

Times of Heroism, Times of Terror

**American Presidents
and the Cold War**

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Preface

Two civilian aircraft were deliberately crashed into the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York City, a third aircraft was successfully targeted against the American Department of Defense headquarters (known as the Pentagon), and a fourth aircraft was crashed into a field in Pennsylvania. These events of September 11, 2001, were a significant turning point in the history of the United States and its people, and of such magnitude that they affected international relationships with a host of very different nation states; and they took place after the cold war. Whether or not the actions and consequences of September 11, 2001, prove to be a watershed in American foreign policy, as the ending of the cold war proved to be, is yet to be seen, but the irony is apparent. America had “girded its loins” in fear of a potential attack from the Soviet Union for some four decades, but suffers a direct attack from non-communist civilian terrorists.

The circumstances of September 11, 2001, make Ralph Waldo Emerson’s words on crises, used as a frontispiece, seem exceedingly apposite. Although his words have resonance for the history of the cold war, they have added brevity under the tragic circumstances of a direct, undeclared attack on America itself, and the consequences that had to be addressed by President George W. Bush. Not only were these events indicative of the nature of modern political terrorism, but also the pivotal role of the American president for the American political system and world events. President George W. Bush responded to the unexpected attack with a call to arms and mobilization of American and associated forces to fight terrorism and to launch a major war in Afghanistan against the base of al-Qaeda terrorism. This was followed in 2003 by waging war on Iraq, a foreign policy conducted with allies, to remove Saddam Hussein and his regime from power and authority.

Although many events illustrate the unpredictability of international events, the attacks on the United States on September 11, in particular, reflect the dilemmas faced by American presidents because of notable foreign policy events. The carefully prepared policy positions drawn up by the State Department, Department of Defense, National Security Agency, the Central Intelligence Agency, and think tanks are exposed for their limitations when such seminal events occur. Political choices exist within existing political structures, but crises help to redefine the substance of choice and sometimes to change the structures in which they take place. The period of the cold war was beset with a number of crises that tested the mettle of those directly involved and the institutions they worked within.

The cold war between the United States and the Soviet Union now appears more definitive in terms of specific ideological differences that have been brought to a conclusion. The end of the cold war is a seminal event in American foreign policy. The collapse of the Soviet Union gave the United States unrivalled global power status. Capitalism as a system of modernization was left with few rivals, and even communist China has moved to selling goods in the international and United States marketplaces. Whether or not the economic, political, and strategic “realism” that followed the end of the cold war is fundamentally shaken by the events and consequences of September 11, 2001, is already being debated.¹ The cold war worries and scenarios developed by a number of American presidents and their administrations are recent but clearly definable history.

Notes

1. F. Cameron, “Utilitarian Multilateralism: The Implications of 11 September 2001 for US Foreign Policy,” *Politics* 22, 2 (2002). A. Lieven, “The Secret Policemen’s Ball: The United States, Russia and the International Order After 11 September,” *International Affairs* 78, 2 (2002).

Acknowledgments

This book was conceived and partly researched while in the United States as a Visiting Professor at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee. The good provisions of the Department of History and the Jean and Alexander Heard Library at Vanderbilt University were gratefully received. Having taught courses where students exhibited strong interest in the role of individual American presidents, I set about writing this book.

In the course of researching and writing this work I visited eight of the ten presidential libraries and museums that relate to the American presidents between 1945 and 1991. Six of the libraries provided interesting material that I have incorporated into this work. All of the presidential libraries have Web sites with fascinating material ranging not only from finding aides, but biographical material, National Security Council memoranda, and some very personal documents.

The material gathered from the depository of Richard M. Nixon's material relating to his time as vice president has also proven to be useful, and the archivist Fred Klose was generous with his time. John H. Taylor, director of the Richard Nixon Library and Birthplace in Yorba Linda, California, was kind enough to send to me in England post-presidential speeches of Richard M. Nixon.

The hospitality and help from the Dwight D. Eisenhower Library in Abilene, Kansas, was channeled through Barbara Constable, a staff archivist who was particularly helpful with a number of avenues of research. My first interest at the library had been the relationship of President Eisenhower with Canadian statesman Lester Bowles Pearson but this broadened to an interest in President Eisenhower as commander in chief. The excellent published collections of documents on Eisenhower have provided memoranda of Eisenhower's communications with political subordinates and foreign dignitaries.

