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Presidential Greatness as an Attribute of Warmaking

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The founders of the nation were acutely aware of the penchant among executives to pursue war as a means of achieving fame and glory. Scholars, like presidents, have assumed a strong correlation between presidential tenure during war and presidential greatness. That assumption must necessarily rest on either the decision to go to war or on the president's conduct of war, or on both considerations. This essay contends that, contrary to the assumption of a linkage between wartime service and presidential greatness, very few presidents have achieved greatness through war, and that for others, the path of war has been a path to disappointment and devastation.

There lies behind the title of this essay a working assumption among students of the presidency of a direct correlation between presidential tenure during war and presidential greatness. President John F. Kennedy, according to Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., "observed that war made it easier for a president to achieve greatness" (Schlesinger 2003, 18). No doubt the assumption has been encouraged by the practice of presidential rankings undertaken by political scientists and historians who, with some slight variation, typically have rated as "great" or "near-great" twelve men who constitute the top tier of chief executives and are associated with warfare: Abraham Lincoln, Franklin Roosevelt, George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, Andrew Jackson, Harry Truman, John Adams, Lyndon Johnson, Dwight Eisenhower, and James Polk (Murray and Blessing 1983). To the extent that scholars have drawn a correlation between wartime presidents and presidential greatness, some consideration must necessarily have been given to either the decision to go to war or to the president's conduct of it, or perhaps to both factors. In any event, it is difficult to

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contemplate the premise of a correlation between wartime tenure and presidential greatness without recognition of at least one of the factors as a basis for evaluation and judgment.

The purpose of this essay is to explore, both analytically and historically, the premise of presidential greatness as an attribute of warmaking. The subject is intrinsically interesting, as measured by both the attention devoted to it in scholarly works and the broad range of coffeehouse rants and ruminations that it engenders. There is, as well, an utterly pragmatic point to it: power. For with distinction, honor, and glory, whether long lasting or merely transitory, there is opportunity. A popular president can draw upon the well of appreciation and admiration for the purpose of effectuating his agenda. This capability has not been lost on advisers to President George W. Bush, who believed that his deep wellspring of popular adoration, gained by his status as a wartime president, would be a major weapon in his 2004 reelection campaign (Balz 2003, A1). And where there is power, there are seekers—hence the broad and deep interest in the issue of presidential greatness.

This work is conceived as an essay because an adequate examination of this subject exceeds the capacity of a single article. “The essay,” Felix Frankfurter once wrote, “is tentative, reflective, suggestive, contradictory, and incomplete. It mirrors the perversities and complexities of life” (quoted in Casper 1997, 6). This essay is not without a point of view, however, because the subject is one of central importance to the study of the presidency and constitutional government. The question of the relationship between executive use of force and a reputation of greatness is, of course, older than the Republic itself and, indeed, plumbs the depths of history. The founders of the nation, like the Framers of the Constitution, engaged in an extended, thoughtful, and penetrating examination and analysis of the question of whether an individual might achieve some measure of fame and glory through the use of military force. Their assessments and conclusions, as we shall see, represented driving forces behind the design and configuration of the War Clause of the Constitution. Various presidents and their advisers, moreover, have viewed the use of military power as a means of achieving both immediate popularity and historical standing.

Yet, questions remain. Does the historical record support an assumption of a significant correlation between presidential employment of force and presidential greatness? What conclusions may be drawn about the “success” of unilateral executive warmaking ventures? What, indeed, is the relationship, if any, between executive use of force and the national interest? These, and related questions, constitute the focal point of this essay.

It is argued here that there is no significant correlation between presidential greatness and the use of force. Moreover, whereas presidential acts of force are apt to boost a president’s public approval rating in the short term, the long-term gain derived from the act is difficult to assess and, in any case, may be negative or negligible. Unilateral executive warmaking may well undercut and damage presidential reputation. Worse, wars undertaken by presidents without congressional authorization may shatter a presidency. Finally, presidential use of force for questionable political motives or cynical reasons may not be consistent with the nation’s interests.

Executive Use of Force and Fame: Thoughts from the Founding

Since the beginning of time, or so it seems, executive leaders—Julius Caesar, Alexander the Great, and Napoleon, among scores of others—have sought to burnish their image, heighten their stature, garner fame and glory, and secure wealth and legacy through the use of force. The Framers of the Constitution were keen students of history and understood the intoxication of power and the delirium of ambition, the utter incapacity of men to withstand the temptation of power, which the Framers viewed as corruptive, malignant, and pernicious, a force that constituted a persistent threat to law and liberty. They knew, too, that among the passions of men, dreams of military glory represented a crowning achievement, and that Americans were not immune to the allure of fame, honor, and power. As James Madison observed, “it is in war, finally, that laurels are to be gathered; and it is the executive brow that they are to encircle. The strongest passions and most dangerous weaknesses of the human breast, ambition, avarice, vanity, the honorable or venial love of fame, are all in conspiracy against the desire and duty of peace” (Hunt 1900-10, 6: 152).

George Logan, a well-known Quaker, echoed the sentiments of the founding generation when he observed in 1798 that “wars created by ambitious executives have been undertaken more for their own aggrandizement and power than for the protection of their country” (DeConde 2000, 18). And while the Framers were hopeful that future presidents would possess at least a modicum of republican virtue, they were nonetheless wary of their ability to fend off the temptations of power and avoid seduction by fame and glory. Fearful that a president might plunge the nation into carnage or distress for reasons having little to do with merit or the national interest but on other, less virtuous grounds—personal agendas, political motives, and the lure of fortune, among them—the Framers granted to Congress the sole and exclusive authority to initiate military hostilities, great or small, on behalf of the American people (Adler 1988; Fisher 1995). Founding documents and materials are rife with references to the Framers’ fear of unilateral executive power in warring and foreign affairs, a fear rooted in their doubts about the ability of the executive to perceive the national interest in matters involving war and peace. Alexander Hamilton’s explanation in *Federalist No. 75* of the Constitutional Convention’s refusal to vest in the president unilateral authority to make treaties applies with equal force to the authority to initiate war:

The history of human virtue does not warrant that exalted opinion of human nature which would make it wise in a nation to commit interests of so delicate and momentous a kind, as those which concern its intercourse with the rest of the world, to the sole disposal of a magistrate created and circumstanced as would be a president of the United States (Hamilton, *Federalist 75*, 487).

