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War and Presidential Greatness

— ♦ —

DAVID R. HENDERSON
AND ZACHARY GOCHENOUR

War, he observed, made it easier for a president to achieve greatness.
—Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., commenting on a conversation he had had
with President John F. Kennedy¹

If there is not war, you don't get the great general; if there is not the great
occasion, you don't get the great statesman; if Lincoln had lived in times of
peace, no one would know his name now.
—Theodore Roosevelt, complaining in 1910 after leaving office²

What makes U.S. presidents great? Although ways of judging presidential greatness vary from person to person, one thing that is likely to affect many people's judgments of presidents, especially presidents who died decades or even more than a century ago, is historians' views. So let us narrow the question: How do historians rank presidents? Although the criteria differ among historians, we investigate here the patterns in their rankings, seeking to provide a

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1. Schlesinger 1997, 180.

2. Quoted in Treanor 1997, 764.

plausible explanation for them. We investigate specifically the connection between presidents' greatness rankings and the intensity of the wars those presidents carried on. Using multiple-regression analysis, we compare the effect of war intensity with other explanations that previous researchers in the field have advanced.

One measure of a war's intensity that is specific to the United States is the number of Americans killed in the war. We examine in this article the relationship between historians' rankings of U.S. presidents and the proportion of Americans killed in wars in which the U.S. government engaged during the various presidents' times in office. We find a strong positive correlation between the number of Americans killed during a president's time in office and the president's greatness rating.

The Literature on Presidential Greatness

In 1948, historian Arthur M. Schlesinger asked fifty-five historians to rate U.S. presidents as Great, Near Great, Average, Below Average, or Failure. The standard given to the raters was each president's performance as president, not his performance or achievements before or after being president. Since then, many other surveys of historians on presidential greatness have been conducted.³ Discussing the surveys taken before 1997, Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. writes: "Of national crises, war is the most fateful, and all the top ten save Jefferson were involved in war either before or during their presidencies. As Robert Higgs has noted, five (Polk, Lincoln, Wilson, Franklin Roosevelt, and Truman) were commanders-in-chief when the republic was at war, and four more (Washington, Jackson, Theodore Roosevelt, and Eisenhower) made pre-presidential reputations on the battlefield" (1997, 187). Higgs, whose work Schlesinger cites, states bluntly: "The lesson seems obvious. Any president who craves a high place in the annals of history should hasten to thrust the American people into an orgy of death and destruction" (2004, 56).

These statements suggest a promising approach to estimating the variables that affect president ratings: ascertain whether these ratings are correlated with war. We certainly have grounds for hypothesizing that not only correlation but also causation exists. Historians and other scholars who study presidents tend to pay more attention to presidents who have been involved in wars, and the more important the war, the more attention these scholars pay, all other things being equal. Of course, paying attention is not the same as paying positive attention, but historians do tend to regard a president as greater if, all other things being equal, he has made "tough" decisions. Such decisions often involve getting the United States into costly wars or, if other countries' governments have initiated wars, failing to avoid them.

3. See, for example, Murphy 1984; Murray and Blessing 1994; Schlesinger 1997; Ridings and McIver 2000; Griffin and Hines 2008; "C-SPAN Presidential Ranking Survey" 2009; and Morgan 2010.

Consider, for example, the following statement by John O. McGinnis: “To be sure, Coolidge was not a truly great president, like Washington or Lincoln. While he successfully handled small foreign policy crises in China, Mexico, and Nicaragua without saddling the United States with permanent and expensive commitments, he was never tested by a substantial foreign war” (2004, 149). McGinnis is a law professor, not a historian, but the tone of these remarks is similar to that of many historians. He judges Coolidge negatively because he was never “tested” by substantial foreign wars rather than positively for having kept the United States out of major wars. McGinnis and many historians commit the mistake highlighted by nineteenth-century economic journalist Fredric Bastiat (1848) of not paying attention to “what is not seen.” In this case, the unseen is the wars that various presidents might have injected the United States into but did not. Or, to employ an analogy, when a president avoids war, this avoidance is like the clue in the Sherlock Holmes story “Silver Blaze”: the clue is that the dog did *not* bark. It takes a clever man such as Holmes to realize that the dog’s not barking is the important thing. It takes an historian different from the usual ones to realize that a president’s decisions that helped to prevent a war also evince leadership and greatness.

