**war and politics**

War and politics have always been entwined in American history. Politicians and pundits often complained that politics intruded upon war or war upon politics; generals should wage war without second-guessing by politicians, some demanded. The very phrase “war and politics” treats the two as separate if linked entities. But instead they mutually constitute each other, especially if “war” is understood expansively as all activities, institutions, and attitudes involving military power. War defined American politics, not merely intruded upon it, just as politics defined war. This relationship was not unchanging, however. It became more consequential to Americans and the world as the scale of American wars and military prowess grew.

**Political Control**

The enmeshment of war and politics was inevitable: modern states exist in part to wage war, and war is an extreme form of politics. Some Americans hoped that the United States would be an exception, having witnessed European monarchies and dictatorships deploying war to address personal, imperial, ideological, or racial ambitions. But American exceptionalism was impossible.

The relationship began with the nation's founding. Imperial and local politics sparked the war for American independence, and the nation owed its political existence to war. The Constitution set the terms of enmeshment by giving political authorities control of war and its institutions. Only Congress could declare war and fund it even if war were undeclared (undeclared wars erupted almost from the start). It also had power “to raise and support armies,” “maintain a navy,” and “make rules” for the armed forces. Its power of the purse was striking (beyond what most European legislatures possessed). Congress could not dictate deployment, strategy, and tactics, but it could set the fiscal terms that made those things possible. The president was made “commander in chief of the army and the navy” and of state militias “when called into the actual service of the United States” but not commander in chief of all government or of the nation, as some presidents and other political figures later presumed. The Constitution was notably briefer about the president’s war powers than about those of Congress. Whether brevity established an implicit check on presidential power or a tacit blank check for it periodically roiled American politics. Civilian secretaries of war and the navy (superseded after 1947 by a secretary of the new Department of Defense) headed cabinet departments, although their authority varied widely. Civilians also headed other agencies, proliferating in modern times, that had war-related functions, from the State, Justice, and Treasury departments at the nation’s founding to the Veterans Administration (1912), Central Intelligence Agency (1947), and the Department of Homeland Security (2003). Americans phrased these arrangements as imposing “civilian” control of the military, but “civilian” often meant “political.”

Most military officers accepted political control, even if they chafed at the decisions, forces, and strategies that politicians provided. Among advantages for officers, civilian supremacy made politicians—often more determined than officers to initiate war or wage it aggressively—more responsible for the controversial decisions and ghastly mistakes that war usually entails. Civilian supremacy prevailed in political dramas, as when Abraham Lincoln fired generals in the Civil War and President Harry Truman fired General Douglas MacArthur during the Korean War (an act condemned by some cold warriors as an intrusion on war making by politicians with a defeatist or subversive mentality). Some officers challenged political control during the cold war by favoring a nuclear first strike on the Soviet Union or China, conducting unauthorized spy missions, or broadcasting a Christian political agenda. But they were few and their damage to political control was minimal.

**War and the State**

War was key to the creation of the American state—the activity it most expansively and expensively undertook. War justified its general scale and many of its specific measures, such as a federal income tax (imposed during the Civil War, reestablished in 1913, and greatly expanded during World War II), a welfare system pioneered through veterans benefits, and scientific and medical innovations by the armed forces. “War is the health of the State,” the radical critic Randolph Bourne declared in attacking America’s entry into World War I. Conservatives sometimes suspected much the same, as when they asserted that President Franklin D. Roosevelt sought to use rearmament and war to consolidate the New Deal and the Democratic Party’s hegemony (though World War II undermined both). Americans also expressed their political debt to war by justifying state initiatives as warlike in character: in 1933 FDR wanted the nation to respond to the Depression “as if invaded by a foreign foe”; later presidents waged “war” on crime, disease, drugs, and other challenges. Appeals to war as a model for national action overrode Americans’ chronic suspicions of an activist state. They also made war an even more political category.
Similarly, Americans imagined war as serving political purposes, not just the nation's defense or expansion. War, it was said, would Americanize immigrants serving as soldiers (a favorite idea in World War I), crush subversive people and ideas, enhance social mobility (the military is "the greatest equal opportunity employer around," President George H. W. Bush boasted in 1991), revive a flagging economy, spur technological development, and unite a fractious nation. Americans rarely assumed that the perils and benefits of war involved combat alone.

The actions and institutions of war propelled the nation's development. Military force subdued Native Americans and conquered new lands. The Civil War aside, U.S. wars before at least 1941 were efforts at national aggrandizement, not survival; the Mexican-American War (1846–48) secured vast territories in the American West; the Spanish-American War of 1898 expanded America's power and holdings in the Caribbean and the Pacific. The armed forces also promoted development by undertaking exploration, charting canal and railroad routes, building dams and ports, and cultivating technical expertise when the nation lacked other technological institutions (the U.S. Military Academy at West Point was the nation's first engineering school, among its functions). The military's developmental role was often highly visible, as with its building of the Panama Canal (completed in 1914) and its promotion of nuclear, aviation, space, and computer technologies (the Internet had origins in a Defense Department program). Sometimes the military remained in the background except during disaster, as in 2005, when hurricane Katrina spotlighted the Army Corps of Engineers, the politically astute builder of much of America's infrastructure. In these ways, the role of the armed forces was political as well as military.

