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## Why it's the Democrats who should be girding their loins

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Two days later, Joe Biden's "[gird your loins](#)" gaffe seems even worse than it did at the time. John McCain has made Biden's warning that U.S. enemies would be likely to "test" President Obama the way they did John F. Kennedy into a [regular feature](#) of his stump speech, adding details about his experiences in the Navy during the Cuban missile crisis. His vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin, displaying an truly enviable lack of [self-awareness](#), has been [hammering](#) Obama as unprepared for international crises:

It wasn't that long ago that he said Barack Obama wasn't up to the job, he's not ready to be president. He said, I quote, 'the presidency is not something that lends itself to on-the-job training.'

As ludicrous as this attack is coming from Palin, the McCain campaign is likely thrilled that Biden has inadvertently reminded the country of the potential for a terrorist attack. (I know that's not exactly what Biden said but it's how his opponents will construe it.) I was reminded of what the Rand Corporation's Claude Berrebi [told me](#) about his research on terrorism and Israeli voting patterns:

Voters see attacks during a right-wing government as something inevitable, whereas under a left-wing incumbent, it's seen as something that could have been prevented if they had only used tougher antiterrorism policies."

Obviously, the U.S.'s political context is very different than Israel's but I think that there a similar dynamic at work. As long as the danger of terrorism is in the back of voters' minds behind far more immediate economic dangers, Obama's more conciliatory foreign policy seems fine. When the threat seems more immediate, a tolerance for nuance gives way to a demand for action. Try as he might, if the race came down to a toughness contest, Obama would be in trouble.

The problem is, seven years after 9/11, and despite several [valiant efforts](#), Democrats still have a hard time talking about fighting terrorism in a way that both tough enough and convincing. Luckily for them, the enormity of the financial crisis is likely to eclipse the fallout from Biden's comments in a few days, but it's a problem that the party is going to need to figure out. Until then, Biden is probably right to just [change the subject](#) and wait for this to blow over.

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