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# Battle Hymn of the Democrats

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As the bruises dealt by the midterm election results begin to fade, Democrats are beginning to face facts: to win—or even to fare respectably—in the next round, the party will need a clear, firm, and forceful foreign policy platform. The need for a coherent vision of the United States’ role in the world, accompanied by sensible policies and rousing rhetoric, poses a challenge for party strategists who, for more than a decade, have run on the economy and entitlement programs. While those issues will remain important—and maybe even decisive—the absence of a strong foreign policy agenda, which wounded the Democrats in 2002, could prove fatal in 2004.

To fill this gap, Democrats need to recognize that, both in style and substance, the measured, deliberative mode of leadership they have evolved in recent years is out of step with the national mood. They must overcome the feelings of self-doubt on foreign policy within their own ranks to define a tough-minded agenda that includes both sharp criticisms of the current administration and an alternative Democratic vision. The substance of this agenda, a call for “responsible realism” must center on the aggressive pursuit of U.S. interests through means including force, but be tempered by a smoother, smarter vision of how a superpower ought to behave.

## MISREADING MAIN STREET

Since the end of the Cold War, polls have shown that foreign policy matters less and less to the electorate. In the weeks right after September 11, 2001, some observers suggested that this pattern would change. But come 2002,

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Democratic insiders had convinced themselves that despite the terrorist attacks, voters in the booth would return to bread-and-butter issues. In June 2002 the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee touted poll results showing 54 percent of likely voters of the view that domestic issues like the economy and Social Security were most important to them, compared to just 30 percent ranking foreign policy (including the War on Terrorism and Afghanistan) first.<sup>1</sup> "It's the Economy Again, Stupid," some Democratic strategy documents proclaimed.

While fueled partly by a genuine belief in the importance of domestic concerns, Democratic de-emphasis of foreign policy also stemmed from doubts about their own ability to offer credible and popular positions. Right after the 9/11 attacks, some Democrats whispered relief that Bush was in charge, not because he was saddled with the crisis, but because they secretly thought his team would do a better job handling it. By the 2002 campaign season, afraid of retreat-

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ing into traditional dovish stereotypes, the Democrats went silent on foreign policy, resigned that it could not help them, and praying that it might not hurt either.

Democrats now need to accomplish the foreign affairs equivalent of the domestic policy metamorphosis that Bill Clinton effected in 1992. Taking a party whose unreconstructed commitment to taxes and government programs had exhausted itself as a political strategy and discredited the Democrats on issues from crime to welfare

to budget matters, Clinton fashioned a vision, a set of policies, and campaign rhetoric that won back ground that many Democrats despaired of reclaiming. He did not worry about the "liberal" or "centrist" labels; today pundits still argue over where Clinton belongs on that standard spectrum. The key, instead, was to offer voters a cogent message that was broad, easily grasped, and that tapped into real concerns. This strategy beat a President Bush the first time it was tried, and, if the Democrats can pull it off, might do so again.

## WHY FOREIGN POLICY WON'T GO AWAY

Last year's resurgence of frivolous obsessions with Chandra Levy and Lizzie Grubman convinced some that, for better or worse, things were back to normal. But September 11 and its aftermath endure in a myriad of ways that Democrats overlooked last fall. The anthrax attacks and pro-al-Qaeda sympathies of sniper John Allen Muhammad bred fear that terrorism can unsettle communities with a sinister, invisible hand. The call-up of the reserves has disrupted careers and family

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lives. Fluctuating oil prices, travel warnings, airport friskings, and bizarre color-coded threat alerts reinforce the sense that things are not as they should be. The global recession, with stock prices undulating based on prospects of war, makes people's portfolios and job security partly contingent on foreign policy decisions.

Another key reason why foreign policy hasn't faded in importance is that Bush won't let it. The administration has diverted attention from the country's economic doldrums by forcing a relentless focus on Osama and Saddam. By framing its War on Terrorism as boundless and open-ended, the administration created an umbrella justification for domestic policies ranging from the tax cut to Arctic drilling. Policies that would be controversial in peacetime get less scrutiny when the commander-in-chief insists they will help prevent another September 11.

