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Veterans Running for President

Being in on this here D Day is goin' to be worth 250,000 votes back home.

—**STROM THURMOND**, QUOTED IN HADLEY, *THE INVISIBLE PRIMARY*

The Normandy invasion into Hitler's stranglehold of Europe started on the early morning of June 6, 1944, and the certainty of the Allies' success in establishing a beachhead to defeat Germany became apparent only in the days that followed. Those brutal hours involved hundreds of thousands of combatants. Survivors would commemorate the bloody experience afterward—manifesting dramatic effects not only on the outcome of the war but on their individual lives and fortunes after returning home. Waves of men parachuted, flew, or came aboard landing boats to face an entrenched enemy. Strom Thurmond, an American soldier from South Carolina, rode into battle in a particularly risky fashion. He was a lieutenant colonel serving in a civil-affairs unit that contended with ordinary legal matters, so he convinced a combat unit in the 82nd Airborne to allow him to ride shotgun. He volunteered to leave his army desk job in Great Britain to fly in a glider to Normandy to secure area behind the German beach defenses. He was older, a forty-one-year-old among younger soldiers, and he elected to ride in the back of an engineless plane, a disposable airborne combat ferry. They landed harder than intended in an apple orchard near St. Mère-Eglise, and his newly adopted squad was instantly under enemy fire. After engaging in firefights and contending with casualties, he ended up in a foxhole with Captain Stuyvesant Wainwright II, who would later be elected to Congress. Thurmond yelled to Wainwright the words quoted in the epigraph to this chapter, asserting

that serving in such a titanic battle would win him “250,000 votes” after the war.¹

A large photo of Thurmond in uniform receiving the Bronze Star ran on the front page of a major South Carolina newspaper in 1944 after the successful invasion, and it was “the best free advertising a gubernatorial hopeful could imagine.”² Soon after his return stateside, he went back to South Carolina and won the Democratic Party primary to become governor in 1946, a position that served as a launching platform toward national fame and higher office. Thurmond’s electoral math about the quarter-million-vote yield of military service was naturally hyperbole, but the sentiment behind it, that past military service for the nation enhanced a candidate’s ability to attract votes, relies on a logic that extends back to the beginning of the republic and forward to today’s elections.

A generation later, another man confronted large questions about his potential wartime service. In 1969, American involvement in Vietnam continued along with the draft that compelled men into the war. Bill Clinton was a Rhodes Scholar who would later become Arkansas attorney general, governor, and U.S. president. In 1969, he was twenty-three years old and against American involvement in the war. He sought to avoid the draft and the war he felt was wrong. However, rather than become a conscientious objector, abscond to Canada, or choose other means to avoid the draft illegally, he expressed interest in the University of Arkansas Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC), which would defer his immediate draft eligibility, stating he would attend law school there. He ultimately attended Yale after spending time at Oxford University, however, and had written a letter to an ROTC recruiting officer apologizing for misrepresenting the depth of his antiwar feelings. He viewed the ROTC option as a means to avoid the draft, and the letter spelled out that his interest in the program was not genuine. He expressed great admiration for those who defied the law and the draft, but he felt he could not take this route for a critical reason: “I decided to accept the draft in spite of my beliefs for one reason: *to maintain my political viability* within the system.”³ In essence, the young Clinton foresaw a political career for himself and believed avoiding military service would portend negative political consequences for his prospects in public life. Looming large for the future politician were concerns that breaking the draft laws would exclude him from public service later, but implied in his letter is also recognition that military

1. Quoted in Hadley 1976, 3.

2. Bass and Thompson 2005, 72.

3. Ifill 1992, A1 (emphasis added).

service was an expected path toward a life in politics for men of his generation. To embody the logically opposite role of military hero, “draft dodger,” would proscribe political options, so he sought a middle course, a legitimate means to avoid war service.

The implied logic behind both Thurmond’s optimistic appraisal of the votes that his medals would attract and Bill Clinton’s apprehensions assumes that military service helps candidates attract votes while lacking it harms a candidate’s chances. This perception has been an article of faith since the electoral coronation of George Washington in 1789. Washington successfully commanded a patchwork of militias and regulars to win independence from British rule and was a national hero because of his service. This experience was part of what made him the sole candidate for the new executive position. Subsequent candidates for high political office have shared the belief that military service is a boon for gaining popular support and votes.

