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**The Re-election of Incumbent Presidents:  
Wars, War Heroes, Patriots, and Prosperity**

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**The Re-election of Incumbent Presidents: Wars, War Heroes, Patriots, and Prosperity**

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## The Re-election of Incumbent Presidents: Wars, War Heroes, Patriots, and Prosperity

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In 1789 the fledgling nation of the United States of America unanimously elected its first president, a war hero named George Washington. In accordance with the provisions of the Constitution, Washington served a four-year term, at the completion of which he ran again for president. He won, and after four more years, was succeeded by his vice-president, John Adams, who defeated Thomas Jefferson to become the second president of the United States of America. Four years later Jefferson would turn the tables on his victor and defeat Adams to become the nation's third president.

For over two hundred years a cycle of presidential elections, re-elections, defeats, and deaths has continued, with forty-one men claiming at different times the title of President of the United States of America. Some of the greatest leaders in modern history have carried this title, men such as Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln, and Roosevelt. These men have left their names and deeds indelibly etched into the annals of history, and the American people owe much to their accomplishments.

Though the Washingtons and the Jeffersons of American history usually come to mind at the mention of the word "president", men with names such as Fillmore, Pierce, Hayes, and Hoover also hold an equal right to share the same distinction. How come then, are they forgotten when the average American invokes thoughts of the presidency?

Perhaps the James K. Polks and the Millard Fillmores of the past have been forgotten because they were one-term presidents. Of the forty-one US presidents, over

half (23), have served only one term. Of these twenty-three one-term presidents, very few occupy a prominent position in the collective lexicon of the American people. If a one-term president is well known by the American public the reason usually lies in the recentness of their presidency (Ford, Carter, and Bush) or the fantastic events surrounding their death (Kennedy).

Perhaps the American public simply due to the shorter duration of their presidency forgets one-term presidents. After all, serving four years rather than eight leaves just half the time to accomplish policy, shape national and global events, and to leave one's mark on history. Given the opportunity for four more years of the highest office in the land, how may the occurrence of the one-term president be explained?

One explanation for occurrence of the one-term president is quite simple. Six of the one-term presidents died in office. Another answer can be found in the choice of the president not to run for re-election. Factors such as job stress, poor health, and unpopularity may have factored into the decision of four presidents (James K. Polk, James Buchanan, Grover Cleveland, and William Howard Taft) not to seek re-election. Even two-term presidents such as Harry Truman and Lyndon Johnson with eligibility to run again opted to vacate the top post in favor of a quieter life. On the opposite end of the spectrum, five presidents attempted to seek re-election, but were denied nomination by their party.

Having identified the factors of death in office, unwillingness to run for re-election, and refusal by party to nominate, there still remain nine one-term presidents whose length of tenure as president remains unexplained. The answer? These nine presidents served only one-term due to a loss to another candidate in a presidential

election. Why did these presidents lose their bids for re-election? Were they poor leaders? Or did other factors play a role in their defeats?

Instead of dissecting the failures of the one-term presidents, perhaps another approach may be used to explain why they were not re-elected. For various reasons, the American public did not deem re-election of the current president vital to the state of the country. So what factors make the re-election of the president a guarantee in the fickle favor of the voting public? By concentrating on the successful re-elections of the two-term presidents and the factors surrounding their re-elections, an understanding may be gained of the factors necessary for presidential re-election.

An investigation of the seventeen successful presidential incumbents, indicates that at least one of four re-occurring factors has been present in each successful re-election bid. This paper will analyze the four factors present in the re-election attempts of the incumbent presidents in order to determine the impact each of the factors had on the re-election of the incumbent president. The paper will then offer an analysis of which factors are likely to influence future presidential elections.

Of the eighteen successful incumbents four were re-elected as founding fathers and revolutionary patriots of the United States. Five presidents were re-elected while the United States was engaged in war. Five of the successful incumbents were publicly acknowledged war heroes from previous conflicts. The remainder of the successful incumbents were re-elected during times of relative economic prosperity.

### **Founding Fathers and Re-election Bids**

The early American patriot presidents enjoyed a fair amount of success in their bids for a second term. George Washington, whose election in 1788 was a mere

formality, triumphed easily again in 1792, with runner-up John Adams occupying the office of vice-president. After winning the presidency in 1800, Thomas Jefferson thoroughly buried his opponents Charles Coatesworth of South Carolina and Rufus King of New York in what amounted to an electoral landslide. Like Jefferson, James Madison's win in the election of 1812 over DeWitt Clinton occurred without major cause for concern on the part of the incumbent.

