

Subscribe to
SALON PREMIUM



Get a year subscription to
UTNE READER *too!*

To print this page, select "Print" from the File menu of your browser



The wishy-washy strategy

Many leading Democrats can't seem to make up their minds on Iraq. And some insiders suggest that might be on purpose.

By Jake Tapper



Feb. 26, 2003 | WASHINGTON -- The Feb. 27 New York Times headline says it all: "Political Memo: Bush's War Success Confers an Aura of Invincibility."

Except that this headline was from 1991.

Given the actual results of the 1992 election, claims that George H.W. Bush was "close to unbeatable" -- made at the time by the president of the Association of State

Democratic Chairs -- seem to illustrate the tired but true cliché that one year is a lifetime in politics.

Still, the senior Bush's image as conquering hero, however ephemeral, illustrates one of the many dilemmas faced by Democrats today, who largely have decided that it's safer to be with George W. Bush than against him. "Everybody would prefer to have a multination force go in," Terry McAuliffe, Democratic National Committee chairman, told Salon last week, "but if the president decides that it's critical for our society that we do it alone, unilaterally, then that's his decision and we'll support the president."

This all creates a dilemma for Democrats -- particularly the Democratic presidential candidates who were trying to court the party faithful at a DNC conference last weekend. Democratic primary voters, for one, are far more antiwar than the electorate as a whole. The pending war creates tensions not only between Democratic primary voters and the swing voters Democrats need in order to defeat President George W. Bush in 2004, but also between important constituencies within the party. So while some Democrats seem to be scrambling to take a side on the Iraq issue -- voting for the Iraq war resolution last October but slamming the way the Bush administration is threatening to use it, for example -- they might actually know what they're doing.

Usually wishy-washiness is regarded as a negative; with this war it may actually be smart politics.

Democratic officials hope that none of this will mean much come Election Day, of course. "By the time we get to the 2004 election we're going to be dealing with the aftermath of Iraq; it's not going to be what people are going to go vote on," McAuliffe says. "They're going to vote on the total picture of George Bush, both on foreign policy and domestic." But Harold Ickes Jr., former deputy chief of staff for President Clinton, disagrees that the issue will go away soon. "There's no bigger issue than war and peace," he told Salon. "It will trump everything. It will even trump the economy. This is a very profound issue being debated in the country. People are going to die and everybody knows that. This is not going to be an easy enterprise."

Democrats oppose the war far more than either Republicans or Independents or the nation as a

Democrats oppose the war far more than either Republicans or Independents, or the nation as a whole. According to a CBS News poll conducted on Feb. 5 and 6, when asked if they approve or disapprove of the U.S. taking military action against Iraq to try to remove Saddam from power, the nation as a whole supported the idea 70 percent to 21 percent. Republicans supported it strongly, 88 percent to 6 percent, and Independents supported it fairly strongly as well, 70 percent to 20 percent. In contrast, Democrats supported it 53 percent to 36 percent. The numbers are even more starkly antiwar in the first state where votes will be counted. A Zogby poll from January of likely Democratic voters in next year's Iowa caucus indicated substantial support -- 84 percent to 13 percent -- for a candidate who believes that before the U.S. takes any military action against Iraq it needs more evidence, more inspections, and more international support over a candidate who urges action now.

So the Democratic candidates have an immediate problem. And it was excitedly highlighted by Public Opinion Strategies, the firm of top Republican pollster Bill McInturff, less than a week before the DNC meeting. The basic premise is that Democratic primary voters are so liberal on the issue of Iraq, it seems unlikely that any candidate could win that party's nomination without alienating him- or herself from the swing voters he or she would need during the general election. Swing voters support having U.S. forces take military action to force Saddam Hussein from power 63 percent to 30 percent, while "core Democrats" -- liberals representing more than a third of those very likely to vote in the primary -- oppose it 43 percent to 51 percent.

