

Pages from the Liberal Handbook

A Conservative strategist critiques a Grit's modus operandi.

TOM FLANAGAN

The War Room: Political Strategies for Business, NGOs and Anyone Who Wants to Win

Warren Kinsella

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Warren Kinsella's new book, *The War Room: Political Strategies for Business, NGOs and Anyone Who Wants to Win*, is a must-read for anyone interested in political campaigning in Canada. And not just political campaigning. Kinsella is a leader among those now applying the techniques of political campaigning to the causes pursued by corporations, charitable organizations and all sorts of social movements—hence the subtitle of his book.

Warren is a wordsmith, so *The War Room* is an easy, breezy read, although his sporadic descents into punk-rock vulgarity can become tiresome. But then, as Warren might put it, "What the fuck does Flanagan know?"

I wish I'd had the chance to read *The War Room* before I became Stephen Harper's campaign manager; it might have saved me from many mistakes and months of painful learning on the job. It is too late for that, of course, but I will definitely put the book on the list of assigned readings for a course on campaigning that I will teach next term (there are only 20 students, so the author should not plan to dine out more than once on the royalties).

What will students learn from *The War Room*? To mention only a few highlights, they will read how the American Democratic consultant James Carville originated the war room, or "quick response," concept in 1992, and how Kinsella brought it to Canada for the 1993 election. They'll also learn a great deal about political advertising—how television advertising began in the 1950s; how the Democrats ran the "Daisy" ad, perhaps the most successful television ad of all time, against Barry Goldwater in 1964; how the Liberals designed their advertising in 1993 and how the Conservatives blew it that year with ads focusing on Jean Chrétien's face; and how to structure a media buy for a national campaign. And, of course, they will learn how Kinsella

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derailed the Canadian Alliance campaign in 2000, lampooning Stockwell Day's alleged creationist belief's with a purple Barney dinosaur and the inspired line, "I just want to remind Mr. Day that *The Flintstones* was not a documentary."

And it's not all ancient history from five or ten years ago. There is a lot of up-to-the minute stuff about how Kinsella used his blog to conduct his own campaign defending his hero Chrétien against the Gomery inquiry, and how the anti-globalization crowd has used the internet to organize their protests in Seattle and elsewhere. Campaigning is an ever-evolving art, and Kinsella, perhaps more than anyone else in Canada, is always right up to the minute (see his YouTube parodies of John Tory in the 2007 Ontario provincial election).

No doubt about it—Warren Kinsella is a state-of-the-art scrapper. We belong to different parties, but there is no one I would rather have watching my back in a political street fight. Although, to be honest, I'm not much of a street fighter; my role

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in the Conservative organization was to recruit street fighters, make sure they got paid and hold their coats while they beat up opponents.

But let me be a little more serious. Warren deserves it, for he is actually a very serious person. He is a living, breathing exemplar of that most fundamental of political virtues—loyalty. He is almost limitlessly loyal to political parties (provincial and federal Liberals), people (Jean Chrétien) and causes (anti-smoking). So let's look at how political loyalty, which in itself is a good thing, can work at cross-purposes with rational thought.

Kinsella is now the president of the Daisy Consulting Group. The company takes its name from the "Daisy" ad that Warren describes so lovingly in *The War Room*. A little girl is counting the petals on a daisy. When she gets to nine, a loud male voice suddenly starts a reverse count-down. A mushroom cloud fills the screen, and Lyndon Johnson, the Democratic candidate for president, says: "These are the stakes—to make a world in which all of God's children can live, or to go into the dark. We must love each other, or we must die."

"Daisy" was the biggest advertising bargain of all time. The Democrats ran it only once, but the subsequent media coverage was enough to pin

the warmonger label on Republican candidate Barry Goldwater. Game, set, match. Kinsella, as a good Liberal, roots for the Democrats in American politics, and he obviously reveres the memory of the way this ad destroyed the Republicans' chances in 1964. He wrote about it in an earlier book, *Kicking Ass in Canadian Politics*, he wrote about it in this book and he named his company after it.

But there are some inconvenient truths (as another famous Democrat might say). Throughout the 20th century, at least until the time of Bush père et fils, the Democrats were the party of war in American politics. Woodrow Wilson brought the United States into World War One, Franklin Roosevelt entered World War Two and Harry Truman fought the Korean War. At the time of the Daisy ad, the Kennedy-Johnson administration, which Johnson had inherited, had already begun to ratchet up the American intervention in Vietnam.

Within a year of the 1964 election, Johnson had undertaken a full-scale war in Vietnam, ultimately committing more than half a million troops. Granted, it was not a nuclear war, but the 50,000 Americans and millions of Vietnamese who died were no less dead because they died from TNT and napalm

rather than nuclear explosions and radiation. The Vietnam war destroyed Johnson's presidency, leaving the despised Republican Richard Nixon to make peace, just as the Republican Dwight Eisenhower had made peace to end Truman's war in Korea. Presenting the Democrats as the peace party in 1964 was an inspired fraud. The Daisy ad was a great ad, but it was also an essential part of the hoax.

I am not trying to claim any moral high ground here. Anyone who participates enthusiastically in politics for any length of time gets involved in his own share of frauds. *De te fabula narratur*. Loyalty to the party, the leader and the cause can easily override rational analysis. This is not a problem with a solution; it is the situation in which all campaigners ply their craft. The self-reflective may agonize over it, but what about those who are not predisposed to questioning themselves?

Fortunately, a democratic election, like a common-law trial, is an adversarial process. One side immediately pounces on the misstatements, exaggerations and outright lies of the other. You can't get away with very much for very long (about ten minutes in the age of the quotes database and the BlackBerry) before being challenged by your opponents. Competition is not always edifying, but it is the preservation of democracy. □