During the first term of his presidency the name George Washington carried not only the highest level of recognition but also the highest level of any person in colonial America. As the hero of the Revolutionary War, Washington's exploits were legendary and his election as first president was the obvious choice of the young nation. During the first tumultuous years of the United States the role of the presidency carried with it a heavy burden for Washington. So great was the stress of the job that Washington sought to leave office at the completion of his first term. Only the cajoling of his ministers and a concern for the future of the young nation persuaded Washington to run for a second term.<sup>1</sup>

Jefferson and Madison, two of the most respected names in politics of the time disagreed with several aspects of the Washington administration, the largest of which being Secretary of the Treasury Alexander Hamilton's radical policies and his vast amount of influence on Washington's decisions. However, the two statesmen felt it essential for the well being of the young country for Washington to remain in office, so they joined the rest of Washington's ministers in clamoring for his return.<sup>2</sup> Once

<sup>1</sup> Richard North Smith, *Patriarch: George Washington and the New American Nation* (New York, 1993), p. 133.

<sup>2</sup> Arthur M. Schlesinger, jr., *Running for President: The Candidates and their Images* Vol. 1, (New York, 1993), p. 8.

Washington committed to the job the election was never in doubt, as the major political drama of 1792 was the possibility of Washington opting out of the presidency for the quieter setting of Mount Vernon.

The next patriot to retain the White House was Thomas Jefferson, the third president of the United States. The author of The Constitution, Jefferson maintained a level of recognition and respect in the eyes of the American public equal to that of Washington. The election of 1804 proved a monumental landslide for Jefferson and his political party, the Democrats. The opposition Federalist party partially owed the defeat of its candidate, Rufus King, to the inability to find an appealing issue for which to fault Jefferson.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, while Jefferson should receive credit for his efforts to maintain the strength of Democratic party unity on a national level, his major contribution to the success of his party lie in himself as a national symbol.<sup>4</sup> Like Washington, Jefferson's status as icon almost completely ensured that an attempt for re-election would be successful.

Immediately following Jefferson, James Madison also succeeded in his bid for two terms. Both Madison and Washington are unique in this analysis of presidential re-election bids in that they belong to two different categories. Along with the factor of wartime president improving his chances for re-election, Madison also played a large role as one of the founding fathers of the United States. Advisor to both Washington and Jefferson, Madison's contributions to shaping the government of the young nation were well known to the American voter.

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<sup>3</sup> Dumas Malone, *Jefferson the President: First Term, 1081-1805* (Boston, 1970), p. 434.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, p. 434.



Almost as if he knew his status as founding father would guarantee victory, Madison's refusal to campaign offers a stark contrast to the vicious partisan tactics played by incumbent and challenger in modern presidential elections. Though DeWitt Clinton, Madison's opponent, campaigned savagely in an effort to win the office, Madison remained regally serene, and upon election day won by a handsome margin.<sup>5</sup>

Three of the first four presidents were handily re-elected to second terms. The exception arises with John Adams, the second president of the United States. Just like Washington, Jefferson and Madison, Adams was a patriot and founding father of the United States, however, the American voters chose not to re-elect Adams in the election of 1800. One reason for this anomaly might stem from the fact that Adams' opponent in 1800 was Thomas Jefferson, who was arguably a patriot of greater regard and esteem than Adams. Though the voting public had no major qualms with the Adams presidency, the possibility of Thomas Jefferson, author of the Declaration of Independence, gaining the highest office in the land, seemed a more exciting prospect to Americans than four more years of Adams. This possibility looks even more probable considering the fact that Adams had the misfortune to follow George Washington, the greatest patriot in American history. Stuck between one half of the faces of Mount Rushmore, Adams election loss in 1800 is quite understandable.

Despite his loss, Adams should still be recognized as a founding father and a great patriot to the United States of America. His margin of defeat to Jefferson was not large, and the campaign was highly contested and close until the very end. One factor which severely hurt Adam's bid for re-election was the division between the Federalist party which split between Adam's followers, and those who believed that Alexander Hamilton

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<sup>5</sup> Robert Allen Rutland, *The Presidency of James Madison* (Kansas, 1998), p. 118.

was the true brain behind the party.<sup>6</sup> In the same respect that Adams' defeat may be explained by the greater popularity of Thomas Jefferson, party infighting might have been the true reason for Adams loss in 1800.

Though the factor of founding father/ patriot guaranteed re-election for three of the first four presidents, the influence this factor will play on future elections looks to be minimal. Trapped by the constraints of time and the human life span, the founding father re-election factor is limited to those men who participated in the founding of the United States. Even James Monroe, who followed Madison and succeeded in becoming a two-term president does not qualify for this category due to his young age during the Revolutionary War. Although an accurate predictor of incumbent success during the early days of the country, the would-be founding father factor no longer affects the re-election of American Presidents.

