

*Plan of Attack***In a Risky Move, Kerry Shifts Focus to Iraq From Economy****As War Gets Messy, Democrat Challenges the President On Republican Turf****Bush Derides 'Mixed Signals'**By JACOB M. SCHLESINGER  
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WASHINGTON -- A month ago, Iraq was one of John Kerry's biggest political liabilities. His campaign had decided to play down the Iraq war to focus on issues that seemed more favorable to Democrats: the economy, jobs and voters' health-care anxieties.

Now all that has changed: Mr. Kerry sees Iraq and more broadly the war on terror as essential to his hopes for capturing the White House, having given three major speeches on the subject in the past three weeks.

**John Kerry**

This shift reflects a basic strategic decision within the Kerry campaign, encouraged by a coterie of communications advisers and pollsters he brought into his flagging campaign at the end of August. While polls continued to show voters relatively dissatisfied with the country's direction, Mr. Kerry was having trouble capitalizing on that sentiment and connecting with those voters.

During internal pre-Labor Day deliberations, the Kerry team urged him to move away from an earlier plan to focus largely on the economy during the campaign's final phase, calculating that ceding so prominent an issue as the war to the president was a likely path to defeat. Played right, they felt, the issue could actually shake up the race in their favor. They also persuaded him to shed his summer strategy of avoiding direct attacks on President Bush.

That advice was reinforced by reports from Mr. Kerry's security advisers, based on little-noticed public information, that while Iraq had receded from the news over the summer, the situation was deteriorating again.

Now the Kerry goals for the final weeks of the campaign start with shifting the media spotlight from Mr. Kerry's long and complex Senate record -- which Republicans have used to attack him as indecisive -- to Mr. Bush's own record as commander in chief. Mr. Kerry needs to move "from Kerry's flip-flops to Bush's flops," as one Democratic adviser puts it.

**POLL RESULTS**

<sup>1</sup> • [See the latest results](#)<sup>2</sup> from The Wall Street Journal/NBC News poll.

• [National Polls](#)<sup>3</sup>: A roundup of other recent polls



The Kerry camp will seek to sever the Iraq war in the public's mind from the broader war on terror, where polls give Mr. Bush an edge. And the Kerry camp now sees a need to refurbish the candidate's national-security credentials tarnished during the Swift Boat controversy. In sum, Mr. Kerry is attempting a delicate balance: energizing antiwar voters by criticizing the invasion, while comforting security-conscious voters by arguing he could better manage the fallout.

A Wall Street Journal/NBC News poll taken over the weekend showed Mr. Kerry nearly even with President Bush -- the president leads by 48% to 45%. A spate of surveys taken earlier in the month showed the incumbent with a commanding and widening lead. It isn't clear whether that difference reflects a trend in the campaign or simply differing methodologies.

The Journal/NBC survey of 1,006 registered voters shows that the Iraq issue is on a knife's edge right now. Americans tend to think the U.S. should have taken military action to remove Saddam Hussein. If that's the focus of the debate, it's a plus for Mr. Bush.


But increasing numbers think that expelling the Iraqi dictator wasn't worth the cost, and that there's no clear plan to pacify Iraq. Just 40% said that "removing Saddam Hussein from power ... was worth the number of U.S. military casualties and the financial cost," while 52% said it wasn't -- the biggest gap in the year since the question was first posed.

On separate questions asked for the first time: 52% of the respondents said the incursion "has been a poor use of money;" 53% said they weren't confident the war "will come to a successful conclusion;" and by 47% to 41%, those polled said they did not think the war "will be a victory for the United States."

**Big Risks**

Still, an Iraq-centric campaign carries big risks for the Massachusetts senator. In effect, Mr. Kerry is shifting public attention away from domestic issues where he has advantages and toward matters where, for all the public unease, the president enjoys the most trust. Mr. Bush enjoys a 26-point

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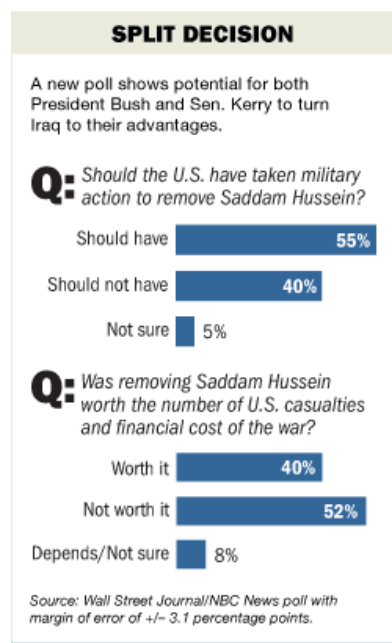
WSJ Political Editor John Harwood says both candidates have a chance to gain ground in the debates.

