

10-23-2006

## Longest-Serving Wartime President?

Gleaves Whitney  
*Grand Valley State University*

Follow this and additional works at: [http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/ask\\_gleaves](http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/ask_gleaves)

---

### Recommended Citation

Whitney, Gleaves, "Longest-Serving Wartime President?" (2006). *Ask Gleaves*. Paper 12.  
[http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/ask\\_gleaves/12](http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/ask_gleaves/12)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Hauenstein Center for Presidential Studies at ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Ask Gleaves by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@gvsu.edu](mailto:scholarworks@gvsu.edu).

## Longest-Serving Wartime President?

Compared with other U.S. presidents, has George W. Bush spent the most number of years at war? The United States has spent most of its history fighting. Over the past 217 years, presidents have been backed by congressional declarations of war 11 times in 5 major conflicts; they have received congressional authorization to use armed force in more than a dozen additional conflicts; and, exercising their Article II prerogative as commander in chief, they have sent U.S. servicemen and -women into action on hundreds of deployments.<sup>[1]</sup> Not surprisingly, quite a few of the 42 men who have served as president have clocked considerable time in armed conflict.

How does George W. Bush compare with his 41 predecessors? As of this writing, the current president has spent the second longest time at war. He has served as a wartime commander in chief for 5 years, 1 month, dating back to the attacks by Islamo-fascists on September 11, 2001. That's not quite as long as Lyndon Johnson's wartime leadership. LBJ served as a wartime commander in chief for 5 years, 2 months during the Vietnam War, which he inherited from the assassinated John F. Kennedy.

George W. Bush will overtake LBJ in several weeks, thereby holding the record for spending the most time at war. Interesting to note is that neither of these longest-serving wartime presidents served as commander in chief in a congressionally declared war.

### G. W. Bush Compared to Presidents Who Fought Declared Wars

Our 43rd president has spent significantly more time as a wartime commander in chief than the 5 presidents who asked Congress for, and received, an official declaration of war:

- Franklin Roosevelt spent 3 years, 4 months battling European and Japanese fascists during World War II, from December 7, 1941, when Pearl Harbor was attacked, till April 12, 1945, when he died.
- James Madison oversaw 3 different wars compressed into 36 months between 1812 and 1815. The War of 1812 went from June 18, 1812, when the U.S. declared war on the U.K., till January 8, 1815, when the Battle of New Orleans was fought; the Creek War in the Deep South spanned 1812 to 1814; and the last of the Barbary Wars, a.k.a. the Algerine War, was fought in the Mediterranean Sea between March and late June of 1815.
- 3 years of William McKinley's presidency were embattled. He reluctantly entered the Spanish-American War, which lasted just six months between February and August 1898. But the war's fallout included the Philippine Insurrection, which broke out in February 1899 and continued through McKinley's assassination in September 1901. (That conflict would formally end eight months later.)
- Woodrow Wilson's wartime tenure, though difficult to calculate, mostly took place over 2 and ½ years of his presidency. He ordered the Punitive Expedition against Pancho Villa in Mexico (from March 1916 till January 1917) and soon afterward sent Doughboys into World War I (from April 1917 till Armistice Day, November 11, 1918). He authorized military force on numerous other occasions between 1914 and 1918 -- for example, when the U.S. intervened in Haiti, Cuba, Panama, and Nicaragua; and in Russia, to thwart Russian revolutionaries (from August 1918 till April 1, 1920).
- James K. Polk was a wartime commander in chief for less than 2 years (dating from April 24, 1846, the outbreak of the Mexican-American War, till February 2, 1848, when the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo was signed, ending hostilities).

### Bush Compared to Presidents Who Fought Undeclared Wars

At 5 years and counting, George W. Bush's wartime tenure is now significantly longer than:

- Thomas Jefferson's 4 years of fighting the Tripolitan War against the Barbary states in North Africa (from the spring of 1801, when Tripoli's ruler unofficially declared war against the fledgling U.S., till a peace treaty was signed on June 4, 1805);
- Abraham Lincoln's 4 years of struggle during the Civil War (from April 12, 1861, when Fort Sumter was fired on, till April 9, 1865, when Lee surrendered to Grant at Appomattox Court House); usually overlooked is that Lincoln also had to deal with armed conflict against Apache and other Western Indians his entire time in office; and
- Richard Nixon's 4 years of effort to end American involvement in Vietnam (from his first day in office, January 20, 1969, till January 27, 1973, when the Paris Peace Accords were signed, formally ending direct U.S. involvement in offensive actions in Vietnam).