Bush's canny use of foreign policy to shore up his political fortunes will only increase as the election nears. The more Democrats try to turn attention to the economy or entitlements, the more Republicans will take advantage of the White House's power over the news cycle to push foreign

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policy to the forefront. This does not mean stooping to "wag the dog" tactics; the world is big and unstable enough to offer clever advisers targets of political opportunity almost anywhere—a summit meeting, visit by a head of state, or high-profile arrest would each work fine. The "October surprise" is a longstanding phenomenon in American politics—a conveniently timed crisis that just happens to show the incumbent in his finest hour. By leaking word that an unmanned Predator drone had pulverized a top al-Qaeda operative on the eve of the midterm elections, the Pentagon gave a taste of what is to come.

#### IN DEFENSE OF PARTISANSHIP

In fashioning a new vision, Democrats must reject the shibboleth that foreign policy allows for no partisan divide. Apart from the fact that the Republicans are never restrained by such compunctions, the truth is that the United States has always benefited from healthy debates over war and peace. Presidents Wilson and Roosevelt both faced vociferous political opposition to U.S. intervention in the world wars. The public did not recoil from these debates, nor assail the Presidents' critics as unpatriotic. In contrast, the call for "bipartisanship" over the 1964 Gulf of Tonkin Resolution led to the most misguided intervention of the last century. Even at its height during the 1940s and 1950s, foreign policy bipartisanship was criticized by Senate legends like Robert Taft as "a very dangerous fallacy threatening the very exis-

tence of the nation.”<sup>2</sup> The Democrats should realize that, having shown the world after 9/11 that the United States can coalesce in a crunch, the party now owes the public a genuine debate. As Harry Truman once said, given a choice between a Republican and a Republican, the voters will choose the Republican every time.

In separating from the President, one key factor is that Democrats must be seen to be every bit as tough-minded as their opponents. Democratic reinvention as a “peace party” is a political dead end. Just as Pearl Harbor silenced that era’s isolationists overnight, 9/11 marginalized the anti-war faction in the eyes of a wounded nation ready and eager to fight back. Moreover, the War on Terrorism thus far, and the war on Iraq the administration promises, are relatively clean, bloodless affairs as far as the United States is concerned. It would take a good number of body bags to turn the public against what is seen as the just prosecution of sworn enemies at low risk. Nor is it smart politics to try to divert attention to “new” security issues like AIDS and global warming. Although important and unconscionably neglected by the Republicans, these issues will never mobilize the public as do matters of war and peace.

In a milieu of war or near-war, the public will look for leadership that is bold and strident—more forceful, resolute, and pugnacious than would otherwise be tolerated. As the Conservative British parliamentarian Leopold Amory said just before Neville Chamberlain was tossed out as Prime Minister in favor of Winston Churchill,

Just as our peace-time system is unsuitable for war conditions, so does it tend to breed peace-time statesmen who are not too well fitted for the conduct of war. Facility in debate, ability to state a case, caution in advancing an unpopular view, compromise and procrastination are the natural qualities—I might almost say, virtues—of a political leader in time of peace. They are fatal qualities in war. Vision, daring, swiftness and consistency of decision are the very essence of victory.<sup>3</sup>

This is the closest thing to war the United States has seen in a generation. While making elites uneasy, President Bush’s talk of wanting Osama bin Laden “dead or alive” and targeting the “axis of evil” resonate with the public. Though often reviled in peacetime, Rudolph Giuliani’s stubbornness and simmering rage were revered after 9/11. Likewise, it was suicide bombings in Israel that drove the population away from Ehud Barak and into the arms of Ariel Sharon.

The Democrats’ problem is that they fit the British description of peacetime virtue to a tee: thoughtful, reasoned, wary of hyperbole and over-simplification, and fearful of making mistakes. Both an appreciation of nuance and a sense of decency restrain them from effectively demonizing opponents at home or abroad. Paradoxically, Democrats’ choice to support Bush, more or less, on the invasion of Iraq, which they hoped would insulate them against charges of cowardliness, only

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reinforced a sense that their leaders lack the mettle to lead. On top of seeming too wimpy to support the war strongly, they seemed too wimpy to try to stop it.

