

From General to President:  
War Heroes in the White House

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History 101

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October, 15 2012

For most of our country's relatively brief history, the U.S. has expressed its shared identity through the election of the president. While Congress and the Supreme Court play equal, if not more important, roles in government, it is the head of the executive branch that captivates the nation and serves as a focus for the issues of the day. These issues, of course, change over time—from concerns about quartering British soldiers to the Louisiana purchase to the gold standard, every president has had to face a unique set of challenges. But no matter what other issues confront us as a nation, war has historically pushed those issues aside and focused Americans' attentions on the military. While this has not been the case during the last century, earlier military campaigns, including the Revolutionary War, the Civil War, and World War II, created a sense of military pride, and those strong emotions radically influenced who Americans chose as their leader and figurehead. Throughout U.S. history, Americans have rewarded the leaders of their victorious military forces with the presidency, although to decidedly mixed results.

America's first president, George Washington, rode the high emotions of the Revolutionary War into office. As the leader of the Continental Army, Washington was the personification of victory. His crossing of the Delaware river to defeat the British army in 1776 made him a legendary figure, and he was widely seen as the public face of the Continental Army's success. While he had strongly mixed feelings about this fame,<sup>1</sup> he was nonetheless convinced to run for office, and in 1789 was elected by a unanimous electoral college vote—the first and only president to have that distinction. As a general, he was seen as a politically neutral leader that Americans could rally behind in the first, difficult years of the new country, and Washington worked hard to live up to that responsibility. As president, he responsible for a

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<sup>1</sup> Ron Chernow, *Washington: A Life* (New York, Penguin Press, 2010), p. 112.

number of important government actions: he formed the Cabinet, developed a strong foreign policy, and helped hold the new, fragile government together. Throughout this time, he was loved and admired by the majority of Americans.

Washington's strong belief in republican values made him wary of serving too long in as the head of state,<sup>2</sup> but crisis after crisis kept in office for a full two terms before he retired back to his native Virginia. After his death, Thomas Jefferson memorialized him as "first in war, first in peace, and first in the hearts of his countrymen."<sup>3</sup> There is no doubt that his popularity and the goodwill he built as a military leader allowed him to accomplish a great many of the tasks needed to run the fledgling U.S. federal government, and to this day he is usually listed as one of the most successful American presidents by scholars and the public alike.<sup>4</sup>

The Civil War, America's next large conflict, also produced a war hero president. Ulysses S. Grant led the Union army in victory in the war in 1865, and was elected to the presidency three years later, in 1868. Unlike Washington, however, Grant was not universally beloved. In the north, he was a bona fide hero: he went on speaking tours, and President Johnson even relied on him to rally the people behind his plan for reconstruction.<sup>5</sup> Obviously, though, he was significantly less popular in the south, which continued to suffer economically and socially after the war. Grant, however, supported strong Reconstruction efforts and advocated for the smooth reintegration of southern delegates into the federal government.<sup>6</sup> His support for the south, along

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p. 237.

<sup>3</sup> Conor Cruise O'Brien, *First in Peace: How George Washington Set the Course for America*, (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2009), p. 19.

<sup>4</sup> Chernow, p. 265.

<sup>5</sup> Jean Edward Smith, *Grant* (New York, Simon & Schuster, 2002), p. 369.

<sup>6</sup> William S. McFeely, *Grant: a Biography*, (New York, Norton, 1981), p. 238-241.

with his slogan “Let us have peace” endeared him to southern voters, and he won in a landslide, with an electoral college vote of 214 to 80.

The great divide created by the Civil War made Grant’s two terms difficult. As the Union hero he had the strong support of the people in the North, but that popularity did little to help him with the continuing economic and social strife that tested his presidency. His term was largely defined by ongoing racial violence in the south and the economic depression caused by the Panic of 1873. His presidency was also marred by several scandals caused by corrupt appointees and friends of his in the government. These scandals erased most of the goodwill he had garnered as a Civil War general, and because of his declining popularity, his party decided not to put him up for a third term. At the time of his death, however, he was still considered a “symbol of the American national identity and memory,”<sup>7</sup> and was mourned nationally. Since then, his presidency has not been viewed kindly by historians, who see his harsh military tactics and his inability to control corruption in his administration as two of his biggest weaknesses.

Almost a hundred years later, another famous general was elected as president. Dwight D. Eisenhower had been the leader of the Allied forces for several of the largest campaigns of World War II, including the successful invasion of France and Germany that ended the war in Europe. He was persuaded by Republicans that the American people would support his candidacy, and indeed he won the 1952 election in a landslide, beating his democratic opponent with an electoral college vote of 442 to 89—one of the ten highest margins of victory in U.S. presidential elections.<sup>8</sup> Four years later, he won by an even higher margin with a vote of 457 to 74. It’s believed by most historians that Eisenhower’s victory was due in large part to the

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<sup>7</sup> Joan Waugh, *U.S. Grant: American Hero, American Myth*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009), p. 2.

<sup>8</sup> Mark Sheppard, “How close were the U.S. presidential elections?” Accessed 15 October 2012. <http://www.mit.edu/~mi22295/elections.html>

goodwill he garnered from his military victories, and he made a strong effort during his presidency to remain available and open with the American people.<sup>9</sup>

Like Washington, Eisenhower proved to be a strong President. He was responsible for the development of the interstate highway system, ended the Korean War, and was instrumental in desegregation efforts. But while his popularity lasted until his death in 1969, his reputation among historians has fluctuated. Some condemned his unwillingness to stop Senator McCarthy's communism hearings and questioned why he hadn't played a larger role in desegregation.<sup>10</sup> Despite these doubts, Eisenhower remains popular and is generally well-regarded. At his memorial service, then-President Richard Nixon remarked on both his military victories and his political accomplishments when he said "Some men are considered great because they lead great armies or they lead powerful nations. For eight years now, Dwight Eisenhower has neither commanded an army nor led a nation; and yet he remained through his final days the world's most admired and respected man."<sup>11</sup>

As a society, Americans value strong military leaders. We glorify the men who are able to lead armies, and generals are able to capture our imagination in a way few other men can. Historically, military leaders have been able to channel this support into political careers, and the truly successful military men, those who carry the U.S. to grand victories, can make their way to the White House. Once there, they have a mixed record: Washington and Eisenhower are generally considered to have had strong, successful presidencies, although there are certainly

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<sup>9</sup> Stephen Ambrose, *Eisenhower: Soldier and President*, (New York, Simon & Schuster, 1991), p. 52.

<sup>10</sup> "Presidential Politics," *PBS American Experience*. Web.  
<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/general-article/eisenhower-politics/>

<sup>11</sup> "1969: Year in Review," *UPI.com*. Accessed 15 October 2012.  
[http://www.upi.com/Audio/Year\\_in\\_Review/Events-of-1969/Eisenhower%2C-Judy-Garland-Die/12303189849225-9/](http://www.upi.com/Audio/Year_in_Review/Events-of-1969/Eisenhower%2C-Judy-Garland-Die/12303189849225-9/)

historians who question Eisenhower's accomplishments. The reputation of Grant, on the other hand, was harmed by a corruption-laden presidency, and today even his military tactics are critiqued by scholars. Whatever their accomplishments, though, it's clear that their role as leaders of victorious U.S. military campaigns were what made their elections possible. In today's world of drone strikes and covert overseas operations, it's difficult to imagine a politician rising from the ashes of war to unite a nation, but Washington, Grant, and Eisenhower were all presidents who did just that.

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