In order to allay fears that the Convention had created an embryonic monarchy, Hamilton launched into a minute analysis of presidential power in *Federalist No. 69*, and noted that nothing was “to be feared” from an executive “with the confined authorities of the President” (Hamilton, *Federalist 69*, 448), a point reaffirmed by George

Washington, who stated: "The powers of the Executive of the U. States are more definite, and better understood perhaps than those of almost any other Country" (quoted in DeConde 2000, 16).

The widespread fear of executive power was striking in its expression of opposition to a presidential warmaking power, principally on the grounds that an executive might plunge his nation into war when it did not serve the nation's interest. An executive with "spirit and ambition," John Adams wrote, "looks forward with satisfaction to the prospect of foreign war," or other "wished-for-occasions presenting themselves, in which he may draw upon himself the attention and admiration of mankind" (Works of John Adams 1969, 6: 260). The distrust of the executive, which derived from the widespread acknowledgment of his thirst for glory, domination, and power, colored most of the contemporaneous essays, tracts, and speeches. In Federalist No. 4, John Jay, whose experience as Secretary of Foreign Affairs under the Articles of Confederation and, later, as an ambassador, rendered him more sensitive than most to executive ambition and international intrigue, stated: "[A]bsolute monarchs will often make war when their nations are to get nothing by it, but for purposes and objects merely personal, such as, a thirst for glory. . . . These and a variety of motives, which affect only the mind of the Sovereign, often lead him to engage in wars not sanctified by justice, or the voice and interests of his people" (Jay, Federalist 4, 18).

Hamilton, no stranger to intrigue himself, could write in Federalist No. 6 with some measure of detachment that some wars "take their origins in private passions," and that leaders "have in too many instances abused the confidence they possessed; and assuming the pretext of some public motive, have not scrupled to sacrifice the national tranquillity to personal advantage, or personal gratification" (Hamilton, Federalist 6, 28). In sum, as Madison pointed out in his stint as "Helvidius" in 1793, the passions, ambition, and thirst for glory and fame that seemed to control the executive rendered him unfit to make decisions on issues of war and peace. In terms that echoed Hamilton's observations in Federalist No. 75, Madison explained that "the trust and the temptation would be too great for any one man. . . ." In words made famous through their repetition, Madison stated: "War is in fact the true nurse of executive aggrandizement. . . . Hence, it has grown into an axiom that the executive is the department of power and distinguished by its propensity to war: hence, it is the practice of all states, in proportion as they are free, to disarm the propensity of its influence." Accordingly, Madison praised the decision of the delegates to the Convention for the "wisdom" that they exhibited in their decision that "confides the question of war or peace to the legislature, and not to the executive department" (Hunt 1906, 6: 108-109).

The Framers' decision to vest the war power in Congress rejected the English model, in which the Monarchy controlled the war power. The rejection of the Royal Prerogative was readily defended by James Wilson, second in importance to Madison as an architect of the Constitution, for the simple reason that it was not a suitable guide for a republic (Farrand, Records, 1: 65-66). The great significance that the Framers attributed to the fundamental shift in the control of the war power from the executive to the legislative, as recognized by Wilson in a speech before the Pennsylvania State Ratifying Convention, was that wars undertaken by monarchs for less than meritorious

and, indeed, often indefensible reasons, would not be undertaken in a republic, which would not venture into war unless it served the national interest. Wilson stated:

This system will not hurry us into war; it is calculated to guard against it. It will not be in the power of a single man, or a single body of men, to involve us in such distress; for the important power of declaring war is vested in the legislature at large: this declaration must be made with the concurrence of the House of Representatives: from this circumstance we may draw a certain conclusion that nothing but our interest can draw us into war (Elliot 1861, 2: 528).

The Convention's stunning departure from the English model for the management and conduct of foreign policy, as manifested not only in the placement of the war power in Congress but in the wholesale transfer of foreign affairs authority from the executive to the legislature, reflected the Framers' understanding that the legislature was better able to perceive the public interest. The Framers' preference for collective decision making was enthusiastically embraced throughout the nation. Patrick Henry's speech to the Virginia Ratifying Convention was illustrative:

A republic has this advantage over a monarchy, that its wars are generally founded on more just grounds. A republic can never enter into a war, unless it be a national war—unless it be approved of, or desired by the whole community. . . . I call also for an example, when a republic has been engaged in a war contrary to the wishes of its people. There are thousands of examples, where the ambition of its Prince [has] precipitated a nation into the most destructive war (quoted in Treanor 1997, 741).

The Framers' decision to vest the war power in Congress represented a thoroughly republican response to the problems posed by executive warmaking. It was assumed that the legislature, through the process of solemn deliberation and discussion, would more readily perceive the nation's interests, particularly on crucial matters such as those involving war and peace. They had recognized that executive warmaking, without constitutional restraints, was an invitation to disaster, for it placed the nation at the mercy of a president's ambitions and passions, including, perhaps, an overweening interest in his historical reputation.

