

Saving Lt. Kerry:

An open letter to the candidate

Dear Sen. Kerry,

You must have noticed problems with your campaign during the past month or two since you have hired new strategists, and you have become more aggressive on the stump. Attacks on Bush will help, and they show a vigor that is vital for the electorate to see, but they need to be matched with better use of your own strengths — from your résumé to your current policy plans.

George W. Bush has done an excellent if not-so-admirable job of defining you in the eyes of much of the electorate. Let's put aside the shock about how you could have let that happen — there's no time for that now. For the few weeks that remain before Election Day, I propose a campaign to educate the electorate about John Kerry. Clearly you've got the substance, but you need a story — to energize supporters and pull swing voters.

The speeches at the Republican National Convention and commercials since then walked through a door you yourself opened by placing so much attention on your Vietnam service with almost no attention to your principled (and patriotic) antiwar stance, your impressive record in state and national government, and the virtues of your leadership, which include flexibility, diplomatic astuteness, and careful foresight.

Reporting for duty, Lt. Kerry, is not enough. In your turn to counter the Republican attacks, I could imagine aggressive commercials highlighting, for example, the way Bush has flip-flopped (against the Patriot Act/in favor of it; the war on terror is not winnable/it is winnable; etc.). But Kerry supporters need to do more than criticize.

Paul Jerome Croce

Take the Iraq situation for example: Voters need a sharp articulation of how you are different and better.

I propose an eleventh-hour campaign blitz to narrate the Kerry story in sharp contrast to the story of Bush's four years — which are so full of problems, but problems many voters have not yet focused on. Call this final-stretch campaign *The Days Since 9/11: The Things I Would Have Done*.

In each part of your story, highlight a Bush policy or action that was fraught with risk, danger and destruction, and clearly state what you would have done differently and how we would be better off with the Kerry difference. Lt. Kerry, you have already reported for duty, but you still have your own compelling story to tell.

Chapter One: Broad sympathy for America after the attacks of 9/11: A better president would have used that to build coalitions and marginalize terrorists.

Chapter Two: Going into Afghanistan: A better president would have done a more thorough job of nation-building and bridge-building with the Islamic world.

Chapter Three: Defining the "Axis of Evil": A better president would have avoided this gross simplification and dealt aggressively with the real threats of nuclear proliferation.

Chapter Four: Gaining authorization for the use of force in Iraq: A better president would have built up a broader coalition and worked with the United Nations, especially by letting inspectors do their work to tell us the facts about weapons programs.

Chapter Five: Sending troops to Iraq: A better president would not assume Middle Easterners would welcome American invaders as liberators.

Chapter Six: The postwar war: A better president would have prevented looting, lawlessness and prison abuse in the move toward international supervision and Iraqi sovereignty.

Throughout this story line, your internationalist, conciliatory, savvy — and yes, sensitive! — approach could be presented as an asset if these policy proposals are expressed as part of American resolve to quell tensions in the Middle East as a whole.

Democrats stand for policies that will calm the root causes of terror and anti-Americanism in the region — but how many voters know this? You can readily articulate improved policies of oil conservation that will bring more American energy independence and reduce funding from oil money to dictators and terrorists. And you can readily articulate improved policies for using the United States' overwhelming might to insist on peaceful resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

We do need a better president, but you need to do more than say that; you need to show it with a story, a counter-narrative of the Bush years. A better president starts with a better story. With this new story line, you will not remain in the negative, but will instead plant your positives on each negative.

And most importantly, the new story will define Kerry as told by Kerry, rather than as told by Bush and Co.

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