McInturff has called these core Democrats "wacko," for ascribing motives other than national security to the president's case for military action -- oil, filial pride, a distraction from the economy and the seemingly futile search for Osama bin Laden. While acknowledging that Democratic primary voters -- particularly Iowa caucus attendees -- are more liberal and antiwar than voters as a whole, several Democratic consultants suggested that McInturff's poll was overstated and might even have been an attempt to spook their candidates. Charlie Cook, of the nonpartisan Cook Political Report, suggests that "the primary question Bill bases his analysis on is not a great question because it doesn't capture the public's nuances on the issue of Iraq." That said, Cook agrees that it effectively shows "how Democratic primary voters are different from other people just as Republican primary voters and caucus attendees do not in any way look like America either. That's what party bases are all about."

Nonetheless, these tensions played out at last week's DNC get-together, where the seven presidential candidates who spoke ran the political gamut on the pending war. There were the peaceniks like Rep. Dennis Kucinich, D-Ohio, the Rev. Al Sharpton, and former Sen. Carol Moseley-Braun. There was the feisty former governor of Vermont, [Howard Dean](#), who has spoken in favor of a war with multilateral United Nations support but opposed it on all other grounds. There was a cautious hawk, Sen. John Edwards, D-N.C., who supported the war but criticized the president's approach to it. (Kerry, recuperating from [prostate surgery](#), seems to hold a similar stance.) And lastly, there were the pro-war Democrats, Sen. Joe Lieberman, D-Conn., and Rep. Richard Gephardt, D-Mo.

After Gephardt declared that he was "proud that I wrote the resolution" enabling the president to go to war, one Democrat in the audience yelled, "Shame!"

Regardless of the futility of his candidacy, Kucinich seemed to speak for a majority of conference attendees when he decried the war as "wrong," and said it would put "the lives of innocent people at risk" and "make the entire world less safe."

"From this meeting we will leave a party either divided by war or united in a sense of peace," the former mayor of Cleveland said on Saturday.

The day before, Dean sought to exploit those very divisions in his buzzy stemwinder of a speech -- which seemed to rouse the most audience applause -- when he began by angrily asking, "What I want to know is why in the world the Democratic Party leadership is supporting the president's unilateral attack on Iraq!" This was no surprise; Dean has made a point of criticizing congressional Democrats for supporting that resolution, and for trying to copy the president in myriad other ways -- rallying around the Leave No Child Behind education act, offering a smaller but still sizable tax cut. Moreover, Dean implicitly slams Edwards and Kerry -- arguably the two front-runners -- for voting for the war resolution but allegedly speaking to activist groups as if they hadn't.

But Dean is not immune to questions of shifting positions himself; Associated Press White House reporter Dan Fournier reported that in an interview, Dean "said he would not support sending U.S.

reporter Ron Fournier reported that in an interview Dean said he would not support sending U.S. troops to Iraq unless the United Nations specifically approves the move and backs it with action of its own. 'They have to send troops,' he said" last Friday. This seemed to contradict what Dean told Salon the week before, when he stated that if the United Nations ultimately didn't follow through on Resolution 1441's demand that Hussein disarm, he would have the U.S. issue Iraq a 60-day deadline after which he would support unilateral action.

Joe Trippi, campaign advisor for Dean, said that this was a matter of tenses -- that Dean doesn't support going into Iraq *right now* without U.N. approval. Trippi underlined that even if the U.N. ultimately didn't authorize force, Dean still wouldn't necessarily support a unilateral invasion unless he deemed Iraq an imminent threat, which he currently doesn't.

More glaringly muddled, of course, is Kerry. Last December on NBC's "Meet the Press," Kerry stated that he would "not support the president to proceed unilaterally" on Iraq, despite the fact that on Oct. 11 he voted in support of a war resolution that allows the president to do just that.