### REREADING HISTORY

To regain a sense of confidence and unity of purpose, Democrats must reclaim their own foreign policy history, confronting demons and purging their feelings of inadequacy on “hard” military and security issues. As the Republicans would tell it, ever since their humiliation in Vietnam the Democrats have been in retreat, hesitant to assert American leadership for fear of new quagmires. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the party’s indelible foreign policy images were Carter’s botched hostage rescue and Dukakis peeking impishly from the top of a tank.

This spin on events should be rejected as self-defeating and, more importantly, inaccurate. Carter’s coup at Camp David helped to sideline the Russians from the Middle East, extending American influence in a crucial Cold War battleground. Though he was defeated at the polls, Dukakis’ foreign policy prescription prevailed when President George H.W. Bush confronted Iraq, rejecting his own campaign commitment to unilateralism in favor of the United Nations. Though tentative at first, the Clinton administration’s later successes in Bosnia, Kosovo, NATO expansion, UN reform, and the extension of free trade add up to a very solid record. The “gee whiz” advances in military training and technology displayed in the War on Terrorism happened mostly under Clinton’s leadership.

Going back further, the foundation for a tough-minded Democratic foreign policy is even stronger. Uncowed by recalcitrant Republican isolationists in Congress, FDR risked his domestic agenda and political career to mount all-out war against totalitarianism. His successor, Harry Truman, dropped the bomb on Hiroshima and then, faced with a war-weary population and festering domestic problems, rejected the easier path of retreat from foreign affairs, committing to a stand against Soviet expansionism. JFK hung tough against communism in Indochina and called the Soviet Union’s bluff during the Cuban missile crisis.

The idea that today’s Democrats lack the foreign affairs substance and spine of their predecessors is bunk. Gore devoted years of his Senate career to becoming an expert on weapons and security issues. Potential hopefuls John Kerry and Joseph Biden served on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee long before it was stylish. Biden and Kerry were very tough on Bosnia. Moreover, as President Bush has convincingly demonstrated, a commander-in-chief can draw extensively on advisers without ceding control. To counter the aura of Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice, the Democrats should create a kitchen cabinet of those in their own ranks—Richard Holbrooke, General Wesley Clark, and Sam Nunn to name a few—who have demonstrated comparable gravitas on security issues.

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### THIS TIME WITH FEELING

In translating what worked as a foreign policy profile in the past into a political strategy for the present, the Democrats must keep their audience in mind. Although the public is alert to terrorism and Iraq, its understanding of international policy matters overall remains low. President Bush's plainspoken, everyman quality is a political asset that Democratic standard-bearers should learn from, replacing their sometimes professorial or vague pronouncements with something more earthy

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*The Democrats owe the public a genuine debate.*

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and passionate. FDR's specialty was homespun analogies; he likened lend lease to a man offering a garden hose to a neighbor whose house was on fire. In a similar vein, even the aristocratic President George H.W. Bush summoned a common touch in announcing

the U.S. attack on Iraq in 1991 when he quoted from talks with soldiers in the field, showing care and engagement that helped rally Americans to a remote conflict.

The Democrats need to overcome their understandable distaste for simplification to devise metaphors, parables, and stories that bring their positions to life. John Kerry's memories of a childhood walk on the Normandy beach are a start. He and other combat veterans can draw effectively on wartime experiences. During the campaign, Democratic candidates should take time out from the forced march between battleground states to visit actual battlegrounds and troop contingents abroad. The experiences and emotions they recount will imbue their rhetoric with an immediacy and human touch that cannot be faked. This is, of course, equally true of domestic issues, and was no small part of Bill Clinton's political genius.

### HERDING CONGRESS

The Democrats' success will hinge not only on finding a policy and language that bespeak resolve, but also on something that has not come naturally to them of late: being unified and unequivocal. In the 2000 campaign, team Bush did not lie awake at night over their party's weakness on health care, Social Security, education, and other core Democratic issues. Instead, they simply asserted themselves to be the party of education and Medicare and, despite the evidence, many Americans believed them.

