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## A Veterans Day Surprise

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# A Veterans Day Surprise

President George W. Bush sets a record.

With the results of Election 2006 in, our nation crossed two historic thresholds this week. For the first time in U.S. history, a second-term president watched both the House and Senate go to the opposition party during the midterm elections, signaling deep dissatisfaction with the status quo. Also for the first time, a woman is set to become Speaker of the House; Nancy Pelosi, the political foil of George W. Bush, is second in line to the Oval Office should something happen to the 43<sup>rd</sup> president whom she opposes.

How to explain this political earthquake? Perhaps by looking at a third historic threshold the nation crossed this week: As of today — the eve of Veterans Day — George W. Bush becomes the longest-serving wartime president in U.S. history, passing the previous record set by Lyndon Johnson during the Vietnam War.

This is quite a marker when you consider that the United States has spent most of its history fighting. Over the past 217 years, presidents have been backed by congressional declarations of war eleven times in five 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 additional deployments. Quite a few of the 42 men who have served as president have clocked considerable time in armed conflict.

George W. Bush now eclipses them all. Dating the current War on Terror back to 9/11, we see that the Bush administration has been at war for five years and two months. For time served as a wartime commander in chief he passes LBJ — not a felicitous comparison.

## G. W. BUSH COMPARED TO PRESIDENTS WHO FOUGHT DECLARED WARS

What is more, our 43<sup>rd</sup> president has spent significantly more time as a wartime commander in chief than the five presidents who asked Congress for, and received, an official declaration of war:

- Franklin Roosevelt spent three years, four 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 three 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.)

“Y qqf tqy "Y kuaqpa'ly ctvko g'vcpwg.'yj qwi j "f hlewa/vq'ecrewcvg.'o quvq' "vqqr'ncg'xqgt'y q'cpf 'c'j cri'f' gctu'qh'j ku'r tgu'f gpe {0J g'qtf gtf "j g' Rwpkxg'Gzr gf kkp'ci clpuv/Rcpej q'Xknc'lp'O g'zleq'f'itqo 'O ctej '3; 38'vniLcpwct { '3; 39+'cpf 'uqpp'chgy ctf 'uepv'F qwi j dq { u'lpv'Y qtrf "Y ct 'K' f'itqo 'Cr tki'3; 39'vniCto kuleg'F c { . 'P qxgo dgt'33.'3; 3: -0J g'ewj qtk gf 'o kixct { 'lqteg'qp'pwo gtqwu'qy gt'qeecukapu'dgy ggp'3; 36'cpf '3; 3: 'o'ht' gzco rrg.'y j gp'vj g'WU'lpvgtxgpgf 'lp'J ckk'Evdcc.'Rcpco c.'cpf 'P lectci wc=cpf 'lp'T wuukc.'q'j y ctvT wuukcp'tgxqmwkqpc'itqo 'Cwi wuv'3; 3: 'vni Cr tki'3.'3; 42+0

• Ico gu'MDRqmly cu'c'y ctvko g'eqo o c'p'f'gt'lp'ej lgh'ht'rguu'vj cp'vy q'f' gctu'f'v'lp' 'itqo 'Cr tki'46.'3: 68.'yj g'qwdt'gcm'qh'vj g'O g'zlecp/Co g'klecp' Y ct.'vni'fgdtwct { '4.'3: 6: . 'y j gp'vj g'v'gtcv'qh'I wcf'cnr'g'J kf'ci q'y cu'uki pgf.'gpf'ipi 'j qu'k'k'kgu+0

" ; "K "6I G< '7 CAD5F98 'HC 'DF9G-89BH'G <C : CI ; <H897 @ F98 'K 5FG

Cv'hxg'f' gctu.'y q'o qpj u'cpf 'eqw'v'lp'i . 'I gqti g'Y 0Dwuj au'y ctvko g'vcpwg'ku'pqy 'uki p'k'lecpv'f' 'hpi gt'j cp<

• 'Vj qo cu'Lgh'gtu'pau'htw'f' gctu'qh'hi j v'lp'i 'yj g'v'kr q'k'cep'Y ct'ci clpuv'vj g'Dctdct { 'ucv'gu'lp'P q'tvj 'C'ht'lec'f'itqo 'yj g'ur t'kpi 'qh'3: 23.'y j gp'v'kr q'k'ca' twgt'wp'q'h'lekm'f' g'nc'rt'gf' y ct'ci clpuv'vj g'ht'f'i n'pi 'WU'v'ni'c'r'g'ce'g'v'gtcv'f' y cu'uki pgf 'qp'Lwpg'6.'3: 27=

- Abraham Lincoln's four 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;
- Richard Nixon's four 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 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 is where he decided to draw the line.

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

- Bill Clinton's time as a wartime president 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 ten-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 antiaircraft fire and radar locks on American aircraft.
- The current president's father, George H. W. Bush, was at war for less than right 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. 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 (Vietnam Veterans Memorial) in Washington, D.C. 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 there 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...."
- 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.

#### 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 Native Americans at some point. The longest-running conflicts were against the Seminoles east of the Mississippi, and Apaches west of the river. But none of them involved the massive, sustained effort that would mark twentieth-century warfare.

One early president whose wartime tenure approached that of the current president is George Washington, who spent nearly five 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.

Over the next century, more than 1,000 servicemen (and many more civilians) would die in the Hundred Years War against the Indians.

#### LETTING SLIP THE DOGS OF WAR

History is always ironic. In the foregoing analysis, 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 an intractable conflict. 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 a terribly mixed legacy.

Even as George W. Bush was setting the record for the most years at war as a U.S. president, he told the American people that he would be unable to conclude the War on Terror, that it would be a long struggle, and that the task would fall upon a future commander in chief to bring about its end. In the midst of the conflict, he and the nation could not 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."

Havoc visited the Republican party on Tuesday.

– *Gleaves Whitney is director of the Hauenstein Center for Presidential Studies at Grand Valley State University.*