Another interesting comparison is that George W. Bush has spent more than twice the time at war as such illustrious commanders in chief as:

- John Adams, who on May 3, 1798 created the U.S. Navy in response to French attacks on American ships. There were about a dozen naval engagements, mostly in the Caribbean, through most of the year 1800.
- Harry Truman, whose two stints as a wartime commander in chief amounted to about two years of fighting during his presidency. This included the last 4 months of World War II (from April 12, 1945, when he took over after FDR died, till August 15, 1945, when Japan surrendered); also the first 1 and ½ years of the Korean War, from June 27, 1951, when Truman authorized U.S. military action on the Korean peninsula, till January 20, 1953, when he retired from office). Truman was the first president of the four-decades long Cold War;
- John F. Kennedy, who escalated U.S. involvement in Vietnam over a two-year period, beginning in 1961, when he ordered the first combat squadron<sup>[2]</sup> to Southeast Asia, up to his assassination on November 22, 1963. JFK was under pressure to push back against the Soviet Union because of the disastrous Bay of Pigs invasion (April 1961), erection of the Berlin Wall (August 1961), and communist threat to the neutrality of Laos. Vietnam appears to be where he drew the line.



President Bush addresses troops at the Elmendorf Air Force Base in Anchorage, Alaska.



Ranked below are the American presidents who spent the most time at war:

1. Lyndon Johnson -- 5 years, 2 months constantly (Vietnam War)
2. George W. Bush -- 5 years, 1 month constantly (War on Terror: Afghanistan, Iraq)
3. George Washington -- almost 5 years intermittently (Indians in the Ohio Valley)
4. Abraham Lincoln -- 4 years constantly (Civil War, Indians in the West)
5. Richard Nixon -- 4 years constantly (Vietnam War)
6. Thomas Jefferson -- 4 years intermittently (Tripolitan War)
7. Franklin D. Roosevelt -- 3 years, 4 months constantly (World War II)
8. James Madison -- 3 years constantly (War of 1812, Creek War, Algerine War)
9. William McKinley -- 3 years (Spanish-American War, Philippine Insurrection)
10. Andrew Johnson -- about 3 years intermittently (various Indian wars in the West)
11. Ulysses S. Grant -- about 3 years intermittently (various Indian wars in the West)
12. Rutherford Hayes -- about 3 years intermittently (various Indian wars in the West)
13. Woodrow Wilson -- 2 years, 6 months constantly (World War I, Punitive Raid into Mexico, Latin American expeditions)
14. John Adams -- more than 2 years intermittently (Quasi-War with France)
15. Harry Truman -- 2 years constantly (Korean War)
16. John F. Kennedy -- 2 years intermittently (beginning of Vietnam War)
17. James K. Polk -- less than 2 years constantly (Mexican-American War)
18. Bill Clinton -- less than one year intermittently (Serbia, Middle Eastern conflicts)
19. Dwight D. Eisenhower -- 6 months

A number of presidents have presided over military conflicts lasting just hours, days, weeks, or months. A constantly (end of Korean War) few examples (proceeding backward in time):

- Bill Clinton's time as a wartime president is difficult to nail with precision but amounted to less than one year. American troops on a humanitarian mission had to deal with intermittent violence in Somalia in 1993-94 (an operation begun by President George H. W. Bush). More significantly, Clinton authorized U.S. air strikes against Serbian forces over a 10-week period in the spring of 1998. Finally, Clinton ordered four days of concentrated air attacks against military installations in Iraq in Operation Desert Fox. Intermittently over the next several months, U.S. missiles struck military targets in Iraq, in response to anti-aircraft fire and radar locks on American aircraft.
- The current president's father, George H. W. Bush, was at war for less than 8 weeks. He authorized U.S. forces in Panama to wage a week-long battle in December 1989 to depose Manuel Noriega -- the only war in U.S. history directed against one person.<sup>[3]</sup> Beginning on August 7, 1990, Bush oversaw Operation Desert Shield in response to Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait; it became Operation Desert Storm with air strikes on the morning of January 16, 1991; U.S. ground troops began their offensive on February 24; and by February 28 a cease-fire was declared.
- Ronald Reagan ordered U.S. armed forces into combat during the last week of October 1983, in the 3-day invasion of Grenada, to protect Americans on the Caribbean island from a Marxist dictator; and he launched an air attack against Libya on April 15, 1986, in retaliation for the bombing of a Berlin discotheque that killed two U.S. servicemen.
- In 1980 Jimmy Carter ordered the rescue of Americans held hostage in Iran; the mission was aborted.
- Gerald R. Ford had to supervise the tense end of the Vietnam War, when U.S. forces evacuated Saigon in April 1975. Less than two weeks later he had to confront Khmer Rouge forces in the Mayaguez Incident, in which 41 U.S. servicemen died. Their names were the last to be engraved on the Wall (formally known as the Vietnam Veterans Memorial) in Washington, DC.<sup>[4]</sup> This confrontation with Cambodia marks the end of U.S. battle deaths in Indochina in the twentieth century.
- At the beginning of his presidency, Dwight D. Eisenhower had to manage the truce in Korea, signed July 27, 1953. (Officially the war has never ended.) At the end of his presidency, he stationed U.S. warships and Marines off the coast of Guatemala. Sidebar: although Eisenhower did not send troops to Indochina to fight, but to advise, the first two American deaths occurred under his watch in 1959.
- In 1859, under authorization of Congress, James Buchanan flexed America's military muscle by deployed 20 warships and 2,500 men toward landlocked Paraguay to redress a minor commercial crisis. Buchanan biographer Jean Baker calls this expedition "perhaps the most ludicrous exertion of American power during his administration...."<sup>[5]</sup>
- In 1820, under authorization of Congress, James Monroe dispatched the U.S. Navy into the Atlantic Ocean to disrupt and destroy as much of the slave trade as possible.

