

STUDENT
STUDY GUIDE

EISENHOWER ★ KENNEDY ★ JOHNSON ★ NIXON
FORD ★ CARTER ★ REAGAN ★ BUSH

PRESIDENTS AT WAR

DRIVEN TO SERVE. DESTINED TO LEAD.



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>

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

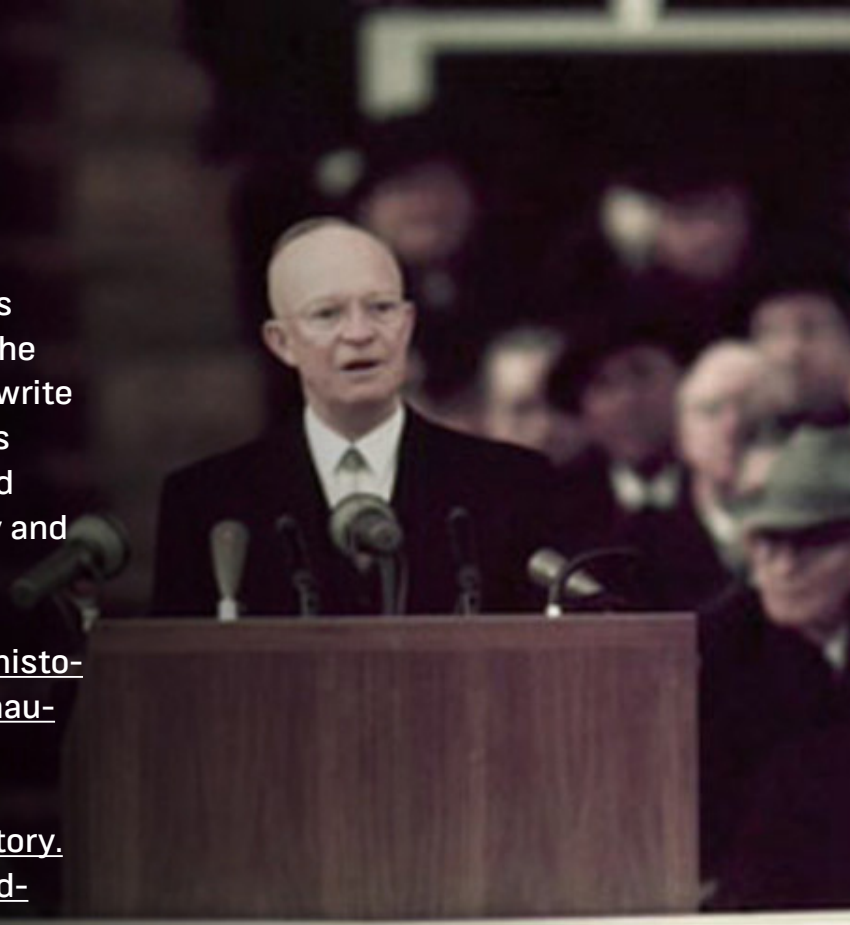
Related Activities

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.

- Elected to the U.S. House of Representatives in 1946, successfully capitalizing on his reputation as a young war hero.

Lyndon B. Johnson

Served in WWII 1941–1942
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).

- Served in the Pacific at an aviation base; supervised logistics, prepared flight plans and manifests, and oversaw aircraft cargo.

- Returned to the U.S. and served in the Navy's Bureau of Aeronautics; released from active duty in March 1946. Ran for Congress later that year.

Gerald Ford

Served in WWII 1942–1945
38th President 1974–1977
bit.ly/GeraldFordInfo

- His background as a college football player and athletic trainer made him a good candidate for the U.S. Navy's V-5 aviation cadet program in 1942.
- He requested sea duty and was assigned to a light aircraft carrier in the Pacific.
- His ship was heavily damaged by a fire during a typhoon in 1944, and he narrowly avoided being thrown overboard.

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.

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.

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.

Photos, left to right: Topical Press Agency/Stringer/Getty Images; Frank Turgent/Stringer/Getty Images; Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library and Museum/NARA; National Archives and Records Administration; Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library and Museum/NARA; Jimmy Carter Presidential Library and Museum/NARA; Bettman/Getty Images; courtesy George Bush Presidential Library and Museum

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.

