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Gleaves Whitney
Grand Valley State University

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Presidents and War

Which Presidents Have Been Shaped By War?

Sometimes the simplest objects of our civilization can be telling. As a history teacher, I am always looking for interesting ways to make a point. Imagine if thousands of years in the future, a pile of pennies were to be found. What would our descendants surmise about America? Studying the lowly penny, they would see:

- It is made of an alloy, a mixture of metals, so they'd surmise the people knew advanced metallurgy.
- It is perfectly round, reflecting knowledge of advanced mathematics.
- All the pennies are perfectly alike, showing that the people who made them were capable of manufacturing to exacting specifications.
- On one side, there is an exquisitely rendered profile of a man, showing admirable anatomical knowledge and artistic skill.
- The date on the penny shows that the people had a sophisticated calendar that reckoned not just in decades or centuries, but in millennia. (The date on this penny I am holding is 1976 -- a great year since native son Gerald Ford was president and that was America's bicentennial celebration.)
- The word "LIBERTY" shows the people's commitment to an idea, to an epochal struggle for human freedom, rights, and dignity.
- The motto "IN GOD WE TRUST" reveals that these people submitted themselves to a transcendent moral order that made their liberty possible.
- Turning the penny over, on the obverse side is a picture of a building that looks like an ancient Greek or Roman temple, showing a conscious debt to a distant civilization (especially its republican virtue).
- The term "ONE CENT" is derivative of an ancient language. *Centum* is Latin for "one hundred."
- The Latin motto "E PLURIBUS UNUM" -- "out of many, one" -- is a social as well as a linguistic statement, revealing that many diverse peoples built up a relatively unified society.
- And the official name of the country, "UNITED STATES OF AMERICA," not only affirms a debt to the Italian Renaissance explorer and cartographer (Amerigo Vespucci), but also suggests that the nation is a federated polity.

The overall impression the penny would convey is of a nation built of free republics that is jealous of its liberties. This impression is reinforced if you look again at the man on the penny. If our descendants thousands of years from now learned anything about Abraham Lincoln, it would be that he was the wartime president who led our nation through our defining crisis -- our Iliad -- the Civil War.

You know what? It's not unusual in American history to have a wartime president, or a president shaped by war. The history textbooks don't do a good enough job teaching our children this, but most of America's commanders in chief have been profoundly shaped by war. And that's what I'd like to talk to you about this evening. Taking a survey of the presidents whose lives and careers were greatly impacted by war, I'd like to lead us through a half dozen points.

First point: Of the 42 men who have served as president, 28 served in at least one war prior to becoming commander in chief; 4 served in at least two wars (Jackson, Taylor, Grant, and Eisenhower); and 1 served in three wars before making it to the White House (Zachary Taylor). War made a profound impact on their lives. For George Washington, to take one example, the French and Indian War was a distilling fire that shaped his character so that he could mature and be a better leader in the Revolutionary War. The Washington who resigned his commission in Annapolis in 1783 was not the Washington in Jumonville Glen three decades earlier and 300 miles away.

The second point can be posed as a question: Can you name the last general to serve in the White House? It was Eisenhower, and his administration seems very distant from us today because he was president a half-century ago. Once upon a time in America, it was not unusual to have a general in the White House. This may surprise you, but more than one quarter of our presidents had attained the rank of general before serving in the White House: 11 in all.

For the third point, another question: Do you know which three wars account for the experience of almost half our presidents? Five of the first seven commanders in chief served in some capacity in the Revolutionary War (Washington, Jefferson who was technically in the military but saw no action, Madison, Monroe, Jackson). Eight presidents in the second half of the 19th-century were soldiers in the Civil War (Johnson, Grant, Hayes, Garfield, Arthur, Harrison, McKinley, even Fillmore who had been president ten years before the outbreak of the Civil War. And seven Cold War presidents served in World War II (Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon, Ford, Reagan, Bush 41).

You can see from what I just said that the Civil War and World War II -- just those two wars -- account for more than 1/3 of our presidents. Those conflicts were veritable incubators of 20 of our future leaders.

Speaking of incubators of experience, do you know which future president was a POW? It was Andrew Jackson, who was a 13-year-old messenger when captured by the British during the American Revolution. The scar on his cheek was the result of refusing to polish a British officer's boots, for which defiance he was viciously beaten.

Fourth point -- also in the form of a question: Just considering the years they spend in the White House, how many presidents have been at war longer than George W. Bush? It turns out that no president has spent more time at war than our 43rd commander in chief. If the Sept. 11 attacks by al Qaeda are regarded as the start of the War on Terror, then George W. Bush has been a wartime president more than six years. That's 50 percent longer than Lincoln fought the Civil War, almost twice as long as Franklin Roosevelt waged World War II, and four times longer than Woodrow Wilson prosecuted World War I. It's even longer than two more recent presidents who were totally consumed by war -- Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon, each of whom got entangled in Vietnam for more than four years and faced fierce domestic opposition as the war dragged on.

The fact is: most U.S. presidents have led the nation in major conflicts. Only five of those wars have been declared. Presidents have justified taking the nation into hundreds of additional conflicts based on Article 2 of the Constitution. Invariably our presidents believed the conflict they entered would be a relatively short affair -- and some were, like the Spanish-American War. But most conflicts lasted longer than anticipated.



