

On terror, Dems should go after Bush from right

by Josh Marshall

As you know, the Republican National Committee (RNC) has just begun running a TV ad—first in Iowa and next in New Hampshire—that throws down the gauntlet for the upcoming presidential election.

Working with clips from the president's 2003 State of the Union address and weaving in zingers from the spinmeisters at the RNC, the ad delivers a simple message: Whatever mistakes he has made, President Bush is about fighting terrorists. Democrats aren't.

In three key chyroned messages to voters, the ad says . . .

“Some are now attacking the President for attacking the terrorists.”

And then . . .

“Some call for us to retreat, putting our national security in the hands of others.”

And finally . . .

“Tell them to support the President's policy of preemptive self-defense.”

Democrats are reacting to the RNC ad with a mixture of outrage and poorly concealed fear. They shouldn't be, because this is a line of attack that a strong, wily Democratic opponent could parry and turn to his advantage. This new line from the president also shows why—in a certain sense—an effective Democratic contender next year will want to—indeed, will have to—run to the president's right on the all-important issue of terrorism.

Allow me to explain.

The RNC ad kicks off with some classic Bush scare talk from the State of the Union address: “It would take one vial, one canister, one crate slipped into this country to bring a day of horror like none we have ever known.” Then the ad follows up with a palpable untruth, the line about how the president's critics are “attacking the President for attacking the terrorists.”

Let's be honest. No one is attacking the president for attacking terrorists.

Some of the Democratic candidates are attacking the president for going to war against Iraq. Others are attacking him for conducting the war and the subsequent occupation ineptly.

But none of them (and pretty much no Democrat anywhere) is criticizing the president for taking too tough a line against al Qaeda or any other terrorists.

The same goes for the last line of the ad: “Tell them to support the President's policy of preemptive self-defense.”

I haven't heard any Democrat say we shouldn't attack first anyone who is going to attack us. That's just common sense.

The key to this whole RNC ad is a premise that was never persuasive to start with and is now increasingly discredited: namely, that an attack on Iraq was an attack on the terrorists and that attacking Iraq would make it less likely that those terrorists would attack Americans with car bombs, planes, germs, chemicals or anything else.

We've seen in recent weeks that we're fighting a vicious insurgency inside Iraq. The president calls it the “central front” in the war on terror.

But the fact that people—who we're not even sure—are using terrorist tactics against our troops in Iraq isn't a sign of the wisdom of the president's policy. It's a sign of its failure.

Meanwhile, al Qaeda—or al Qaeda allied groups—is still able to mount terrorist attacks in Turkey, Saudi Arabia and other countries. To the extent that we haven't suffered another attack on American soil, that's almost certainly because we disrupted al Qaeda's base of operations in Afghanistan and because of law enforcement and intelligence work against their terrorist network, not because of anything we've done in Iraq.

In fact, quite the contrary.

We now know that the U.S. Central Command started cycling personnel out of Afghanistan while we were still in the hunt for Osama bin Laden and his top lieutenants to get ready for the invasion of Iraq. We know that a lot of our diplomatic capital with countries in the region is being expended on dealing with the Iraq issue rather than on assistance in the fight against al Qaeda. And of course we hear almost daily stories about gaps in homeland security—whether its airport screeners, port security, or bio-weapons sensors—which could easily be funded with the literally hundreds of billions of dollars we've already spent on a mix of war fighting and reconstruction in Iraq.

These arguments aren't made for 30-second TV spots or quick rejoinders in presidential debates, but a summary of them easily can be: The president talks a good game on taking the fight to the terrorists. But after a good start in Afghanistan, he got bored with attacking al Qaeda and attacked Iraq instead.

Most voters now realize that the two things are basically unrelated. And to the extent they are related our errand in Iraq has exacerbated our problem with terrorism, not alleviated it.

The Democrats can play defense and complain that the president is questioning their patriotism, or they can take the offense and show that he has failed by the very standards he sets for himself.

A Democrat who can do the latter will be a formidable challenger.