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OPINION

Democrats Are Still Weak on Security

By KARL ROVE
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One out of five is not a majority. Democrats should keep that simple fact of political life in mind as they pursue the White House.

For a party whose presidential candidates pledge they'll remove U.S. troops from Iraq immediately upon taking office -- without regard to conditions on the ground or the consequences to America's security -- a late February Gallup Poll was bad news. The Obama/Clinton vow to pull out of Iraq immediately appears to be the position of less than one-fifth of the voters.



David Gothard

Only 18% of those surveyed by Gallup agreed U.S. troops should be withdrawn "on a timetable as soon as possible." And only 20% felt the surge was making things worse in Iraq. Twice as many respondents felt the surge was making conditions better.

It gets worse for Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama. Nearly two out of every three Americans surveyed (65%) believe "the United States has an obligation to establish a reasonable level of stability and security in Iraq before withdrawing all of its troops." The reason is self-interest. Almost the same number of Americans (63%) believe al Qaeda "would be more likely to use Iraq as a base for its terrorist operations" if the U.S. withdraws.

Just a year ago it was almost universally accepted that Iraq would wreck the GOP chances in November. Now the issue may pose a threat to the Democratic efforts to gain power. For while the American people are acknowledging the positive impact of the surge, Democratic leaders are not.

In September, Mrs. Clinton told Gen. David Petraeus "the reports that you provide to us really require the willing suspension of disbelief." This week, she said "we'll be right back at square one" in Iraq by this summer.

In December, Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid refused to admit progress, arguing, "The surge hasn't accomplished its goals." He said a month earlier there was "no progress being made in Iraq" and "it is not getting better, it is getting worse."

Asked by CNN's Wolf Blitzer on Feb. 9 if she was worried that the gains of the last year might be lost, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi shot back: "There haven't been gains . . . This is a failure." Carl Levin, the Democratic chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee told the Associated Press the same month that the surge "has failed."

This passionate, persistent unwillingness to admit what more and more Americans are coming to believe is true about Iraq's changing situation puts Democrats in dangerous political territory. For one thing, they increasingly appear out of touch with reality, a charge they made with some success at the administration's expense before the surge began changing conditions in Iraq.

For another, Democrats appear to have an ideological investment in things going badly in Iraq. They seem upset and prickly when asked to comment on the progress America is making. It's hard to see how Democrats can build a majority if their position on what they claim is one of the campaign's central issues is shared by less than a fifth of the electorate. They'd be better off arguing success allows America to accelerate the return of our troops rather than appear to deny the progress those troops are making.

There are more problems for Democrats on national security. Led by Ms. Pelosi, House Democrats are digging their party into even deeper difficulty by holding up the bipartisan Senate Protect American Act reauthorization. The reason? House Democrats want personal injury lawyers to be able to sue telecommunications companies for having the audacity to cooperate with the government in monitoring terrorist communications after 9/11.

It appears that in Ms. Pelosi's warped world, the monetary needs of the Democratic Party's most generous financial benefactors take precedence over the nation's security. How else could one rationally explain her opposition? Sens. Clinton and Obama, both of whom opposed the bipartisan Senate reauthorization bill, have joined in her approach.

That is a mistake, both on the merits and politically. For example, a question added to a recently conducted, private national poll introduced the issue by saying "Congress is now debating extending legislation called the Protect America Act, which allows U.S. intelligence agencies to monitor communications of foreign terrorists. Part of the debate is about protecting telephone companies or leaving them open to lawsuits."

It then described two positions, drawing on public statements by those involved in the issue. One position is that of Director of National Intelligence Mike McConnell and Attorney General Michael Mukasey, who "say it is critical that Congress act as soon as possible to reauthorize the Protect America Act. They said we have already lost intelligence information because Congress let it expire, it has had negative consequences for our national security and degraded our intelligence capability."

The other position is that of "Democrat Congressional leaders Harry Reid and Nancy Pelosi," who say "this is a manufactured political crisis, the intelligence community already has the tools that they need, and private companies should not be granted protection from being sued when they cooperate with the government."

When asked whom they agree with, Americans side with Messrs. McConnell and Mukasey over Mr. Reid and Ms. Pelosi by a 54%-37% margin. And this is without describing why House Democrats are fighting this battle: campaign donations from wealthy trial lawyers. The more this issue is discussed, the more Americans will come to see Democrats have put their campaign donors -- an unsavory group of lawyers, some of whom have been in the headlines recently with guilty pleas in fraud and bribery attempts -- above the country's security.

Elections are rarely decided over just one issue; to win, candidates don't need to have a majority of Americans agreeing with them on every big issue. But when it comes to choosing a president, Americans take seriously the candidates' views and experience on national security. Voters instinctively understand a president's principal constitutional responsibility is protecting the country.

The Democrats have two candidates with less national security experience and fewer credentials than the presumptive Republican nominee, Sen. John McCain. And they are compounding these difficulties with positions on Iraq and terrorist surveillance that are shared by a shrinking minority of Americans.

Mr. Rove is a former senior adviser and deputy chief of staff to President George W. Bush.

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