

Charlie Black: Not Just Offensive, but Wrong

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Recent comments by John McCain's advisor Charlie Black regarding the potential impact of future terrorist attacks on McCain's presidential campaign, "Certainly it would be a big advantage to him," are not just offensive and inappropriate, but indicate that the McCain campaign is increasingly out of touch with how American voters are feeling this year. Black's comments rested on the notion that somehow Americans, if they feel threatened, will naturally turn to the crusty old Republican veteran rather than the untested, liberal, anti-war Democrat.

This notion was certainly true in 2002 and still resonated somewhat in 2004, but by 2006, this thinking was no longer accurate. Today, with President Bush's approval ratings around 30%, with few people outside of Fox News, the White House or the McCain campaign believing that we have meaningfully turned a corner in Iraq, and with support for Bush's approach to combating terrorism waning, the notion that another attack during a Republican presidency will help the Republican candidate, borders on being downright bizarre.

Black supported his comments by arguing that the assassination on Benazir Bhutto in Pakistan somehow helped McCain in New Hampshire because voters there were more attuned to foreign affairs and terrorism after the assassination. This argument is difficult to take seriously on its face, but is even less plausible because Bhutto was assassinated before the Iowa caucuses had occurred, but McCain finished a relatively distant fourth there.

For decades, particularly during the Cold War, the Republicans held an advantage on foreign policy and security issues. During the last 40 years, Democrats have only won the White House when domestic issues have been unusually salient either due to scandal, Carter in 1976, or dramatic economic downturn, Clinton in 1992. During the late Cold War period, the Republican Party clearly gained an advantage by being viewed as the party that was tougher on the Soviet Union. As late as 2004, Bush benefited from being viewed as tougher on terrorism.

It is no longer, however, 1972, 1980, or even 2004. The war in Iraq has undermined what for decades had been the Republican's greatest strength. If Obama wins in November, President Bush will not be the first recent Republican president whose unpopularity will be a primary cause of his party's defeat in November. This occurred with Nixon and Bush's father as well. George W. Bush is, however, the first modern Republican who will drag his party down largely due to foreign policy blunders. The war in Iraq, the failure to capture or kill Osama Bin Laden and the bungling of significant parts the war on terror have all driven Bush's support and that of his party's presidential candidate down.

In the past, the Democratic Party contributed to the perceived Republican strength on these issues by failing to challenge this narrative, preferring instead to focus on domestic issues almost exclusively. This was something of a hangover from the Democrats success in 1992, which

lasted well into the early years of this. This approach was certainly wise in 1992, when the US was not embroiled in any major wars and the economy was in a severe recession. However, the Clinton team continued to urge an economy focused strategy on the Democratic Party long after the world, and politics, had changed. Jim Carville, Paul Begala and other Clinton-era strategists are brilliant political minds who stewarded the party to a desperately needed victory in 1992. However, by 2004, it began to seem that if you stopped a Clinton era strategist on the street and asked him where the nearest subway stop was he would have responded "It's the economy stupid."

One of Obama's earliest and most important strategic decisions of the general election campaign was to reclaim foreign policy for the Democrats. He has refused to back down or allow himself to be portrayed as somehow weaker or less knowledgeable on foreign policy than his Republican opponent. Every time McCain accused Obama of lacking experience or judgment, Obama responded by defending his record and views and hitting back at McCain. Demonstrating confidence in his, and the Democrats, ability to challenge the Republicans on the full range of foreign policy and national security issues and understanding that the Democrats should concede nothing to the Republican Party on these issues has been absolutely critical to Obama's success thus far and an important evolution for the Democratic Party since 2004.

Black's comments indicate that the McCain campaign has not fully recognized this change in the Democratic strategy, and the electorate itself over the last four years. Democrats should hope that Black's comments were not just a slip-up but actually reflect Republican strategist's view of the election. Ironically, one of the few claims that the Bush administration can make is that since September 11th, there have been no terrorist attacks in the US. This claim has something of an "other than that Mrs. Lincoln how was the show?" feel about it, but it is a significant accomplishment. If there is a terrorist attack in the US between now and the election it will undermine one of the few remaining national security strengths which the administration can claim. None of us want another terrorist attack against the US before the election, or any other time, but to think that this would somehow benefit John McCain is not only cynical, but it is wrong.