Zachary Karabell, Chester Alan Arthur’s biographer, writes: “Presidents who govern during a time of calm and prosperity often suffer the barbs of history. They are remembered as bland” (2004, 142, qtd. in Eland 2009, 7). To the extent this claim is true, it implies that one way to avoid “suffer[ing] the barbs of history” is to inject the United States into war or not to avoid war when other countries’ governments take hostile actions.

Much of the literature on presidents’ greatness is psychological in nature. In this literature, researchers tend to focus on presidents’ personal characteristics. The leading research psychologist in this area is Dean Keith Simonton (1991). His model has six predictors of historians’ rating of presidential greatness: years in office, the number of years that the country is at war during the president’s time in office, whether the president is assassinated, whether the president is a war hero, the president’s intelligence, and whether the president is involved in a major scandal while in office.

Economists, somewhat surprisingly, have not been prominent in the discussion of presidential greatness. But economists Richard Vedder and Lowell Gallaway (2001) have created a ranking based on two economic variables: (1) the change in federal spending as a percentage of gross domestic product (GDP) and (2) the inflation rate during each president’s time in office. However, they did not use these variables to explain historians’ rankings: their purpose was to create their own ranking. Vedder and Gallaway rank presidents higher if they decreased government spending as a percent of GDP or were presidents at a time when the inflation rate was low or negative.

An obvious economic variable to use to judge presidential performance or greatness is the growth rate of real GDP per capita during a president’s administration. Political scientists Jill Curry and Irwin Morris (2010) use this growth

rate, along with the six other variables used by Simonton, to explain (in the econometric sense) historians' rankings of presidential greatness. They find a positive and statistically significant relationship between the growth of real GDP and presidential greatness.

Using the rate of growth of real GDP as a predictor of historians' views of presidential greatness has clear problems, though. In the span of U.S. history, most presidents were in office when real GDP was not known because the government did not collect the data to compute it. Even the best-informed economic historians probably do not know whether economic growth was higher, for example, during the Grant administration than during the Wilson administration. The rate of economic growth cannot affect historians' judgments when the historians do not know what the rate of economic growth was during a particular administration. It can plausibly affect the rankings only of more recent presidents; even in that case, however, basing a ranking on this measure would be dubious because the president exerts a relatively small amount of control over GDP growth during his tenure.

Curry and Morris also introduce "Win War," a measure of foreign-policy performance for presidents: "*Win War* accounts for the outcome of wars by awarding presidents a score of -1 if the war is considered a partial loss, 0 if the war ended in stalemate, 1 if the war resulted in a partial victory, and 2 if the war ended in a complete victory" (2010, 523–24). They argue correctly that such a variable is a better measure than the Simonton variable, "war years" (the number of years during which a president presides over a war), because it measures the war's actual outcome. It is difficult, however, to assign a numerical value to "strength of victory": most American wars, the Vietnam War aside, are considered victories, and it is usually unclear whether a victory or defeat was "complete" or "partial."

David Gray Adler cites Jack Holmes and Robert Elder Jr.'s 1989 finding that in regard to troop commitments, the data "do not show significant differences between the top and bottom groups" of presidents (2003, 472). So troop commitments are not the key. What *is* the key? We suggest that it is the number of the president's own troops killed. The idea is that if more troops are killed, then, all else equal, historians judge the president to have a bigger impact and therefore to be "great."

The Model and the Data

Because we are considering the factors that cause historians as a group, not only a particular historian, to rate presidents as great, the best measure of historians' rankings of presidents is not a particular historian's ranking but rather an average of leading historians' rankings. A number of competing measures exist. We use the scores from the C-SPAN presidential greatness survey ("C-SPAN Presidential Ranking Survey" 2009) because these scores are based on a survey of sixty-five presidential historians and because doing so enables us to compare our results

Table 1
Summary Statistics for Variables Used to Explain Rankings
of Presidential Greatness

Variable		Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Score	C-SPAN score	536.8	163.0	227	902
MDPC	Military deaths per capita	559.1	2512.4	0	15781.2
MDPC_rank	Ordinal ranking of MDPC	14.7	5.9	1	19
Intellect	Intellectual Brilliance score	-.0325	1.00	-2	3.1
WarYears	Years spent in military conflict	1.15	1.85	0	7
RealGdpGrowth	Annual GDP growth rate	1.78	3.16	-10.13	9

directly with those found by Curry and Morris. These presidential greatness scores are our dependent variable.

