

The toughest decision a national leader can make is to decide whether or not to wage war. Forget about the large financial cost, the diplomatic outcomes and possible harm to political careers. Waging of war which includes attacking part of their citizens to death, parents to live with the absence of their children and children to live without their parents.

However, we will see in this book summary that a lot of US presidents didn't follow this wisdom and dived into a meaningless war which led to the wasting of American blood and treasures. It is true that some were completely inevitable such as Lincoln's Civil War or Roosevelt's entry into World War Two; however, even these great leaders made some suspicious choices that affected their record.

We will see presidents that were provoked into a conflict they didn't want by the public or press, presidents who were forced to go into war by an act of foreign oppressor and presidents who actively went into war just for despicable reasons. However, through it, all comes a common theme which is a progressive abandonment of the Founding Fathers' desire for a democratic war-making process.

## Thomas Jefferson used his presidential influence to save America out of a war.

Even though these blinks concentrate on wartime presidents, we shouldn't forget about leaders that used political direction and diplomatic ability to save their country from conflict. In this, all presidents should consider the story of Thomas Jefferson who successfully avoided war with Great Britain in 1807.

The event that almost caused a war was the Chesapeake Affair. In 1807, on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of June, the American frigate USS Chesapeake sailed through the waters of Virginia and was interrupted by the British vessel HMS Leopard. The Leopard was looking for four British Navy fugitives and they asked the US ship to surrender for scrutiny.

When the Chesapeake rejected, the Leopard fired which killed four American sailors. The Chesapeake surrender and four other sailors were arrested as British fugitives.

With the War of Independence still existing in the memory, anti-British sentiment in the United States was widespread. The Chesapeake Affair strengthened this, which led to domestic upheaval. The public beat themselves into anti-British war rage, encouraged by a bellicose press.

Jefferson saw all these happen, however, he was determined not to declare war.

Jefferson was a pacifist who loathed war and its irrelevant financial and human costs. Moreover, he was not sure if his country could win the British again. He was aware that the United States' young and inexperienced navy couldn't take on the Royal Navy which is the world's best and meanwhile his spending cuts had lessened his forces.

However, Jefferson also knew that his country wanted revenge. Sending an envoy to London, Jefferson requested for the return of the four sailors, an apology for the Chesapeake attack and compensation. As a knowledgeable operator, Jefferson knew that it would take up to four months for him to get a reply. He hoped that by then, American's anger for war would have calmed.

In the meantime, Jefferson prepared the military should it be that diplomacy doesn't work, and tried to resolve the political condition. He reminded aggressive politicians that, according to the Constitution, a declaration of war could only come from Congress which is the legislative part of government that comprises the House of Representatives and the Senate. He refused to call an emergency session of Congress where a declaration of war might be made till he got a reply from the British.

Luckily, the British approved Jefferson's terms, and the feeling for war faded. The United States' third president showed superhuman control in avoiding a damaging war, however, it wasn't an action imitated by his successors.

Against his better decision, James Madison was convinced to fight the War of 1812.

Thomas Jefferson's dedication to peace was the exemption rather than the rule. If James Madison who was Jefferson's successor exhibited similar restraint and political skill, the War of 1812 against the British might not have happened.

However, the United States did have genuine complaints and they're connected to Britain's fight against France during the Napoleonic Wars.

First, Americans were enraged by Britain's impressment of US sailors. Impressment means forcibly recruiting seamen to work on military ships and this was done by the majority of the naval authorities. This was done regularly by boarding a foreign merchant ship and capturing their sailors.

Since the Napoleonic Wars led to a massive request for sailors, the British increased impressment. Between the years 1793 and 1812, the British impressed more than 15,000 US sailors, draining Anglo-American relations to a breaking point.

Second, because America was transacting with Napoleonic France, Britain enforced restraints on US ships, hindering economic growth. The United States saw this as a disrespect to their independence and illegal according to international law.

However, these disputes might've been resolved diplomatically if Madison had not been aggravated into war.