Archivist William H. McNitt was very expeditious in providing files and direction for me at the Gerald R. Ford Library in Ann Arbor, Michigan. I was pleased to receive expert reference assistance and patience over my photocopying.

Brief visits were made by me to the Truman Library and Museum in Independence, Missouri, and the Johnson Library and Museum in Austin, Texas. The Truman Library and Museum was having a very good exhibit on Truman and Israel. The later visit to the Johnson Library and Museum coincided with rather good hospitality provided for the Society for Historians of American Foreign Policy Conference in June 2004. The Perry-Castaneda Library at the University of Texas in Austin had impressive secondary resources.

I made a fruitful visit to the George H. W. Bush Library and Museum at Texas A&M University in College Station, Texas. This is an under-used resource at the moment despite having a sizable number of papers available to researchers. I was grateful that material was delivered to me with great speed and professionalism.

Help at the extremely picturesque John F. Kennedy Library and Museum in Boston, Massachusetts, was much appreciated. Stephen Plath was kind enough to direct me toward the Sorensen and Schlesinger papers and a David Ormsby-Gore interview transcript. The library has also been generous with its time in dealing with enquiries from some of my postgraduate students from the School of History, University of Leeds.

No library, museum, institution, or other individual takes any responsibility for the contents of this book. All blame can be attributed to the author.

The writer acknowledges support and patience of his family, including a considerable debt of gratitude to Eileen, Ethan, and Sean Thornton. My American wife has an inherent interest in the American presidency; my prediction is that my two sons may someday share that interest.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Of all manifestations of power, restraint impresses men most.¹
—*Thucydides*

Under the eighteenth-century Constitution of the United States of America, the checks and balances of the political system inherent to the separation of powers, designed to control and demarcate responsibilities of the legislature, executive, and judiciary, were eloquently defined. The fact that the American Constitution is still a prized working document of the American political and legal system is testament to its inherent quality, and also to its adaptability. As a defined set of rules and obligations, the Constitution was likely to give the appearance of rigidity, and to confine as well as define the role of decision makers. Yet the Constitution is arguably as relevant to the modern political process of the United States as it was at its triumphal inception. The words of the Constitution and Bill of Rights, with limited formal amendments, have largely been preserved as they were expressed by the founding fathers.

The words of the American Constitution remain, but the political fabric of the American political system has been restructured within the constitutional framework. Women and African Americans were not initially accepted as integral components of the political system and had to win acceptance within the system defined by the Constitution. Conflicting social, economic, and racial groups in the United States have been involved in debates and struggles over the relevance of the Constitution and the protection afforded by the Constitution to particular sections of society.

How has the American executive branch of government fared in the development and reinterpretation of the Constitution? Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., in his famous 1973 book *The Imperial Presidency*, eloquently mapped the increased powers granted to, seized by, and manipulated by the executive

branch of government in modern times in the United States.² When Lyndon B. Johnson was president in the White House, Schlesinger could claim that the powers of the chief executive over foreign policy issues had become “The Presidency Rampant,” particularly because of Johnson’s commitment of American military forces to the Vietnam War in 1965.³ Foreign policy developments and the elevated role of the executive within foreign policy decision-making were major reasons for the increased powers afforded to the American president. Both changes in the international environment and the expectation that an American president would be able to satisfactorily advance American foreign policy led to an extraordinary increase in the political, economic, and military power of American presidents.

Whether or not the founding fathers intended the president to be only a titular commander in chief is moot as a historical point and an issue for debate, but clearly the president has become the commander in chief in a literal sense. Article II of the Constitution posits that “[t]he President shall be Commander in Chief of the Army and Navy of the United States, and of the Militia of the several States, when called into the actual Service of the United States.”⁴ As if to reinforce the president’s responsibility to protect American democracy, the oath of office requires a president to declare his defense of the Constitution. As recorded by Arthur Schlesinger Jr. and Samuel P. Huntington, this designation as commander in chief left the actual functions that the president would perform in this position undefined and provided the opportunity for these functions to be subsequently expanded.⁵

Presidents and Military Service

Has military command been the *raison d’être* of the presidency and the function of commander in chief? Of the forty-one presidents to hold office by the end of the cold war in 1991, including President George H. W. Bush, twenty-five American presidents experienced some form of military service, although some were not as active as others. Because sixty-one percent of this group participated in military duties, it would appear that military experience prior to obtaining the presidency has been a reasonably useful career characteristic. Moreover, all nine American presidents since Franklin D. Roosevelt up to 1991 have had military service credentials; eight of these presidents served in the American armed services during World War II and one during World War I.