The Democrats need to muster the same discipline and unflinching self-confidence on foreign policy. Nothing will undercut the party's image like a sharp divide on a key congressional foreign policy vote near election time. Most members of Congress are poorly staffed on foreign policy subjects and pay them scant attention. Congressional leaders including Tom Daschle and Nancy Pelosi must redefine their roles to include educating, leading, and pressing hard for unity.

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They should be held accountable for identifying trouble spots in advance, and working out backroom bargains that keep the seams from showing.

### ARGUING THE ALTERNATIVE: THE DEMOCRATIC CRITIQUE

Self-confidence, discipline, and artful phrases, of course, won't substitute for substance and specifics. The Democrats need both a sharp, persistent critique of the Bush administration and a platform of their own. This is the task that daunts; with Bush's apparent successes in the War on Terrorism and a UN resolution on Iraq, some Democrats secretly fear that they do not have much to say. But a look through the Op-Ed pages or chat with a Democratic foreign policy expert quickly reveals that the partisan gulf is wide. The Democrats need to fault the administration not for its resolve or aggressiveness—which the public admires—but for failure to combine diplomatic smarts, a long-term perspective, and a set of ideals that attracts the respect of the world. The rudiments of this critique are already in place, provided the Democrats are ready to stop pulling their punches.

### NEEDLESSLY ANTAGONIZING ALLIES

Although he proclaims himself “a uniter, not a divider,” much of the world views Bush's stance as the most divisive and unpopular American foreign policy in recent memory. The American public can relate to the distastefulness of someone with power who, rather than behaving in a way that commands respect and loyalty, throws around his weight, makes demands, refuses to listen, circumvents established systems, and ignores the priorities of others. That's every American's nightmare parent, older sibling, boss, teacher, or committee chairman. But it's not enough to point out that policies like Bush's preemption doctrine are predicated on arrogant notions of American exceptionalism. Democrats need to give tangible examples of the backlash Bush's blinkered approach has elicited.

Iraq offers a good example of how the Bush bluster backfires. Though the UN provided an effective forum for coalition building against Iraq in 1990, ten years later an impatient and trigger-happy George W. moved to sidestep the organization. Furious at seeing the international community scorned, those who should have been our closest allies closed ranks in calling us to task. Russia, Europe, the Arab States, Mexico, Australia, and others pledged to support action in Iraq only under UN, rather than U.S., auspices. While Secretary of State Colin Powell is credited with having steered the administration toward the Security Council, it was

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the international chorus that made that course unavoidable. Of note, while Democrats like Holbrooke, Biden, Kerry, Senator John Edwards, Senator Joseph Lieberman, Congressman Richard Gephardt, and others had all pushed Bush toward the UN, the administration claimed all the credit for the decision.

The ill consequences of Bush's initial approach did not end once the U.S. was forced to the bargaining table. When Bush got what he wanted from the UN, his tone was impatient and cocky; if the UN did not give him what he wanted, it was worthless. Bush's petulance put up the backs of those sitting in the Security Council chairs, stiffening their resolve not to give the U.S. everything it asked. Having done none of the careful preparatory work to smooth passage of a controversial resolution, the administration boasted publicly that countries like Mexico would back us, only to watch them side with France on key points. Protracted infighting left the administration saddled with a timetable not of its choosing, raising the possibility that a potential attack would have to take place under the blazing Iraqi summer sun. Further, because they now perceive the U.S. as salivating for war, other countries are waiting for America to try to bend the rules in evaluating Iraqi compliance with the inspectors. They in turn have vowed to rein us in, risking further squabbles and delays.

It did not have to be this way, Democrats can explain. During the 2000 campaign, Bush cited the perils of U.S. arrogance and called for humility. But in practice the cowboy has ridden roughshod over the conciliator. If the U.S. had led the way into the UN, it could have gotten terms and a timeline suiting its needs. With

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the threat of unilateral action whispered, rather than shouted, other countries would have gotten the point without feeling compelled to counter the saber rattling. Apart from being wrong, Democrats must point out that Bush's approach left America weakened. Although the administration spun it as a victory, the world viewed the UN deal as an example of successfully forcing concessions from the bully. After it passed, President Vicente Fox of Mexico and President Jacques

Chirac of France held a press conference smugly denouncing U.S. unilateralism. Our allies' new suspiciousness of American designs will heighten the risks faced by our armed forces and may well add to the costs and duration of a potential war.

