglect of our national security and incompetence to handle military matters. Instead, George W. Bush, using a well-honed strategy of narrative and symbolism backed by a chorus of conservative but unaffiliated think tanks and pundits, was re-elected.

Taking Back National Security

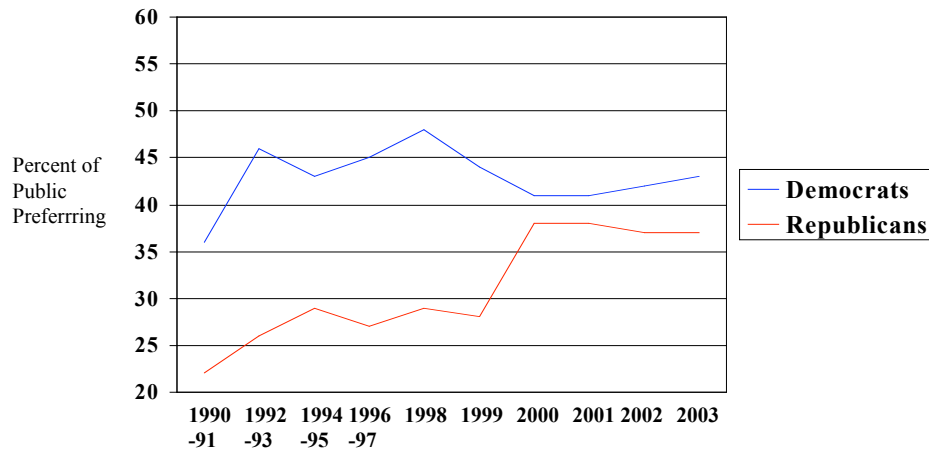
There is no silver bullet for a problem as longstanding and entrenched as Democrats' vulnerability on national security. Republicans established their advantage on national security over a relatively short span in the late 1960s, but that advantage was consolidated only through years of deliberate Republican reinforcement and unwitting Democratic corroboration.

For all its persistence, issue ownership is not forever. The genesis of Republican national security dominance lay in a winning combination of effective politics, narrative, and policy/actions. Democrats will need a similarly potent combination of these three elements to re-establish their good name. Republicans have already showed us how, not only in national security, but more recently, by taking on the issue of education. Democrats had long owned the education issue—enjoying advantages in public confidence of 15 points or more—but a concerted Republican offensive has neutralized the issue. Conservative writers and party officials had been laying the groundwork for years, and George W. Bush's focused and effective offensive during the 2000 campaign did the rest.

A quick case study of Republican reemergence in education provides a primer for how we should proceed with national security.

³⁶ See generally *John Zaller, The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion.*

Table 3: Party More Trusted on Education, 1990-2003



Source: National polls conducted by more than 10 organizations, chiefly Gallup, ABC News/Washington Post, CBS/New York Times, NBC/Wall St. Journal, and Pew. (No single organization provides a comprehensive picture.) Polling data gathered from two proprietary internet polling databases: Gallup Brain and iPoll.

Note: Each data point represents an average of available polls from the relevant year(s). Results before 1998 aggregated into 2-year blocks in order to diminish effect of idiosyncratic poll results.

Narrative

The deepest problem faced by Republicans on education was an unfavorable narrative: history was explained, and the issue was framed, in a way that could only work to their detriment. Until a new narrative coalesced in the public mind, no new political or policy position stood a chance.

Democrats had successfully portrayed the problem of poor public educational results, particularly in majority-minority schools, as one of inadequate federal resources and attention. After Ronald Regan tried to shut down the Department of Education, and with the party platform committed to that goal for two decades, the Republicans could never win a battle fought on these terms.

So the Republicans harnessed ideas incubated in the burgeoning world of neo-conservative think tanks and publications. These groups spent over a decade pounding home a new story: the cause of failing schools lay in a lack of accountability and misaligned incentives, not insufficient resources. Schools were shuffling their students through rather than expecting them to learn, the teacher's unions were not a voice for school improvement but an obstacle to it, and the market was not working: parents were deprived of the choice to switch their kids from a failing school to a better one across town. The new narrative provided a new explanation for what was wrong, and placed the implied solutions solidly in Republican territory by emphasizing incentives, tough love, and market-oriented solutions. By the 2000 election, both parties' candidates were talking about the need for enhanced accountability.³⁷

³⁷ For a brief description of Gore's competing but similar education plan, see id.