### **The Effect of War on a Presidential Election**

Since the election of Washington following the Revolutionary war, the United States has been involved in six major wars or armed conflicts. Amidst four of these conflicts, a presidential election has occurred in which an incumbent candidate has been opposed by a challenger. In every instance, the incumbent emerged victorious and presided over a second term. The first conflict during which a presidential election did not occur was World War One. However, one year prior to the United States' entry into the war, President Woodrow Wilson won his bid for a second term of office. The second conflict that did not take place over the course of a presidential election was the Korean War. It is noteworthy to mention that these circumstances, similar to World War One,

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<sup>6</sup> Schlesinger, Vol. 1, p. 36.

resulted in incumbent Harry Truman's defeat over Thomas Dewey only a year prior to the outbreak of hostilities in winning a second term of office.

As aforementioned, the election of 1812, held during the War of 1812, saw James Madison defeat DeWitt Clinton to gain re-election to a second term. As was the custom for presidents at the time Madison did not actively campaign for re-election. Throughout the course of the fall of 1812, Madison did not make one speech or shake one hand in search of supporters. Meanwhile, Clinton attacked Madison for not pursuing the war effort vigorously enough and for plunging an unprepared country into war. His efforts however were to no avail and Madison was re-elected by a large margin.<sup>7</sup>

Madison's apparent lack of interest in campaigning, which was expected from incumbents of the time, may have aided his chances for re-election. Madison remained silent while Clinton traversed both North and South, playing both sides depending on which part of the country he happened to be campaigning. This silence may have added to Madison's regal air, while Clinton may have muddied himself instead in his attempts to soil Madison.<sup>8</sup>

During the Civil War, the election of 1864 occurred, in which incumbent Abraham Lincoln defeated candidate and former United States General George B. McClellan. Lincoln, perhaps, represents both the best and the most intriguing example of the success of American presidential incumbents during times of war. The only president ever to be elected during a time of civil war, Lincoln's re-election was far from "a sure thing". Less than a month before the election Lincoln himself predicted McClellan would

<sup>7</sup> Rutland, pp. 117-118.

<sup>8</sup> Schlesinger, Vol. 1, p. 70.

receive 114 electoral votes to his 117 electoral votes (the three electoral votes from Nevada were the difference), so unsure was the outcome of the election.<sup>9</sup>

While the Civil War had bitterly split north and south, the war had added another division by splitting the north into two factions, Lincoln's Republican Party and McClellan's Democrats (many of whom wished to end the war and forge a peace with the Confederacy). While the country as a whole was divided almost evenly between continuing the war and ending the conflict, the prospect of peace without victory appalled the Union army, especially the troops who had been fighting since the inception of the war. So strong was the Union soldiers' aversion to the prospect of peace that many soldiers wrote scathing attacks on McClellan and the Democrats, whose actions they deemed "traitorous".<sup>10</sup> The Union soldiers filled out their absentee ballots religiously for Lincoln, doing everything in their power to ensure his re-election.

Part of the Union army's rationale for supporting Lincoln with such vehemence may have stemmed from a dislike of McClellan, their former commander. McClellan's reluctance to fight had angered the troops in the same manner that it had angered Lincoln, who eventually had McClellan removed from command. It is no secret that McClellan felt slighted and embarrassed by what he perceived to be unfair treatment from Lincoln, even before his removal from command.<sup>11</sup> McClellan's decision to run against Lincoln serves as the only time in history that a general has run for president against his former commander in chief. McClellan was so eager for the opportunity to avenge his earlier

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<sup>9</sup> David Herbert Donald, *Lincoln* (New York, 1995), p. 543.

<sup>10</sup> John R. Brumgardt, "Overwhelmingly for 'Old Abe': Sherman's Soldiers and the Election of 1864", *Lincoln Herald* 78 (1976), pp. 153-159.

<sup>11</sup> T. Harry Williams, *Lincoln and His Generals* (New York, 1952), p. 131.

humiliation by Lincoln that he reversed his previous stance insisting on peace negotiations and claimed a desire to see the war to its conclusion.<sup>12</sup>

Perhaps the Union army's greatest contribution to Lincoln's victory occurred with the fall of Atlanta in September of 1864. This military victory provided Lincoln with the momentum his election campaign desperately needed. Though General Sherman and his soldiers secured the actual victory, Lincoln had ensured that the army would be capable of achieving such a victory. No president before Lincoln had so manipulated and expanded the power of the presidency in order to fulfill political and military goals. Lincoln's "emergency" assertions of power rapidly transformed the national army into a formidable force, one just strong enough to win him Atlanta, the victory he needed for re-election.<sup>13</sup> While a war has guaranteed every incumbent to date an election victory, the Civil War might have proved the exception had a man other than Abraham Lincoln been president.

While World War Two raged on, Franklin Delano Roosevelt defeated Thomas Dewey to win an unprecedented fourth term. The Roosevelt presidency represents one of the great anomalies in American politics. Roosevelt holds not only the title of three term president to himself, he also serves as the president and only member of the four-term presidents club.