Perhaps the most compelling fact driving the perception that military service helps win votes is the large number of veterans who have held public office. More than two-thirds of the roughly forty elected presidents have been military veterans. At one point in the 1970s, approximately three-quarters of the members of Congress had served in the armed forces in their early adulthood. Large numbers of elected leaders in governors’ mansions, state legislatures, and local political offices also share a common military experience. The perceived appeal of military service has occasionally been so strong that political candidates have overstated their service records. In recent years, observers have caught candidates in congressional and other elections describing their military service in terms that strayed beyond their actual experience. The very fact that candidates risk getting caught in an exaggeration or fabrication of military service underlines the perception that wearing the uniform helps win office.

Yet sufficient counterexamples undermine the idea that military veterans enjoy an advantage when seeking high political office. William Henry Harrison’s two candidacies raise doubts. If his military heroism on the frontier became such an important factor in 1840, why did his service fail to become a campaign asset in his first attempt to defeat Martin Van Buren in 1836? Military time simply does not guarantee that voters will always be moved toward candidates running on their martial laurels. Another notable illustration of how time in uniform pointed away from electoral victory rather than toward it happened after the Vietnam War. Following Strom Thurmond thirty years later, William Westmoreland ran for governor of South Carolina in 1974. He was *Time* magazine’s “Man of the Year” in 1965 and held a far more well-known military record than

Thurmond's, yet he even failed to obtain his party's nomination despite being a retired four-star general, commander of forces in Vietnam, and in the discussion for the Republican presidential nomination in 1968.⁴

This book helps explain why, given the uneven electoral success of military veterans running for president, parties repeatedly nominate them. Military veterans run for the presidency after our wars, and the major parties nominate them frequently: more than half of the major party candidates for president have been in the armed forces. The parties choose veterans as their standard-bearers more often than the simple number of veterans in the population would suggest. Despite important political implications for veterans in office, no one has systematically sought to understand why they appear on our presidential ballots with such high frequency. I examine and describe the factors that shape veteran candidate emergence patterns over time. The kinds of leaders that become the president of the United States of America, or lose an election trying, reflect on what Americans perceive about themselves. To understand why so many veterans run for office reveals attributes of elections; it also illuminates the relationship between the military and civilian spheres and the preferences of the American electorate.

To achieve this analytic goal, this book understands military veteran candidate emergence as a set of outcomes shaped by factors. The number and kinds of veterans who appear in presidential elections depend on a list of influences stemming from wars, military institutions, and politics. While Chapter 2 elaborates the logic and details, the underlying explanatory power of the book examines how military and political factors shape the outcomes, the veteran candidacies. The outcomes are the number of veterans who run for president, the kinds of veterans who run for president, and the level of salience that candidates' military service attains during campaigns. The factors that shape and constrain these outcomes include (1) an unchanging, elemental bond between military veterans and the state; (2) the size and recruitment patterns for prior wars; (3) the partisan entanglements, federalization, and professionalization of military institutions; and (4) developments in civilian politics, specifically the changing mechanism used by political parties to choose their presidential nominees and the growing presidency as an institution. The book examines how these factors shape veteran candidate outcomes by segmenting U.S. military and electoral history into six postwar eras and analyzing them as distinct case studies.

4. He later described his electoral efforts candidly, asserting that he was an "inept candidate . . . used to a structured organization." Quoted in Pace 2005, B8.

