

STI COMMENTS ON PUBLIC AFFAIRS

**WINNING OR MANAGING 21<sup>st</sup> CENTURY WARS**  
by

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## WINNING OR MANAGING 21<sup>st</sup> CENTURY WARS

War is an imperative term. When used the implication is that there are no other options when addressing a specific issue or problem. In many cases it is used to rally support for a particular end. Historically, war implied hostilities between nations. In the recent past it has taken on a somewhat different connotation. In this regard, the United States as well as other nations, have declared war on terrorism, drugs, illiteracy, poverty, crime, ad infinitum. The difficulty arises when politicians go beyond urging a war on terrorism, for example, to implying that such wars can be won in the traditional sense.

America has been waging a war on crime since the founding of the Republic. In 2007 there were 11,251,828 major crimes committed in the United States. In 2008, at any point in time, 15-20 percent of Americans live below the poverty line as defined by the federal government. The recently enacted “No Child Left Behind Act” is testimony to the fact that the war on illiteracy is on going. In 2008 approximately 20 percent of young adults, ages 18-25, are users of illicit drugs. It is not from lack of effort that these problems remain.

Over the past quarter century the war on terrorism has received the lion’s share of attention. Leaders of all major political parties and persuasions tell us we must win this war, implying that such a war can be won; where the enemy surrenders and accepts the terms of the victors as in the case of World War II. While these wars cannot be won in the conventional sense, they can be managed within the economic and political constraints imposed by a democratic society. Mayor Rudolph Giuliani did not win the war on crime in New York City in the traditional sense but achieved excellent results in managing the problem within the limitations imposed on him as an elected official. Nor did the United States

win the so-called Cold War in a conventional sense. There was no formal surrender by the Soviet Union and later the Russian Federation. Simply stated, U.S. leaders better managed America's economic and political resources than did their Soviet counterparts with an outcome favorable to the United States. We must, however, still deal with an acknowledged military superpower and a nation intent on expanding its political and economic influence.

It follows, that in addition to the traditional qualifications expected of a president, the ability to manage complexity within ever greater domestic and global constraints is a necessary skill, the importance of which cannot be overstated.

In October 2008 our presidential candidates are focusing on the tribal areas of Pakistan and Afghanistan as the place where the war on terror must be fought and won, neglecting the fact that the area has never been effectively governed. Some nations have tried; in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Great Britain and, more recently, the Soviet Union. These attempts ended in failure. Today neither Pakistan or Afghanistan can effectively govern the region. The best outcome that can be hoped for is a low level insurgency, a result not unlike that achieved by Mayor Giuliani in New York City.

The same observations apply to Iraq. There will continue to be turmoil on the Iraq-Turkey border as has been the case for a century. Sunni Muslims will, at best, only grudgingly accept a Shiite dominated government. Attacks by and against one group or another will go on. Some months more, some less. A successful American policy will be one accepts and manages this instability.

What our 21<sup>st</sup> century presidents must have is the ability to manage complex problems within the constraints imposed by our Constitution; not to win the un winnable but to achieve a best solution within our abilities whether the problem be terrorism, education, drugs or crime.

A final admonition is that the American public must be prepared to commit our military forces and national treasure to conflicts that are un-winnable in the traditional sense, but ones that are vital to our national interests. This is not the way Americans have viewed our wars in the past, but ones that will, all too often, be the rule and not the exception in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.