The presidential campaign of 1944 occurred during the largest conflict the world had ever seen, and Roosevelt, along with Stalin and Churchill were in position to finish the war as unanimous victors. The United States had reached all-time zeniths of manufacturing power and global political influence, and Roosevelt was the man who had

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<sup>12</sup> Phillip Shaw Paludan, *The Presidency of Abraham Lincoln* (Kansas, 1994), p. 285.

led the American people to these heights. Into this fray the Republican's nominated Dewey, governor of New York and a former New York City district attorney.

From the beginning Republican political leaders knew they were facing a difficult task. Unlike most presidential elections certain issues were off limits due to the war. One issue in particular, which remained off-limits during the campaign, concerned any criticism of war policy. Any attempt by Dewey to criticize war leaders might look unpatriotic. In the summer of 1944 an anti-Roosevelt officer in the army leaked information stating that at the time of Pearl Harbor the United States had been cracking Japanese codes. When U.S. Army Chief of Staff George Marshall heard that Dewey was considering releasing the code information in an effort to damage the Roosevelt campaign he sent a letter to Dewey underscoring the security importance of keeping the information secret. Dewey was furious, but acquiesced. Though releasing the Pearl Harbor information may have cost Roosevelt thousands of votes, Dewey feared a possible backlash accusing him of harming the war effort.<sup>14</sup>

Dewey also contemplated using Roosevelt's poor health as a key issue to sway voters away from choosing the ailing president. Though the president was visibly ailing and the entire country knew it, Dewey feared that this line of attack might create sympathetic feelings toward the president. As if reading Dewey's mind, Roosevelt abandoned his regimen of rest during the last month of the campaign and stumped with vigor. Ultimately Dewey chose not to pursue this avenue either.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> James T. Patterson, "The Rise of Presidential Power Before World War II", *Law and Contemporary Problems* 40 (Spring 1976), pp. 39-57.

<sup>14</sup> Martin V. Melosi, "Political Tremors from a Military Disaster: 'Pearl Harbor' and the Election of 1944," *Diplomatic History* 1 (1977), pp. 79-95.

<sup>15</sup> Ted Morgan, *FDR: A Biography* (New York, 1985), p. 738.

alternative to Nixon, whose rhetoric included finding "peace with honor" while authorizing bombing runs over Hanoi.<sup>16</sup>

Not since the Civil War had the United States been as internally divided as they were regarding public opinion on the Vietnam War. In editorial columns across the nation the Vietnam War was debated. Some newspapers, such as the Washington Post and the New York Times clearly favored McGovern, while others such as the Chicago Tribune and the Los Angeles Times backed Nixon's bid for re-election.<sup>17</sup> Supporters of Nixon argued that McGovern's plans for peace would leave South Vietnam incapable of self-defense and open to occupation by the North Vietnamese, while his detractors "reminded their readers that the President had promised four years ago to end the war but had failed to do so."<sup>18</sup>

Though the media played a role in manipulating the fortunes of both challenger and incumbent, Nixon realized that he could manipulate the media to control his own fortunes. Nixon knew of the growing unpopularity of American involvement in Vietnam and he skillfully used the media as a mouthpiece by which to convince the American public that the United States' presence in Southeast Asia was drawing rapidly to a close. On a campaign trip to New Hampshire Nixon stressed the coming end of the Vietnam War and along with it his administration's plans for a "generation of peace".<sup>19</sup> On the same trip Nixon publicly noted casualty differences between 1968 and 1972, which were down from over 300 a week to just over ten.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Stephen Hess, "Does Foreign Policy Really Matter?," *Wilson Quarterly* 4 (Winter, 1980), pp. 96-111.

<sup>17</sup> David S. Myers, "Editorials and Foreign Affairs in the 1972 Presidential Campaign," *Journalism Quarterly* 51 (Spring, 1974), pp. 251-257, 296.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 255.

<sup>19</sup> Edward W. Knappman, Joseph Fickes, Mary Elizabeth Clifford, Angelo LaCalandra, & Barry Youngerman, *Presidential Election 1972* (New York, 1973), p. 25.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

Though the election of 1972 was by no means easy, Nixon still managed to defeat McGovern to win a second term of office. Indeed, Granberg and Seidel (1976) assert that McGovern's attempt at the presidency was doomed from the start. They believe that had McGovern taken a more moderate stance in his opposition to Vietnam, the outcome of the election might have differed. However, McGovern's rise from obscurity and his subsequent nomination occurred only due to his radical stance, without which his relatively low level of familiarity would have prevented any possibility of receiving a nomination.<sup>21</sup>

In beating McGovern to gain a second term, Nixon remains the last of the presidents to attempt re-election during a war or armed conflict. That his re-election occurred despite the unpopularity of the Vietnam War indicates either a large amount of political savvy on the part of the Nixon campaign or a sign of the unwillingness of the American public to change leadership during the middle of a foreign crisis. Perhaps the idea of introducing a new leader to a volatile situation with the possibility of a negative outcome seems too frightening or unsure for Americans to consider.

