

Presidents at War  
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Michael Beschloss, one of our country's best presidential historians, labored longer than he expected in writing this large book, Presidents of War. Carefully researched biographies present Presidents with their full human virtues and shortcomings.

Presidents of War was begun 10 years ago, long before our current president, who alarms us with his whim-inspired forays into global events. Beschloss only addresses the dilemma of President Trump in his Epilogue, and gives us this grim thought:

"The Founders would probably be thunderstruck to discover that the option to start a war of a magnitude they would find inconceivable---killing hundreds of millions of human beings in less than an hour---may now rest on the whim of a President. James Madison and his contemporaries never presumed that Americans would be angels, not even in the optimistic atmosphere of their newly fledged nation. But they hoped that all future Presidents would be people of sagacity, self-restraint, honesty, experience, character, and profound respect for democratic ideals."

Not one of these qualities can be applied to Donald J. Trump.

Beschloss continues:

"They anticipated that any Chief Executive would strain to avoid taking the nation into conflict, except to confront a genuine, immediate national danger. And they expected that in the absence of such a danger, all future Presidents would resist any temptation---which the Founders saw in the European despots they abhorred---to launch a major war out of lust to expand their own popularity and power."

The Founders would have been appalled by President Polk's Mexican War, an opportunistic grab of our southwest states. They would have been appalled by President McKinley's justification for taking the Philippines and creating an American Empire (as Europeans were doing at the time), enabling the US to gain new markets and convert "heathens" to Christianity. McKinley wrote in a private memorandum: "While we are conducting war and until its conclusion we must keep all we get; when the war is over we must keep what we want."

Aside from engaging in imperialistic behavior that would have shocked our Founders, Beschloss notes that after every war in our history, each war president took (and kept) powers that formerly belonged to Congress. The voters always supported a war president's powers, and then, after the war, did not insist that these war powers be given back. We are a country of short attention span.

We are now worried about the growing power of our presidents that accrued with each war. Our presidents formerly expected Congressional approval and an official declaration of war. But even Harry Truman, a Constitutional expert who should have known better, declared war on North Korea without Congressional approval. To his credit, however, this war was a United Nations effort. (Truman got the Security Council vote, avoiding the Soviet veto, because the Russians had stormed out of the UN before the vote was taken.)

The concept of a "war president" comes down from ancient Rome, when their young republic recognized that in an emergency (invasion, for example), the Senate could not act quickly enough. They provided that a recognized general be given a temporary appointment (dictatorship) to lead the country in war. Their first such, Cincinnatus, known for his uprightness and courage, repelled the invasion and then voluntarily ceded power back to the Senate.

This model was well known to our Founders, and George Washington not only stepped down as Commander in Chief after the Revolution was won, but did the same after serving two terms as President. Autocrats and monarchs in Europe couldn't believe that a person would voluntarily surrender power.

Unfortunately, not all of our Presidents have been of such sterling and honest character in their use of power, but none of them has refused to step down after an electoral defeat, or (after FDR), upon serving two terms in office.

We now have a President who defies all norms of behavior, believes he has the right to bypass Congress and scorn the courts. Might he get us into a war to distract from his impeachment?

What happens when "norms" do not constrain an autocratic president? Congress must act!

683 words

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