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Dems must define Iraq victory

By Peter Charles Choharis

Peter Charles Choharis served as the executive director of the 2004 Democratic Platform Committee. He is a visiting scholar at George Washington University Law School and practices international law in Washington, D.C.

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Barely one in three Americans approve of President Bush's handling of the Iraq war, according to the latest Newsweek poll. But instead of offering their own solutions, Democrats seem content merely to criticize the administration.

To regain voters' trust on national security, Democrats must adopt a different strategy: winning the war. To prevail in the 2006 congressional elections and beyond, Democrats must establish a clear and realistic definition of success in Iraq — and a strategy to achieve it.

To understand why, consider the following.

Without a consensus on what constitutes success, the administration will be free to declare victory no matter what happens. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld has defined "success" as an Iraq that will not aid extremists, attempt to assassinate U.S. presidents, invade its neighbors or use chemical weapons. By that definition, given before a Senate committee in June, U.S. troops could leave tomorrow.

In 2004, Democrats agreed that, even if the war was a mistake, the U.S. must do what it takes to win. Today, the party shows signs of a split. Fifty House members recently formed the Out of Iraq Congressional Caucus, calling for a troop withdrawal, as has Democratic Sen. Russell D. Feingold of Wisconsin. If Democrats divide over Iraq the way they did over Vietnam in 1968, with some favoring pulling out and others opposing it as dangerous to national security, a more united Republican base will again prevail in elections.

Politically, a Republican strategy of declaring victory and withdrawing troops could be popular. But a Democratic strategy of declaring defeat and removing troops will never be, as the 1972 election showed. And fairly or not, the 2004 race demonstrated that

American voters will choose wrong but strong over right but unclear.

Beyond stopping the cut-and-run strategy brewing in the House, Democratic leaders must define a meaningful victory as 1) a unified, stable Iraq with 2) a non-theocratic democracy that protects minority and women's rights and 3) a functioning economy. If the constitutional process crumbles and these goals prove impossible, the U.S. will need enough troops to stop a partition from becoming a bloodbath and jihadists and radical clerics from grabbing power. The key, then, remains security.

Democratic Sens. Joseph Biden of Delaware and John Kerry of Massachusetts have offered proposals such as deploying Iraq's militias and introducing NATO troops. But militias are neither loyal nor answerable to government authorities. And Germany would never agree to send NATO troops with general elections scheduled for this year.

While Democrats admonish Bush to come clean about the task ahead, they have not shown the political courage to do what is necessary: call for more American troops. Although 135,000 U.S. troops are stationed in Iraq, at most only 60,000 American and coalition troops, along with a much smaller number of Iraqi soldiers, are available for combat. Democrats should urge the U.S. to increase combat forces by up to 20,000 troops for the period necessary to elect and secure a permanent government. This would approximate the force during successful interim elections in January. More troops can stop jihadists from infiltrating Iraq and prevent enemy fighters from retaking territory, as in Fallouja.

The administration argues that newly trained Iraqis should fill this role. But only a fraction of the 107 Iraqi battalions being trained can operate independent of American support. We cannot afford to wait. Rumsfeld announced last week that he will boost troop strength temporarily to about 160,000, mostly by juggling troop rotations. But those levels will fall again after Iraqi elections in December — too soon to secure the new government.

Opponents claim that a larger U.S. presence would fuel anti-Americanism. Yet higher troop levels late last year did not spark an anti-U.S. backlash. Also, most new troops would deploy along sparsely populated borders.

Bush has said he will send more troops if U.S. military authorities ask. Widespread press reports confirm that ground commanders privately say they need more. Yet no Democratic leader currently supports increasing troops. Like the president, Democrats fear that increasing troop levels could be politically costly, even though an August CBS poll found Americans divided on the issue.

Besides, these numbers reflect the administration's failure to identify a convincing exit strategy or even a change in course. Democrats have a tremendous opportunity — as FDR and JFK did — to appeal to service and sacrifice to help the nation achieve long-term security. Democrats must stop following the polls and start assuming leadership on national security. Sixty percent of Democrats think that the Iraq war has increased the

threat of terrorism against the United States, according to the CBS poll. They may be right, but losing the war will definitely hurt our security.

Unless Democrats demonstrate the political courage and resolution to win a war, rather than just criticize it, they will remain a minority party no matter what the polls show.