One main antagonist was Henry Clay who was a combative senator from Kentucky. Stirring up war with terrifying arrogance, Clay claimed that in order to revenge Americans honor the war with Britain was important. Furthermore, Clay asserted that they could take huge swathes of disputed territory from British Canada.

Madison was still hesitant to get involved in a damaging war with Britain; however, political judgment was against him.

A pro-war political division soon established in Congress. This was headed by Henry Clay and it was named the "War Hawks," these politicians were constantly concerned for conflict and they condemned Madison as a weak-willed and confused.

Madison was still trying to avoid war, he wanted a promise from the British in order to put a stop to impressment and if this promise was not given, he would request the Congress to announce war. However, the British rejected Madison's proposal because they wanted the sailors.

Therefore, on the 1<sup>st</sup> of June 1812, Madison asked Congress to vote in order to declare war on Britain. They voted and it was 79 voted to 49. Ironically, at that point British had already decided to stop interfering with the French-American trade; however, Madison didn't know about this due to slow communications that day.

The war started terribly for the United States, with an unsuccessful attack of Canada and the seizure of Washington by British troops. However, Americans were finally able to grab victory from the jaws of defeat; this is majorly due to the British preoccupation with the Napoleonic Wars.

The next war in America would go far more easily.

## James Polk was dedicated to fighting a war of territorial increase.

While James Polk was elected in 1845, we got to the United States' most disgraceful wartime event. The majority of the wartime leaders have made terrible choices, however, none had worse intentions than that of President Polk.

THIS was due to the reason that Polk who was a veteran politician from Tennessee created war with Mexico mainly for the purpose of expanding US territory.

Polk was a strong believer in manifest destiny which is a belief that, as a result of white America's supposed political and cultural dominance, it was meant to resolve all of North America. Manifest destiny was a common notion as American settlers increased in the west, taking Native American land. However, for Polk, it was more than this: manifest destiny involved the white settlement of the vast parts of Mexico.

However, the people of America would not support such a corrupt act and such glaring hostility would be voted against by the Congress for war. In order to achieve his conflict, Polk needed to create a ploy.

In 1845, Texas had merged with the United States after a war of independence with Mexico. Mexico claimed that the new Mexican-Texan border was the Nueces River, however, Polk disobeyed Mexico by moving US troops to protect the banks of the Rio Grande, further south, and pointed guns at the Mexican town of Matamoros. Polk was aware that his actions would aggravate Mexico into attacking.

On the 26<sup>th</sup> of April of 1846, Captain Seth Thornton and his patrol of about 80 men were attacked by 1,600 Mexicans. Eleven of the US soldiers were killed in what is known as the Thornton Affair. After this incident, Polk requested the Congress to vote for war against Mexico. It was accepted by 174 voted to 14.

Polk had manipulated the incident into making Mexico look like the attackers. Even presently, although the public didn't know of Polk's huge territorial determinations. However, Polk's cabinet knew about his territorial ambitions: James Buchanan, who was the Secretary of State, reminded Polk that Congress' announcement of war didn't declare the seizure of Mexican territory.

However, Polk was determined and it was time for manifest destiny. After a bloody longing war of almost two years in which thousands of lives were lost, the United States eventually won in 1848. In the peace treaty, America seized over one million square miles of Mexican territory, modern-day California, Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado, and Utah. Manifest destiny was complete.

**In order to wage a morally fair war, Abraham Lincoln infringed on civil liberties.**

When Abraham Lincoln who was the ardent opponent of slavery was elected as a president in the year 1861, the country was plunged into commotion. Seven of the southern states whose

economy depended on massive slave plantations separated from Washington and were announced as the Confederate States of America.

However, Lincoln attempted to solve this disagreement diplomatically and he even promised not to get involved with the slavery of the southern states. He also promised that there won't be any military action except it was forced on the government. However, he also stated that the Confederacy was unacceptable and it wouldn't be politically accepted.

The South was determined to wage war. A southern newspaper called the Memphis Appeal referred to Lincoln as an "abolition despot," and Texan Senator Louis Wigfall referred Washington with the words "WAR WAR WAR."

