

Time for Iraq plan, not posturing

As howls of discontent about the Bush administration's Iraq war policy grow louder, many Democrats are licking their lips at the prospects of political gains in the midterm elections that

could create the momentum needed to reclaim the White House.

America, however, is not Connecticut, and the Democratic Party will be foolishly wrong if it thinks it can ride an anti-



Jim Hall

war campaign to victory in 2008. History clearly shows anti-war campaigns during times of war are not successful. As a veteran who served in Vietnam in 1968, I know firsthand what happens when opposition to a war — regardless of how poorly planned and poorly executed it is — turns into opposition to the troops.

President Bush has reiterated that American troops will remain in Iraq for the remainder of his term, and that he will leave it up to his successor to set the course from there. His successor can very well be a Democrat, but only if the candidate has a well-laid-out plan for dealing with Iraq, the Middle East and the ongoing threat of global terrorism.

I cringe at the claim by some that the party must play to its so-called left-of-center base to recapture the White House. In fact, if Democrats are to win in 2008, the party must first

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reclaim the disenfranchised centrists it has lost in recent years, particularly in the South — a group of voters who increasingly have become Republican-leaning independents or made the party leap altogether.

Reclaiming those centrists will not happen if the party's leaders continue their political posturing on Iraq. It's time to stop the votes on an immediate withdrawal. It's time to stop sending messages to the world community that our country does not support the president, does not support the war, does not support our troops.

It is clear that a unilateral withdrawal from Iraq would be a total disaster. Rather than continuing to call for such a withdrawal, Democrats would be much wiser to begin formulating a plan for the party's post-Bush Iraq policy.

Like many of my fellow Americans, I believe that the Bush administration has handled the war badly. The lack of appropriate planning and the lack of understanding about the dynamics of the deep divisions among the Iraqi people are very apparent. There continues to be no real plan that the American people understand on how we are to reach our objectives and allow all our troops to return home safely.

But as a nation, and as a party, we must deal with the reality in which we find our-

selves. We are committed to maintaining sufficient troops in Iraq to stabilize the country and give democracy a chance to succeed there. American servicemen and women are on the ground in Iraq, risking their lives every minute of every day. We are at war. We must support the commander in chief and we must support our troops, even as we may disagree with the administration's specific policies and strategies.

As Democrats look toward 2008, it is imperative for leaders of the party to come together now to begin building consensus on a post-Bush Iraq policy that acknowledges the need for a stable Iraq and Middle East, that recognizes the need to maintain our vigilant fight against global terrorism and that, most importantly, can gain the support of a majority of Americans.

I am a lifelong moderate Democrat who loves our country and my party, and I am deeply committed to both. I know as well as anyone that you can't change policy if you don't win the election. That is why I feel so strongly that Democrats will be making a huge mistake if they erode support for the president's efforts in Iraq and support for our troops in an attempt to make political hay.

History has taught us that such a move will backfire.

Jim Hall is a lifelong Democrat and Vietnam veteran. He most recently served as chairman of the National Transportation Safety Board under President Bill Clinton and currently heads Hall & Associates LLC, a government relations firm with offices in Washington and Chattanooga.