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## **President Admits War on Terror Cannot Be Won**

by Julian Borger

George Bush admitted yesterday the war on terror could not be won, as the Republican party convention, designed to showcase the president as a resolute leader at a time of national peril, was launched in New York.

The White House rushed to limit the potential damage as Democrats seized on the remarks as a sign of defeatism. A spokesman for the president said he was simply pointing out the unconventional nature of the conflict.

However, the timing of the remarks could not have been worse for the president, coming on a day that the party had lined up two of its biggest names - Rudy Giuliani, the ex-mayor who led New York through the September 11 trauma, and John McCain, a Vietnam war hero - to pay tribute to his qualities as a wartime leader.

Asked on NBC television whether America could win its "war on terror", the president replied: "I don't think you can win it. But I think you can create conditions so that the - those who use terror as a tool are less acceptable in parts of the world."

The comments represented a break from earlier determined predictions of victory, and drew an immediate Democratic response.

"After months of listening to the Republicans base their campaign on their singular ability to win the war on terror, the president now says we can't win the war on terrorism," John Edwards, the Democratic vice presidential candidate, said. "This is no time to declare defeat - it won't be easy and it won't be quick, but we have a comprehensive long-term plan to make America safer. And that's a difference."

The White House spokesman Scott McClellan argued that the president was only being realistic about the nature of the struggle.

"He was talking about winning it in the conventional sense ... about how this is a different kind of war and we face an unconventional enemy," he told reporters.

In the NBC interview, the president also made it clear that he had no intention of

retreating in the face of the terrorist threat. That, he told the interviewer, "would be a disaster for your children".

He added: "You cannot show weakness in this world today because the enemy will exploit that weakness. It will embolden them and make the world a more dangerous place."

As the controversy was unfolding, more than 4,000 Republican delegates were assembling in New York's Madison Square Garden arena, to begin the party's national convention. They acclaimed the submission of Mr Bush and his running-mate, Dick Cheney, as the party's presidential and vice-presidential nominees, and passed the party's manifesto without debate.

Bill Frist, the Senate majority leader, told the cheering delegates: "Our platform highlights the principles that unite our party." But the manifesto has drawn criticism from party moderates for its uncompromising tone on a string of divisive social issues. It calls for abortion rights to be overturned, an end to stem cell research and a constitutional ban on gay marriage.

Administration critics also pointed out the wide gap between the manifesto and the moderate face the party has donned for its four-day New York rally. Yesterday's prime time speakers, Mr Giuliani and Mr McCain - both on the left of the party spectrum - are at odds with major elements of the platform.

The two moderates focused instead on President Bush's martial virtues.

"He has been tested and has risen to the most important challenge of our time, and I salute him," Senator McCain, formerly a bitter rival of the president, said of Mr Bush, according to an early release of his speech. "I salute his determination to make this world a better, safer, freer place."

Mr Giuliani's speech stuck to the same theme. "There are many qualities that make a great leader, but having strong beliefs, being able to stick with them through popular and unpopular times, is the most important characteristic of a great leader," an advance text of his speech said.

Meanwhile, Mr Bush was touring New Hampshire and Michigan, two of about 20 swing states that will decide the election on November 2. Polls showed the contest still very close, but with the president's standing improving slightly to eliminate the narrow advantage John Kerry, the Democratic nominee, established after the Democratic party convention in Boston.

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