It is difficult to exaggerate the wisdom exhibited on this score, and the Framers probably believed that they had succeeded in saving the nation from an impetuous executive. By all accounts, they were entitled to believe that the transfer of the war power from the executive to the legislature had, indeed, in Thomas Jefferson's phrase, chained "The Dog of war" (Boyd 1954, 15: 397). Perhaps they could not have anticipated, in their time and place, the demise of Congress and the rise of presidential government, marked significantly by executive usurpation of the war power for ends that they probably believed had been sufficiently checked by their constitutional measures. By the end of the 20th century, however, it had become clear that presidents perceived warmaking not merely as a means of achieving, at the very least, temporary boosts in public opinion polls, but also as means of acquiring lasting fame and glory and, indeed, a place in history.

Presidential Warmaking and Presidential Greatness

There is, as we have seen, a long and widely held assumption which asserts the idea that the road to greatness runs through the battlefield. Madison, it will be recalled, had written that "among the passions of men, dreams of military glory represented a crowning achievement. . . ." Hamilton's contemporaries observed that he had aggressively sought a full-throttled war with France in 1798, rather than the limited military activities that characterized the "Quasi-War." Hamilton, it seems, had hoped to engineer the creation of an army of 50,000 men, which he hoped to lead as its commander in chief. Hamilton, it has been observed, "was undoubtedly motivated by his ambition and quest for military fame (Editorial Note, Hamilton Papers, 22: 5, quoted in Treanor 1997, 751). But peace was "pernicious," John Adams wrote, to Hamilton's "views of ambition and domination. It extinguished his hopes of being at the head of a victorious army of fifty thousand men, without which, he used to say, he had no idea of having a head upon his shoulders for four years longer" (Adams 1969, 9: 309-10).

Abraham Lincoln believed that President Polk's instigation of the Mexican-American War derived from his quest for "military glory—that attractive rainbow, that rises in showers of blood—that serpent's eye that charms to destroy" (quoted in Donald 1995, 124). President Richard Nixon thought that war was the surest path to lasting fame. Nixon, an ardent admirer of Winston Churchill, said that by virtue of his "brilliant leadership in WW II," the Prime Minister had become "a mythical hero who belongs to legend as much as reality, the largest human being of our time" (Nixon 1990, 27). It was observed by Admiral William Crowe, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, that President George H.W. Bush's interest in his historical reputation was a motivating factor behind the Gulf War. Admiral Crowe stated: "To be a great president you have to have a war. All the great presidents have had their wars" (Woodward 1991, 6). For some presidents, the absence of war represented a deprivation, a missed opportunity that was irretrievable. Thus, as Alan Brinkley said of Theodore Roosevelt:

Theodore Roosevelt complained frequently that his times had denied him the greatness to which he had aspired and of which he considered himself capable. "A man has to take advantage of his opportunities," he said in 1910 after leaving office, "but the opportunities have to come. If there is not the war, you don't get the great general; if there is not the great occasion, you don't get the great statesman; if Lincoln had lived in times of peace, no one would know his name now." The great disappointment of Roosevelt's life was that World War I came after he had left office, that as he saw it, Woodrow Wilson and not he had the real opportunity for greatness (quoted in Treanor 1997, 764).

Unless the achievement of greatness is nothing more than a matter of good fortune and timing—residency in the White House when a great event occurs—which would reduce fame to mere association rather than meritorious leadership, the attribute of greatness would seem to apply to either the decision to go to war or to the president's conduct of it in his capacity as commander in chief. For purposes of this essay, we can utilize the analysis of Professors Holmes and Elder (Holmes and Elder 1989), which examines and compares presidents in the top and bottom tiers on the basis of several

indicators, including years in office and troop commitments without a declaration of war. As we might have expected, those twelve presidents who are ranked in the top tier experienced significantly more war years than those rated in the bottom tier. However, when it comes to troop commitments, Professors Holmes and Elder's findings "do not show significant differences between the top and bottom groups" (Holmes and Elder 1989, 543).

Let us consider the implications of these findings for the ascription of presidential greatness. If the attainment of lasting fame is integrally related to the decision to initiate or commence war, then the acclaim must be attributed, at least in the United States, to either Congress or the president, or perhaps to both. A president who recommends war to Congress, as Madison did in the War of 1812, or as Roosevelt did in World War II, may be acclaimed for his vision and for his leadership and statesmanship qualities, but in all likelihood he will be forced to share the glory with the legislative branch. It may occur that a president, persuaded that war represents the best course for America, will be forced to spend his considerable capital and exert all of his leadership abilities and rhetorical skills to persuade a reluctant Congress to authorize war, but this has not happened to date.

It would be far more likely, given executive practice in the United States (at least in the last half of the 20th century), for a president to initiate war or resort to the use of force unilaterally, rather than awaiting congressional authorization. The instances and locales in which this has occurred constitute a lengthy list and they span the globe, from Korea and Vietnam and Grenada, to Panama and Iraq and Kosovo. On the other hand, the decision to go to war may not be made by either the president or Congress. A foreign nation may thrust the United States into a state of war, as Japan did when it attacked Pearl Harbor. Or, an internal rebellion, such as the effort mounted by southern states in what became the Civil War, may require the president, as it did Abraham Lincoln, to respond to a military attack on government property, which occurred with the firing on Fort Sumter, to respond as commander in chief as though the invading army were a foreign army. In either case, the decision for war had already been made, and it had been imposed on the United States.

In light of the historical record, however, it is unlikely that any of the American presidents whose names have appeared on the lists of "great" or "near-great" earned their rankings by making a decision to go to war. On the contrary, the decision to initiate war has on two recent occasions—Harry Truman in Korea and Lyndon Johnson in Vietnam—proven ill advised, at least from the standpoint that "their" wars seriously damaged their historical reputations and their political parties.