Policy

Narrative then needed to be translated into actionable policy. More than a decade of Republican thinking on education went into what would become the No Child Left Behind legislation, whose main components are accountability and choice. The movement toward accountability began in earnest in the first Bush Administration, which floated for the first time the notion of national goals, standards, and tests. The idea ripened through advisory committees and think tanks. Congress composed a national standards bill signed into law by President Clinton in 1994.³⁸ The 2000 Bush campaign essentially extended the notion of national standards by giving them teeth. Increased school choice, for its part, had long been a central goal of conservative thinkers, who had been hammering home the philosophical and policy case for vouchers, charter schools, and open enrollment for decades.

Catchy slogans and revamped narratives will be exposed as vacuous without a foundation in sound and actionable policy ideas. The Bush education plan, of course, became the No Child Left Behind Act, arguably the most fundamental national education reform since desegregation. Ending “the soft bigotry of low expectations” translated into the elimination of social promotion and working to ensure that every child learns to read by fourth grade.³⁹ Challenging “failure with charters and choice” translated into a mandatory system of national tests with escalating consequences for failing schools.

Politics

By the time the 2004 election approached, the public was prepared to receive a new message on education, Republicans had conceived of a set of bold policies, and these had received a makeover: they were stripped of think tank jargon and repackaged with catchy messaging. The Bush education offensive was distinguished by slogans that were both memorable and tailored to its message. Bush’s trademark saying emphasized both accountability and faith in the ability of all children to learn. “This nation of ours,” he said, “must challenge what I like to call the soft bigotry of low expectations.”⁴⁰ The “No Child Left Behind” legislation was also memorably and effectively named (even if it is now mocked in the wake of funding shortfalls). Though wordplay will not be enough, Democrats will need to package their ideas in similarly appealing and memorable terms.

Catchy words framing strong ideas then needed repetition to get the message to the American people. The most basic political lesson of the Republican turnaround on education is that progress requires that politicians talk about the issue and that the public pays attention. Bush 2000 campaign chairman Scott McClellan called education the campaign’s “number one priority,”⁴¹ and a study found that Bush mentioned education 58 times in television advertisements⁴² and 72 times in the debates,⁴³ a frequency matched only by taxes. Voters, for

³⁸ See generally John F. Jennings, *Why National Standards and Tests? Politics and the Quest for Better Schools*.

³⁹ See “Bush Expands on Education Theme,” *supra* note **Error! Bookmark not defined.**; “Bush Touts School Visit as a Milestone,” *supra* note **Error! Bookmark not defined.**.

⁴⁰ See, e.g., James Dao, “Bush Expands on Education Theme, Saying a Reading Crisis Endangers the Economy,” *New York Times*, 9/26/00, at A20.

⁴¹ See Terry M. Neal and Mike Allen, “Bush Touts School Visit as a Milestone,” *Washington Post*, Sep. 1 2000, A04.

⁴² William L. Benoit et al., *Campaign 2000: A Functional Analysis of Presidential Campaign Discourse*, at 45.

their part, were tuned in: 38 percent rated education the government's first or second most important priority.⁴⁴ With the public at least that focused on national security issues today,⁴⁵ Democrats have a similar opportunity. We cannot shy away from talking—and talking—about the issue of security, once we have conceived our strong ideas and strong narrative.

Conclusion

Winning back a lost issue is not a campaign strategy. While it can happen quickly under a focused Presidential administration, as President Bush accomplished with education, the overnight success is built upon years of thinking, policy discussion, messaging, and prioritization within a party. If we are to win another Presidential election, we need to take back the issue of national security. We need to start fighting this fight now, within our party, so that national security is the number one priority issue in the next campaign. We need our political operatives to understand the political importance of security issues, not simply their policy value. In other words, our policy thinkers and pundits need to come together with our politicians and rhetoricians. Together, in monthly meetings and yearly conferences, we need to conceive of a coordinated strategy of policy, politics, and narrative that can help us regain our ground. Finally, we need to believe we can win. Issues can be retaken. Democrats were once the undisputed party of national security. We will be again.

⁴³ *Id.*, at 67.

⁴⁴ Dan Balz and Richard Morin, "Education Voters' Pose a Tough Test", *Washington Post*, June 30, 2000, at A1.

⁴⁵ See Table 1.

The Truman Paper Series

The Truman National Security Project is dedicated to creating a Democratic Party with a strong, smart, principled national security stance that sets the terms of the U.S. foreign policy agenda.

Truman Papers are intended to spark debate while articulating our vision of a unique national security policy based in Democratic values.

About the Author

Loren Griffith holds a J.D. from Stanford Law School and a Master's Degree in Public Affairs from Princeton's Woodrow Wilson School. In September, he will rejoin McKinsey & Co., a management consultancy, as an Associate in their New York office. Loren is a policy consultant for the Hope Street Group and a former member of the House Ways & Means Committee's Democratic staff.



TNSP