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lead on his ability to handle terrorism and homeland security. Mr. Kerry holds a 16-point lead over Mr. Bush on the question of which candidate could better handle the issue of jobs, and a 19-point lead on health care.



Republicans have countered Mr. Kerry's new line by suggesting it raises questions about his support for U.S. troops. "My opponent is sending mixed signals," Mr. Bush said during a Pennsylvania campaign stop yesterday. "You cannot expect our troops to continue to do the hard work if they hear mixed messages from Washington, D.C." As Mr. Kerry's motorcade pulled into a recent Denver rally, he was greeted with a sign that read "Support Terrorism, Vote Kerry."

Every time Mr. Kerry opens his mouth on Iraq, he also opens himself up to new charges of flip-flops. Yesterday, the Bush campaign countered the new Kerry Iraq offensive with a television ad showing Mr. Kerry windsurfing back and forth, while the announcer wonders "in which direction would John Kerry lead? Kerry voted for the Iraq war, opposed it, supported it, and now opposes it again." The tag: "John Kerry. Whichever way the wind blows."

Iraq has defined and bedeviled Mr. Kerry's candidacy, practically from the beginning.

In the months after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, Mr. Kerry was one of the first Democrats to realize the 2004 campaign would be waged largely over national security, territory Republicans had dominated for three decades. And he quickly positioned himself -- as a Vietnam veteran and a longstanding member of the Senate foreign-relations and intelligence committees -- as the Democrat best able to challenge Mr. Bush on that ground.

When President Bush asked Congress that October for the authority to wage war against Iraq, Mr. Kerry voted for the resolution, hoping to demonstrate his party's new resolve in the age of terror.

Yet before Mr. Kerry could take on Mr. Bush directly, he needed to win the Democratic Party nomination. The early rounds of that competition were dominated by former Vermont Gov. Howard Dean, who attacked Mr. Kerry for backing a conflict deeply unpopular with the Democratic base. Amid that challenge, Mr. Kerry nodded to the antiwar bloc by voting in the Senate against an \$87 billion funding bill for Iraq.

Then shortly before the primaries began, Saddam Hussein was captured, and Mr. Dean was put on the defensive. Mr. Kerry himself blasted his Democratic rival, saying "those who doubted whether Iraq or the world would be better off without Saddam Hussein ... don't have the judgment to be president or the credibility to be elected president."

Bush operatives, meanwhile, were closely monitoring Mr. Kerry's evolving statements on Iraq, filling their video archives with footage of every pro- and anti-war statement he made. And Republicans quickly decided that Iraq would be a pillar of their general-election campaign against the Democratic challenger.

The Iraq debate, as they sought to frame it, would be less about the merits of the war or its progress, and more about Iraq as a prism for judging Mr. Kerry's decision-making and his fitness to be commander in chief. The Republican National Committee produced a skillfully spliced video of Mr. Kerry, entirely in his own words, taking seemingly contradictory positions on the issue over a two-year period -- 10 different positions by one Republican count. The point: Mr. Kerry was dangerously indecisive. And as Vice President Cheney put it in a campaign rally shortly after the senator had locked up the nomination: "Indecision kills."

The seminal moment for the White House political strategy on Iraq came in early August, as the president was ramping up his campaign efforts after a quiet period during the Democratic convention. "There are some questions that a commander in chief needs to answer with a clear yes or no," he told a New Hampshire picnic rally. "My opponent hasn't answered the question of whether knowing what we know now, he would have supported going into Iraq."

The question itself implied the most important Iraq issue was the initial decision to invade, not how the war had been prosecuted. And Mr. Kerry would lose however he answered. If he said "yes," he would suggest little difference between himself and Mr. Bush. If he said "no," he would appear to be repudiating his vote for war authority, adding fuel to the "flip-flop" fire.

Three days later, during a campaign stop in the Grand Canyon, Mr. Kerry took the bait. "I'll answer it directly," he said. "Yes, I would have voted for the authority." And while he went on to criticize Mr. Bush's handling of the war, that got lost in the coverage. The next day in Florida, Mr. Bush pounced, saying: "My opponent ... now agrees it was the right decision to go to war in Iraq."

While the Kerry campaign protested that Mr. Bush was twisting his words, the follow-up explanations only made his position seem less clear. Combined with the simultaneous attacks by the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth, swing voters began to have doubts about Mr. Kerry's strength as a leader. Meanwhile, various Democratic polls showed Mr. Kerry's support wavering among the party's base -- with some moving to Ralph Nader -- as Mr. Kerry appeared to be pushing away the antiwar vote.

Having spent much of his late-July nominating convention in Boston on national security, Kerry advisers had originally hoped to make the fall campaign more about jobs and health care. "The plan was to establish his credentials as commander in chief in the convention speech, then pivot right to domestic issues," says one adviser. "The situation changed."