It would seem, therefore, that the attribution to a president of "greatness" during wartime must be derived from the conduct of the war—the decisions, troop deployments and tactics, and strategies undertaken and pursued. Surely there is some prospect for historical admiration in this realm. The decisions, for example, to commit huge resources, billions of dollars and hundreds of thousands of troops, to Vietnam or to the Persian Gulf, raise the stakes for the nation. Similarly, the decision to use an unprecedented weapon of mass destruction, such as the atomic bomb against Japan, virtually guarantees an ongoing assessment and reassessment, across generational lines, of its rel-

ative wisdom, desirability, and efficacy. There is little doubt that wartime determinations on matters of strategy and policy, whether ordered directly by the commander in chief or tacitly approved by him through acts of delegation of decision-making authority to admirals and generals, raise the prospect, as Madison wrote of "laurels encircling the executive brow." And it probably is not a matter of great significance whether a brilliant battlefield success has its origin in a general's plan or whether it is attributable to presidential recognition of a general's brilliance, as in either case, the success ultimately will be attributed to the president.

Presidential Rankings

Let us consider the extent to which it may be said that the "top twelve" presidents, as ranked in the Murray and Blessing study of 1983, owe their historical stature to wartime decisions and military leadership. One statistical indicator of presidential greatness might be represented by the number of years that the nation was at war during the tenure of a particular president. This may be measured by two factors: a congressional declaration of war and troop commitments. The application of the first criterion—declaration of war—will prove instructive. There were no declarations of war during the presidencies of Washington, Jefferson, Theodore Roosevelt, Jackson, Adams, Johnson, Eisenhower, and Polk. Of course, Congress issued several declarations of war while Wilson and Franklin Roosevelt served in the White House. Congress did not declare war during Lincoln's tenure, but war was inflicted upon the nation by the Confederacy. The absence of a declaration of war does not preclude a president from becoming a great wartime executive, but it narrows the definitional factors that could account for wartime greatness.

It could not be said of Washington, for example, that his stature as a great president is attributable to wartime decisions, because the nation was not at war while he served as chief executive. Nor was the nation at war under Jefferson, Theodore Roosevelt, Jackson, or Eisenhower, unless we count the dispatch of a few ships or the deployment of a few troops here and there, but such consideration would not seem a promising prospect for the attainment of political immortality. No doubt other factors account for their historical reputation. Washington, for example, has been recognized as a first-rate administrator, a man of exceptional integrity and an excellent judge of character and talent. Moreover, it would be silly to ignore the likelihood that his reputation preceded his ascension to the presidency.

Something on the same order may be said of Jefferson. It is probably just to accord him as "great" for the contributions for which he hoped to be remembered, as set forth in his epigraph: author of the Declaration of Independence, framer of the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom, and founder of the University of Virginia. Jefferson's accomplishments as president are, of course, historically significant, and deservedly acknowledged as great and long lasting. He transformed the presidency into a partisan office and the president into the leader of his party; indeed, his strong partisan leadership of Congress constituted one of his major contributions to the presidency. The Louisiana

Purchase was undoubtedly the greatest real estate deal in the nation's history. Jefferson wondered whether he had exceeded his constitutional authority and briefly considered the idea of seeking a constitutional amendment to perfect its legality, but he was properly disabused of the need for such action. Jefferson could not be called a great wartime president. The dispatch of a naval squadron as a defensive measure to protect American commerce from the raids of the Barbary pirates does not even constitute a blip on the reputation radar screen and, indeed, the United States had been coping with the pirates for as long as any of the Founders could recall. Moreover, the embargo was not his idea, although he did slowly come to embrace it.

The remaining presidents in the top tier who did not hold office when the nation was at war—Theodore Roosevelt, Jackson, and Eisenhower—also deployed ships and troops, but there seems to be no evidence to suggest that their military decisions would clothe them with high historical standing. Roosevelt gained great attention from his flamboyant posturing, but he was justly regarded as a leading progressive thinker, a man of arts and letters, a trust buster, and, of course, a man with vision who understood the need for a nation to protect its environment and wilderness through a system of national parks. Jackson's reputation as a general preceded his service as president, and for his tenure in office he is best remembered for his efforts to "democratize" the political system. And Eisenhower, of course, was a truly great wartime general and hero, but not a great wartime president. To his credit, Eisenhower refused to engage the nation in military hostilities on the basis of unilateral decisions. He was committed to collective decision making and to congressional control of the war power. In 1954, he rejected entreaties to become involved in war in Indochina (Fisher 1995, 104). Like Washington, he came to office suffused in greatness and, like Washington, his deserved reputation as a fine chief executive awaited the research efforts of revisionist scholars such as Fred Greenstein (Greenstein 1982).

What may be said of the criteria for attributing greatness to the remaining members of the top-tier presidents, Lincoln, Franklin Roosevelt, Wilson, Truman, Adams, and Polk?

Lincoln's presidency was unique. Perhaps only Franklin Roosevelt, among all the other presidents, could be said to have had the experience necessary to truly appreciate the depth of the dilemmas that Lincoln faced, but then again there has been only *one* civil war. Military necessity was the driving force behind his presidency; indeed, it was unavoidable. Aside from the American war, his administration faced few foreign policy problems and no additional military conflicts or crises. The attribution of greatness to Lincoln as a wartime president is virtually a matter of definition, as all of his decisions and actions, such as the Emancipation Proclamation, represented a reaction to the stresses and strains of the Civil War. As we have observed, the Lincoln presidency was *sui generis*, and it thus defies comparisons.