However, even though Lincoln led his people to victory at the cost of over 620,000 American lives, he never declared war on the Confederation.

This is because Lincoln thought that an official state of war would accept the Confederacy as a different nation. The Constitution clearly prohibits states from leaving the United States; hence, the Confederates were seen as illegal rebels.

However, this was just political maneuvering. More practically, Lincoln got his side ready for all-out war, imposing a naval obstruction on southern states and the addition of eight new regiments to the US Army.

Even though Lincoln was a great wartime leader, he also operated as an autocrat, the president that was famous for stopping slavery abused civil liberties.

Lincoln placed on hold habeas corpus in the area between state and Washington when four US soldiers were killed in Philadelphia by pro-rebel rioters. Habeas corpus is a law demanding a person under arrest to be brought forward a court and a verdict must be given to the person. Lincoln wanted to maintain the peace forcibly, however that came with a price which was Americans in that area could be detained forever.

Also, Lincoln declared martial law in the upsetting state of Maryland, suspending the democratic government and also using the soldiers to maintain peace. Lincoln claimed that the Civil War needed risky conditions and a parting from the constitutional procedures.

However, Lincoln did this hesitantly and made clear through his various speeches, letters, and memos that his extended authority would only go on until the end of the civil war. Lincoln a talented communicator regularly kept in touch with the public using speeches, letters, and meeting which assisted in improving morale and it also encouraged Americans to support the Union.

Along the line, Lincoln would extend the objectives of the Civil War to comprise the elimination of slavery. By doing that, he changed a civil war that the government was trying to crush a rebellion into a fair war with more moral intentions; an act that was not emulated for decades.

## The trigger that caused the Spanish-American War was possibly a misinterpretation.

Cuba was a hesitant colony of the Spanish Empire in 1895. During that year, an upheaval happened on the island and its dwellers waged a guerrilla war on the Spanish troops. In order to crush the riot, Valeriano "Butcher" Weyler who was the Spanish General at that time forced one-third of Cubans into filthiness, a disease-ridden concentration camp. In these camps, about 25% of the population died.

A lot of Americans both the citizens and politicians saw these horrors happen at their doorstep with disgust. Outspoken newspapers and violent politicians cried for the American military to intervene.

President William McKinley was unwilling to heighten the circumstance at first and he requested that the Spanish follow the military law. He also offered to buy the island. Both of his requests were unsuccessful and the Spanish-American association weakened.

Against this setting, on the 15<sup>th</sup> of February 1898, an explosion ripped through the USS Maine which led it to sink alongside 260 American lives. During that period, the vessel was in Havana port on orders to safeguard the lives and property of Americans. The US Navy ruled it'd been sunk by a Spanish sea mine.

The press whipped the public into a war rage in which the politicians couldn't control. On the 20<sup>th</sup> of April 1898, Congress accepted McKinley's request to use the military force to release Cuba from Spain. On the 21<sup>st</sup> of April, the island was blocked by the US Navy. The Spanish-American war had started.

What was tragic irony? Maine was definitely not sunk by a Spanish mine.

In an investigation that was done by Admiral Hyman Rickover in 1974, he concluded that Maine was sunk by an aboard fire which burnt the ship's ammunition. This was suspected by some military personnel at the time, however, their voices died down.

Even though McKinley initiated the three-month war in order to grant Cuba its independence, his determinations rapidly extended.

During that period, there was an increasing public interest in an American empire and McKinley accepted. Cuba was yet to have its own independence, however American victories mounted and the president started having eyes on Spain's colonies in Guam, Philippines, and Hawaii.

In a wartime approach that was later called mission creep, McKinley extended the US purposes in the Spanish-American war to cover the seizure of these islands. He was partly controlled by his wish to bring Christianity to Filipinos and "civilize" them. However, he was also motivated by glory, trying to grant America an empire and launch it as a world power.

McKinley succeeded on the 13<sup>th</sup> of August 1898, leading an era of American dominance.