General George Washington, as commander in chief of the Continental Army during the Revolutionary War, was inaugurated as the first American president, thus setting an early association between military prowess and the office of the presidency. World War I produced only one president associated with direct combat, Harry S. Truman, although he was not picked as Franklin D. Roosevelt’s vice president in 1944 for his World War I military record. Nevertheless, Truman had commanded an artillery battery in France

during the closing American involvement in World War I and left the American army as a brevet major.

In contrast, Dwight David Eisenhower's popularity and nomination for the presidency did stem from an exemplary and well-publicized military record. Like Ulysses S. Grant, Eisenhower was trained at West Point, commanded a victorious army, and claimed no political experience before being nominated for the presidency. It would appear, however, that Grant felt far more uncomfortable as president than Eisenhower ever did. During World War II, U.S. Army Chief of Staff George C. Marshall chose Eisenhower to lead the Allied invasion of North Africa. Following this success he became the supreme Allied commander for the invasion of Europe and reaped the political benefits of the allied victories in Europe. The fact that Eisenhower had not voted in a national election and was a political novice did not prevent both the Democratic and Republican political parties seeking his candidacy for the presidency. Eisenhower, as a Republican candidate with his war record juxtaposed against the Korean War and with campaign buttons declaring "I like Ike" was able to sweep away the Democratic challenge of the more academic Adlai E. Stevenson.

A number of post-World War II presidents experienced U.S. Navy service, including John F. Kennedy, Lyndon B. Johnson, Richard M. Nixon, Gerald R. Ford, Jimmy Carter, and George H. W. Bush. John F. Kennedy was a lieutenant junior grade (j.g.) and commander of a P.T. boat in the South Pacific. He contracted malaria, suffered an injured intervertebral disc, and won a Purple Heart and a Navy-Marine Corps medal. Although initially a lieutenant commander and then a commander in the U.S. Naval Reserve, Lyndon B. Johnson saw active duty between December 1941 and July 1942. Richard M. Nixon received a Navy commission as lieutenant j.g. in 1942 and finished the war as a lieutenant commander, seeing service overseas from June 1943 to August 1944. Gerald R. Ford entered naval service during World War II as an ensign and emerged as a lieutenant commander, serving on the USS *Monterey*. The longest presidential naval career was held by Jimmy Carter, who entered the U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis in 1943 (although his appointment was accepted in 1942 and he spent a year as a Naval Reserve Officer Training Corps student in Atlanta at Georgia Tech) and subsequently served as a lieutenant commander, leaving the Navy in 1953.⁶ Ronald Reagan's successor as president, George H. W. Bush, had a very active and distinguished Navy flying career, flying fifty-eight combat missions in the Pacific theater of operations during World War II.

Although President Ronald Reagan spent the World War II years in the United States of America, he was also officially on active duty. He was a second lieutenant in the U.S. Army Reserve and then a captain on active duty with the U.S. Air Force from 1942 to 1945.

The association of military men with the White House should not suggest that presidents have acted belligerently or led the nation to war as a consequence of their previous military service. Interestingly, Frederick W. Marks

III has pointed out that there has been an inverse relationship between military men occupying the presidency and the waging of war.⁷ High-ranking military personnel have avoided war after becoming president, whereas some presidents from a civilian background or of an "intellectual" disposition have taken the United States to war. Presidents with significant military records who are associated with avoiding major conflicts include George Washington, James Monroe, Andrew Jackson, William Henry Harrison, Zachary Taylor, Franklin Pierce, Ulysses S. Grant, Rutherford B. Hayes, James A. Garfield, Benjamin Harrison, Theodore Roosevelt, and Dwight D. Eisenhower. Marks puts forward the strong argument that "[n]ot a single one of these individuals led the nation to war despite numerous opportunities."⁸

Whether or not active military service was a significant benefit to the presidents who have possessed it is a debatable point. Some presidents who were the product of military academies behaved in a very unmilitary way in office (i.e., Grant, Eisenhower, and Carter). World War II military service has certainly proven to be a useful credential for those aspiring to the presidency, based on the profiles of presidential candidates from 1945 to 1992. Nevertheless, candidates with "superior" military records have also been defeated in some presidential elections. These include George McGovern, Walter "Fritz" Mondale, Bob Dole, and the incumbent presidents Jimmy Carter and George H. W. Bush. Of course, their service was not an exclusive factor for election, nor did it guarantee specific advantages to candidates (with the notable exception of General Dwight D. Eisenhower). However, in a cold war political climate where the Soviet Union was considered a constant cause of international unrest and military tensions were significant being perceived as able to respond rationally and efficiently to strategic and military international problems was a valuable attribute for a president of the United States. Even if the cold war is characterized as a lack of overt military conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union, it was still a period with regional conflicts and the threat of World War III.