- 20. James Buchanan -- several months intermittently (Indian wars, Paraguay)
- 21. Grover Cleveland -- several months intermittently (end of Apache War)
- 22. Chester Arthur -- several months intermittently (Apache War)
- 23. James Garfield -- several weeks intermittently (Apache War)
- 24. Benjamin Harrison -- several weeks intermittently (Sioux War)

### The Hundred Years War against the Indians

During its first century of existence, the U.S. fought an intermittent Hundred Years' War against numerous Indian nations. Between 1790 and 1890, most of our presidents authorized military force against Indians at some point. The longest-running conflicts -- spanning decades -- were against the Seminoles east of the Mississippi, and against the Apaches west of the river.

- George Washington spent nearly 5 years in intermittent battle against Little Turtle, Blue Jacket, Tecumseh, and Indians in the Ohio Valley (from the autumn of 1790 till the signing of the Treaty of Greenville on August 3, 1795). The Indians were loosely allied to remnant British troops in the Old Northwest. The first two generals Washington sent into the region were routed. Only General Anthony Wayne was able to subdue the Indians northwest of the Ohio River.
- At the same time James Madison was fighting the British in the War of 1812, he was waging war on a second front in the Deep South, namely against the Red Stick Creeks (backed by the British and supplied by the Spanish in Pensacola). The Creek War lasted from 1813 till the signing of the Treaty of Fort Jackson, on August 9, 1814.
- James Monroe also fought an Indian war on the Southern frontier, this time against the allies of the Red Sticks, the Seminoles (from November 1817 till May 1818); as noted above, two years later he deployed the U.S. Navy to suppress the African slave trade.
- Andrew Jackson, of Indian Removal fame and hero of the Creek War, was later commander in chief when two Indian wars broke out. First was the Black Hawk War in 1832. Next was the Second Seminole War, the fiercest fighting in which took place during the last two weeks of December 1835. For almost a quarter century thereafter, until May 8, 1858, five additional presidents (Martin Van Buren, William Henry Harrison, John Tyler, Franklin Pierce, and James Buchanan) would have to deal with the Seminoles.
- In the aftermath of the California Gold Rush of 1849, several presidents had to deal with Indian uprisings in the Far West -- Millard Fillmore, the Mariposa War (1850-51) as well as the Yuma and Mojave Uprising (1852-52); Franklin Pierce, the Rogue River War (1855-56) and Yakima War (1855); and James Buchanan, the Coeur d'Alene War (1858), Paiute War (1860), and beginning of the Apache and Navajo War (1860-68).
- Abraham Lincoln's battles against Apache, Cheyenne, and Arapaho Indians have already been noted. U.S. troops also had to go up against the Santee Sioux and Navajo during his four years in office. The Indians, not surprisingly, were taking advantage of the diminished presence of the U.S. Army in the West during the Civil War.
- Andrew Johnson's unhappy time in office was consumed by years of fighting Indians in the West, most notably in the Cheyenne and Arapaho War (1864-65), War for the Bozeman Trail (1866-68), Hancock's War (1867), Snake War (1866-68), and Sheridan's Campaign (1868-69).
- Ulysses Grant's years of fighting Indians in the West involved the last 4 months of Sheridan's Campaign (in 1869), 8-month long Modoc War (1872-73), 6 month-long Kiowa or Red River War (1874), Sioux War for the Black Hills (1876-77), and the Apache War (from 1876 to the end of his second term, March 3, 1877).
- Rutherford Hayes, James Garfield, and Chester Arthur spent their time in office intermittently battling Indians in the Apache War.
- During his first administration, Grover Cleveland oversaw the final act of the Apache War, whose denouement was a 2,000 mile chase through the Southwest U.S. and northern Mexico. During the spring and summer of 1886, U.S. cavalry went deep into Mexico, traveling 200 miles south of the border in pursuit of Geronimo's warriors.<sup>[6]</sup>

- In 1890 the U.S. Census determined that there was no longer an American frontier. In December of that same year, Benjamin Harrison was president when the Seventh Cavalry killed between 200 and 300 men, women, and children at Wounded Knee Creek. This was the final episode in the Hundred Years War between the U.S. government and Indians.