It is important to understand the reasons behind the high number of veterans in American presidential elections. The framers of the U.S. Constitution were gravely concerned about the dangers that standing armies and militarism present to liberty. Two ancient Romans, Coriolanus and Cincinnatus, provide contrasting visions for how former defenders of the state return to civilian politics after the war. Coriolanus, elevated from either myth or reality into literature within Plutarch's chronicles and later in Shakespeare's verse, was a Roman military leader from the fifth century B.C. He successfully fended off an enemy attack and achieved military honors through battle heroism. With that fame and popularity, he ritualistically showed his war wounds to the people to ascend to power. The framers of the U.S. Constitution clearly feared that such demagoguery might allow a latter-day Coriolanus to use elections to seize power with martial glory and debase the Constitution. Alexander Hamilton wrote in "Federalist 9" that the "petty republics of Greece and Italy" were precisely the examples to avoid by building a more "firm union." Their main pathology for Hamilton was the "perpetual vibration between the extremes of tyranny and anarchy," as ephemeral leaders translated personality and military fame to power only to be torn down in their excess.⁵ It was not lost on the American framers that military heroes were frequently the vehicles for these cycles of revolution. The framers also inherited their fear of domestic standing armies from the English tradition, whose memory of Oliver Cromwell and the New Model Army coupled standing armies and despotism. Evidence of their concerns peppers the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and the *Federalist Papers*. The Second and Third Amendments, with various grievances in the Declaration of Independence, are only the most obvious examples. A dozen *Federalist* papers discuss the militia and military, while only one discusses the Electoral College. The concluding *Federalist* paper promotes ratification of the Constitution specifically as a bulwark against various political perils, including "the military despotism of a victorious demagogue."⁶ Those who wrote America's charter feared that a potential Coriolanus could prorogue civilian authority.

It was not Coriolanus but another Roman who became the archetype for George Washington and a tradition of soldiers-turned-leaders. Cincinnatus left his plow to take up arms and lead a defense of the homeland from invaders. With the threat abated, to the fields he returned, voluntarily passing power back to the Roman Senate. The allusions between Cincinnatus and George Washington were too ripe to go unpicked. Lord Byron, in his 1814 "Ode to Napoleon Buonaparte," described Washington's

5. Hamilton et al. 2009, 42.

6. Hamilton et al. 2009, 445.

return to Mount Vernon after Yorktown, deeming him the “Cincinnatus of the West,” and the poet was not the only one to make the comparison. The spirit of Cincinnatus stands compatible and complementary with the notion of a citizen-soldier defense posture, eschewing martial influence on politics. American voters have not feared presidential candidates’ military experiences but instead have celebrated them. Candidates’ supporters associate martial experiences not with potential despotic tendencies but with patriotic sacrifice.⁷

If the shadow of Coriolanus had endured, it is doubtful that parties would have nominated a dozen generals, doubtful that more than half of presidential candidates had donned a military uniform. Instead, those seeking elected office heralded and highlighted their experience, sometimes even exaggerating their wartime valor. Parties nominate veterans more frequently than the veterans’ share in the electorate at large should predict, despite early fears of standing armies. Such a formative environment could have created conditions that precluded military experience among candidates. It did not. In a pattern that corresponds to wars, their legacies, and other forces, American electoral history has undergone different waves of veterans in presidential contests featuring different types of veterans at different times. These surges and ebbs matter for understanding our elections, but whether and how much our election system is biased toward attracting veterans also matters for other important concerns. The potential implications of military veterans in presidential elections extends to how parties enjoy advantages on defense issues, gender politics, distinctive foreign policy views, and even levels of presidential success.

The two major parties in American politics compete on political issues that face the country, but this competition is not symmetrical on every issue. Each party enjoys a perception of credibility on certain issues over the other party, with voters believing that one party is better than the other at handling that issue. Education policy, for example, belongs more to the Democratic Party in the eyes of the electorate, while the Republican Party has owned defense and national security issues since the Vietnam War.⁸ If voters see veteran and nonveteran candidates differently, then there are partisan implications to such differences. My past research using experimental settings demonstrated that candidates with military service provide voters with a “veteran” cue, but more important, potential voters

7. One exception was initial fears about the Society of the Cincinnati, the hereditary organization of Revolutionary War army officers and their descendants. Jefferson and others felt the group might perpetuate a permanent war caste that would become “undertakers of republicanism.” Hünemörder 2006, 191.

