

Which US presidents had the most consistent and active support in Congress for fighting a foreign war? Quora.com

With most wars in which the United States has engaged, there has been loud and significant disagreement by massive numbers of Americans, including by members of Congress. The singular exception was 1941-1945, when President Franklin Roosevelt gained virtually unanimous support in Congress for US involvement in World War II, to fight against the military dictatorships of Japan, Italy, and Germany.

Lets first look at contrasting examples of Congressional opposition to wars.

## THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

In the American War of Independence, the very founding of the nation, only about a third of the population were active supporters of the new revolutionary Congress. Another third of the population, approximately equal in number, were those colonists who were active and strong supporters of the British Empire. These loyalists felt that the American colonists should be grateful to be part of the large empire, and they showed loyalty to King George III. The last third of the population were those who did not want to be involved in the fighting on either side. They just wanted to go about their daily life without disturbance by either patriots or loyalists.

The first Congress established the Articles of Confederation, a form of government that reserved most power to the thirteen state governments, and even their limited central government lacked an independent executive. The patriots of the Revolution had fought against the powerful British Empire, with its strong-willed King George III. They were not about to grant significant power to a president.

However, after over a decade of ineffective government under the Articles of Confederation, some leaders emerged who argued for more power to the central government. General George Washington, the military leader most responsible for the success of the revolutionary armies, had been frustrated during the war by the lack of dependable support in Congress. Benjamin Franklin, the American ambassador to France, who negotiated the treaty that led to vital French support for the American revolutionaries, emphasized the need for the colonies to “unite or die.” Regarding the need for Americans to support a strong central government, that would protect them from the powerful British Empire, he famously wrote, “We must all hang together, or surely we will all hang separately.”

Franklin, Washington, and Washington’s former military aide Alexander Hamilton were the three most famous advocates arguing for establishment of a stronger central government led by a strong chief executive. Other leaders, like James Madison, wanted both a stronger Congress and an independent judiciary, to balance a strong President. They adopted the idea of a balance of power within the central government, and with the state governments, to form a “federalist” form of government.

When Congress authorized a convention in Philadelphia to “amend” the Articles of Confederation, Federalists usurped the opportunity to write an entirely new constitution. When George Washington was chosen as the first President, there were many in Congress who felt the new Constitution gave too much power to the federal government. Objections to the Constitution by “Anti-Federalists” almost led to its rejection. To save their whole efforts, Federalists compromised by adding specific limits on federal power. These limits guaranteed to American citizens freedom of speech, of the press, of religion, of peaceable assembly to protest, of the right to bear arms, of the rights of people accused of crimes, and of the right of people to be secure in their homes, to be protected from government interference in their private lives. These limitations on federal power became enshrined as the first ten amendments to the Constitution, and became known as the Bill of Rights.

## THE WAR OF 1812

After establishment of the Constitution, the next significant conflict was the War of 1812. Once again there were deep divisions in Congress and in the general population. The US army invaded Canada, with the idea of annexing it to the United States, but after Canadians organized a strong resistance the invasion failed. Many Congressmen blamed the ultranationalist “warhawks” for provoking such a needless folly. Some merchants in New England, who had considerable trade with England and Canada, were so disaffected that they almost organized a secession movement.

## SEMINOLE WARS

Though indigenous peoples of North America were involved in numerous wars as English settlers spread over their lands during the colonial era, and though Native Americans were involved on both sides of the American Revolution, it was during the War of 1812, when the British army invaded Washington DC, that a massive indigenous resistance movement came closest to success. Led by Tecumseh, resistance spread from the Shawnee in Kentucky and Ohio to the Creeks in Alabama. US General Andrew Jackson led a military expedition to seek out Creek settlements, and at a bloody battle at Horseshoe Bend Jackson scored a major victory.

In 1814 most Creeks gave up after that defeat, when the British pulled their troops out of the United States. Many of them concluded that their future was hopeless in their present location, and decided to leave the United States entirely. They escaped by migrating south, to take refuge in the Spanish colony of Florida. These Creeks became known as “Seminole,” a word in their language which means “runaways.” As they established new homes in Florida, they hoped the Spanish government would protect them.

What they did not predict was the vindictiveness of General Jackson, who in 1819 created an international crisis by leading his army across the border into Spanish Florida. Some members of Congress objected to Jackson’s attacks, which became known as the First Seminole War. It was a “foreign war,” in the sense that it took place when Florida was a Spanish colony. Congress was divided, but rather than apologize, to resolve the crisis the US ambassador pressured the King of Spain to sell Florida to the United States. Spain gave in, and in 1821 Florida was annexed to become a territory of the United States. Once again, to their horror, the Seminoles found themselves back in conflict with their former enemy.

