For a while last week, the Democrats were doing better at framing the issues. The poll numbers showed that Bush’s approval rating was down, that around 60% of the voters had turned against the Iraq War, that support for Bush on his handling of 911 and terrorism was lower, but still pretty high.

They correctly recognized in the numbers that the public had begun to separate Iraq from 911, and they recognized the relevance of the Downing Street memo in showing that Bush had betrayed the trust of the American people in sending troops into Iraq on false pretenses. They had begun to form an anti-Iraq-War caucus and to hammer home the consequences of these development. And even staunch Republicans were listening to their arguments and coming to Bush to suggest withdrawal of troops from Iraq.

In short, the Democrats had begun to use the basics of framing issues in terms of their own values and principles, the lessons arising from research at the Rockridge Institute. Had they continued to argue with unity on the difference between 911 and Iraq, and on the fact that George Bush betrayed our troops and is weakening our country, they might have made it impossible for Bush to once again link Iraq with 911.

Then they lost it. Karl Rove outsmarted the Democrats again. And he used the most basic trick in the book to do it.

The first lesson of framing is not to activate the other guy’s frame. Negating a frame activates it in the minds of hearers, as Richard Nixon found out when he said “I am not a crook” and everybody thought of him as a crook. The very title of my book, Don’t Think of an Elephant makes the point: if you negate a frame, it reinforces the frame.

Rove managed to link Iraq with 911 again, and to delegitimate the Democrats in the process. And he did it with the Democrats’ help.

Rove achieved this brilliantly – in one sentence!
“Conservatives saw the savagery of 9/11 in the attacks and prepared for war; liberals saw the savagery of the 9/11 attacks and wanted to prepare indictments and offer therapy and understanding for our attackers.” [NY Times, 6/23/05]

When the Democrats took the bait, Rove reeled them in. Here’s what he achieved:

1. Rove changed the context of discourse, from Bush’s disaster in Iraq, to support for Bush in the wake of 911.
2. The Democrats had had the Republicans playing defense; Rove put them on offense and the Democrats on defense.
3. With the words “savagery” and “attack”, Rove evoked the frame in which war is the appropriate response. He thus made Bush the heroic Commander-in-Chief in the war frame, while making “liberals” wimps for wanting to deny Bush unlimited war powers.
4. Rove thus evoked the conservative branding of liberals as weak and conservatives as strong.
5. When the Democrats attacked Rove for his remarks and defended themselves, they wound up expressing support for Bush’s going to war after 911, and with it implicit support for Bush’s position in Iraq.
6. Rove made putative Democratic weakness the issue, and by negating the frame, the Democrats played right into his hands.
7. Moreover, using the word “liberal” and not “Democrat”, Rove made it look like any Democrat attacking his remarks was a lily-livered liberal, and that the party had been taken over by weak-kneed chickens – anyone against Bush’s use of the military.
8. This enabled the right-wing message machine to go to work, attacking the Democrats as being controlled by naïve unpatriotic weaklings – MoveOn.org, Howard Dean, George Soros, Michael Moore.
9. Rove, of course, stood tall and strong, sticking by his guns, with a loud chorus of supporters.
10. This enabled Scott McClellan, the administration mouthpiece, to call for a nation debate on conservative – liberal philosophy, beginning with the handling of 911.

What should liberals have learned from reading the Rockridge Institute website and Don’t Think of an Elephant?

1. Start with resisting Rove’s juicy bait.
2. Spell out the progressive philosophy of Total Security – keeping a strong military while also
supporting job security, pension security, and security in the form of health and education. Attack Bush for giving up on homeland security, failing to protect cargo shipments, nuclear and chemical plants, and so on.

3. Point out Rove’s attempt to cover up Bush’s disaster in Iraq, and dwell on the public’s repudiation of the Bush policy for good reasons.

4. Keep pounding on the Downing Street memo, pointing out how Bush doctored intelligence and sent troops to war on false pretenses. Goad him about there being no WMD’s in Iraq, but plenty in North Korea.

5. Attack Bush for weakening our military and our economy, while strengthening al Qaeda. Point out that Bush is al Qaeda’s best friend, since he is their best recruiter.

6. Raise the stakes. Point out how the administration has been using 911 for their own political ends; of using the war in Iraq as a pretext to carry out a radical political agenda at home, and to get re-elected. Point out the immorality of using American and Iraqi lives for political ends.

7. Use the opportunity to brand the right wing as political fundamentalists, showing the intimate connections between Christian fundamentalism and Islamic fundamentalism.

8. Raise the question of whether the brutality arising from the US occupation of Iraq led to an anti-US reaction in Iran and the squelching of democratic forces there – exactly the opposite of Bush’s predicted result.

In short, be pro-active, not reactive.

But the Democrats helped Rove get Iraq identified with the war on terror again, characterizing the Democrats as unpatriotic naïve weaklings, and setting the stage for Bush’s address on June 28, 2005, in which he followed Rove’s lead and again framed the Iraq War in terms of 911 and the war on terror. This time John Kerry stepped in to help Bush, basically supporting the president’s position but offering policy-wonk modifications. The message: Bush is basically right, except for some minor twiddles.

The Democrats can learn from Bush and Rove: Stick to your guns and stay the course.