

Trump's presidency

Historians often rank Woodrow Wilson as one of America's dozen best presidents. The eminent historian Paul Johnson disagrees; instead, he claims that Wilson was one of America's worst presidents. What did Wilson do to earn Johnson's

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unflattering assessment? One thing really. Johnson argued that Wilson got the U.S. into World War I, even though we had no good reason to get involved. If Johnson is correct, then all of the U.S. casualties in that war were unnecessary – all 116,516 of them (I pulled the war casualty data in this column from Wikipedia).

Large segments of the American public believed that Vietnam was another example of an unnecessary war. The public's view would have probably prevented Lyndon Johnson from being re-elected – if he had been willing to run. By the end of this war, the U.S. suffered 58,209 casualties. The public's disgust over these casualties stayed with the nation for quite some time – as anyone who lived through the late 70s and early 80s can tell you.

Unnecessary deaths is an inter-

esting metric to use when evaluating Presidents. By this measure, President Trump will not fare well. By the time this column appears in print, the coronavirus will have caused over 400,000 U.S. deaths. This death toll is more than two times greater than the casualties that our nation suffered in World War I and more than five times greater than the death toll in Vietnam.

The coronavirus death toll is reaching a level that our nation experienced during our most devastating wars. Right now, the U.S.'s coronavirus death toll is already about the same as it was during World War II (405,399 casualties). Some medical experts believe the casualties from covid will end up being about the same as the casualties from the Civil War (655,000). Almost all historians believe that the Civil War and World War II were necessary wars, so they do not criticize the leaders for getting us into these wars. Quite the contrary, Lincoln and FDR are usually ranked among our best presidents. Historians give them credit for managing a difficult situation well.

Under President Trump's leadership, the U.S. has already suffered more casualties from the coronavirus than we suffered in some of our worst conflicts. Comparing the covid death toll to

war casualties helps put the tragic losses that we are currently living through in perspective.

Of course, it would be unfair to blame all of the covid deaths on Donald Trump. The virus was going to kill some Americans no matter who was president or what that president did. The real question that historians will have to grapple with is how many people died unnecessarily. Donald Trump broadcast a message that discouraged wearing masks and discouraged social distancing. Social scientists will estimate how many deaths were attributable to his messaging and his policies. Historians will compare the death toll in the U.S. with the death toll in other countries when they assess the Trump presidency. In some comparisons with other countries, the U.S. will not fare well. For instance, Japan and South Korea have each lost fewer people to covid since its outbreak than the U.S. has lost in a single day.

If social scientists end up estimating that many U.S. deaths were preventable, historians like Paul Johnson will probably stop talking about Woodrow Wilson. They will have a different past president to disparage.

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