However, the American public is not alone in their actions, as the pattern of re-electing incumbents during times of war illustrates a sociological phenomenon not limited to the United States. Throughout history when a nation clashes with foreign powers the people of the nation rally around their countries' leader, despite any previous grievances or complaints. One of the most famous examples of this occurrence is shown by the fantastic support given to Churchill by the British people during World War II. Upon the immediate completion of the war, however, the British Parliament called for an

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<sup>21</sup> David Granberg & John Seidel, "Social Judgements of the Urban and Vietnam Issues in 1968 and 1972," *Social Forces* 55, (1976), pp. 1-15.



election, in which Churchill lost soundly. As the war drew to a close and victory seemed assured, the British electorate looked increasingly toward issues such as demobilization and postwar reconstruction, and away from the war time leadership of Churchill.

Churchill, sound in the belief that his Conservative party still held the goodwill of the English people due to his heroic leadership viewed the defeat as a great surprise.<sup>22</sup>

A situation similar to that of Churchill occurred quite recently in the case of George Bush and the Persian Gulf War. During the Gulf War the American public's attention was drawn, in large part by the media, towards Bush's handling of the Gulf crisis and away from his handling of domestic policy issues. Since the American public viewed Bush's handling of the Gulf crisis much more positively than they evaluated his efforts in domestic issues, a sharp increase in Bush's popularity occurred.<sup>23</sup> However, by the time the election of 1992 had arrived the war had been won, the public had refocused their attention to Bush's domestic policy, and Bush was summarily defeated in the polls by challenger Bill Clinton. The successes of Madison, Lincoln, Wilson, Roosevelt, and Nixon seem to indicate that had the Gulf War occurred during the 1992 election campaign Bush would have defeated Clinton to gain a second term in the White House.

The increase in Bush's popularity during the Gulf War occurred in large part because of the popularity of the Gulf War with the American people. The yellow ribbon phenomena, in which multitudes of Americans across religious, political, social, regional, economic, racial and age barriers affixed yellow ribbons to themselves, their trees, houses and cars, serves as a testament to America's support of the Gulf War and the troops

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<sup>22</sup> Raymond A. Callahan, *Churchill: Retreat from Empire* (Wilmington, Delaware, 1984), pp. 237-239.

<sup>23</sup> Jon A. Krosnick and Laura A. Brannon, "The Media and the Foundations of Presidential Support: George Bush and the Persian Gulf Conflict," *Journal of Social Issues* 49 (Winter 1993), pp. 167-182.

fighting the war. America's largest manufacturer of ribbon showed nearly a 1000 percent increase in sales the year of the war, an obvious sign of the popularity of the war.<sup>24</sup>

Though the most recent, the Gulf War is not the only example of the American people unifying in their support of the government during a foreign crisis. Research has shown that throughout United States history, a "rally 'round the flag" effect which occurs when foreign policy crises arise.<sup>25</sup> Though crises such as the OPEC embargo and the taking of hostages in Iran will produce the rally 'round the flag effect, the effect will be strongest during times of war.<sup>26</sup> The yellow ribbon phenomenon provides a prime example for the increased strength of the rally 'round the flag effect during times of war.

These examples illustrate the almost certain effect of the presence of an enemy to unify the people of a nation. In America, Great Britain, Israel, even in Hitler's Nazi Germany people support their leaders if they perceive a common threat. One explanation for this phenomena can be found within the realms of sociological and psychological study. In 1988 psychiatrist Vamik Volkan hypothesized that humans have an innate need to identify another group as being "the enemy". Psychologically, this process helps the individual to create an identity for themselves and their group, an aspect essential to human development. On a sociological level, the existence of an enemy helps to create cultural identity and fosters group achievement.<sup>27</sup> Though the need for enemies often

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<sup>24</sup> Lotte Larsen, "The Yellow Ribboning of America: A Gulf War Phenomenon," *Journal of American Culture* 17 (Spring 1994), pp. 11-22.

<sup>25</sup> John E. Mueller, "Presidential Popularity from Truman to Johnson," *American Political Science Review* 64 (1970), pp. 18-34.

<sup>26</sup> John Oneal and Anna Lillian Bryan, "The Rally 'Round the Flag Effect in U.S. Foreign Policy Crises, 1950-1985," *Political Behavior* 17 (1995), 379-401.