## Woodrow Wilson misinformed the public by suggesting that he could prevent them from World War One.

In Europe, when World War One happened in 1914, President Woodrow Wilson dedicated himself to a policy of neutrality. Even after a German submarine sank the British Lusitania which killed 128 Americans, Wilson encouraged the thought of peace and dispassionate thinking and he warned the politicians as well as the newspapermen not to make impulsive statements.



However, as the war increased, American civilian fatalities increased as well. Germany sank a passenger ship full of British people in August 1915 and these killed two Americans. Also, in March 1916 another similar occurrence happened which injured four more Americans. By now, the famous mood in America was pro-British and a lot of the press, as well as political leaders, supported going into war.

Wilson was aware that if he continued with the German violence, he wouldn't be able to sustain the US neutrality for long, however, there was also a presidential campaign coming up.

Despite the fact that Wilson knew that a war was possible going to happen, he campaigned for re-election on the deceptive that it was still likely to prevent war. Imitating the increasing pro-war mood of the US, Wilson was re-elected but only with the smallest gap.

In January 1917, the British interrupted the Zimmermann Telegram. This telegram was a means of communication of the German to Mexican officials giving them support if they ever waged war against the United States. America was left with no choice than to declare war in Germany which eventually happened on the 6<sup>th</sup> of April 1917.

Then Wilson made some doubtful choices.

Wilson was an extremely hard and self-righteous leader. Taking all criticism or political problems to his choices as a personal offense; he introduced a "loyalty test" among government employees to vaguely determine whether they were "inimical to the public welfare." Those who failed this test were sacked.

Unlike Lincoln whose persistent communication assisted in winning support for the war, Wilson kept silent even when thousands of Americans died.

Wilson also mismanaged the repercussion of the war.

Instead of Wilson to show gratitude to the Americans for their support, he toured around the streets of Paris in lavish victory marches. Also, he didn't put any senior Republican which is the opposition party to Wilson's Democrats on his peace delegation.

In the long run, Wilson requested his nation to join a new supranational organization he assisted in creating. The organization was called the League of Nations which will offer an international

forum for solving conflict and also hopefully avert war in the future. However, at home people were concerned that merging with the League would decrease American sovereignty in which Wilson never attempted to assure the public.

In the end, Wilson experienced an embarrassing defeat. The League was shunned domestically and his nation would never join the international forum he assisted in creating.

## President Franklin D. Roosevelt was a great wartime leader however; he still made some disgraceful decisions.

The 7<sup>th</sup> of December 1941 was the day that the in-then-President Roosevelt's words, "will live in infamy."

When the neutral United States stopped its abundant-needed oil exports to Japan in reaction to their aggression of World War Two in Asia, the Japanese military launched a disbelief attack on the American fleet anchored in Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. It was devastating as four battleships sunk, which led to the death of 4,403 Americans.

However, although Pearl Harbor was a shocking attack for a lot of Americans, Roosevelt knew more than he was letting on. Roosevelt wanted a war with the Axis powers because he assumed there were threats to liberal democracy; however, he experienced a tough anti-war sentiment back home.

In 1940, Roosevelt's choice to transfer the Pacific Fleet to Hawaii in the hope that it would prevent Japanese attacks was doubtful. This made America's navy closer to the Japanese shores which made attack easier. Additionally, Pearl Harbor was not easily defensible this is because it could be attacked at every side. When Admiral Richardson worries were told to the president, Roosevelt sacked him and he was replaced with the more submissive Admiral Kimmel.

In 1940 as well, the US cryptanalysts decoded the code the Japanese used to encrypt messages to their embassies. In late 1940, from the nature and tone of the messages, one

could see that an attack was forthcoming even though none said it would happen at Pearl Harbor. Even at that, Roosevelt failed to inform Pearl Harbor's commanders to be prepared.

Also, Roosevelt made a mistake on the domestic front, his choice to bury thousands of Japanese American families was an atrocity.