8. Holian 2004; Norpoth and Buchanan 1992; Petrocik 1996.

use that cue to conclude that the candidate is better able to handle issues of national defense and security.⁹ The same study did not find that party conditioned these citizens' perceptions of a veteran candidate's future ability to cope with security- and defense-related issues. Another study that used experimental conditions found that candidates' military service influenced voters' hypothetical vote-choice decisions—and also found party asymmetry in the results: Democrat candidates gained more advantage than Republican candidates from being a veteran.¹⁰ However, if Republican candidates in general enjoy an advantage in the eyes of voters pertaining to their ability to contend with defense matters, and voters see military veteran candidates with more credibility on defense, there is a potential for a built-in advantage for Republican veterans on defense issues in elections. This concern depends heavily on whether there is a disproportionate number of Republican or Democratic veterans and on whether Republicans continue to enjoy a defense-issue advantage.¹¹

There are also important gender implications that stem from an electoral environment conducive to military veterans when considering the rarity of female veterans in general, certainly among the political class. While the central focus of this book targets presidential elections, its implications extend to other races for federal and state public office. Candidates and incumbents with military service appear to enjoy an advantage over nonveterans when engaging their biography to achieve or at least initiate policy outcomes. Military service aids incumbent legislators' efforts to achieve action and gain media attention for their views over those of nonveterans. Given that military service is still experienced overwhelmingly by men, there is a gender asymmetry to how politicians can frame expertise on defense and security issues.¹²

Central to the importance of understanding an election mechanism that nominates an abundance of military veterans, evidence suggests that there are important differences between political leaders with and without experience in the armed forces.¹³ Policy makers with military experience hold different views on war and defense than others who did not serve.¹⁴ One study measured the proportion of key policy makers in the federal government over time since 1816 by tracking biographies of

9. Teigen 2012.

10. McDermott and Panagopoulos 2015.

11. Others have written that the George W. Bush administration diminished the Republican advantage on defense and security issues by the way it conducted the Iraq War. See Goble and Holm 2009.

12. Swers 2007; Huddy and Terkildsen 1993.

13. Horowitz, Stam, and Ellis 2015.

14. Feaver and Gelpi 2005; Gelpi and Feaver 2002.

members of the U.S. House of Representatives and the president's cabinet, including the president and vice president. Sometimes veterans have held large numbers of House seats and cabinet posts; as high as 72 percent of House members have had military service, and as high as 92 percent of cabinet members. Other eras have seen far fewer, with 13 percent and none, respectively. The highs and lows correspond with American war making. Peter Feaver and Christopher Gelpi's research shows that the share of veterans in positions of power affects the propensity to start conflicts. When there were more veterans in policy-making roles, the United States was less likely to initiate military action. When there were fewer veterans, the United States was more likely to initiate conflict. The pattern was even stronger for veterans' reluctance to initiate militarized disputes when considering "interventionist" types of wars rather than those with national security more at stake. Such research is not the only scholarly investigation into the political and foreign policy implications of the "gap" between civilian and military cultures, but the empirical evidence supplies a germane policy reason to better understand the mechanisms that propel so many veterans toward major-party nominations.

Last, candidates' pre-presidential experiences influence later perceptions about their success as president. In particular, one study that examined presidents from William McKinley to George W. Bush concluded that military experiences helped presidents become more successful once in the White House.¹⁵ By disaggregating different forms of military service, the study showed that serving during times of war as a young man drives a president toward higher performance in public persuasion, while combat experience buoyed how well a president does in crisis leadership. When assessing all ten arenas of presidential success, having served in combat and being on active duty during a time of war shape how well a man will do as president overall. Some may criticize this type of study because presidential success is too abstract to be quantified or ranked meaningfully or that there are insufficient cases for analysis. Even if we take such studies with a healthy grain of salt, it is at a minimum suggestive that military service and presidential quality are linked. When comparing the loosely defined political and policy success of the presidents since McKinley, the men with wartime military service differed from those without it, warranting the interest in the number of veterans who appear in elections.

15. The authors defined presidential success by using a survey commissioned by C-SPAN of "scholars and other professional observers of the presidency" who ranked each president on a scale of 1-10 in ten categories of success, such as "public persuasion" and "crisis leadership." Uscinski and Simon 2012, 522.