As a counterweight to the charges that Lincoln engaged in actions characteristic of a "dictator," it ought to be emphasized, and remembered, that his own uncertainty about the legality of his bold acts in April 1861 compelled him to seek from Congress retroactive authorization of his actions. In the midst of the gravest crisis this nation has ever endured, Lincoln chose to preserve and protect the Constitution.

However, presidents may be judged as wartime strategists and decision makers. Lincoln has been criticized for his irresolution, but even if this is accurate, it reflects a major problem in the evaluation of presidents in light of their conduct of war. How can we know whether wartime policies, strategies, and tactics are the product of the president's mind, or that of his generals and admirals? Perhaps we could express with some considerable confidence that wartime policies and methods executed under presidents such as Washington and Eisenhower—had they been wartime presidents—would have reflected the military experience and expertise of two superb generals. But can the same be said of the conduct of wars under Franklin Roosevelt, Wilson, Truman, Adams, Johnson, and Polk?

Few will doubt that Franklin Roosevelt deserves the appellation of greatness for the conduct of his wartime presidency. He will forever be remembered for the fact that he blocked Adolf Hitler's ambitions, and for the considerable powers and adroit skills that he brought to the war, as James MacGregor Burns characterized in his book entitled "The Lion and the Fox" (Burns 1956). Yet, quite apart from his wartime achievements, Roosevelt will be remembered for the transformation of the presidency, his bold and far-reaching efforts to lift the nation from the depths of the Depression, the tremendous expansion of the regulatory power of the federal government over the economy, and the introduction of the welfare state. He will be remembered, too, for the fact that he was the most dominant political figure of the 20th century.

Let us further assume, for the sake of argument, that Wilson, to a large degree, earned his status as a great president for his conduct of the war. There is no doubt that he exhibited great executive skills in preparing the nation for war, from his success in persuading a reluctant Congress to approve of a military draft to his mobilization, on the strength of a broad delegation of legislative authority, of American industry for the production and distribution of food, fuel, and other supplies critical to the success of the war effort. A fair account of his wartime presidency would take into consideration the criticism of his means and methods, including his administration's intolerance for, and indeed its suppression of, dissident speech. Such an evaluation is beyond the scope of this essay, but it may be said that the rigidity and intolerance that marked his posture against dissenters and which, many have observed, constituted a personality trait, came to characterize his behavior in his campaign for the venerable but ill-fated idea of a League of Nations. But for his stubbornness, the Senate might have approved the Treaty of Versailles, and Wilson's presidency would have been regarded as truly transformative.

President Wilson's handling of the Treaty of Versailles was perfectly illustrative of the Framers' fears that a president would exalt his own personal interests above and beyond the national interest. Wilson, it is understood, deeply resented and strongly objected to reservations presented by Senator Harry Cabot Lodge (R-Massachusetts). Wilson claimed that the reservations "cut the heart of this covenant" and represented "nullification" of the treaty (Link 1990, 451; 1991a, 47, 51). As Louis Fisher has observed, "Wilson's principal advisers, including Secretary of State Robert Lansing, Bernard Baruch, Herbert Hoover, and Colonel Edward Mandell House, all urged Wilson to accept the reservations. Personal spite caused Wilson to dig in his heels. As the newspapers reported at the time, 'The President has strangled his own child'" (Fisher 2002,

681). Nonetheless, Wilson has been highly regarded by scholars for his significant contributions to the evolution of the presidency, for his humanitarian ideals, and for his efforts to produce world peace. For those achievements alone, he deserves his ranking as a great president.

Let us acknowledge at this juncture that of the twelve top-tier presidents who have been ranked as great or near great, among wartime presidents, Lincoln, Roosevelt, and Wilson genuinely merit that measure of acclaim. Here, I venture to suggest, we must draw the line. The remaining quartet—Truman, Adams, Johnson, and Polk—cannot have been accused of being great presidents by virtue of their having served as president while the nation was at war. Polk's rating is likely more attributable to his aggressive policy of "Manifest Destiny" and his territorial expansion of the United States. The acquisition of California, of course, had enormous financial and national security implications for the nation, and the resolution of the Oregon boundary question, the development of an independent treasury, and internal developments represented important contributions and mark his historic rating. But it seems doubtful that his manipulation of the Mexican-American War, for which he was widely criticized and properly censured by the House of Representatives, which included Congressman Abraham Lincoln, can be credited for his historical reputation.

And it would seem even less likely that President Adams could be regarded as a top-tier chief executive for his behavior during the Quasi-War in 1798 with France. To his credit, Adams asserted no unilateral executive warmaking power; in fact, he was a consistent voice for moderation and provided a bulwark against the more aggressive and pro-war voices of his own Federalist Party, including the vaulting ambitions of Hamilton, perhaps the most bitter and vexing foe of his entire political career. In the context of the Quasi-War, Congress made crucial decisions and provided governance through the passage of some two dozen statutes that authorized military measures against the French (Alfange, Jr. 1996, 274). Adams's restraint during the war was widely admired; indeed, he was praised by contemporaries for his ability to withstand the temptations of power for the purpose of seeking greatness and the "laurels" that accompany military victory.

If it is to some extent true that executives may find some measure of lasting fame and glory in war, it is equally true that the presidencies of Truman and Johnson stand as testimony for the proposition that war can also ruin a president's reputation and inflict great damage on his political party. The Korean War, dubbed "Mr. Truman's War," devastated his presidency and derailed the plans, policies, and goals of the Democratic Party. More than that, the war proved so costly, bloody, and divisive that it ended twenty years of Democratic reign in the White House.