As the independent variables, we use all the variables used by Simonton (1991) and the growth rate of real GDP per capita used by Curry and Morris (2010). We add our own variable: the percentage of Americans on the president's side of the war who died as a direct result of the war. Again, our idea in using this measure as an explanatory variable is that historians judge presidents to be great if they were involved in large wars, and an obvious measure of a war's size is the number of Americans killed in it. Table 1 describes the data (the full data set is available from the authors on request).

A number of judgment calls must be made about the variables. On the variables that Simonton uses, we rely on his judgment. For our new variables, we first had to define war. The War of 1812–14, World War I, World War II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, the first Gulf War, the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, and the U.S. invasion of Iraq count as wars. But what about the smaller conflicts? For example, was Ronald Reagan at war when he sent marines to Lebanon or when he invaded Grenada? Rather than making a judgment call on these wars, we take Simonton's "years at war" variable as given. However, because we are adding our own variable for the percentage of Americans killed in war, we use the commonsense idea that if military people are involved in a conflict in which they are shot at, bombed, or in some other way attacked, this event counts as war. The big advantage of using the number of war-dead Americans as a percentage of the total population is that it scales automatically. There is no danger, for example, of equating the invasion of Grenada with U.S. government participation in World War II. The fact that the number of American deaths was so many orders of magnitude greater in the latter than in the former automatically affects the size of the variable for the number of war dead. Using this variable has the further advantage of helping us avoid the issue of whether the U.S. government is at war if it has never declared war. We, like U.S. presidents themselves, especially from Harry Truman on, do not worry about whether Congress

has declared war.⁴ If one American or more is killed in a military conflict, we regard that person as being killed in a war.

Another significant issue is how to count deaths in the Civil War. As noted, we use only military deaths on the president's side of the war. If we used simply the deaths of Americans, this total would include the many military deaths of people in the Confederate States of America, but none of the many Southern civilians killed. Abraham Lincoln saw himself as fighting to save the union—his goal in fighting the war in the first place⁵—and so if Lincoln were doing this study, he would need to include the deaths of Confederate States military personnel. By the very nature of war, however, the Civil War pitted one side against the other. Therefore, it is consistent with the spirit and letter of our criteria to include only the military war deaths on the Union side.

As we do not count Confederate soldiers among the war dead, we do not count American Indians killed during the various Indian wars. Instead, we count only the American soldiers killed while fighting American Indians. At the time, American Indians were certainly widely regarded as being “on the other side.” Including the number of American Indians killed in the number of dead would not have a great effect on our data analysis.⁶

Results of the Econometric Estimation

Our empirical model takes the following form:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{SCORE} = & \beta_1 * \text{RealGdpGrowth} + \beta_2 * \text{YearsInOffice} + \beta_3 * \text{Intellect} \\ & + \beta_4 * \text{WinWar} + \beta_5 * \text{WarYears} + \beta_6 * \text{Scandal} + \beta_7 * \text{Assassination} \\ & + \beta_8 * \text{MDPC rank}, \end{aligned}$$

where SCORE is the C-SPAN score; the first independent variable, RealGdpGrowth, is the same as the one used in Curry and Morris; the next six independent variables are the same as the ones used in Simonton and in Curry and Morris; and the MDPC (military deaths per capita) rank corresponds to American military combat deaths divided by the population during a president's tenure, with rank 1 meaning the most military combat deaths per capita.

4. The last declared war in which the U.S. government was engaged was World War II. The last formal U.S. declaration of war was on June 5, 1942, against Bulgaria, Hungary, and Romania. Since then, the U.S. government has been involved in many wars, but U.S. presidents have not bothered to go to Congress for a formal declaration of war.

5. In his famous letter to Horace Greeley, Lincoln wrote: “My paramount object in this struggle is to save the Union, and is not either to save or to destroy slavery. If I could save the Union without freeing any slave I would do it, and if I could save it by freeing all the slaves I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing some and leaving others alone I would also do that. What I do about slavery, and the colored race, I do because I believe it helps to save the Union; and what I forbear, I forbear because I do not believe it would help to save the Union” (Lincoln 1862).

