



The Spoils of War: Greed, Power, and the Conflicts That Made Our Greatest Presidents

Bruce Bueno de Mesquita, Alastair Smith

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How would we remember Abraham Lincoln if not for the Civil War?

This may seem like a silly question—Lincoln is applauded for starting a war over a moral outrage he couldn't bear, so there's little reason to imagine his legacy without it. Yet when political scientists Bruce Bueno de Mesquita and Alastair Smith examine the facts, a different picture emerges. Lincoln did little to take on slavery before Dred Scott proved that the political climate was changing. Seeing an opportunity, Lincoln began sowing the seeds of political disunion, thus making himself a serious presidential contender. It was a strategy that paid off for Lincoln, in his career, his finances, and his historical legacy. But he also dragged out the war, taking an enormous human toll in the process.

And it isn't just Lincoln. Indeed, it's striking how many of the presidents Americans most venerate—Lincoln, Washington, FDR, and JFK, to name a few—oversaw some of the republic's bloodiest years.

One after another, Bueno de Mesquita and Smith put America's great leaders under the microscope, showing how their calls for war, usually remembered as brave and noble, were in fact selfish and convenient. In every case—and in many others not covered here—our presidents chose personal gain over national interest while loudly evoking justice and freedom. The result is an eye-opening retelling of American history and a call for reform.

Neither pacifists nor war hawks, the authors instead argue for a more transparent dialogue between politicians and the people they are meant to serve. By offering concrete policy changes (for instance, abolishing the electoral college), they suggest a way in which such transparency—a notion most of us have long since given up hope imagining—could be brought about. This is an entertaining and persuasive debunking of some venerated national myths, and proof that we'd be better off without them.

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