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Presidents Who Fought in Wars

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Presidents Who Fought in Wars

Which of our commanders in chief had wartime military experience prior to becoming president?*

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."^[1] 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 (Commander in Chief, Continental Army)
- James Madison (Col., Orange County Militia)
- James Monroe (Lt. Col., Continental Army)
- Andrew Jackson (Courier, Continental Army)

War of 1812

- Andrew Jackson (Maj. Gen., U.S. Army)
- William Henry Harrison (Maj. Gen., U.S. Army)
- John Tyler (Capt., Virginia Militia)
- Zachary Taylor (Maj., U.S. Army)

Black Hawk War

- Abraham Lincoln (Capt., Illinois Militia)
- Zachary Taylor (Col., U.S. Army)

Mexican War

- Zachary Taylor (Maj. Gen., U.S. Army)
- Franklin Pierce (Brig. Gen., U.S. Army)
- Ulysses S. Grant (Capt., U.S. Army)

Civil War

- Andrew Johnson (Brig. Gen., U.S. Army)
- Ulysses S. Grant (Gen. Army, U.S. Army)
- Rutherford B. Hayes (Bvt. Maj. Gen., U.S. Army)
- James Garfield (Maj. Gen., U.S. Army)
- Chester A. Arthur (Qt. Gen., U.S. Army)
- Benjamin Harrison (Bvt. Brig. Gen., U.S. Army)
- William McKinley (Bvt. Maj., U.S. Army)
- Millard Fillmore (Maj., U.S. Army)

Spanish-American War

- Theodore Roosevelt (Col., U.S. Army)

World War I

- Harry S. Truman (Maj. Gen., Missouri Army National Guard)
- Dwight D. Eisenhower (Lt. Col., U.S. Army)

World War II

- Dwight D. Eisenhower (Gen. Army, U.S. Army)
- John F. Kennedy (Lt., U.S. Navy)
- Lyndon B. Johnson (Cdr., U.S. Navy)
- Richard M. Nixon (Cdr., U.S. Navy)
- Gerald R. Ford (Lt. Cdr., U.S. Navy)
- Ronald Reagan (Capt., U.S. Army Air Forces)
- George H. W. Bush (Lt., U.S. Navy)

Korean War

- Jimmy Carter (Lt., U.S. Navy)

Vietnam War

- George W. Bush (1st Lt., Texas Air National Guard)

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."^[2]

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 ^[3]

- 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."
(*Question from Ted M. of Toledo, Ohio*)

* Full question: I'm a veteran of World War II, and this Memorial Day I am wondering which of our commanders in chief had wartime military experience prior to becoming president.

[1] George W. Bush, State of the Union address, January 28, 2003.

[2] Michael Korda, *Ulysses S. Grant: The Unlikely Hero* (New York: Harper-Collins, 2004), pp. 117-18.

[3] Polk reached the rank of colonel in the U.S. Army during peace time.