<sup>27</sup> Vamik D. Volkan, *The Need to Have Enemies & Allies: From Clinical Practice to International Relationships* (Northvale, New Jersey, 1994), p. 3.

produces negative consequences such as wars, Volkan insists that this condition plays a permanent and unchangeable role in the human condition.<sup>28</sup>

Volkan's ideas, while they may seem radical, are supported by American and global voting behavior. Americans re-elect their presidents during times of war, regardless of any factors, even ones as important as the popularity of the war or the popularity of the president. One usually reliable indicator of election success is the ratio of federal spending to Gross National Product. In elections in which the ratio of federal spending to Gross National Product has increased, the public's reaction is usually negative for the incumbent president.<sup>29</sup> Periods of major war serve as the only exception to this rule. During wars, the rally 'round the flag effect influences even financial matters, as voters believe that the extra spending is justified and the benefits will outweigh the costs.

During times of war, an incumbent president seems almost immune to the dangers posed by the challenger. Increased spending does not seem to hurt his chances for re-election. Nor will an unpopular war doom his fate, as the victories of Lincoln and Nixon illustrate. FDR proved that poor health will not stop the public from supporting an incumbent. Given the fact that these negative circumstances did not bring about a change in office, imagine the invulnerability of a popular president with sound health fighting a popular war. His re-election would seem almost a foregone conclusion. This scenario almost occurred with George Bush; however, fate conspired to end the Persian Gulf War a year before his re-election bid and by then the fickle American had grown tired of Bush and his attempt at a second term fell short. The American president is almost unassailable

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., pp. 94-95.

during a war, however, the war must be occurring for the president to have the full support of the American voter.

### **The War Hero Factor in a Presidential Election**

Similar to the first two factors present in successful re-election attempts, the factor of war hero president combines the element of patriotism, a necessity in the first factor, and the element of war, a necessity in the second factor. For the purposes of this paper the war hero president will be defined as someone whose direct military involvement in a war, either in combat or from a strategic approach, had been general knowledge to the American public prior to their presidency. Having merely served in the army or navy does not confer upon a president war hero status for the purposes of this paper, rather the president must have exhibited either an act of personal heroism or the strategic involvement in a tactical victory to qualify for this factor.

In terms of chronology and historical importance the first president considered for the war hero factor is undoubtedly George Washington. The general responsible for the American victory in the Revolutionary War, Washington qualifies for consideration due to his strategic contributions. However, Washington also qualifies for his personal heroism, which manifested itself in episodes such as the brutal Valley Forge winter of 1776-1777 and his midnight crossing of the Delaware to surprise the British in Trenton. So revered was Washington as a national hero that not only his first term but also his second term as president were foregone conclusions by the public and the politicians of the time.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Alfred, G. Cuzan & Charles M. Bundrick, "Fiscal Policy and Presidential Elections, 1880-1992," *Polity* 29 (Fall, 1996) pp. 141-157.

<sup>30</sup> Smith, p. 133.

The post-war boom that ushered in the presidency of Coolidge was also in full swing for Harry Truman. Having seen the country to the completion of World War Two following the untimely death of FDR, Truman had watched over the roaring economic success that America experienced following the close of hostilities. In addition to the economic success Truman's presidency enjoyed, the world had entered into a new type of conflict with the onset of the Cold War. The happiness brought by economic success, coupled with the comfort of having a battle toughened president captain the country, gave many American voters no reason to want a change in leadership. Despite these factors, the public perception was such that Truman had no chance to win, so much so that Democrat leaders wanted to dump him for Eisenhower in the spring of 1948.<sup>46</sup> Ike, however, would not agree to run as a Democrat. The election of 1948 proved one of the closest in American history, so close that some newspapers prematurely heralded Thomas Dewey as victor and president-elect. Nonetheless, Truman achieved re-election, just as his predecessor FDR had done and his successor Eisenhower would do.

Lyndon Baines Johnson, would, like Coolidge and Truman gain the presidency due to a death in office. The assassination of John F. Kennedy midway through his first term as president, ended the Camelot administration and placed Johnson in the White House. The America Johnson had inherited from Kennedy contained many positive aspects. Patriotism was still popular, in part a result of Kennedy's dramatic standoff with Khrushchev during the Cuban missile crisis, and the economy was still flourishing, years away from the OPEC embargoes and automotive woes which characterized the seventies. The JFK mystique, which Johnson captured in part when he claimed to be fulfilling

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<sup>46</sup> Schlesinger, Vol. 2, p. 239.

JFK's legacy, greatly aided his fight against Republican candidate Barry Goldwater.<sup>47</sup> Johnson's re-election in 1964, riding the twin skis of economic prosperity and the concept of the "Great Society" serves as a perfect example of the American public's willingness to stand behind a leader in times of a healthy economy.

Just as the American public will stand behind a leader during good economic times, so will they abandon him during bad economic times. Such was the case in 1980, when the American public, tired of high unemployment, spiraling inflation, and Jimmy Carter's style of micro-management, voted Ronald Wilson Reagan into office as the fortieth president of the United States. Under the Republican Reagan administration the American economy began to recover, due in part to Reagan's hard line stance against the Soviet Union, which resulted in an arms race that poured billions in to the economy while at the same time sending the national debt into the trillions.

