

How 9/11 transformed women voters
BY CAROL A. TABER

MILLIONS OF women are watching the presidential debates looking for answers to key questions: "Who can win the war on terror and keep America and my family safe?" "Who is the stronger leader?" "Who would use better judgment in a crisis?"

Given past elections, that's not what we've come to expect from women as they go through the process of picking a president. Conventional wisdom has always dictated that women vote for the most part on domestic issues, particularly education, healthcare, and the economy. Although women still care about those issues, fears for the personal security of themselves and their families have changed the way they process politics.

That switch is changing the dynamics of the presidential election. In a poll conducted Oct. 1-3 by the Pew Research Center, President Bush is running far stronger with women than expected, closing a gender gap that has traditionally favored Democrats. Even with last week's debate "win," the survey found Kerry had only a 2-point lead over Bush with women (45-43 percent).

Women saw the two men for what they are -- a commander in chief versus a debater in chief; and in this age of terror, that's a clear choice. Research shows that this transformation from "soccer moms" -- a key voting group in the 2000 election -- to "security moms" began on 9/11, and much like D-Day vets whose recollections of war remain vivid 60 years later, the impact of seeing the burning towers collapse in real time on television has not lessened for women over time. To the contrary, it has morphed into a powerful issue with an intense emotional component that has huge political implications. It's hardly surprising. After all, it was women, for the most part, who faced difficult choices that day -- whether to pick up their children from school, which child to get last, and how to explain such terrible pictures. Those are moments one doesn't easily forget.

The horrific terrorist attack on a Russian middle school last month followed by the cowardly and inhuman bombings targeted at children in Baghdad last week only reinforced fears that we are dealing with an enemy whose barbarism knows no bounds and must be met with a tough, forceful response. In the post-9/11 environment, strong leadership is what women want, not vacillation or acquiescence to "a global test," as Kerry calls it, getting international permission before taking action to protect America. Most polling indicates that Kerry "won" Thursday's debate, but most polls also indicate that his performance did little to change the race.

One reason may be Kerry's inability to understand what women really want -- a serious, substantive plan to ensure the safety of their children. What they heard from him were a lot of promises and a "plan" to do things better, smarter, and faster -- though not, in reality, markedly different from the president's own battle plan to fight the war on terror. The question he never answers and the media never ask is: How? How is he going to convince more allies to send troops to what he himself now says is "the wrong war, in the wrong place, at the wrong time?" How is he going to "fight the war on terror by strengthening our military" when given the chance, he voted against the \$87 billion to

support the troops? How is he going to "strengthen our intelligence" when as a member of the Intelligence Committee, he missed 76 percent of its public hearings? How will he go after the financing of terror more authoritatively" when he now opposes the Patriot Act after voting for it?

On other issues in the debate, Kerry contradicted his previous statements on the power of the president to take preemptive action against enemies. He blasted Bush for not taking a multilateral approach to the Iraq war and then attacked Bush's multilateral approach to North Korea. His solution was little more than a discredited strategy based on the failed bilateral policies of the Clinton administration that gave us a nuclear North Korea. All style. No substance.

Bush has addressed the concerns of women with strength and clarity. He may not be the best debater in the race, but this president stood in the rubble of the World Trade Center. He has comforted the families of the dead. He understands the evil nature of the enemy, and he will accept nothing less than total victory. Bush is tested and true. In the end, that is what women want.

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