This essay is adapted from a speech delivered to the Sons of the American Revolution on November 2, 2007.



POW-MIA Ceremony

The following tribute was read before Gleeves's speech to the Sons of the American Revolution:

At this time it is all together fitting and proper we pay tribute to our comrades who are missing in action. This program is the idea of a group called The National League of American Prisoners and Missing in Southeast Asia. Its purpose is to keep us reminded that this country still has military personnel missing in action. However, it also applies to other federal and state agencies that send personnel into harms way.

The missing man table is empty&but it is a stark reminder that we must never forget our missing in action's. Those who have served that those currently serving the uniformed services of the United States are ever mindful that the sweetness of enduring peace has always been tainted by the bitterness of personal sacrifice.

We are compelled to never forget that while we enjoy our daily pleasures, there are others who have endured and may still be enduring the agonies of pain&deprivation and interment. So at this point in the wonderful evening of good camaraderie, good food, and gratitude for our country and the patriots, who founded this great nation, let us pause to recognize our missing in action and prisoners of war.

They are unable to be with their loved ones and families tonight&so we join together to pay our humble tribute to them once again^ bear witness to their continued absences.

This table, set for one, is small symbolizing the frailty to one prisoner who stands alone against his or her suppressors.

The white tablecloth is symbolic of the purity of their intentions to respond to their country's call to arms.

The single red rose in the vase&signifies the blood that many have shed in sacrifice to ensure the freedom of our beloved United States of America. This rose also reminds us of the family and friends of our missing comrades who keep the faith&while awaiting their

Not surprisingly, the chaos and unintended consequences of war are reflected in the word's etymology. "War" is derived from the Indo-European root *wers-*, "to confuse, mix up." In a number of Germanic languages, this root gave rise to words relating to confusion or the act of mixing things up. Wars definitely can turn the world upside down in unexpected ways.

This is where historical experience can teach us a lesson or two. Americans want a peaceable order. They tend not to be forgiving of presidents who wage unfinishable wars. Harry Truman presided over the "police action" in Korea only two-and-a-half years, which seems short compared to Iraq or Vietnam, yet he was dogged with the lowest approval ratings in presidential polling history because of the perception that the war was a stalemate.

In a republic or democracy, it is difficult to sustain a people's will to fight over a long period, and the unintended consequences can be dramatic. The 30-year-long Peloponnesian War unraveled democratic Athens, drawing its so-called Golden Age to a close. A century of civil war severely weakened the Roman Republic, leading to its displacement by an autocratic empire. The two most extensive wars in U.S. history -- the century-long Indian Wars and Vietnam -- left ugly scar tissue on the nation's body politic.

Bush has told the American people that he will be unable to conclude the War on Terror, and that the task will fall upon a future president to bring about its end. In the midst of the conflict, we cannot fathom all the consequences, good and ill. No president goes into war thinking, "I want to fail, I want to be brought down, I want my party to take a beating, and I want my country to be humiliated in the process." Yet it can and does happen. As Shakespeare famously put it in Julius Caesar, "Cry havoc, and let slip the dogs of war."

A fifth and related point. Our Hauenstein Center scholar in residence, Richard Norton Smith, made this point in passing last week: few presidents fight the wars they intend to. Until September 1862, Lincoln thought he was fighting the South to preserve the Union, but he ended up fighting for much more -- freeing the slaves. At the outbreak of the Spanish-American War, McKinley thought he fighting for American honor against a decadent Spanish empire, but he ended up establishing an American empire and getting the U.S. bogged down in a guerilla war in the Philippines. Wilson thought he'd be fighting the Germans to preserve the freedom of the seas and to restore the balance of power in Europe, but he ended up fighting for universal democracy and championing an ill-fated League of Nations. Lyndon Johnson committed the U.S. to fighting in Southeast Asia in part to stop communist expansion, and in part to take the New Deal to the Third World. He wanted the Mekong River to be the new TVA. But he ended up in a domestic war that ended his career in politics.

Final point. Article 2 of the U.S. Constitution designates the president as the commander in chief of the Army, Navy, and state militia (National Guard) under specific circumstances, but does not make prior military experience a prerequisite for office. Does it make any difference? Dwight Eisenhower thought so. He certainly knew the horrors of war. Following the invasion of Normandy, he wrote about walking through fields of corpses so thick his boots couldn't avoid stepping on their spilled blood. Ike said, "God help the nation when it has a president who doesn't know as much about the military as I do."

What does that mean for 2008? Hillary? Giuliani? Bloomberg perhaps? On Election Day 2008, you will decide.

return.

The black napkin symbolizes the darkness and dirt of their lives. Fear, pain and the uncertainty of life are their only companions.

The yellow ribbon on the vase represents those worn on the lapels of thousands who demand with unyielding determination a proper accounting of our comrades who are not among us tonight.

The slice of lemon on the plate reminds us of the countless fallen tears of families as they wait.

The glass is inverted&they cannot toast with us this night.

The chair is empty&they cannot be here.

The candle is reminiscent of the light of hope which lives in our hearts to illuminate their way home&away from their captors&to the open arms of a grateful nation.

Let us pray to the supreme commander that all of our comrades will soon be back within our ranks.

Let us remember and never forget their sacrifices.

May God forever watch over them and protect them and their families.