American presidents have become extremely powerful through America's rise to global power and because of the capability to intervene in every part of the world. All American presidents since 1945 have been called upon to make strategic foreign policy decisions and to decide on appropriate responses to military conflicts and crises. They were certainly not omnipotent or exclusive decision-makers; nevertheless, their significance is clear in a number of areas. Harry S. Truman was intimately involved in the use of atomic bombs against Japan, responded to the Berlin crisis, and orchestrated the response to the Korean War; Dwight D. Eisenhower was also involved in the Korean War and the growing problem of Southeast Asia; John F. Kennedy had a dramatic showdown with the Soviet Union over the attempted positioning of missiles in Cuba and increased the number of "quiet Americans" in Vietnam; Lyndon B. Johnson's legacy is intertwined with the Vietnam War, and he also took direct action in the Dominican Republic; Richard M. Nixon's policies in Southeast Asia were dramatic and

controversial; Gerald R. Ford showed his mettle in the foreign policy arena over the *Mayaguez* affair; Jimmy Carter suffered through events in the Middle East and Soviet aggression in Afghanistan; and Ronald Reagan is remembered for both his tough stance against the Soviet Union and his more awkward policies toward Central America. In the post-cold war period, George H. W. Bush pursued strong military policies and prosecuted the Persian Gulf War against Iraq. In the new millennium his son and successor to President William Jefferson Clinton, George W. Bush, launched himself into a war against international terrorism.

The Cold War

The term “cold war” is a general and imprecise one, although it is widely used, and understood, to describe a situation in which two or more antagonists avoid becoming involved in direct conflict, and often carries associations of an ideological conflict or propaganda war. It is neither a rigorously defined social-scientific concept nor a historical period that can be precisely demarcated. The term has, nevertheless, become associated with the period of hostilities between the Soviet Union and the United States in the post-World War II period of history that comes to an end with the collapse of the Soviet Union. It might be applied more generically to Western and Eastern world political divisions or to the incompatibility of Soviet-style communism and Western-style democracy. This simplification, however, would tend to ignore periods of peaceful cooperation and *détente*, internal divisions within the rival blocs, and the development of a multipolar rather than a bipolar world.

The exact dating of the beginning, and for that matter the ending, of the cold war are significant and arguable points in their own right. Joseph M. Siracusa has cited a “Cold War Certificate” of the Department of Defense defining the start of the cold war from the end of World War II on September 2, 1945, and its culmination as the lowering of the flag of the Soviet Union on December 26, 1991.⁹ The origins of the cold war developments of the 1940s and 1950s can be traced back as early as the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 and the creation of a communist state in the Soviet Union. Nineteenth-century socialists, and Karl Marx in particular, diagnosed a fundamentally antagonistic character in industrial societies. Marx and his followers would come to see the logical development of history producing an inevitable conflict between two opposing camps, represented by the bourgeoisie and the proletariat.

Once a communist state had been established, whether as an aberration or as an adaptation of Marxism, the creation of further ideological extremes followed. In the interwar years, the competition of fascism with liberal democracy, and communism was important in the development of Italy's domestic and external policies, in Germany's foreign and domestic policies, in producing the Spanish Civil War with its considerable international

involvement, and ultimately in producing World War II. Soviet and American isolationism helped to keep the cold war latent in the interwar years. American, British, and French diplomats had attempted to reconcile the contradictions inherent in Soviet foreign policy in the 1930s and 1940s, but even the Allied cooperation during World War II could not overcome the ideological antagonism between capitalism and communism. It was the American journalist Walter Lippmann, whose articles were syndicated around the world, and some published in book form, who popularised the term "cold war" for the postwar years.

