

10-22-2004

Wartime Presidents

Gleaves Whitney
Grand Valley State University

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/ask_gleaves

ScholarWorks Citation

Whitney, Gleaves, "Wartime Presidents" (2004). *Ask Gleaves*. 59.
https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/ask_gleaves/59

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.

Wartime Presidents

How have presidents in wartime fared in seeking a second term?

When the United States is at war, Americans don't like to change horses mid-stream. Six presidents have run for re-election when U.S. forces were involved in blockades, naval battles, or major ground operations - and in each case the incumbent won. During the first Barbary War, voters returned Thomas Jefferson to office. During the War of 1812, they sent James Madison back to office (1812). During the Civil War, they returned Abraham Lincoln (1864). During World War II, they kept Franklin Roosevelt (1944). During the Vietnam War, they retained Richard Nixon (1972). And during the Iraq War, they kept George W. Bush (2004).



The lesson is, when wartime presidents seek re-election, Americans keep them. But there is a twist; for the pattern to hold, the president has to seek re-election. Two presidents declined to run for re-election because they were so downcast by war: Harry Truman did not seek re-nomination in 1952 because Americans had grown weary of the Korean War, and Lyndon Johnson did not seek re-nomination in 1968 for a similar reason during the Vietnam War. (Coincidentally, both Truman and Johnson were Democrats who had become president upon the death of their predecessor, then won an election on their own, then declined to run four years later during a major war when they were afraid of being jettisoned by voters; indeed, in both cases voters chose the candidates -- that old team, Eisenhower and Nixon -- from the ranks of Republicans. Does history repeat itself?)

Also, if major combat operations have ceased, it's hard to discern any meaningful re-election pattern. While some presidents win big after a war (William McKinley in 1900 after the Spanish-American War), others are thrown out of office (John Adams in 1800 after the Quasi-War with France, and George H. W. Bush in 1992 after the Persian Gulf War). After still other wars, the commander in chief's successor was rebuffed (as happened in 1848 and 1920).

In November 2004, George W. Bush was the sixth president to seek re-election when the U.S. was conducting major combat operations. Because history so often is prologue, his re-election fit the pattern.

(Question from WUOM listener [Ann Arbor, Michigan])