#### Time to Rethink

Iraq had become a metaphor for everything that had gone wrong with the Kerry campaign: a fuzzy message and a defensive posture against the incumbent. It was time to rethink the strategy.

So as the candidate huddled with his expanded set of advisers in late August and early September, they decided to make Iraq the metaphor for how they would try to turn the campaign around. Former Clinton aides -- such as onetime White House spokesmen Joe Lockhart and Mike McCurry, campaign strategist James Carville, and pollster Stan Greenberg -- advocated an edgier tone.

"Voters are frustrated with Bush's policies and priorities," Messrs. Greenberg and Carville wrote in a strategy memo. "Without that frustration and passion and definition, Democrats do not get the full power of the message."

So in post-Labor Day campaigning, Democrats decided to unleash a harsher criticism, woven around Mr. Kerry's new stump line that Mr. Bush's "most catastrophic decision of all was the decision he made about the war in Iraq."

Iraq also became the framework for Mr. Kerry to offer a more cohesive message about his laundry list of complaints about the Bush administration, including: its veracity (playing on questions about prewar intelligence and the rationale for war); its ideological bent (blaming "extremist" neoconservative hawks for pushing the war); its competence (saying officials hadn't planned enough for the occupation) and its fiscal policy (blaming the war's cost for inflating the deficit and forcing cuts in domestic programs).

Iraq even became the door to get to the desired economic messages. "Two hundred billion dollars -- that is what we are spending in Iraq because George Bush chose to go it alone," Mr. Kerry says in a new TV ad unveiled earlier this week. "Now the president tells us we don't have the resources to take care of health care and education here at home."

The changing situation in Iraq also fostered the changing Kerry strategy. Through the summer, bad news out of Iraq had largely disappeared from the headlines. Kerry aides privately complained that this wasn't necessarily because the news was better, but because they thought TV networks were paying less attention after the June turnover of sovereignty to a domestic Iraqi-led government.

Yet despite the transfer, "there was an increasing level of violence that was only growing over the last several months," says Rand Beers, Mr. Kerry's chief foreign-policy aide. "As the situation became more and more bleak," he adds, "it became clear it was time to represent what was really happening on the ground, in contrast to what the president was trying to portray."

For all the talk of a new Kerry message on Iraq, the president and the senator are really only sharply divided on two major current points: the assessment of conditions there, and which man could better fix them. The two share the main goals of keeping U.S. troops in Iraq until conditions stabilize. Mr. Kerry's highly publicized speech at New York University earlier this week purported to offer a different policy, but his new "concrete steps" -- more training for security guards and more steps to secure polling places for the January elections -- are, at most, contrasts in procedural emphasis.

Mr. Kerry has also said he'd try harder than Mr. Bush has to broaden international support for the war. But he also admits that, under current conditions, it won't be easy to get other countries to send personnel to Iraq.

Indeed, in shaping his new Iraq statements, Mr. Kerry rejected proposals that would offer a clearer difference with Mr. Bush -- like postponing or limiting elections -- for fear of influencing events in Iraq as certain factions bank on a change with a Kerry administration. And while Mr. Kerry, hoping to win antiwar votes in the U.S., talks more than Mr. Bush of withdrawing troops from Iraq, he doesn't promise to do so any sooner.

Overall, the new Wall Street Journal/NBC poll shows a closely contested election. Among registered voters, Mr. Bush currently holds a 48% to 45% edge over Mr. Kerry with independent Ralph Nader drawing 2%. The remaining 5% were undecided, weren't voting or supported other candidates. Among the subset of "likely voters" -- identified by having expressed the highest levels of interest in the campaign -- Mr. Bush enjoys a slightly wider 50% to 46% lead, with Mr. Nader drawing 1%. The poll's overall margin of error is 3.1 percentage points; for likely voters, it is 3.5 percentage points.

The results of Journal/NBC survey -- conducted by Peter Hart, a Democratic pollster, and Republican Bill McInturff -- show a narrower lead for Mr. Bush than some recent polls, and a wider one than others. One reason may be how different polls estimate the partisan make-up of the electorate. The polls favoring Mr. Bush have more Republicans than Democrats, while those favoring Mr. Kerry have more Democrats.

The Journal/NBC poll respondents were nearly evenly split in partisan sympathies: 40% identified themselves as Democrats or Democratic-leaning, compared with 39% Republican. The 2000 electorate contained four percentage points more Democrats than Republicans, according to exit polls, though the Bush campaign argues the balance could be even in 2004.

Roughly three in 10 Americans staunchly support the Iraq war, and three in 10 consistently oppose it. But on this issue the views of the largest group -- roughly 40% of the electorate -- are mixed. That large group with mixed views backs Mr. Bush at the moment, by 48% to 35%.

--John Harwood contributed to this article.

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