The cold war period from 1945 to 1991 is beset with heroic attempts to find peaceful solutions to conflicts: summit diplomacy, détente, peace accords, and strategic nuclear arms limitations. Throughout this period, the president, as the chief executive and commander in chief of a superpower state, has been involved in international problem solving, peace initiatives, traditional diplomacy, and the prosecution of wars. With foreseen and unforeseen outbreaks of international violence, presidents have found themselves in "times of heroism and times of terror."¹⁰ The personalities and actions of presidents have been significant factors in the handling of American foreign policy crises.

To focus on the president's role in conducting the foreign policy of the United States emphasizes and accepts that foreign policy power has been centralized in the hands of the executive. Of course, it cannot be ignored that there are other loci of power in the making of U.S. foreign policy residing with individuals and processes involving the Department of State, Department of Defense, National Security Council (NSC), Congress, other national bureaucracies, the mass media, domestic and multinational corporations, the military and the military-industrial complex, and public opinion. Nevertheless, the present work is a study of the presidency and foreign policy, and operates within more confined, manageable, and personalized parameters. The interaction between the president and other, possibly conflicting loci of power and influence will be covered when they interpose themselves between the president and the ultimate foreign policy decisions.

Edwin S. Corwin captured the relationship between the United States Congress and the president in his remarks in 1941: "Contrary to a common, but quite mistaken impression, no President has a mandate from the Constitution to conduct our foreign relations according to his own sweet will. If his power in that respect is indefinite, so is Congress's Legislative power, and if he holds the 'sword', so does Congress hold the 'purse strings'."¹¹

Before leaving office, President Eisenhower raised the specter of a military-industrial complex as a significant force in American foreign policy. Some sociologists and new-left historians have accepted much offered in this view, and feature film director Oliver Stone even made it a central thesis of his conspiracy theory about the Vietnam War and the assassination of John F. Kennedy, depicted in his film *JFK*.¹²

The eminent academic Graham T. Allison was to look to organizational, bureaucratic, and rational-actor models for explanations of the Cuban missile crisis.¹³ Much of Allison's wisdom has been accepted in academic analyses of foreign-policy decision-making. A number of alternative approaches to a rational-actor model as an explanation of the president's role in the making of American foreign policy can be found elsewhere. This study charts the significance of acting presidents to American foreign policy during the complex period of the cold war and captures some of their frustrations, confusions, hopes, intentions, ambitions, and in some cases overweening power in the postwar period. Whether or not each president, over the forty-six years of the cold war, has shown the appropriate levels of restraint in foreign policy decisions has been open to much debate. Each post-World War II president has found a "crisis to try his edge."¹⁴

Notes

1. This quotation from the Athenian historian Thucydides (c. 470–400 BC) was, according to Bob Woodward, a quotation favored by the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Colin Powell, a copy of which was kept in his glass-topped desk in the Pentagon. B. Woodward, *The Commanders* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991), 153.

2. A. M. Schlesinger Jr., *The Imperial Presidency*, revised edition (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1989).

3. *Ibid.*, 177–207.

4. In the appendix of G. B. Tindall, D. F. Shi, *America: A Narrative History*, 3rd edition (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1984), A18.

5. Schlesinger, *The Imperial Presidency*, 62.

6. This aspect of his career is explained in J. Carter, *Why Not the Best?* (Eastbourne: Kingsway Publications, 1977).

7. F. W. Marks III, "Power and Peace in American Diplomatic History," *The Society of Historians of American Foreign Relations (S.H.A.F.R.) Newsletter*, March, 1996.

8. *Ibid.*, 15.

9. J. M. Siracusa, "The 'New' Cold War History and the Origins of the Cold War," *Australian Journal of Politics and History* 47, 1 (2001), 1–49. In footnote 2, Siracusa points out: "The flag of the former USSR was lowered for the last time on Christmas day, 25 December 1991, but Congress was apparently loath to assign the anniversary of the death of communism to the same day as the birth of Christ."

10. R. W. Emerson, *Essays, First Series* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1883), 246–247.

11. E. S. Corwin, "Some Aspects of the Presidency," *Annals*, 218, November 1941, 122–131, cited in W. LaFeber, *The American Age: U.S. Foreign Policy at Home and Abroad, 1750 to the Present*, 2nd edition (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1994) 410, endnote 73.

12. *JFK*, directed by Oliver Stone (Warner Bros., 1991).

13. G. T. Allison, *Essence of Decision* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1971).

14. Emerson, *Essays, First Series*, 246–247.