It is understood that in taking the United States into the Korean War, Truman became the first president to claim a unilateral executive power to wage war (Adler 1988; Fisher 1996). Truman did not seek authorization for his military action in Korea from Congress, as required by the Constitution. He explained, rather, through his Secretary of State Dean Acheson, that he was acting "under the aegis of the United Nations" (Department of State Bulletin 1950, 23: 43). In this assertion the Truman administration was mistaken and deceitful. In fact, President Truman committed United States

forces to Korea before the U.N. Security Council called for military assistance from its members (Fisher 1995, 85).

Truman's claims of a unilateral presidential power to initiate military hostilities, and his reliance on U.N. approval rather than congressional authorization for war, have left a deeply troubling legacy. First, virtually every president since Truman has asserted a unilateral executive authority to use military force, even though such claims find no footing whatsoever in the architecture of the Constitution (Adler 1988; Fisher 1995). Presidents, for example, have ordered military strikes, in one form or another, in such places as Vietnam, Grenada, Libya, Panama, and Iraq, among others. It is true, of course, that since the Vietnam War, most military actions ordered by presidents have been limited in scope and duration. President Bill Clinton's military action in Yugoslavia in March 1999, undertaken without congressional authorization, represented the most intensive and sustained military campaign conducted by the United States since the Vietnam War (Adler 2000, 155). Still, whether large or small in scale, the use of U.S. military power requires prior authorization from Congress (Adler 1988; Fisher 1995). President Truman's actions and arguments reflected a bold and indefensible effort to revise the meaning of the Constitution.

Truman's invocation of U.N. authorization for the use of American troops, as opposed to congressional authorization, was equally breathtaking in its revisionist reaches. What's more, he knew better. The Truman administration had shaped the U.N. Participation Act of 1945, the vehicle by which the United States would respond to calls from the United Nations for military assistance from its members. As Professor Fisher has pointed out, the "legislative history of the U.N. Participation Act reinforces the need for advance congressional approval" (Fisher 1995, 81).

Secretary of State Acheson explained the procedures of the Act in an appearance before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs and made it clear that the president may not respond to any request from the U.N. for military assistance without authorization from Congress. Upon arrival from Congress, the president is "bound to furnish that contingent of troops to the Security Council; and the President is not authorized to furnish any more than you have approved of in that agreement" (quoted in Fisher 1995, 81). Thus, Truman's refusal to seek authorization from Congress before deploying troops to Korea violated both the War Clause of the Constitution and the U.N. Participation Act.

It probably was to be expected that subsequent presidents would seize Truman's plot line and adduce U.N. authorization to circumvent Congress. In the 1991 Gulf War, President George H.W. Bush advanced that argument, although, in the end of course, he did receive congressional authorization. Moreover, where there is a policy need, a legal rationale can be readily contrived. When President Clinton was unable to obtain support from either the U.N. Security Council or Congress for his military actions in Yugoslavia, he sought and received "authorization" from NATO (Fisher 1997, 47: 1237).

President Truman's stature among scholars is attributable to various monuments, including, of course, the Marshall Plan, the creation of NATO, and the Berlin Airlift. Historians will justly praise Truman for his success in thwarting the efforts of the Soviet Union to dominate Europe. But his reputation cannot be built on the Korean War.

The Vietnam War, it may be said, was probably the only thing that stood between Lyndon Johnson and a place among the greatest of presidents. Biographers of the Johnson Presidency have agreed that he coveted greatness. Franklin Roosevelt was his hero, and he wanted to surpass Roosevelt. He might have realized his dream, if his ambitious and laudable programs including the Great Society, the War on Poverty, and his earnest efforts to battle racial discrimination, had not been subverted by the Vietnam War. The tragedy of Vietnam drove him from the White House and toppled the Democratic Party. Like the Korean War, "Johnson's War" was brutal, costly, and deeply divisive. Johnson's recognition among the top-tier presidents has come in spite of his conduct of war, and not because of it.

From the beginning, President Johnson's conduct of the Vietnam War was pock-marked with concerns having to do with his ego, his political standing, and his place in history. Moreover, his conduct of the war, like his reports of it, was characterized by stealth and deception. Johnson's overarching ambition, his lust for fame and desire for glory, have been ably captured and portrayed by various scholars. Eric Goldman, an aide to President Johnson, wrote that his former boss

was not satisfied to go down in the history books merely as a successful president in the Roosevelt tradition. He aimed instead to be "the greatest of them all, the whole bunch of them." And to be the greatest president in history, he needed not just to match Roosevelt's performance but to surpass it (quoted in Leuchtenburg 1989, 142).

Johnson's ambition, according to the distinguished historian William Leuchtenburg, placed him on a path to disaster: "In his determination to outdo Roosevelt, [Johnson] carried everything to excess—the overladen apparatus of the Great Society; the insistence on having both guns and butter, which had calamitous inflationary repercussions; and, most of all, the body counts and the napalm and the saturation bombing" (Leuchtenburg 1989, 160).

President Johnson's concerns about his political standing led him to ignore his own forebodings, and those of others, about the prospects for success in Vietnam. On December 2, 1963, only days after assuming the presidency, he was warned by Senator J. William Fulbright (D-Arkansas) of the "hopelessness" of the prospects for military victory in Vietnam. Johnson admitted, in a searching conversation with John S. Knight, Chairman of the Board of the Miami Herald, on February 3, 1964, that he had harbored deep misgivings about U.S. involvement in Vietnam as early as 1954, and that he was no more optimistic about American prospects during what would be an election campaign against Senator Barry Goldwater (R-Arizona). Johnson was keenly aware of the risks associated with involvement in Vietnam, but he was plagued by fears that the Republicans would portray him as "soft on Communism," which would jeopardize his chances for election to the White House. As the subsequent record revealed, he afforded his opponents no grounds for such exploitation (Fisher 2000, 53).