Andrew Jackson used his popularity with the American people, based on his military victories over the British and the Indians, as a basis to be elected as President. Once elected, he pushed through Congress the 1830 Indian Removal Act. US army troops forcibly rounded up the Choctaw, Chickasaw, Creeks, and Cherokee peoples, and led them on what the natives called “trails of tears,” to march west to new homes in Indian Territory (today’s Oklahoma).

Seeing these tragedies, the Seminoles decided to resist. To gain more warriors, they welcomed black enslaved people who were escaping from plantations in Georgia and Alabama. These African Americans were valuable allies, because they knew the location of white settlements, they knew how best to win battles against whites, and—most importantly—they knew how to speak English. These black escapees served important roles as interpreters, as spies when they snuck back into the plantations to learn crucial information about US plans, and as warriors when US army troops showed up to force the Indians to leave Florida. The American government expected the Seminoles to give up their African American allies, but Seminoles and blacks united to resist, in what became known as the Second Seminole War.

The Second Seminole War lasted from 1835 to 1842, and was one of the most frustrating campaigns in the history of the US army. Northern abolitionists in Congress recognized the parallel types of oppression, and voted against funding for the army. Lighting raids by Seminole and black guerrilla warriors caught army camps by surprise. The war was not being won until US General George Jessup deceptively invited Seminole leaders to come into a US fort for peace discussions. When the unsuspecting Seminoles arrived, and were led into the fort, Jessup commanded his troops to throw each of them into the fort’s jail cells. General Jessup then issued an order for all Seminole people to move to the Gulf coast so they could be put on ships going to Indian Territory, before he would release the chiefs he had imprisoned. Furthermore, he demanded that all escaped slaves must be returned to their white masters. Though Seminole relatives wanted the release of their captive chiefs, they refused to leave Florida unless their African American allies could travel with them to Indian Territory. They did not want to abandon their black friends to be returned to slavery. While these negotiations continued, the imprisoned Seminole leader Osceola, as well as others, died of grief. At last, in 1842, US President John Tyler agreed to allow the black Seminoles to go with their indigenous friends to Indian Territory, instead of being returned to slavery.

## PLAINS INDIAN WARS

In 1844 Tennessee Congressman James K. Polk narrowly won the presidential election, by claiming it was the “manifest destiny” for the United States to expand across all of North America. Polk supported the annexation of Texas and backed up Texans’ outrageous claims for a much larger territory than they actually occupied. Texans’ attempts to spread into the southern Great Plains provoked severe resistance by the Comanche Empire, the indigenous occupants. Comanches fought to retain their lands from the 1840s to the 1870s. They were the first of a new era of Indian wars, waged for control over the western territories. Some members of Congress insisted that the government follow the promises that the US made in the treaties signed with various tribes, but most of them went along with government policy which ignored these promises.

## MEXICAN AMERICAN WAR

In 1846 President James K. Polk ordered US army troops to move south from Texas, and provoked a war with Mexico. Many Americans in the Northern states feared that the underlying motive for Southerners who volunteered to fight in the Mexican American War was to gain more territory for the expansion of slavery. After the US army took control of the northern third of Mexico, and forced the Mexican government to accept this loss of their territory, a little-known first-term Congressman from Illinois named Abraham Lincoln sponsored a resolution in Congress to prevent the spread of slavery into the vast territory taken from Mexico (now comprising the states of California, New Mexico, Arizona, Colorado, Utah, and Nevada.

At the same time, anti-slavery abolitionist Henry David Thoreau conducted his own personal anti-war protest against the US government's theft of northern Mexico. Thoreau issued his essay on "Civil Disobedience," suggesting that individual citizens should resist unjust government policies by refusing to pay taxes that supported unjust wars. His advocacy of direct actions taken by massive numbers of citizens later became the inspiration for protest movements all around the world, most famously by Mahatma Gandhi in the 1930s India independence movement and by Martin Luther King in the 1950s and 1960s civil rights movement.

## AMERICAN CIVIL WAR

Since the American Civil War of 1861–1865 was not a "foreign war," it is not a direct answer to this question. However, it is notable that in the US Congress there was significant opposition to the military policies of President Abraham Lincoln, while in the Congress of the newly formed Confederate States of America there was bitter opposition to the war policies of Confederate President Jefferson Davis.