War and politics also intersected in the scramble for military spending and the resulting connections between civil and military institutions. The desire of local authorities—mayors, legislators, businessmen—for military bases and contracts is an old story, though its scale swelled in the twentieth century. Often it meant overriding the military's judgment about where to erect a base, whether to develop a weapon, or which company should build it. Many politicians who decried civilian interference in other military matters were masters of military pork. Especially in the twentieth century, military spending directed resources, population, and political influence toward southern and western states. From the start, the armed forces used civilian institutions for research, weapons, supplies, and services, and civilians went to work for the military while officers retired to jobs in defense or other businesses. The use of private organizations for quasi-military operations, an old practice by states and especially evident in America's post-9/11 military conflicts, further blurred the line between "civilian" and "military."

War and politics were also enmeshed in how Americans understood citizenship. African Americans' Civil War military service helped underwrite the citizenship they acquired, in theory, during and after the war. Through America's post-9/11 conflicts, non-citizens' military service guaranteed their citizenship. Since service was overwhelmingly a male activity—coerced during periods of conscription—citizenship was gendered in this way as in others. Beyond legal citizenship, war reshaped political and social citizenship. Military service in World War II strengthened citizenship for millions of Americans of eastern and southern European descent. Colin Powell, a career officer and Joint Chiefs of Staff chairman, became the highest-ranking African American in government as secretary of state (2001–5). The second woman in a cabinet post was Oveta Culp Hobby, World War II commander of the Women's Army Corps and then secretary of health, education, and welfare (1953–55). Military service lubricated upward mobility and social change, especially as measured by prominent figures. Likewise, those barred from military service or denied equality in it felt treated as lesser citizens—hence the long struggle over racial desegregation of the armed forces, ordered by Truman in 1948; conflicts over women's place in military service; and the 1993 battle over "gays in the military."

Veterans also had housing, health, education, and employment benefits lacked by most Americans, even as critics regarded those benefits as puny or badly managed. Veterans' elevated status was hardly a constant. Anxiety periodically erupted that veterans, especially of combat situations, would return damaged, disruptive, or dangerous. White Southerners feared demobilized black Union troops, and freed slaves feared ex-Confederates in the Ku Klux Klan. Anxiety surged during World War II—one reason for the famous 1944 GI Bill, or Servicemen's Readjustment Act, which gave unprecedented benefits to most of the war's 16 million veterans. Anxiety resurfaced when Vietnam War veterans were often diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder. Still, the sense of veterans as especially entitled or deserving citizens generally prevailed, as evident in the number of presidential candidates who were veterans. Those candidates were especially successful when regarded as heroes in victorious wars—Washington, Jackson, Harrison, Taylor, Grant, Theodore Roosevelt, Eisenhower, Kennedy—although military service was no guarantee of electoral victory; as Nixon in 1960, Dole in 1996, Kerry in 2004, and McCain in 2008 learned.

War and the Presidency

The presidency underlines how war and politics constituted each other. War or its apparent threat underwrote the presidency's expanding powers, both legal and illegal. Major crises, none more so than 9/11, produced presidential claims that constitutional provisions, international laws, and humanitarian norms should be altered, suspended, or reinterpreted. War
as formal declarations of war ceased after World War II, Americans could readily imagine a distinction between war and politics. The last protracted debate about entering war came before Pearl Harbor, after which power to initiate war lay with the presidency, positioning itself as above politics, not with Congress, the more obviously (though substantively no more) political body. To varying degrees, military actions were undertaken by presidents operating in haste, secrecy, and deception—hardly circumstances conducive to freewheeling debate. Congress trailed behind with various measures, usually approved overwhelmingly, that authorized operations. Hence political contests erupted about the conduct and consequences of wars more than their initiation, especially since most wars seemed dissatisfying or disastrous. As earlier, civilians and service personnel, and voices abroad, charged U.S. forces and leaders with illegal, excessive, or misguided use of force or torture against enemy soldiers, civilians, and captives.

The practice of politicians and pundits criticizing presidents and generals was bipartisan, however partisan at any moment. Many Democrats tried to shield the White House from criticism when their party held the presidency. Many turned against Nixon later in the Vietnam War and George W. Bush in the Iraq War. Likewise, Republicans, often defending the uniformed military from attacks, participated in the lives of presidential prerogative and military wisdom, second-guessed Clinton’s use of force amid Yugoslavia’s disintegration in the 1990s.

War and politics were above all interwoven because the United States waged war frequently. It became a foremost participant in the militarization of the modern world. Perhaps no state waged war more often, even though, or perhaps because, the cost in American lives was light (the Civil War aside), compared to that of its enemies and allies, even in a losing war like Vietnam’s. If the Founding Fathers hoped that war would play only an episodic role in American politics, the episodes became so numerous as to be nearly continuous, though often the incidents were not declared or widely recognized as wars (as in Nicaragua in the 1920s and Beirut in 1983).

Efforts to portray war and politics as distinct arenas were not persuasive, but they did express a desire to restrain the course by which war defined much of American life. Americans partook of the appeals and benefits of war, but they also remained suspicious of them.

See also Caribbean, Central America, and Mexico, interventions in, 1903–34; Civil War and Reconstruction;
Korean War and cold war; Iraq wars of 1991 and 2003; Mexican-American War; Vietnam and Indochina wars; war for independence; War of 1812; World War I; World War II.


MICHAEL SHERRY