The Framers of the Constitution, it will be recalled, feared executive management of foreign affairs because it was an area so susceptible to manipulation, deception, and abuse. The control of information—deceit and misinformation—was the key point of departure. President Johnson's behavior confirmed the Framers' fears and suspicions. In

August 1964, Johnson asked Congress to pass the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, which would authorize military action against North Vietnam. The basis for the request lay in Johnson's report of two separate attacks on U.S. ships by North Vietnam. It is very likely that the second attack never occurred. In 1964, Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara was certain that the second attack had occurred. But by 1995, he had changed his mind. Following a trip to Vietnam, he said that "I am absolutely positive" that the second attack never occurred. At that juncture, he was willing to say, "without a doubt, there was no second attack" (quoted in Fisher 2000, 54). The Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, of course, provided the basis for Johnson's massive escalation of the war in Vietnam. Later, members of Congress regretted their support of the resolution, and many felt that they had been sandbagged by Johnson.

Johnson's "report" to Congress represented only one, among many, of his efforts to deceive Congress and the American people. Shortly before the election, Johnson told an audience in Ohio that "we are not about to send American boys nine or ten thousand miles away from home to do what Asian boys ought to be doing for themselves" (quoted in Fisher 1995, 118). During the campaign, it is familiar, he warned American voters of Senator Goldwater's penchant for war. But once elected, Johnson engineered a tremendous escalation in a war that produced horrific casualties, and, as a result of the administration's policies and false body counts, spurred a huge anti-war movement and engendered deep divisions within the nation. Johnson, as we have observed, was deeply pessimistic about American prospects in Vietnam shortly after he entered the White House. Once there, his assessment underwent no substantial revision. But, as chief executive, he now had a vested interest in the war, politically and emotionally, and, as he told confidantes, he did not intend to become the first American president to lose a war.

Johnson pursued his political interests and his historical aspirations, but the result was a career of carnage. The Vietnam War, which spoiled Johnson's dreams of greatness, also served to confirm the Framers' concerns and suspicions about wartime executives who might pursue their own interests at the expense of those of the nation's.

Our review of wartime presidents suggests that the relationship between wartime service in the White House and the attainment of presidential greatness is tenuous at best. Among the top-tier presidents, perhaps only Lincoln, Wilson, and Franklin Roosevelt may be justly characterized as great by virtue of their leadership in war. It appears, moreover, that there is no significant correlation between the attainment of greatness and presidential deployment of troops. Indeed, as the study undertaken by Professors Holmes and Elder discloses, "numbers . . . of troop commitments abroad do not show significant differences between the top and bottom groups" of presidents (Holmes and Elder 1989, 543). The bottom tier of presidents, based on the 1983 Murray and Blessing analysis, includes, in order of descending rank: Jimmy Carter, Benjamin Harrison, Zachary Taylor, John Tyler, Millard Fillmore, Calvin Coolidge, Franklin Pierce, Andrew Johnson, James Buchanan, Richard Nixon, Ulysses S. Grant, and Warren Harding.

Apart from the fact that some military deployments are more visible and intense than others, the sheer number of commitments reflected in the tabulations of Holmes

and Elder illustrates the inutility of drawing conclusions about the relationship between presidential use of force and historical achievement (Holmes and Elder 1989, 544). President Harding, for example, deployed troops on more occasions than such top-tier presidents as Polk and Adams, and on as many occasions as such giants as Lincoln and Jefferson. If a significant correlation could be drawn between presidential deployment of troops and presidential greatness, then such heavyweights as Grant, Buchanan, Adams, Johnson, Pierce, and Coolidge would be rushed to the upper tier. But such a conclusion could be reached only if we employed the topsy-turvy logic of Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*. Manifestly, the numbers do not tell much of a story, but the story that they do tell is sufficient to dispel the notion that the use of military force is a likely path to historical admiration.

None of this is meant to deny the fact that presidents can and do resort to the use of force in order to attain at least a temporary boost in public opinion polls or to reshape their image and reputation. President George H.W. Bush, it will be recalled, had been unfairly labeled as a "wimp," despite the fact that he had been a decorated fighter pilot in World War II. However, a successful military invasion of Panama in 1989 to capture strongman Manuel Noriega went a long way toward strengthening Bush's image. Public opinion polls showed that four out of every five people approved of his action. A Pentagon official said the invasion represented "a test of manhood" and a political "jackpot" (quoted in DeConde 2000, 249). The surge in popularity was a harbinger of things to come. In 1991, Bush ordered, with authorization from Congress, a large-scale military operation to force Iraq's Saddam Hussein out of Kuwait. The operation, Desert Storm, was an enormous success. As Alexander DeConde observed, "Bush bathed in the glory of a Caesar" (DeConde 2000, 255). Bush enjoyed a skyrocketing public approval rating of 89 percent, the highest figure ever reported in the history of the Gallup Poll.

President Clinton arrived at the White House with no military experience. The perception, in some quarters, that he was a "draft dodger" during the Vietnam War shadowed him and seemed to compromise his status as commander in chief. In June 1993, President Clinton ordered military strikes against Iraq. The attack marked his first projection of U.S. force as president. Reports from the media indicated that the White House understood the utility of the air strikes as a means of shaping "Clinton's image into that of a strong and decisive leader" (Fisher 2000, 81). In 1995, as the Clinton administration contemplated the deployment of troops to Bosnia as a means of enforcing the Dayton Accords, aides and advisers signaled their awareness of the potential for a political windfall, particularly in the upcoming reelection campaign. The deployment of troops and the projection of military force were again perceived as an opportunity to enhance Clinton's standing as a leader. An aide observed: "One of the things he has realized over the last two years is that foreign policy can help your image. It makes him look like a president" (DeConde 2000, 269).

