About the Show

*Presidents at War* is a two-night History Channel event. This landmark series tells the story of World War II through the experiences of eight remarkable men. Men who, like sixteen million other Americans, bravely serve their country during its darkest hour, and then go on to further service as the nation’s Commanders-in-Chief. Dwight D. Eisenhower, John F. Kennedy, Lyndon B. Johnson, Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford, Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush. This is the story of how their war experiences change them, how they emerge from conflict as leaders and how the crucible of war shapes the decisions they make when they reach the White House.

Find out more:
https://www.history.com/shows/presidents-at-war
Presidents at War would be useful for History, American Culture, African American History, and Political Science courses. It is appropriate for high school and college students.

Discussion Questions

1. In the days after the attack on Pearl Harbor, military recruiting offices across the country were flooded with volunteers. Why do you think the attack motivated people to volunteer for military service?
2. What does it mean to be a good leader? What examples of good leadership did you see depicted in Presidents at War? Are there other examples you can think of?
3. What kind of traits make for a poor leader? What examples of poor leadership did you see in Presidents at War?
4. Do you think wartime military service helps build leadership skills? In what ways might fighting in a war help a person become a good leader?
5. What other qualities or skills do you think military service might help a person develop?
6. Do you know anyone who has served in the military or fought in a war? How do you think it affected his or her life?
7. In Presidents at War historian H.W. Brands says, “War is a rigorous meritocracy. Those people who have talent rise quickly to the top.” What do you think he means by this? How might this differ in other areas of life? Can you think of other “rigorous meritocracies”?
8. Which story of presidential World War II service did you find most inspiring, interesting or surprising? Why did you feel that way?
9. Would you be more likely to support a person for president if they had military or wartime experience?
10. What traits or skills do you think it is important for a president to have?

Terms to Define

- Pearl Harbor
- Allies
- Axis
- Nazi Germany
- commander-in-chief

Yoichi Okamoto/LBJ Presidential Library
Related Activities

They Said It.
Ask students to listen to Dwight Eisenhower’s or John F. Kennedy’s inaugural addresses at the links below. Then discuss or ask students to write a short essay explaining how he or she thinks each of these two men’s experiences in World War II influenced his vision for his presidency and America’s place in the world.

Eisenhower Inaugural Address: https://www.history.com/topics/us-presidents/eisenhowers-inaugural-address-video

Kennedy Inaugural Address: https://www.history.com/speeches/john-f-kennedys-inaugural-address

You're Hired.
Ask students to write a job description for the job of U.S. president. The description should include responsibilities of the job, ideal experience and required and preferred personality traits and skills.

Map It.
Ask students to examine maps showing the spread of Axis power in Europe and Asia prior to and during World War II, and discuss as a class what students think was happening in these two theaters of war. Then, ask students to put themselves in the shoes of someone who volunteers for the army after the attack on Pearl Harbor. What would his or her reasons be? Assignments could take the form of journal entries, letters home or a short interview between a military recruiter and a volunteer.

These map series may be helpful:
https://omniatlas.com/maps/asia-pacific/19411211/

https://omniatlas.com/maps/europe/19411204/#event-143
WWII Cheat Sheet

A quick refresher on important war dates, plus some key facts about the presidents who served.

Dwight D. Eisenhower
Served in WWII 1941–1945
34th President 1953–1961
bit.ly/EisenhowerInfo

- Named Commanding General of the European Theater in 1942.
- Oversaw planning and implementation of invasion of Normandy that began on D-Day, June 6, 1944.
- Led the Allied advance across Europe that culminated in Germany's surrender in May of 1945.

John F. Kennedy
Served in WWII 1941–1945
35th President 1961–1963
bit.ly/KennedyInfo

- After training school, he was stationed in Panama as commander of a torpedo boat, but requested transfer to the Pacific Theater in 1943.
- When his PT-109 boat collided with a Japanese destroyer, he helped save the lives of 10 of his crew members. Awarded the Purple Heart.

Lyndon B. Johnson
Served in WWII 1941–1945
36th President 1963–1969
bit.ly/LBJInfo

- Was a member of Congress representing Texas when he reported for active duty three days after the Pearl Harbor attack in December 1941.
- Worked as an observer on South Pacific bomber missions; avoided disaster when he accidentally missed boarding a plane that crashed on a mission.
- He served for just six months until FDR recalled all members of Congress to Washington, DC.