<https://www.history.com/shows/america-the-story-of-us/videos/d-day-invasion>

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>

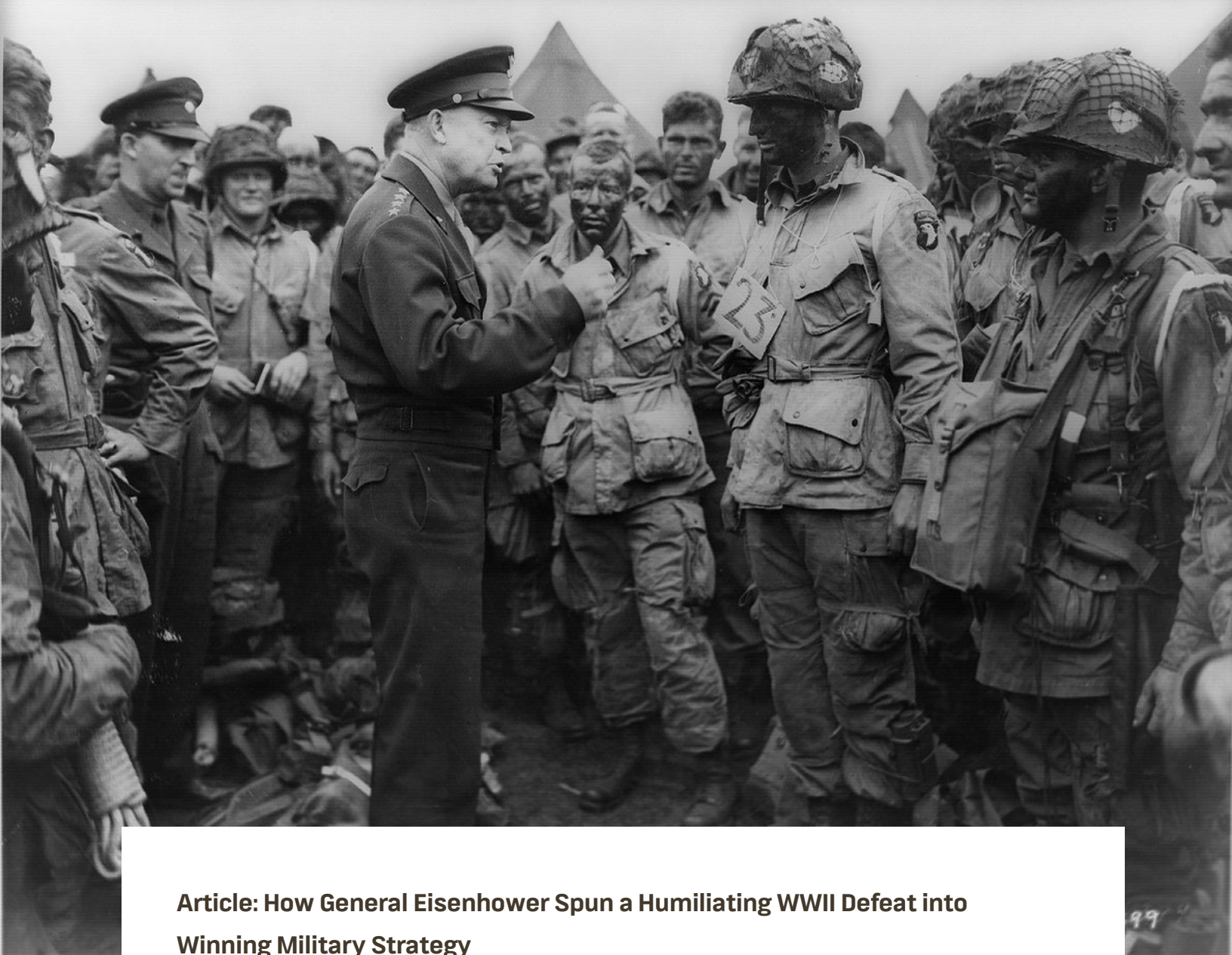
Johnson: <https://www.history.com/topics/us-presidents/lyndon-b-johnson>

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

<https://www.history.com/news/eisenhower-wwii-battle-kasserine-pass>

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

<https://www.history.com/news/jfk-wwii-purple-heart-torpedo-boat>

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

<https://www.history.com/news/lbj-world-war-ii-bathroom-break>