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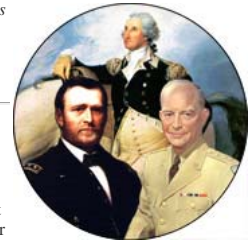
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Presidents and the Armed Forces

By Gleaves Whitney

Following are excerpts from two articles by Hauenstein Center director Gleaves Whitney about U.S. presidents and war -- one focused on the president's constitutional role as commander-in-chief, and the other on presidents who served in the military during wars.



+ From Ask Gleaves, ["Presidents who fought in wars"](#)

Americans like their presidents to bring military experience to the office, the more wartime experience the better. As President George W. Bush observed before the Iraq War, "Sending Americans into battle is the most profound decision a president can make." Of the 42 men who have been president, 28 served in at least one war prior to becoming commander in chief; 4 of them served in two wars; 11 of them attained the rank of general. The list of presidents with wartime military experience is impressive:

Revolutionary War

- George Washington
- James Madison
- James Monroe
- Andrew Jackson

War of 1812

- Andrew Jackson
- William Henry Harrison
- John Tyler
- Zachary Taylor

Black Hawk War

- Abraham Lincoln

Mexican War

- Zachary Taylor
- Millard Fillmore
- Franklin Pierce
- Ulysses S. Grant

Civil War

- Andrew Johnson
- Ulysses S. Grant
- Rutherford B. Hayes
- James Garfield
- Chester A. Arthur
- Benjamin Harrison
- William McKinley

Spanish-American War

- Theodore Roosevelt

World War I

- Harry S. Truman
- Dwight D. Eisenhower

World War II

- Dwight D. Eisenhower
- John F. Kennedy
- Lyndon B. Johnson
- Richard M. Nixon
- Gerald R. Ford
- Ronald Reagan
- George H. W. Bush

Korean War

- Jimmy Carter

Vietnam War

- George W. Bush

Some wars were veritable incubators of future presidents: fully one-third of our presidents served in either the Civil War or Second World War. The four men who served in two wars before becoming president are Andrew Jackson, Zachary Taylor, U.S. Grant, and Dwight D. Eisenhower. It will be interesting to see if any future American presidents are veterans of the Persian Gulf War (1991) or the Iraq War (2003-2004).

No doubt the president with the most colorful military career was Andrew Jackson. Already as a 13-year-old boy, he was serving in the Continental Army as a messenger. Jackson was captured by the British and held as a prisoner of war, the only future president to have experienced that. He went on to distinguish himself in the U.S.'s second war against the British -- the War of 1812 -- dealing a decisive (if unnecessary) blow to them in the Battle of New Orleans.

More than one-fourth of our presidents attained the rank of general prior to becoming commander in chief. The eleven in that category are Washington, Jackson, W. H. Harrison, Taylor, A. Johnson, Grant, Hayes, Garfield, Arthur, B. Harrison, and Eisenhower. Americans love their war heroes, but it is debatable whether generalship is the best preparation for the presidency. Any individual who goes from the one peak to the other will face a steep learning curve. Michael Korda observes that Truman "would remark of Eisenhower that he would never know what hit him when he reached his desk in the White House -- as a general, when he gave an order it would be obeyed instantly, but in the White House he would give an order and nothing would happen. The same phenomenon hit Grant almost immediately. He too, like Ike, was accustomed to instant obedience, not to the political process of building up support for a policy in Congress, or appealing for support to the public, or wooing newspapermen to obtain it. He expected at the very least the backing of his own party, without realizing that everything in politics has to be negotiated -- at a price."

The U.S. Constitution (Article 2, section 2) designates the president as commander in chief of the Army, Navy, and state militia (National Guard) under specific circumstances, but does not make prior military service a prerequisite for the office. The following men did not serve in the military before being elected president:

- John Adams
- Thomas Jefferson
- John Quincy Adams
- Martin Van Buren
- James K. Polk
- James Buchanan
- Grover Cleveland
- William H. Taft
- Woodrow Wilson
- Warren Harding
- Calvin Coolidge
- Herbert Hoover
- Franklin D. Roosevelt
- Bill Clinton

A final thought. Eisenhower famously said, in the context of the Cold War, "God help the nation when it has a president who doesn't know as much about the military as I do."