As befits the two men's personalities, Edwards seems to have less of an internal struggle going on, though his is not a dissimilar position. "I know a lot of you here don't agree with me on this, but I do believe Saddam Hussein must be disarmed," Edwards told the DNC members on Saturday, acknowledging that he was one of the 27 Democrats who supported the Iraq resolution. In an October speech at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, Edwards said that on Iraq, members of the Bush administration "seem determined to act alone for the sake of acting alone" and referred to its attitude as "arrogance without purpose."

For all this criticism of Bush going it alone, [the Iraq resolution](#) does give him that right, stating: "The president is authorized to use the Armed Forces of the United States as he determines to be necessary and appropriate in order to 1) defend the national security of the United States against the continuing threat posed by Iraq; and 2) enforce all relevant United Nations Security Council Resolutions regarding Iraq." It is essentially, as Sen. Robert Byrd, D-W.V., described it, "a blank check."

That Edwards and Kerry have taken this "yes, but" position actually has impressed McInturff -- for political, if not strategic, reasons. "It looks to me like those candidates are trying to deal with this tension," he said. More unequivocal war supporters, "Gephardt and Lieberman could have very difficult trouble" in the primaries.

Which may be part of the reason why, in their Friday speeches to the DNC, Lieberman slammed Bush's "go-it-alone" foreign policy and Gephardt called it "bullying."

A more charitable view of all this is that Democrats are conflicted just like the people they represent. "My reading of the polls is that a majority of Americans now think he ought to disarm or be disarmed," says Ickes. "They would like to have it be done multilaterally. But I think if push comes to shove they're prepared to have us go it alone. And I think that's where damn near every candidate is."

Ickes may have a point. When the questions are more nuanced and get into the difficult gray areas of foreign policy, it can be the Republican voters who can seem out of step. A Los Angeles Times poll conducted Feb. 7 and 8 indicated that, when asked if "the United States should take military action against Iraq only if that military action has the support of the United Nations Security Council," 62 percent of those polled in general agreed and 37 percent disagreed. Broken down, 78 percent of Democrats and 64 percent of Independents agreed that the U.S. should take military action only with U.N. backing, with 22 percent of Democrats and 35 percent of Independents disagreeing. Conversely, 32 percent of Republicans said yes to the war only with U.N. support while 65 percent said no to that notion.

With all these devilish details, others see a certain wisdom -- both political and in terms of policy -- in not being locked down in full support or full opposition. "Conflict in Iraq and the issue of whether or not to use force in Iraq is an unfolding situation, a moving target," says Mike Feldman, a former advisor to Vice President Al Gore. "As a U.S. senator or announced presidential candidate, you're constantly evaluating a changing set of circumstances, and I don't think it's prudent to be rigid since events are unfolding every step of the way."

Former Gore campaign manager Donna Brazile also says that Dean's comparatively clear position on

Former Gore campaign manager Donna Brazile also says that Dean's comparatively clear position on the war is "why [he] has so much buzz, because he can say that he doesn't speak in Washington-speak, he doesn't speak out of both sides of his mouth." That said, she adds, "It's a mistake for Democrats to just speak to primary audiences." Kerry and Edwards will be able to "come right back at Dean and say he has no experience with these issues and there's a reason they have what I would call an ambiguous position on Iraq."

A senior advisor to a Democratic rival of Kerry and Edwards doubts that polling has had any effect on their war messages, but believes that the phenomenon comes from other political pressures. "I think that the ambivalent positions these guys have on Iraq is more a reaction to pressure from activists than any polling information or data," the advisor says. "Many of the activists are antiwar and that's causing people to slightly change their rhetoric depending on the audience." That will change as the campaign progresses and a wider, "more representative" swath of Democrats starts paying attention, but "the activists who tend to be the most engaged at this point tend to be the most liberal. So those campaigns are reacting to the pressure."