The prospect that a president might resort to the use of military force as a means of promoting his political standing was, of course, contemplated by the Framers. And they were, as we have seen, acutely aware of the fact that the deployment of military power might serve the ends of the president, but not necessarily those of the nation. Presidents might resort to the use of force or, at any rate, make a show of force for cynical

political motives. In July 1974, shortly after surrendering the notorious "Watergate Tapes" as ordered by the U.S. Supreme Court in the landmark case *United States v. Nixon*, President Nixon placed American forces on worldwide nuclear alert. There was widespread concern and speculation about his state of mind. The tremendous strain of Watergate on Nixon left Americans to wonder at his motives. Fred Emery has written that there "was no question that the alert was linked to Watergate" (Emery 1995, 408). It was possible that Nixon's action was intended to convey to the Kremlin that the United States remained strong and vital, despite the domestic crisis. Or, as some have speculated, perhaps it represented a political gesture for domestic political consumption "that Nixon might have engineered the crisis to show that he was both in control and personally irreplaceable in the superpower relationship" (Emery 1995, 409). Others expressed the sentiment that Nixon simply needed a distraction from the crushing weight of Watergate. Wherever the truth of the matter lies, the notion that a president might place the nation's military forces on red alert and engender a nuclear crisis for purely self-serving ends confirms the Framers' deepest worries about executive possession of the war power.

If President Nixon had exploited American foreign policy for purely political purposes, perhaps Ronald Reagan could have appreciated his motives. On October 23, 1983, a suicide bomber in Beirut crashed through the barriers that surrounded an American compound where Marines were sleeping. The results were devastating. Some 241 Marines were killed and more than 100 others were injured. President Reagan was under intense pressure to explain why American troops on a peace-keeping mission in Lebanon should remain. Reagan insisted that the United States had vital interests in Lebanon, but few Americans agreed. Reagan's advisers feared that the devastation in Lebanon would become a major issue in the forthcoming presidential election. Forty-eight hours after the murder of the Marines in Beirut, President Reagan ordered an invasion of Grenada, where the administration said the lives of U.S. medical students were at stake. Critics disagreed, and saw the invasion as a diversionary tactic. Perhaps Secretary of State George Schultz recognized the opportunity that an invasion afforded, when he urged President Reagan to "strike while the iron is hot" (Isaacson 1983, 44). The invasion of the tiny island ended in a rout. The American public offered enthusiastic approval of the invasion, and it soon moved beyond concerns about Lebanon. The incident recalls John Quincy Adams's refrain about the achievement of glory through military victory: "A giant obtain[s] glory by crushing a pigmy" (*Annals of Congress*, 12th Cong., 2d sess., January 1813, 561).

The correlation between presidential use of force and an immediate spike in public approval ratings yields troubling implications, not the least of which is the cynical suggestion of a prescription for political success. Yet, we may find some consolation in the fact that the surge in public opinion polls is merely transitory. President George H.W. Bush's defeat in the 1992 presidential election, on the heels of a groundswell of public adoration for "his" sensational victory in the Gulf War, is illustrative. It is also instructive. President Bush's defeat was largely attributed to a weak economy which, critics observed, the president had largely ignored. The public's adoration for Bush as a wartime president had waned. His fame had been fleeting. It remains to be seen, of course,

whether the high approval ratings registered in support of President George W. Bush's invasion of Iraq will last long enough to withstand the effects of a weak economy in his bid for reelection in 2004, or whether his wartime success will fade in the public's memory, as it did in his father's case.

Conclusion

History has its claims on the minds of presidents. As Forrest McDonald has pointed out:

What presidents do in office, or try to do, is powerfully influenced by a unique conception of history. The president lives in a museum of the history of the presidency. When walking along the halls of the White House, the president is constantly reminded that Jefferson walked the same halls as he waited for news of negotiations with Napoleon, that Lincoln walked them when waiting for the news of Antietam. When dining, the president never escapes the realization that he is using the same silver that Madison and both Roosevelts used. The president understands that he is a member of a mystical fraternity, representing an unbroken chain of history and mythology, and knows that far into the future presidents will be aware that he was a link in that chain, and cannot avoid wondering what his place will be in their memory and in the nation's memory (McDonald 1994, 466-67).

The concern among presidents about their place in the "nation's memory" was particularly important to President Kennedy. In a biography of Kennedy, Richard Reeves observed:

There was no question in Kennedy's mind, and little argument from anyone else, that the struggle with communism would be the focus of the history of his times. As 1961 ended, he had begun an address to historians meeting in Washington by quoting Churchill's prediction that history would be kind to his role in World War II: "Because I intend to write it!" And Kennedy intended to do the same, with the help of Sorensen and Schlesinger. He had invited one of the historians, David Donald of Princeton, an expert on Abraham Lincoln, to the White House and asked him: "How do you go down in the history books as a great president?" (Reeves 1993, 278).

President Kennedy's assumption, shared by others, that executives can acquire glory, fame, and honor through war was a great concern among the Framers of the Constitution. Executive self-interest, they understood, may not reflect the nation's interest. The Framers hoped that their remedy against executive warmaking—the placement of the war power in Congress—would provide effective protection for the Republic. But mere parchment may not constitute an effective barrier against presidents determined to achieve honor, distinction, and immortality through the use of military force. Perhaps a more effective barrier may be found in the historical understanding that the path to war is not a path to greatness. Perhaps only Lincoln, Wilson, and Roosevelt can be said to have found greatness in war. But for the others, notably Truman and Johnson, war was a path to disappointment and devastation. Perhaps that is the lesson that presidents should learn from history.

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