Richard Nixon
Served in WWII 1942–1945
37th President 1969–1974
bit.ly/NixonInfo

- Already a successful California lawyer, he enlisted in the U.S. Navy in 1942 (despite his pacifist Quaker upbringing).

Ronald Reagan
Served in WWII 1942–1945
40th President 1981–1989
bit.ly/ReaganInfo

- A well-known Hollywood actor, he was excluded from overseas duty because he had poor eyesight.
- Served in the Army Air Force's First Motion Picture Unit in Los Angeles, which produced 400 training films.
- Was one of the public faces of the war, selling War Drive Loans to raise funds and appearing at public speaking events.

George H.W. Bush
Served in WWII 1942–1945
41st President 1989–1993
bit.ly/BushInfo

- Delayed going to college and joined the U.S. Navy as an aviator on his 18th birthday; he was one of the youngest Naval aviators at the time.
- Was an officer on the light carrier USS San Jacinto.
- In September 1944, the plane he was flying was hit by enemy anti-aircraft fire during a bombing run over Chichi-Jima, causing his engine to catch fire and his plane to go down.
- Flew more than 58 missions and earned the Distinguished Flying Cross.

Jimmy Carter
Served in WWII 1943–1945
39th President 1977–1981
bit.ly/CarterInfo

- Received an appointment to the U.S. Naval Academy in 1943.
- Although considered an active duty midshipman during the war, Carter did not see combat.

IMPORTANT WWII DATES

| SEPTEMBER 1, 1939 | WWII begins with Nazi Germany's invasion of Poland. |
| APRIL – MAY 1940 | Germany invades Norway, Denmark, Belgium, Netherlands, Luxembourg, and France. |
| JULY 1940 | Germany begins bombing raids against Great Britain. |
| DECEMBER 7, 1941 | Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. The next day, the U.S. declares war on Japan. Later that month, Italy and Germany declare war on the U.S. |
| JUNE 6, 1944 | D-Day invasion of Normandy (Operation Overlord). |
| OCTOBER 26, 1944 | Allied victory at the Battle of Leyte Gulf in the Philippines. |
| MAY 7, 1945 | Germany surrenders to the Allies, ending World War II in Europe. |
| AUGUST 6, 1945 | United States drops atomic bomb on the Japanese city of Hiroshima. Three days later, the U.S. drops a second bomb on Nagasaki. |
| SEPTEMBER 2, 1945 | Japan formally surrenders to the Allies, ending WWII. |
Related Content from HISTORY.com

Video: Pearl Harbor: The Last Word
This series of short videos tells the story of Pearl Harbor in the words of men who were on the frontlines.
https://www.history.com/shows/pearl-harbor-the-last-word

Audio: “A Day Which Will Live in Infamy”
Listen in as President Franklin D. Roosevelt asks Congress for a declaration of war against Japan in the wake of the Pearl Harbor attacks.
https://www.history.com/speeches/fdr-asks-congress-to-declare-war-on-japan

Video: D-Day Invasion
Watch a short video introduction to D-Day.

Article: These Are the Six Essential Traits Every President Needs, Says Doris Kearns Goodwin
https://www.history.com/topics/doris-kearns-goodwin-on-presidential-leadership

Topics: World War II
Browse a variety of articles and video related to World War II, including key battles, people and themes.
https://www.history.com/topics/world-war-ii

Topics: U.S. Presidents
Find out more about the lives of the eight U.S. presidents featured in Presidents at War.
Eisenhower: https://www.history.com/topics/us-presidents/dwight-d-eisenhower
Kennedy: https://www.history.com/topics/us-presidents/john-f-kennedy
Johnson: https://www.history.com/topics/us-presidents/lyndon-b-johnson
Nixon: https://www.history.com/topics/us-presidents/richard-m-nixon
Ford: https://www.history.com/topics/us-presidents/gerald-r-ford
Carter: https://www.history.com/topics/us-presidents/jimmy-carter
Reagan: https://www.history.com/topics/us-presidents/ronald-reagan
Article: How General Eisenhower Spun a Humiliating WWII Defeat into Winning Military Strategy

Article: The Navy Disaster that Earned JFK Two Medals for Heroism

Article: How a Luckily Times Bathroom Break Saved LBJ's Life During WWII