Once the war happened, concern over the likely Japanese attack of the United States increased. This is because up to 100,000 of Japanese-American were living in America and some viewed this as a national security threat.

On the 19<sup>th</sup> of February 1942, Roosevelt relocated all US residents that were of Japanese ancestry to confinement camps across the country. In some places, a family of eight people was made to live in one room. It was only in 1988 that the United States gave a formal apology for this action.

However, his enthusiasm to fight Nazi Germany and Japan should be applauded; this is because this war had precise moral reasons. Roosevelt was a strong leader with charisma and bravery who regularly gave his country people public speeches and press conferences in order to encourage them as well as to remind them of the reason why there were fighting.

Roosevelt's leadership was nothing short of commanding, and Americans were fortunate to have such a gifted man at their control during the world's bloodiest war.

## President Truman wasn't tough enough while he was dealing with North Korea.

On the 25<sup>th</sup> of June 1950, the Cold War changed to extremely hot when the communist North Korean army attacked capitalist South Korea. Proclaiming the North Korean attack as an act of violence, the United Nations (UN) formed the UN Command and sent a force to protect the South Koreans.

Although President Truman didn't want this war to happen, he could have done better to prevent it from happening

In March 1949, the North Korean leader named Kim Il-Sung met with the USSR's Joseph Stalin in order to gain support for an attack. However, Stalin didn't support him, cautious of war with the United States.

However, in October 1949, when communist forces became the authorities in China, and Truman didn't interfere, Stalin was aware. Possibly the United States would stay neutral in Korea too. In January 1950, Secretary of State Dean Acheson proclaimed that America was imposing a "defense perimeter" against Communism in East Asia. Importantly, Acheson excluded South Korea in this region.

Therefore, Truman and Acheson naively led Stalin to support a North Korean attack on the South. However, with the attack at hand, Truman realized that there must be a way to safeguard the country. He dedicated America totally to the UN-led protection effort.

General Douglas MacArthur was in control of the war. He was sent to Korea and Truman gave the legendary general "all the authority he needs" to push the North Koreans back.

This was an error because Truman didn't find MacArthur trustworthy. The general was notoriously difficult to get information from during World War Two, and Truman saw him as a prima donna.

Truman should have followed his instincts.

After a terrible start to the war, MacArthur won different victories and he was able to push the North Korean forces back to the Chinese border. To this point, Communist China had refused to get directly tangled in the Korean War, however, this changed shortly. Chinese troops were scattered over the Korean border and they began invading the UN forces.

MacArthur pushed Truman for a violent reaction to the Chinese involvement, however, the president prohibited him to send troops to the north of Yalu River. MacArthur accepted, however, he stepped up military attacks south of this line. This action got a Chinese-led counteroffensive annoyed, and the UN forces began to withdraw.

Then, a letter was sent from MacArthur to Joe Martin who was a Massachusetts politician. The letter was to request that the Chinese anti-communists be enlisted to invade China from the inside. It was certain that such action would have sent the United States into a straight war with China, infuriating World War Three.

This was the final straw for Truman. He sacked MacArthur for disobedience.

Although Truman was not famous then, he did his country a service by sacking MacArthur. Through interfering in policy and attempting to worsen the Korean conflict to more terrible conflict, MacArthur reminds us of the reason why the military serves the state and also the reason why the president performs as Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces.

## Lyndon Johnson misinformed the public and politicians to heighten the Vietnam War.

On the 2<sup>nd</sup> of August 1964, Washington got a report which says that the North Vietnamese forces had fired the USS Maddox located in the Tonkin Gulf. Then, the United States had a military that was present there in Vietnam, however, only in an advisory role to the South Vietnamese government. Things were about to get different.

Robert McNamara who was the Defense Secretary told the president of a second attack on the Maddox on the 4<sup>th</sup> of August. However, as conflicting military reports dropped through to Johnson as well as his advisers, it became unclear whether or not a second attack had happened.

That evening, in a meeting with senior politicians, Johnson spoke with total confidence of the attack. In order to take revenge, Johnson requested airstrikes along the North Vietnamese coast.

