

**THE BLOG**

Our Pet Goat

By Marty Kaplan

09/15/2006 01:41 pm ET | Updated May 25, 2011

On nearly every night of the year, the White House and the Republican Party conduct expensive field polls, tracking surveys and focus groups in which they test the political appeal of various potential messages. Watching Bush's Friday press conference, you can easily figure out what the numbers the night before told Karl Rove about the best way for the President to frame the interrogation dust-up.

"I am confident that I can work out a successful compromise with members of both parties." Nope. That doesn't move mid-term voters toward Republicans.

"Honorable people on both sides of the aisle have reasonable differences about how to resolve this." Uh-uh. Needle still stuck.

"If Congress doesn't add specificity to the Geneva Conventions, that will kill the program, hurt our fight against terrorism and endanger the American people." Yup, that's the ticket. My way or the highway. My way = safety and security. Their way = exploding hair gel.

The numbers are telling Rove that the more goat-like and belligerent Bush is, the more Bush frames the fight as my-program vs. no-program, the less he's forced to talk about Iraq and accountability, and the less the Congressional ballot tilts away from the party of Ney & DeLay.

Opposition on this issue from Senate Republicans must also play well in the overnights. The less that Congress can be depicted as a rubber stamp, the less furious voters are about the lack of checks and balances. So even if Bush loses on the issue, he wins on the politics.

My guess is that the biggest political danger Bush faces comes when this fight is framed not as a smackdown drama, but in moral terms. Not: who will win this battle? But rather: is it good or bad for captured American soldiers to lose the protection of the Geneva Conventions? I've got no doubt what the polls tell Rove about that.

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