#### **THE ADMINISTRATION'S FAILURE TO FINISH WHAT IT HAS STARTED**

Despite professed dedication to the War on Terrorism, the administration has failed to demonstrate the commitment and staying power to finish the job.

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Afghanistan offers the most glaring example. The current Bush administration concedes that previous presidents erred when, after the Soviet defeat, the U.S. turned its sights to new Cold War battlefields rather than helping to stabilize Afghanistan. The resulting chaos culminated in a Taliban-run breeding ground for al-Qaeda.

Less than a year after overthrowing the Taliban, the U.S. is already showing signs of turning its back once again. The administration admits it will fall short of commitments to train and equip that country's nascent local security force. Despite clear signs of chaos including attacks on the government and al-Qaeda sightings, the international force in the country is limited to Kabul, constrained by costs. Rather than expanding it, the U.S. proposed extra protection only for its own troops and aid workers. Promised help to rebuild roads, pay teachers, establish a police force, and kick-start an Afghan economy has not arrived. Rather than finishing the job of putting Afghanistan on stable footing, the U.S. has turned its sights to Iraq.

While it is less sexy than a military onslaught on the Taliban, the U.S. should not forsake the painstaking, long-term campaigns needed to restore "failed states"—which, after all, it identifies as a root cause of terrorism. The idea that this dirty work can be sloughed off on the UN or other inferior forces is myopic and risks undoing the hard-fought achievements of U.S. military operations. If our armed interventions are to be worth the effort, expense, and danger, we must be prepared to see them through.

The flight from Afghanistan is not an isolated incident. In 1991, the first Bush administration retreated from the Gulf in haste, turning its back on the Kurds and Shi'a whom they had encouraged to revolt against Saddam. Ten years later these groups' lingering sense of betrayal complicates Bush junior's task in Iraq. Donald Rumsfeld has proposed cutting off Pentagon support for the fragile peace in Bosnia and Kosovo. Though these missions have been successful, safe, and no drain on the budget, Rumsfeld is ready to jilt our allies and the vulnerable populations we intervened to save. There are early signals that the administration may be primed for the same mistake in Iraq. Despite grandiloquent rhetoric about Iraq's becoming a model for democracy in the Arab world, the administration shows no appetite for the intensive involvement and expense necessary to achieve this naively ambitious goal. Though the Republicans have more than once witnessed their own unfinished business coming back to haunt the United States in devastating ways, the administration has yet to learn its lesson.

### LOST PRINCIPLES

In facing down the terrorist threat, the administration has more than once invoked FDR's leadership after the attack on Pearl Harbor and JFK's handling of

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the Cuban missile crisis. In fact, these examples underscore precisely what Bush is doing wrong. When FDR and JFK faced threats to American security, they agonized over how to counter these menaces while maintaining America's commitment to legitimacy in the use of force. Thus, Roosevelt refrained from preemptive assaults on Germany and Japan, and Kennedy chose to blockade rather than attack. Both saw that by showing restraint, they would render an ultimate decision to use force, should it be necessary, more legitimate, more widely supported, and therefore more effective. In neither case did the President kowtow to international demands, nor sacrifice American interests to abstract concepts of international law. FDR and JFK both carefully balanced the two imperatives with policies that both defended America's security and reinforced its role as exemplar of responsible global leadership. By contrast, when it ignored norms of legitimacy—for example at the Bay of Pigs—the U.S. has wound up embarrassed, its power and influence undermined.

Many members of this administration seem to think, somewhat counter-intuitively, that legitimacy negates rather than enhances power. It uses the UN only when forced to, avoids treaties wherever possible, and takes preemptive action when it deems it necessary. The Democrats need to explain how this reckless and arrogant approach to the responsibilities of a superpower risks setting the United

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States up for a fall. While the administration claims to be trying to block the rise of a "peer competitor," its actions invite others—like a unified Europe or fast-growing China—to challenge U.S. supremacy. Europe is already trying to displace U.S. leadership on trade, pointing out that America's actions don't match its rhetoric. China is quietly deepening

ties within the developing world, building coalitions of support at the UN that shield them from criticism and put the U.S. on the defensive. While the American military is presently uncontested, when it comes to diplomatic maneuvering, alliances, and economic clout, America's upper hand is less decisive. We leave ourselves more vulnerable to these forms of brinkmanship by failing to shore up our military strength with the legitimacy, respect, and approval that have buttressed American power for most of the last century.