The following day, Johnson asked that Congress to approve a bill that will allow him to do whatever is important to “protect the peace” in southeast Asia. This bill was passed on the 10<sup>th</sup>

of August and it was called the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution. The United States was increasing its military involvement in Vietnam.

However, the second Gulf of Tonkin attack never took place.

Even at then, naval officers scrutinizing Maddox's messages were doubtful that the second attack happened. Johnson was aware that the evidence wasn't reliable, however, he and McNamara misinformed the politicians as well as the public, pretending as if they were dealing with certain facts. Soon as the Resolution was approved by the Congress, US intelligence officials informed Johnson that the second attack probably didn't occur.

Therefore, Johnson used a weak excuse to heighten US involvement in Vietnam to cause an all-consuming war. At that time, the Vietnam war led to a terrible quagmire for the United States which led to the deaths of almost 60,000 Americans.

However, it could have led to a darker conflict had it been that Johnson had not quashed any opportunity to use nuclear weapons.

In 1968, in the build-up battle at Khe Sanh, General William Westmoreland who was the commander of US military forces in Vietnam thought about moving nuclear weapons into South Vietnam just in case the battle turns against them. This possibility was given a codenamed called Operation Fracture Jaw.

When Johnson heard about the Fracture Jaw, he was perplexed and he told the Westmoreland that the use of nuclear weapons was totally forbidden.

Although Johnson didn't show much sense by intensifying the war in Vietnam, we can appreciate that a rasher president wasn't in the White House.

Presidents have persistently left the Founding Fathers' ideals and used their influence to wage war.

In 1787 when American giants such as George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, and James Madison sat down in Philadelphia to write the Constitution of America, they imagined a country that is free from the oppressive influence of European rulers. They were aware that these authoritarian leaders had regularly exercised their power to initiate damaging wars in order to increase their own power, steal resources or territory and expand their own regime's popularity.

In order to oppose this, it was written in the Constitution by the Founding Fathers that only Congress and not the president could declare war. Every time Congress declared war, most votes will be needed in both the Senate and House of Representatives. By doing this, it was believed that the choice to go to war wouldn't be decided by a single person.

However, all through the history of America, presidents have disregarded the Founders' philosophy and system of checks and balances.

Firstly, in 1846, there was James Polk who provoked Mexico into an attack. Polk created a war just to gain his purpose of territorial expansion, behaving like the tyrannical European monarchs loathed by the Founders.

Shockingly, there was Abraham Lincoln who did not ask Congress for a formal declaration of war, this is because he didn't want to see the Confederacy as a country and give them legal legitimacy. However, he laid a risky example in which a lot of presidents will follow.

After was William McKinley. Just like Polk, McKinley asked Congress for a declaration of war and once he was at war, he behaved like a European colonial power by seizing Spanish territory and establishing an American empire.

In 1941, when Congress declared war on the Axis powers, that would be the last time they would do such. In all the war the United States has fought even against Truman's Korea and Johnson's Vietnam, presidents always found approaches to remove Congress from the decision-making process.

Truman dodged Congress on the notion that the United States was really waging war under the UN flag; hence they didn't need Congress to approve it. Johnson used shady military proof to convince Congress to pass the vague Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, which made the president do whatever he felt essential to protect South Vietnam.

If there's one lesson we should learn from all these presidents of war, it's that a present president can undermine the democratic process and manipulate his way into almost any conflict he or she wants.

## Presidents of War: The Epic Story, from 1807 to Modern Times by Michael R. Beschloss Book Review

America's presidents of war have been a varied bunch, and a balanced, objective analysis reveals that even valued wartime leaders committed mistakes as well as their achievements. Presidential intentions have also been mixed, some instigating war to unite or protect their nations; others for territory or misunderstandings that could've been resolved diplomatically.

However, if there's a theme that cuts across this striking American history, it's that the United States has shifted from the Founding Fathers' wish that only the Congress and Senate have the right to announce war.

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