Despite the rampant spending the American public liked its economic impact, and in 1984 their votes resulted in Reagan's landslide victory against Democratic candidate Walter Mondale, who had previously served as Carter's vice-president. Similar to election of 1972, the media played an especially large role in the election of 1984. On camera Reagan's acting skills helped portray him as a suave and charismatic leader, while at the same time the lens captured every bit of Mondale's beaked nose, sagging jowls and paunchy eyes.<sup>48</sup>

The most recent case of presidential re-election during economic prosperity occurred in 1996 when Democratic incumbent Bill Clinton defeated Republican hopeful Bob Dole. The Clinton administration, though rocked by personal scandals of both

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<sup>47</sup> Schlesinger, Vol. 2, p. 311.

<sup>48</sup> Schlesinger, Vol. 2, p. 408.

financial and sexual nature still held the favor of the American voter as Clinton won a second term in the White House.<sup>49</sup> Once again, positive economic signs such as a spiraling stock market and low unemployment rates caused American voters to believe a change in leadership was not necessary.<sup>50</sup> Ironically, Dole's status as war hero (he lost use of one arm during World War Two) could not win him the election as it had for many other presidents.

Of the successful incumbents for whom economic prosperity is identified as a possible factor in achieving re-election, great variance exists between the presidents themselves. While Truman and Monroe are viewed from a scholarly viewpoint as successful presidents and good leaders, presidential scholars hold the presidency of Coolidge in a much lower regard. However, regardless of the competency of the president as an individual, they all share the common factor of election success during a time of economic prosperity.

Having established the four factors by which successful re-election bids may be separated, what insights can be drawn regarding how the American public perceives its leaders? The factors of war and war hero status, two strong indicators of re-election success, illustrate the affinity of the American voter for heroic leaders. As mentioned earlier, Eisenhower typifies the heroic leader as president. Many of the qualities that combined to make Eisenhower a heroic leader were also present in George Washington. Like Eisenhower, Washington had first championed the nation through war as a military

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<sup>49</sup> "Fortune's Favorite Son" *The Journal of Commerce* (November 7, 1996), p. 8A.

<sup>50</sup> Robert J. Bresler, "Labor and the future of the Democratic Party; labor unions may provide greater influence on political issues as economic issues replace cultural issues during elections" *USA Today Magazine* 126 (January, 1998), p. 25.

leader. After the war public sentiment and adoration stayed with Washington, but, as with Eisenhower, gradually turned its focus from military to political. Though distinctly uncharismatic in terms of qualities such as self-confidence, speech and writing, Washington nonetheless captured the admiration of the American people to a degree matched by few, if any, presidents to follow him.<sup>51</sup>

Washington and Eisenhower are merely two more obvious examples of the presence of heroic leadership on the American political landscape. Bruce Miroff (1993) details four types of leadership that encompass the range of leadership possibilities within the American political context. These types include aristocratic leadership as presented by Adams and Hamilton, democratic leadership typified by Lincoln and FDR, the dissenting leadership of Martin Luther King and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and the heroic leadership of men such as JFK and Theodore Roosevelt.<sup>52</sup>

Miroff, however, does not present heroic leadership in the glowing, messianic terms that scholars have used to describe presidencies of Washington and Eisenhower. Rather, he believes that at its best “heroic leadership brings color and charm to American politics”, while at the same time the ego of the heroic leader “is magnified, leaving democratic commitments secondary and opportunistic.”<sup>53</sup> Miroff categorizes the true heroic leader as obsessed with image making, and as harboring feelings of superiority at guiding a public of lesser capacities and instincts.<sup>54</sup>

If these sentiments are true, then the idea of the heroic leader suddenly becomes much less appealing in the realm of the American presidency. The American presidents

<sup>51</sup> Barry Schwartz, “George Washington and the Whig Conception of Heroic Leadership” *American Sociological Review* 48 (February, 1983), pp. 19-20.

<sup>52</sup> Bruce Miroff, *Icons of Democracy* (New York, 1993), pp. 352-356.

<sup>53</sup> Miroff, pp. 354-355.



who were also heroic leaders seem much less worthy of respect and honor by the American public in light of the negative qualities surrounding heroic leadership. The issue of the heroic leader becomes even more confusing considering JFK, “Teddy” Roosevelt, Washington, and Eisenhower are joined, by varying degrees, in the circle of heroic leadership by many other presidents.