Finally and, perhaps, most seriously, the current administration can be faulted for squandering the most potent, if intangible, component of American power: our position as a beacon of compassion and high principle to ordinary people worldwide. America's commitment to freedom and democracy across the globe gave encouragement to those who resisted Hitler, rejected colonial rule, and threw off the Soviet Union. Even Stalin acknowledged this influence as a tangible and irreplaceable source of power, citing America's ability to give hope to Nazi

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victims as an indispensable allied war weapon. Now the idea of a city on the hill is being replaced by a fortress America with closed borders and a ruthless approach to tackling threats from within. In 19 of 27 countries polled in December 2002, favorable opinions of the U.S. had declined by anywhere from four to 22 percent since 2000.<sup>4</sup> Democrats need to point out that this loss of moral authority amounts to a loss of influence and power.

### THE VISION THING

To succeed, a Democratic foreign policy vision must recast and build on the critique with a few simple messages:

- **Unswerving dedication to the War on Terrorism and maintenance of American security.** In their haste to proffer an alternative, Democrats should not overlook the issues that are uppermost in the public mind. When it comes to the War on Terrorism and military preparedness, along with pointed criticism of the administration's means, the Democrats must express unequivocal support for its intended ends, stressing that their commitment is born not of "me-too" opportunism, but from the party's own long tradition of muscular intervention and global leadership.
- **Taking a long view on steps to strengthen America's security and superpower status.** The Democrats should pair the current emphasis on the War on Terrorism with far-sighted measures to keep today's problems from resurfacing. Even before entering the Second World War, FDR had thought through how to apply the lessons of Versailles to secure post-war peace. In implementing the Marshall Plan, FDR and Truman looked long past their own terms in office to ensure that the benefits of a hard-fought victory endured for future generations. Calls by John Kerry and others for a full court press toward energy independence fit this vision. So does a commitment to see through efforts to mend failed states long after the fighting has stopped. An aggressive effort to fully account for "loose nukes" should likewise be seen as a duty that the last Cold War generation owes to its successors.
- **Restoring the Beacon.** The Democrats should pledge to restore the United States' cherished position as worldwide standard-bearer of democratic ideals, respect for the rule of law, and concern for the oppressed. Along with

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military and economic power, this third-leg of America's superpower status helps multiply U.S. influence worldwide. To reassert it, the U.S. must first get its own house in order, rolling back the incursions on due process that have been tolerated in the name of the War on Terrorism. The Democrats should pledge to reverse the pattern of rejecting wholesale international organizations and treaties, promising instead to use these organs and instruments to U.S. advantage. More than 50 years ago FDR proved that inter-

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national organizations could form part of a hard-headed security strategy. While some instruments need reform, rather than allowing other countries to shape these entities to suit their own purposes, the U.S. will lead such efforts, ensuring that its goals and ideals hold sway. In doing so, America will remind the world why, for most of the last 50 years, it has viewed U.S. global leadership as preferable to the alternatives. As an essential part of this vision, Democrats need to focus attention on the so-called "soft issues"—

AIDS and other global health matters, human rights, refugee protection, the environment, and poverty. We cannot expect other countries to share our obsession with terrorism while we ignore the threats that hit them closest to home. When their attention is drawn to these problems, most Americans can appreciate how important they are, and recognize that U.S. leadership in these areas is critical to our global stature and is the only way many of these thorny issues will ever get properly addressed.

With foreign policy back on the marquis, the Democrats face the intimidating prospect of having to reinvent themselves with a personae every bit as tough as the Republicans', only smarter, more responsible, and more in keeping with America's tradition of leadership by example. If they succeed, the party will step into the spotlight for what could be the performance of the next political era. If they fail, they will be stuck waiting in the wings until domestic drama retakes center stage. ■

#### NOTES

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