## ANNEXATION OF HAWAII

In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, Christian missionaries from various denominations traveled to the Kingdom of Hawai'i in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. Their motives, unlike the sailors from whaling ships who took breaks from their hard work to hunt and slaughter whales, the missionaries arrived with the goal of converting the Native Hawaiians from their indigenous Polynesian religion to Christianity. As more Europeans and Americans arrived in the islands, they brought with them germs of many diseases. The Hawaiians had never been exposed to these germs before, and they died in large numbers. The survivors were traumatized by so many deaths, and many of them felt that the spiritual power of their traditional religion had been lost. Feeling this way, many Hawaiians converted to Christianity.

As the decades passed, most of the children and grandchildren of the missionaries continued to live in Hawai'i. Unlike their parents, most of them cared little about spreading religion but more about enriching themselves. By manipulating compliant members of the Hawaiian royal family, they gained control of land and established large plantations. Their idea was to grow tropical fruits, and to sell them to the many ships docking at Hawaiian ports. The plantation owners needed lots of laborers to plant, nurture, and harvest pineapples, papayas, bananas, and other

Sedible plants. With the Native Hawaiians weakened by diseases, the plantation owners brought in workers from many nations, especially Portugal, Japan, China, and the Philippines.

In this context, Native Hawaiians became a smaller portion of the island population, and they lost power. However, in 189

## SPANISH AMERICAN WAR

The next war outside of North America was promoted by a young class of expansionists who wanted to take control of the Spanish colonies of Cuba and Puerto Rico. When President William McKinley declared war against Spain in 1898, many anti-imperialists in Congress protested. Opposition in Congress increased when the US Marines overthrew the government of the independent Kingdom of Hawai'i. Nevertheless, Assistant Secretary of the Navy Theodore Roosevelt ordered a US fleet to attack the Spanish fleet in the Spanish colony of the Philippines. After the US navy attacked and sank the entire Spanish fleet in Manila Bay, imperialists pushed for the annexation of the Philippines.

Anti-imperialist Democrats and some Republicans protested against this new policy of US imperialism, but Roosevelt and other (mostly Republican) imperialists in Congress argued that taking over the Philippines and governing the Filipinos as colonial subjects was not a new policy at all. Imperialists effectively pointed out that what the US Army was doing in subjugating the Filipino Insurrection was no different than what the US Army had been doing on the western frontier during the many Indian Wars since the founding of the Republic. And they also effectively argued that governing Filipinos as colonial subjects was no different from the policies of the US Bureau of Indian Affairs, which ruled Indian reservations with just as much dictatorial power as was now being applied to suppress the Filipino Independence Movement. With such arguments, the anti-imperialists consistently lost debates and votes in Congress, and the United States moved into the twentieth century as an internationally-recognized colonial power.

[For further explanation of this subject, see articles I wrote on imperialism, now presented at [walterwilliamsphd.org](http://walterwilliamsphd.org) and especially: "United States Indian Policy and the Debate over Philippine Annexation: Implications for the Origins of American Imperialism," *Journal of American History* (1980). ]

## WORLD WAR I

When the First World War broke out in Europe in 1914, most Americans strongly opposed getting involved. Many Congressmen referred to George Washington's Farewell Address, in which he warned Americans about the peril of "foreign entanglements." Nevertheless, leading industrialists were becoming quite wealthy in selling their products to the combatants in the war. As the war grew in intensity, and combat deaths mounted, European governments passed laws drafting their men into their armed forces. With this withdrawal of much of the local labor force, governments looked to other sources to get the weapons they needed to mount their war efforts.

In a sudden rush of orders, American factories produced massive amounts of guns, bullets, jeeps, ambulance wagons, and other equipment of war. To prevent its enemy from buying American

products, Britain declared an effective naval blockade of the short coastline of Germany. Faced with a denial of this trade, the German navy began a policy of unrestricted submarine warfare in the North Atlantic Ocean. The Imperial German government felt that, if Britain would deny it to means to trade with American corporations, it would attack the British trade from North America.

US President Woodrow Wilson strongly protested this German policy, especially when a British ship, the *Lusitania* was sunk by a German submarine. Germany pointed out that it had publicly warned Americans not to travel on British ships. And German spies had learned that the *Lusitania* carried much ammunition in its hold. Nevertheless, a number of Americans were passengers on that ship, and when it was sunk an outcry of protests were published in US newspapers. President Wilson put so much pressure on the German government that it decided to restrict its submarine warfare to British naval vessels only.

When Wilson ran for reelection in 1916, his campaign slogan was "He kept us out of war." He won the election as a result of a lot of Americans voting against involvement in the war. Socialist candidate Eugene Debs also ran on an anti-war platform, and he received more votes than any socialist candidate before or since. It was clear that a majority of Americans, as well as many Congressmen, did not want to get involved in the war between the European imperial governments.

