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War Presidents

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War Presidents

How many presidents have been at war longer than George W. Bush?

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, twice as long as Franklin Roosevelt waged World War II, and four times longer than Woodrow Wilson prosecuted World War I.

Two other presidents consumed by war were 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.

Most U.S. presidents have led the nation in war. Only five of the wars have been declared. Presidents have justified taking the nation into numerous undeclared wars based on Article 2 of the Constitution. Invariably they believed the war would be a relatively short affair -- and some were, like the Spanish-American War. But most conflicts lasted longer than anticipated.

Americans 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. As Shakespeare famously put it in Julius Caesar, "Cry havoc, and let slip the dogs of war."

(Question from Sarah Gosline, Grand Valley history major)



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