But there's also a distinct pressure among Democratic funders to go the other way. A disproportionate percentage of the Democratic Party's individual donor base is made up of two groups: trial lawyers and Jews. And if Jewish American voters are accurately represented by the pro-Israel lobbying groups in Washington, many seem to support the war. "I can't find anybody who's very active in the pro-Israel community who isn't very supportive of the war," says Cook. "The pro-Israel community is very, very supportive of this war. They see Saddam Hussein as a real and immediate threat to Israel," Cook says. "So the Democratic candidates, who have dovish tendencies to begin with, are stuck between an important antiwar constituency in the party and an equally important part that's pro-war." Thus, Cook says, many are "trying to fudge it down the middle."

Some of these Jews are thinking of Israel's security, some are hawkish in general. This same community, after all, supported U.S. military involvement in the Balkans in defense of Bosnian Muslims.

There is anecdotal evidence, however, that Jews are softening in their support of the war. Edwards has spoken of a recent fundraiser held on the Upper West Side of Manhattan where he was urged to allow the inspections more time to work.

And one Jewish Democratic member of Congress tells Salon that while early on "in order to appeal to some of the more conservative Jewish donors it was almost a prerequisite to be supportive of the president on Israel -- and by extension Iraq -- that may seem less and less like the smart play." This member, who supported the Iraq resolution, observed that "Jewish Democratic activists seem to be losing their stomach for this" because of the bad economy and weeks of indecision.

The only way that the Democrats seem to be trying to score points while sidestepping Iraq is by taking on the president on the war on terror, specifically on homeland security matters. "It is indefensible that the Bush administration has not made funding for first responders its top priority," House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., said to the DNC meeting. "Instead, it advised Americans to buy duct tape, plastic sheeting and bottled water."

"Duct tape" was indeed the punch line of the meeting. And many candidates cited the need to continue effectively fighting the war on terror as a reason to oppose military action against Iraq. Bush "has not given us a report on why he has not delivered bin Laden," Sharpton said. "I don't understand why our intelligence can tape conversations in Baghdad but can't find a man hiding in a cave in Afghanistan." He described bin Laden as "a man who comes out every two months with a new video. Bin Laden now has more videos than any rock star in Hollywood."

Criticizing the president on homeland security issues could prove effective. [Firefighters](#) are complaining that the White House and Congress didn't provide enough funding for their needs in a recent "first responders" bill, an issue that could be used against the president were there to be another terrorist attack. Edwards mentioned in his remarks that "after lobbying by chemical companies, the president canceled plans to improve security at chemical plants."

"There are increasing questions about the prosecution of the war on terrorism, which in fact is a clear and present danger to the United States." John... stating that the... subject

and present danger to the United States, Ickes says, noting that the threat Iraq poses is more subject to debate. "I think you're seeing increasing questions about how Bush is handling the war on terrorism."

"The tough thing about war is that it really is hard to be political, and that's sort of the box the Democrats are in," says a White House advisor. "It's very difficult to do anything but take a 'yeah, but' position."

About the writer

Jake Tapper is national correspondent for Salon.

Sound Off

Send us a [Letter to the Editor](#)

GO TO: [Salon.com](#) >> [News](#)

[Salon](#) | [Search](#) | [About Salon](#) | [Table Talk](#) | [Advertise in Salon](#) | [Investor Relations](#)

[News & Politics](#) | [Opinion](#) | [Tech & Business](#) | [Arts & Entertainment](#)
[Indie film](#) | [Books](#) | [Life](#) | [Sex](#) | [Comics](#) | [Audio](#) | [Dialogue](#)
[Letters](#) | [Columnists](#) | [Salon Gear](#)

Reproduction of material from any Salon pages without written permission is strictly prohibited

Copyright 2003 Salon.com

Salon, 22 4th Street, 16th Floor, San Francisco, CA 94103

Telephone 415 645-9200 | Fax 415 645-9204

[E-mail](#) | [Salon.com Privacy Policy](#) | [Terms of Service](#)