6. The data on war deaths are from Carter et al. 2006, 202–11. We thank Jeffrey R. Hummel for alerting us to this data source.

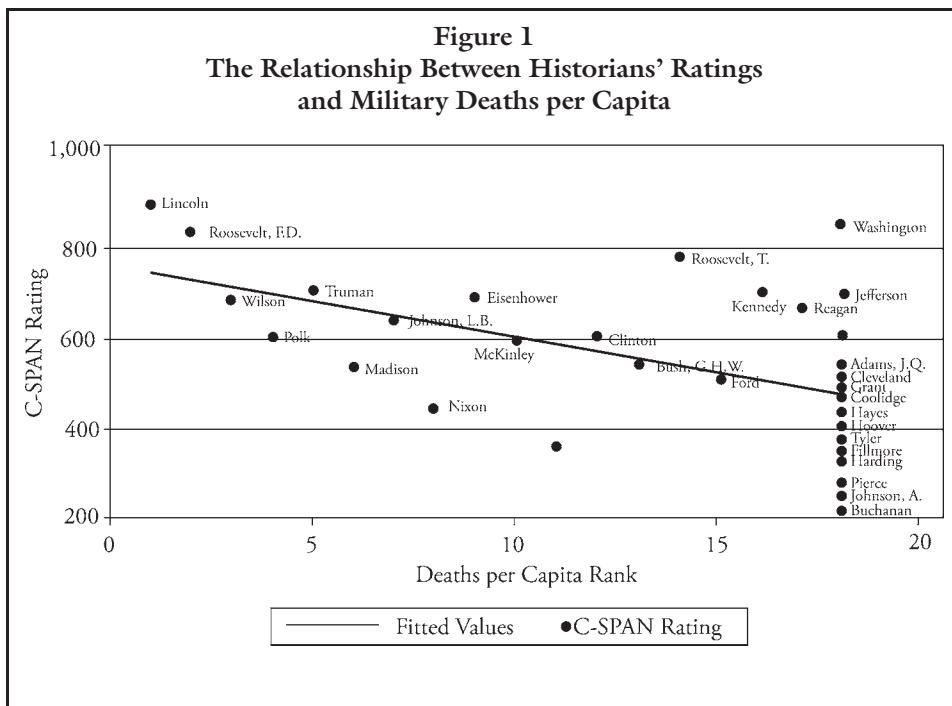
The results indicate that military deaths as a percentage of population is a major determinant of greatness in the eyes of historians. In both our empirical analysis and the similar analysis performed by Curry and Morris, which we replicate in specification (1) in table 2, the variables for “war years” and “war win” are found to be insignificant.

Table 2
OLS Regression Results

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
InOffice	26.52*** (6.87)		24.23** (7.11)	22.67** (7.81)
Intellect	57.30* (21.06)		63.73** (18.20)	57.79** (17.60)
WinWar	31.29 (28.28)		5.01 (22.24)	
WarYears	-0.36 (16.22)		-20.14 (11.47)	
Scandal	-10.58 (52.99)		-13.79 (46.30)	
WarHero	140.72** (42.52)		134.04** (42.81)	147.86** (43.93)
Real GDP Growth	9.49* (4.20)		8.18* (3.74)	7.75* (2.69)
Assassinate	228.98** (73.75)		178.21** (62.95)	195.97*** (54.80)
MDPC_rank		-15.91*** (3.53)	-12.37*** (3.88)	-8.73*** (2.68)
N	40	40	40	40
adj. R ²	0.63	0.42	0.73	0.73

Note: Standard errors in parentheses.

* p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001



Furthermore, our results suggest some effect of GDP growth on presidential evaluations, but at a lower significance level than found by Curry and Morris. In other words, once our MDPC variable is added, the effect of GDP growth on presidential greatness falls. There is a plausible economic explanation. Wars in which many Americans are killed tend to be wars on which the government spends a great deal of money. The Civil War, World War I, and World War II caused many Americans to die, and all resulted in great amounts of government spending on war. As G , government spending on goods and services, rises, GDP, all else equal, tends to rise also.⁷ Military spending, especially during times of war, is a major component of G .⁸ The collinearity between military deaths per capita and GDP is likely to be the result of both deaths and GDP being driven by war. Therefore, whereas Curry and Morris argue that GDP growth is more important than war in affecting presidential rankings, we assert that the opposite is more likely to be true: big wars, all else equal, cause historians to rank presidents highly (see figure 1).