Should Americans hunger after or fear the coming of the heroic leader as president? Some scholars believe this point moot as America may be entering into an age where heroism is not viewed as an important factor in American politics. Rather, the sometimes too public world of politics at the end of the millenium has created an environment where an intense scrutiny into the private lives of leaders renders difficult the creation a mystique that traditionally surrounded heroic leaders. This change, however, is not necessarily bad, as Americans have increasingly expressed their desire for an honest and flexible leader, not an immortal superman.<sup>55</sup>

Whether the American voter desires them or not, heroes may have already been rendered extinct by the rapidly changing postindustrial world, as it becomes increasingly difficult for a leader to “stand” for something in a world that is changing so rapidly.<sup>56</sup> FDR and Churchill are the closest that modern political figures come to the patriot-hero, however, their partisan political association denies them access to the highest levels of patriot sainthood.<sup>57</sup> This dearth of heroes raises the possibility that people no longer feel

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<sup>54</sup> Miroff, p. 354.

<sup>55</sup> Walter Truett Anderson, “Have We Outgrown the Age of Heroes” *Utne Reader* (May/June, 1993), pp. 95-97.

<sup>56</sup> Peter Karsten, *Patriot-Heroes in England and America: Political Symbolism and Changing Values over Three Centuries* (Wisconsin, 1978), p. 164.

<sup>57</sup> Karsten, p. 164.

the need for a patriot-hero. Though people still have heroes, the heroes may be athletes, activists, or celebrities.<sup>58</sup>

Since the decline of the patriot-hero seems a real possibility, what are the implications for future presidents? The factor that would be directly affected by the declining need for heroes is that of the war hero president. Though the first five war hero presidents to seek re-election had been successful, the six and most recent, George Bush, failed in his bid during the election of 1992. Interestingly enough, the next presidential election saw another war hero, Bob Dole, lose his attempt to the White House. Both Bush and Dole also lost to Bill Clinton, a candidate with no military experience and long standing questions regarding drug experimentation and extramarital affairs. While these losses do not constitute enough evidence to discount the probability of future war heroes gaining presidential election and re-election, they do raise issues as to the continuing strength of the war hero factor as the twenty-first century approaches.

Possibly of more significance to the importance of the war hero factor than the losses by Bush and Dole to Clinton concerns the possibility of continued peace. Except for Vietnam the United States has not been involved in a major war since Korea. As the window to run for president closes around the last of the World War Two and Korean War veterans, the factor of war hero president may lose a large deal of potency. The unpopular Vietnam War does not tug at emotional heartstrings to the degree that World War Two and other conflicts have done; therefore future candidates with war experience in Vietnam might not receive the same degree of patriotic sentiment that has aided past presidents. Perhaps even more damning, the war hero factor might become obsolete if the United States continues to remain at peace. After the Vietnam War, the only conflict that

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<sup>58</sup> Anderson, p. 99.

may produce a war hero president is the Gulf War, a marginal war against an outmatched foe, fought to preserve cheap oil.

Given the weakening of public adoration for political heroes, coupled with the lack of conflict that grows with the duration of peace, the factor of war hero status on incumbency might become obsolete, like the founding father factor. A more likely scenario presents the United States entering into a war sometime in the future and the eventual re-appearance of war hero candidates the magnitude of Grant and Eisenhower. However, this occurrence would be far enough in the future that to predict the dynamics of the American public and the political environment would be an exercise in wasted time.

While the future influence of the war hero factor on presidential re-election remains unclear, the importance of economic prosperity to incumbent presidents is much easier to predict. A sound economy serves as the ideal panacea to the incumbent president. Though an opponent may always raise questions about the fiscal success of the current president, the gut feeling of the voting public will be the true measure of the state of the economy. Economic issues have raised and toppled governments worldwide throughout the history of recorded events, and the future will not change the enormous degree of influence that money and economics play in the political arena. Future presidents who keep the United States in sound financial health will experience greatly improved odds in gaining a second term. A logical correlation also exists between the economy and re-election, the better the economy of the United States, the more influence this factor will have in ensuring successful incumbents.

The state of the American economy has served and will continue to serve as an excellent predictor of presidential re-election. The economic prosperity factor, however, is surpassed in prediction strength by the presence of a war or foreign conflict during a presidential election guaranteeing incumbent victory. A United States presidential incumbent has never lost an election during a time of war, and the strength of the ongoing war factor indicates that such an event would be unlikely. Sociological theory and historical trends have been presented supporting the idea that people dislike internal change during times of external crisis. If a leader is known and established during a time of war, the citizens of the country will not opt for a leadership change, primarily in fear that the situation will worsen. This fear of change during crisis acts as the primary factor in re-electing incumbents during times of war.

Of the three factors into which successful presidential incumbents can be categorized (the founding father/ patriot factor notwithstanding), the presence of a war during re-election will act as the best predictor of re-election success. The second strongest factor is the state of the United States economy, which if favorable will have a strong positive correlation to re-election success for incumbents. The final factor in determining re-election success relates to the status of the incumbent as a war hero. For this measure, the greater the magnitude of the war hero, the greater the chance of re-election success. These factors may be applied to any future presidential elections in which an incumbent is facing a challenger in order to gain an insight on the probability of re-election success for the incumbent.

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