+ From Ask Gleaves, "[All the presidents' roles](#)"

Commander in Chief. The Preamble to the Constitution observes that one purpose of government is to "provide for the common defence." The framers of the Constitution believed that civilian control of the military is a cornerstone to liberty in times of war and peace. General George Washington demonstrated this commitment at Newburgh, New York, when he had to bring to heel insubordinate officers who wanted to march on Congress.

The nation was still in its youth when a series of crises forced our first four presidents to act in the role of commander in chief. Washington had to put down the Whiskey Rebellion in western Pennsylvania. John Adams had to wage the Quasi War against the French in the Caribbean. Thomas Jefferson had to go after the Barbary Pirates in the Mediterranean. And James Madison had to finish the War for Independence from Great Britain by waging the War of 1812 (America's first congressionally declared war). Our first presidents sported swords on ceremonial occasions; now they go to rallies with the "football," the briefcase that contains nuclear codes and other information needed in a military crisis.

No other duty has caused our presidents more anguish than being commander in chief in time of war. Every president has said the most wrenching decisions he faced, by far, involved sending men into battle knowing that somebody's son, brother, or father wouldn't make it home. A stark photograph of Lyndon Johnson captures the agony of being a wartime commander in chief. LBJ is slumped over in a chair in the Cabinet Room, his head down; a reel-to-reel tape recorder is in front of him. The photo captured LBJ listening to a recording by his son-in-law, Charles Robb, who was a captain in the U.S. Marines serving in Vietnam. "When I left for Vietnam," Captain Robb explained, "the president gave me a small battery-operated tape recorder ... so that I could send Lynda occasional recordings. I think [those tapes] gave him some of the texture of the war at company levels."^[6] And that photograph gives Americans some of the texture of being a wartime commander in chief.

There is often an idealism to which presidents appeal to justify American war-making. While Jefferson, a passivist, spoke of expanding the Empire of Liberty, it was Abraham Lincoln who truly infused war with transcendent aims. To Lincoln it was not enough to preserve the Union; by 1863 he also meant to emancipate all black slaves on American soil. To Woodrow Wilson it was not enough to go to war to defend United States interests against German aggression; we had to "make the world safe for democracy." To Ronald Reagan it was not enough to maintain detente with the Soviet Union; communism was an evil system destined for the dustbin of history; we had to help liberate the people in its shackles. To George W. Bush it is not enough to defend the U.S. against jihadists; we have to establish democratic governance in Afghanistan, Iraq, and elsewhere in the Middle East.

Imagine if the president were Ghengis Khan, a law unto himself. His ability to make war would be infinitely easier than a U.S. president's ability, hemmed in as he is by constitutional, institutional, legal, and democratic restraints. Indeed, the commander in chief cannot appropriate the funds to wage war; for that he must work with Congress. The commander in chief cannot be indifferent to the law when he wages war; he has federal courts with which to contend and ultimately the threat of impeachment and removal from office. The commander in chief cannot have a tin ear when it comes to public opinion in times of war; as the people exercise their sovereignty every four years, he must respect the public and the media who help shape their opinion, assuming he or his party wants to stay in power. (See the Ask Gleaves column, "Wartime presidents," for historical trends regarding wartime presidents running for re-election.)

The following story illustrates the limits on a president's power, even during wartime. Since 9/11, President George W. Bush has been leading the fight against Al Qaeda. He wanted terrorist detainees at Guantanamo to be tried as war criminals. But shortly after Bush's re-election, a "federal judge ruled ... that President Bush had both overstepped his constitutional bounds and improperly brushed aside the Geneva Conventions in establishing military commissions to try detainees at the United States naval base here [at Guantanamo Bay] as war criminals."

It was a blow to the president, who is trying to win a war. A spokesman at the U.S. Department of Justice explained the administration's position: "The process struck down by the district court today [November 8, 2004] was carefully crafted to protect America from terrorists while affording those charged with violations of the laws of war with fair process, and the department will make every effort to have this process restored through appeal.... By conferring protected legal status under the Geneva Conventions on members of Al Qaeda, the judge has put terrorism on the same legal footing as legitimate methods of waging war."^[7] (See the Ask Gleaves column, "Bush Doctrine and Roosevelt Corollary," for pre-emptive wars in U.S. history.)