Beyond the issue of statistical significance is the more important issue of economic or historical significance. Our MDPC variable, even though statistically

7. GDP is defined as $C + I + G + (X - M)$, where C is consumption expenditures, I is investment expenditures, G is government spending on goods and services, X is exports, and M is spending on imports.

8. This does not mean that economic well-being rises because the resources spent on war are destroyed rather than consumed in the more normal peacetime way. But one's judgment about GDP as a measure of economic well-being need not concern us here.

significant, would be relatively unimportant if a one-rank difference in deaths per capita had little effect on the presidential ranking. But such is not the case. A one-rank difference on the deaths per capita scale has a large effect on presidential ranking; indeed, it is equal to the effect of a 1.8 percentage point increase in annual growth of real GDP per capita. As is well known, such an increase in economic growth is economically very significant.

These results are robust to slight variations and to different econometric tests. The statistical significance of the MDPC rank variable remains strong, although diminished, when the top two presidents (Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Abraham Lincoln) are removed from the sample.

Furthermore, we estimated the regression coefficients in an ordered probit model (table 3) and found a highly statistically significant relationship between the greatness rating and the military deaths per capita rank. Using the ordered probit model with other significant variables from Curry and Morris, we find that GDP growth is not statistically significant even at the 90 percent level.

Table 3
Ordered Probit Results

	(5)	(6)
InOffice		0.27** (0.09)
Intellect		0.75*** (0.20)
WarHero		1.99*** (0.48)
Real GDP Growth		0.08* (0.03)
Assassinate		3.12*** (0.85)
MDPC_rank	-0.12*** (0.03)	-0.12** (0.04)

Note: Standard errors in parentheses.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Conclusion

Our data analysis shows that wars in which a large percentage of the U.S. population is killed, all other things equal, have led historians to judge as great the president on whose watch those wars occurred. Presidents Theodore Roosevelt and John F. Kennedy certainly perceived the situation in this way. Other presidents probably did so as well.

This conclusion is troubling. Most presidents, after all, probably want to be thought of as great. When they spend resources on war, they are spending almost entirely other people's money—and lives. They get little credit for avoiding war. Martin Van Buren, for example, effectively avoided a war on the northern border of the United States. He also forestalled potential war with Mexico by refusing to annex Texas (see Hummel 1999). How many people know about these actions today? Indeed, how many people have even heard anything about Martin Van Buren, aside from perhaps his name?

Woodrow Wilson, in contrast, inserted the United States into World War I, a war in which the United States might easily have avoided participation. Moreover, had the U.S. government avoided World War I, the treaty that ended the war probably would not have been so lopsided. The Versailles Treaty's punitive terms for Germany, as John Maynard Keynes predicted in 1919, helped set the stage for World War II. So it is reasonable to think that had the United States not entered World War I, World War II might not have occurred. Yet, despite his major blunder and more likely because of it, which caused more than one hundred thousand Americans to die in World War I, Wilson is often thought of as a great president.

Of course, an important policy question is whether the wars in which so many Americans were killed were necessary. Our view is that they were not, although making that case lies beyond the scope of this article.⁹

This analysis has a disturbing public-choice implication: if modern presidents understand these incentives, and they almost certainly do, they will modify their behavior in light of them. Therefore, we have identified another potential source of deviation from median-voter preferences, which springs from the executive's attempt to cement a legacy of greatness in the eyes of historians. Those who want peace should take historians' ratings of presidents seriously. Moreover, we need to stop celebrating and try to persuade historians to stop celebrating presidents who involved the country in unnecessary wars. One way to do so is to remember the unseen: the war that did not happen, the war that was avoided, and the peace and prosperity that resulted. If we applied this standard, then Presidents Martin van Buren, John Tyler, Warren G. Harding, and Calvin Coolidge, to name four, would receive a substantially higher rating than the historians usually give them.

9. The case of World War I is obvious. Jeffrey Hummel (1996) makes a strong case that even the U.S. Civil War was not necessary for ending slavery. Higgs (2011) and the references cited therein make the case that U.S. participation in World War II, the so-called Good War, was not necessary for U.S. survival.

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