

## *A Path to Greatness?*

“Presidential Greatness as an Attribute of Warmaking” by David Gray Adler, in *Presidential Studies Quarterly* (Sept. 2003), Center for the Study of the Presidency, 1020 19th St., N.W., Ste. 250, Washington, D.C. 20036.

Theodore Roosevelt always lamented that World War I started after he had left office, believing that he’d been robbed of a president’s only opportunity for greatness, a war. “If Lincoln had lived in times of peace, no one would know his name now,” he declared in 1910. Of course, Roosevelt went down as one of the greats anyway, showing that presidents don’t need a war (or perfect judgment) to win a place in history, writes Adler, a political scientist at Idaho State University.

Others, notably John F. Kennedy, have shared TR’s view. The Founding Fathers feared that dreams of glory might prompt the chief executive to wage war, which is why they vested the war-making power in Congress. As James Madison wrote, “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.”

Seven presidents of the dozen often rated by

historians as “great” or “near-great” held office while the nation was at war, according to Adler. But four of these — John Adams, James Polk, Harry Truman, and Lyndon Johnson — did not owe their standing to their actions as commander in chief. Indeed, Truman and Johnson achieved greatness *despite* their wartime leadership. Adams was “a consistent voice for moderation” and let Congress make “crucial decisions” during the quasi-war with France in 1798. Polk owes his standing not to his “manipulation of the Mexican-American War, for which he was widely criticized and properly censured by the House of Representatives,” says Adler, but more likely to “his aggressive policy of ‘Manifest Destiny’ and his territorial expansion of the United States.” Of the top wartime presidents, says Adler, only Abraham Lincoln, Woodrow Wilson, and Franklin Roosevelt “may be justly characterized as great by virtue of their leadership in war.”



*Battlefield heroics help a presidential reputation, but making war as president is another story.*

As for presidents who simply deploy troops hither and yon, as many chief executives have done, they seem as likely to wind up with the dirty dozen presidents at the bottom (Warren Harding et al.) as with the admired dozen at the top.

Truman's claim of "a unilateral executive privilege to wage war" has left "a deeply trou-

bling legacy," in Adler's view. But if the parchment barrier the Framers erected against chief executives seeking greatness through martial glory no longer appears adequate, he concludes, history provides presidents with another one, if only they will heed it: the lesson that war is seldom the path to presidential greatness.

## *Jefferson and his Slaves*

"Jefferson, Morality, and the Problem of Slavery" by Ari Helo and Peter Onuf, in *William and Mary Quarterly* (July 2003), Box 8781, Williamsburg, Va. 23187-8781.

It's a perennial puzzle: How could the author of the Declaration of Independence, with its soaring proclamation of human equality, justify in his own mind remaining a slave owner?

Thomas Jefferson "never thought that slavery was morally justifiable," write historians Helo and Onuf, of the University of Helsinki and the University of Virginia, respectively. But neither did he think that he had violated "the natural rights of man" by having been born into a slaveholding family.

Jefferson's thinking was grounded in a complicated but coherent "historical conception of morality." Slavery was as old as Western civilization, and even the great liberal philosopher John Locke (1632-1704) had argued that victors in a just war were morally justified in enslaving (rather than killing) their captives. No longer, Jefferson insisted. The "moral sense" had shown a further "remarkable instance of improvement."

But that was not to say slavery needed to end immediately. Long before the American Revolution, white Virginians, in Jefferson's view, "had developed institutions of government and made laws for themselves and so had emerged as a distinct people with a civic and

moral identity." Until the enslaved blacks did the same, they had no rights.

Jefferson's "primary goal was not to free black people," observe Helo and Onuf, "but to free white people from the moral evil of being slaveholders." (In his draft of the Declaration of Independence, Jefferson accused Britain of having imposed the institution of slavery on the colonies, but the congressional editors of the draft excised the charge.) The challenge "was to find a practical solution to the slavery problem that would enable Virginians collectively to extricate themselves from the institution, reversing the process of historical development that had deprived Africans of their freedom, but doing so in a way that would not jeopardize the free institutions that were themselves the products of history."

"Jefferson's solution to the slavery problem was to institute a program of gradual emancipation, separate slave children from their parents in order to prepare them for freedom," and create a new state in Africa. Jefferson didn't do much to advance the cause, and he emancipated only a few of his own slaves, but he believed that Virginia's slaves would one day be free.

### FOREIGN POLICY & DEFENSE

## *The Decline of War*

"Policing the Remnants of War" by John Mueller, in *Journal of Peace Research* (Sept. 2003), Sage Publications, 2455 Teller Rd., Thousand Oaks, Calif. 91320.

Will the world ever war no more? In certain important respects, the ancient institution of war is already on the way out,

asserts Mueller, a political scientist at Ohio State University. Major war among developed countries is now rare and un-