By early 1917 European governments on all sides were reaching a crisis point because of the huge expenses and large number of deaths due to the conflict. After a major mutiny by Russian troops on the eastern front, the Tsarist government collapsed, and a new democratic government was formed in Russia. Beyond that, both the French and German armies were on the verge of mutinies. The German government decided that they must take a gamble that the Americans might join the British and French, so they decided to resume unrestricted submarine warfare as their only hope of bringing the British to the negotiating table. That was a major miscalculation on the part of German military leaders.

An even more stupid decision was made when a lower-level officer in the German diplomatic corps sent a telegram to the German ambassador in Mexico. The officer, named Zimmerman, sent the telegram suggesting that if the United States declared war on Germany, the German ambassador to Mexico should ask the president of Mexico to attack the United States southern border. If Mexico did so, the German promised that upon victory Germany would press the United States to surrender control of New Mexico and other territories captured by Mexicans, as partial revenge for California and other states of the Southwest being taken by the US army in the Mexican American War of 1846-48.

Though Mexicans certainly retained much resentment against the US for the loss of the northern third of their country in 1848, there was zero chance that the president of Mexico would declare war on the US in 1917. Nevertheless, when British spies intercepted the message, newspaper publication of the Zimmerman Telegram produced a huge outrage in the American mass media. The combination of this telegram with the already tense relations between Germany and the United States as a result of the resumption of unrestricted submarine warfare, led a frustrated

President Wilson to give in to pressure from interventionists in Congress and beyond. Wilson asked Congress to declare war on Germany, and Congress obliged.

For the first time, the United States got involved in a major war in Europe. This was exactly the involvement in “entangling alliances” that George Washington warned about, and it was a major turning point in American history.

Ever since 1917, historians have disagreed about Wilson’s decision. In my opinion, as a historian, Wilson made a severe mistake when he asked Congress for a declaration of war. The Zimmerman Telegram, though a huge mistake of the German bureaucracy, was a minor diplomatic outrage that had no realistic chance of happening. What Wilson should have done is to make a public speech expressing outrage about the government of Germany, and then followed with a fancy ceremony, complete with mariachi music and much tequila, followed by a joint declaration of friendship and peace signed between the governments of Mexico and the United States.

The submarine issue was more complex. The US government did not attempt to trade with Germany after Britain imposed its naval blockade, so it was an implicit taking sides for the US to continue trading with Britain and objecting to the German policy of unrestricted submarine warfare. It is ironic that the United States navy followed the exact same policy during World War II, when US submarines surrounded the islands of Japan and blasted any ship that sailed anywhere in those waters.

In my opinion, as a historian, I think Wilson should have gotten Congress to pass a law which prohibited American ships from entering a war zone in contested waters during the conflict, and should have refused to allow any American citizen to embark on any ship that was going into the area where German submarines operated. If an American citizen did become a passenger on a British ship, US law would emphasize that such a person was ignoring US government warnings, and if they drowned when their British ship was attacked, it would be regrettable but not a reason for the United States to enter the war. And as far as far as US trade along routes where German unrestricted submarine warfare was going on, US merchants could still engage in trade, by simply selling American products to Canadian merchants. Then those Canadian merchants could send such sold products on Canadian ships into the contested waters in order to help the people of Great Britain. US profits from the war, in short, would not have to lead to a declaration of war.

By the end of 1917, US troops were arriving on the front lines in Allied trenches in northern France. The war had become a stalemate, but after the Americans joined the British and French that shifted the balance and Germany was forced to declare an armistice. At the Versailles conference in 1918, German diplomats were required to sign a statement that Germany alone was responsible for the war and the millions of deaths. The German government dissolved, Kaiser Wilhelm II was forced to abdicate, and a new democratic government was established. But this government was inherently unstable, because France and Britain required huge reparations payments to be paid. The financial burden on Germany was catastrophic, as runaway inflation destroyed economic growth.

## WORLD WAR II

The 1920s were a disaster for Germans, but the economy slowly improved until 1929, when the collapse of the stock market in the United States led to the Great Depression. As the effects rippled through the shaky German economy, the early 1930s were even worse for many Germans. Millions lost their jobs, and were destitute.

It was this economic chaos that a significant minority of Germans turned to right wing nationalists in the Nazi party, which reacted with resentment over the losses from the First World War. In 1933 Nazi leader Adolf Hitler rose to power.