In all, more than 1,000 servicemen (and more civilians) died in the Hundred Years War against the Indians [7]

### Letting Slip the Dogs of War

History is always ironic. In the foregoing discussion, did you notice the absence of the one president who most glorified war, who thought that armed conflict was good for a nation because struggle kept a people fit and strong? How odd that Theodore Roosevelt spent hardly any time as a wartime president. Yes, he cleaned up the guerilla war in the Philippines; he relished a muscular gunboat diplomacy; and he encouraged the Panamanians to revolt against Colombia for the sake of building the Panama Canal; but TR also won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1906 for negotiating an end to the Russo-Japanese War.

U.S. armed forces have frequently engaged in armed conflict, yet our presidents have been chary of fighting the long war -- with good reason: war strains not just a nation's military, but its economy, politics, constitution, society, and culture. There are always unintended consequences that attend a war. Especially in a republic or democracy, it is difficult to sustain a people's will to fight the long war. The thirty-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 from George Washington's administration to Benjamin Harrison's, in which about 1,000 men died in battle; and Vietnam, which left more than 58,000 American dead -- left a terribly mixed legacy.

Even as George W. Bush closes in on the record for having spent the most years at war, he has told the American people that he will be unable to conclude the War on Terror, that it will be a long struggle, and that the task will fall upon a future president to bring about its end. In the midst of the conflict, we cannot begin to fathom all the consequences, good and ill. As Shakespeare famously put it in *Julius Caesar*, "Cry havoc, and let slip the dogs of war."

(Question from Brian B. of Wheeling, West Virginia)

---

[1] For an overview of the many hundreds of times presidents have deployed the U.S. military, see Richard F. Grimmett, "Instances of Use of United States Armed Forces Abroad, 1798-2004" (Washington, DC: Library of Congress, Congressional Research Service report RL30172, October 5, 2004), available online at <http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/crs/rl30172.htm>, accessed September 28, 2006. For other lists see Barry Goldwater, "War Without Declaration: A Chronological List of 199 U.S. Military Hostilities Abroad Without a Declaration of War, 1798-1972," *Congressional Record*, V. 119, July 20, 1973, pp. S14174-14183; US Department of State, "Armed Actions Taken by the United States Without a Declaration of War, 1789-1967," Research Project 806A, Historical Studies Division, Bureau of Public Affairs; John M. Collins, *America's Small Wars* (New York: Brassey's, 1990). For useful context of such lists of military deployments, plus the legal authorization for various actions, see Francis D. Wormuth and Edwin B. Firmage, *To Chain the Dog of War: The War Power of Congress in History and Law* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1986), pp. 133-49.

[2] There is controversy over dating U.S. battlefield involvement in the Vietnam War. The convention is to date the origins of the U.S. at war in Vietnam in 1964 (after passage of the Tonkin Gulf Resolution) or 1965 (after Lyndon Johnson's large troop deployments were in country). A number of historians and journalists adhere to this convention because they are admirers of John F. Kennedy and try to spare JFK blame for the Vietnam War; they assign the beginning of true U.S. military action in Vietnam to Kennedy's successor, LBJ. This is to ignore important evidence. The escalation of U.S. involvement under JFK is striking. When JFK took over from Dwight D. Eisenhower, on January 20, 1961, there were 800 U.S. "advisers" in South Vietnam. At the time of his assassination in November 1963, there were 16,700 military personnel there, and our nation was fighting an undeclared war in Indochina. U.S. servicemen were assisting the South Vietnamese army (ARVN) in offensive operations, and providing air cover for ARVN troops. As David Anderson writes in the *Oxford Companion to American Military History*, "The Vietnam War was the longest deployment of U.S. forces in hostile action in the history of the American republic. Although there is no formal declaration of war from which to date U.S. entry, President John F. Kennedy's decision to send over 2,000 military advisers to South Vietnam in 1961 marked the beginning of twelve years of American military combat.... [Starting] In May 1961, Kennedy sent 400 U.S. Army Special Forces (Green Beret) troops into South Vietnam's Central Highlands to train Montagnard tribesmen in counterinsurgency tactics."

[3] Alan Axelrod, *America's Wars* (New York: John Wiley, 2002), pp. 501, 503.

[4] The number of casualties has been disputed. See Christopher Hitchens, "The Kiss of Henry," *The Nation*, April 30, 2001.

[5] Jean H. Baker, *James Buchanan* (New York: Times Books, 2004), p. 111.

[6] Axelrod, *America's Wars*, p. 319.

[7] Estimate from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, online at <http://www.va.gov/pressrel/amwars01.htm>, accessed September 28, 2006.