Thus, it is no exaggeration to say that the end result of the European war from 1914 to 1918, led directly to the outbreak of war in 1939. In other words, World War II was in many ways merely a second stage of World War I. But it was bigger and even more catastrophic.

US President Franklin Roosevelt, who took office in the same year as Hitler, recognized the threat of Nazi ideology. Anti-Jewish attitudes were rife within American society, but Roosevelt strongly opposed such prejudices. However, foreign affairs took a back seat to domestic concerns, and Roosevelt had to focus on rebuilding the economy and creating jobs for Americans.

By 1938, when Germany invaded Czechoslovakia, it became obvious to Roosevelt that the United States must rejuvenate its alliance with Britain and France to crush Hitler. Roosevelt was Secretary of the Navy during World War I, and he was a strong supporter of Woodrow Wilson's interventionist policies. Roosevelt pushed for an expansion of the US military.

Still, however, although there was concern about Hitler's aggressions, a large number of members of Congress opposed getting involved in another European war. When Roosevelt ran for an unprecedented third term in the presidential election of 1940, he was forced to promise that he would not send American boys to fight in another European war. Many Americans were disillusioned that Woodrow Wilson's progressive reforms at home had been overshadowed by the influence of big corporations in foreign policy. Increasingly large numbers of people believed that it was the influence of arms manufacturers, who greatly profited from the war, were the secret force behind the push for the US declaration of war. By 1940 a majority of Americans felt that it was a severe mistake to send American servicemen into battle in Europe once again.

In secret, however, Roosevelt pushed for an expansion of the US military. When Winston Churchill became prime minister of the United Kingdom, he and Roosevelt met secretly on a battleship in the north Atlantic ocean. They both saw Hitler as a threat, and in reaction they formulated a North Atlantic Alliance to oppose Nazi aggression. After Hitler invaded Belgium and France in 1940, and almost destroyed British forces at Dunkirk, Roosevelt pushed Congress for more aid for Britain.

Some members of Congress opposed this expansion, but Roosevelt argued that a strong military was needed to deter war. His goal, he said, was to make the United States into "an arsenal for democracy." If he could not get Congress to agree to grant direct aid to Britain, he came up



with the idea of “Lend Lease.” This program allowed Roosevelt to “lend” US ships, tanks, aircraft, and other military equipment to Britain, and to “lease” other forms of assistance to Britain.

In 1940, Roosevelt persuaded enough members of Congress to pass Selective Service, a draft of men into the armed forces, the first peacetime military conscription in US history. Roosevelt had more than one target in mind. He was worried not only about Hitler, but also about aggression by the Empire of Japan. Japanese military forces had invaded the coastal parts of China in 1937, committing horrible atrocities. In response, Roosevelt cut off US exports of steel, oil, and military equipment to Japan. The Japanese military leaders decided that they must have these imports, so they started planning to invade the British colonies of Malaya, Singapore, and the Dutch East Indies to get to the large oil deposits that were known to exist. But, halfway in between Japan and Indonesia, was the US colony of the Philippines.

In 1941, Roosevelt received secret intelligence reports that Japan was planning a largescale attack, but US analysts thought it would be in Southeast Asia. Japanese propaganda focused on the need to throw European imperialists out of Asia, and create an Asian “Co-Prosperity Sphere” led by Japan. They encouraged rebels like Vietnamese leader Ho Chi Minh, and the Indonesian nationalist Sukarno, to revolt against their French and Dutch masters.

On the early morning of December 7, 1941, the Japanese navy launched a large fleet of airplanes to attack and destroy the US naval base at Pearl Harbor in Hawai’i. This attack was swiftly followed by another attack on the US colony of the Philippines. There had never been such massive attacks by air, and Japan celebrated its great victory.

Pearl Harbor was one of the major military miscalculations in world history. Japanese military leaders assumed they could quickly conquer the Philippines, Malaya, Singapore, French Indochina, and the Dutch East Indies, and then later negotiate a settlement with the US government. They were gravely wrong. American public opinion suddenly changed, from opposition to involvement in another war, to a seething determination to seek revenge. The direct attack on Pearl Harbor united Americans more than any other time in US history. Congress not only passed Roosevelt’s declaration of war, but also his massive expansion of the US navy and army.

unknown to them, several US aircraft carriers were on naval exercises out in the open ocean that day, and these became the spearpoint of attack that the US navy would use to mount a counterattack months later near the Pacific island of Midway.

## CONCLUSION

The main point of this essay is to show that, with the great exception of World War II, the usual pattern of American history has been great division of opinion and lack of support for the military actions by the U.S. government. Lack of support for the more recent wars in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan are more typical for our history.

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