

## **America's Fighting Spirit Throughout The Centuries**

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What does it mean to be an American?

I contend that to be an American, it means a person possesses a fighting spirit, that they possess bravery even when faced with danger. At the core of what it means to be an American is the desire to band together (when warranted) to fight a common foe.

Native Americans also share this same fighting spirit. After the bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1941, hundreds of Navajo Indians volunteered their services to the US military; they wanted to help defend America. The Navajo Code Talkers used their language to provide a code for America to use when transmitting military radio communications. The Axis powers were never able to break the code.

Asian Americans have shown this fighting spirit with units such as the 442nd Regiment and 100th Battalion, both segregated units composed of mainly Japanese Americans in WWII. The 442nd regiment went on to become the most decorated unit of its size in America. The two units fought in the Battle of Monte Cassino Belvedere in Italy, where they helped to drive the enemy north during the Rome-Arno campaign.

African Americans have shown this spirit with the Tuskegee Airmen in WWII, all men who were in a program that trained African Americans in aircraft combat. These men are notable for attacks such as Operation Corkscrew, which was a combat mission to attack Pantelleria, a strategic Italian island in the Mediterranean Sea. It was the first time Italian and German troops had ever surrendered because of an air attack.

From labor workers fighting for justice in the workplace to soldiers fighting for freedom on the front lines, the American fighting spirit is visible on all levels. At the highest level, even presidents have shown this fighting spirit.

When choosing presidents to discuss, I decided to pick famous presidents from different centennials of America since America was founded. I decided upon George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt, and George H.W. Bush. They all passed away in consecutive centuries from each other: Washington -- 18th century, Lincoln -- 19th, Roosevelt -- 20th, and Bush -- 21st. Each had their own brush with death during wartime. It seems fate was on their side in these events.

### **George Washington - September 11, 1777 - Revolutionary War**

At this point in the war, it is believed General Washington and Count Pulaski (who is widely considered to be the father of the American cavalry) were riding together around Brandywine Creek. They were roughly 25 miles southwest of Philadelphia, which was the Patriot capital. They were inspecting American troops for readiness in anticipation of a British attack.

It seems the Americans had good reason to expect an attack, as a British division had recently landed by Chesapeake Bay. The British plan was to head to Philadelphia from there, with Brandywine Creek being enroute. The British sent out a scouting party led by Captain Patrick Ferguson, who was widely regarded to be one of the best marksmen in the British army. His troops were equipped with



*Portrait of Captain  
Patrick Ferguson*

*(Ferguson 2020)*

fast-firing rifles of his own design. This gun was unique in that it had a rifle barrel, which improved accuracy over that of the commonly used smoothbore barrel. Ferguson and his men hid in the woods along Brandywine Creek. Confident in the abilities of his gun, Ferguson also planned on ambushing American soldiers while on the lookout.

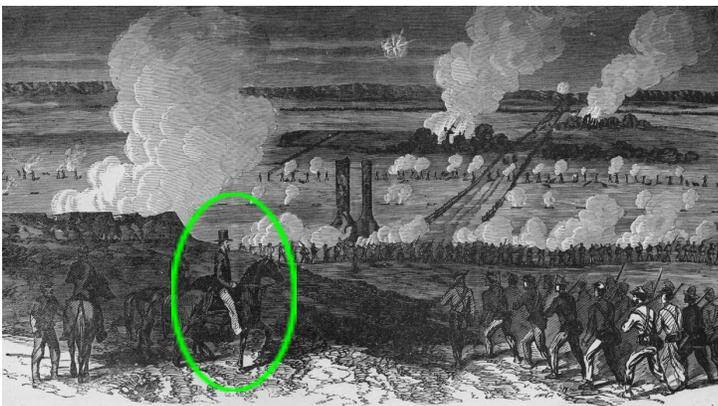
Suddenly, two officers, unknown to Ferguson at the time, emerged into his line of sight: one dressed as a hussar (now believed to be Count Pulaski) and one dressed as an American (now believed to be General George Washington). Seizing the opportunity, Ferguson ordered three of his best men to sneak towards the rear of the two officers with intentions of killing them. However, before his men reached their places to fire, Ferguson found that he had second thoughts about shooting them with their backs turned. His code of honor made it uncouth to shoot at a man in this manner; it didn't provide such a man with a chance to defend himself.

In this pivotal moment of American history, Ferguson instead yelled out to the American officer (Washington). The American officer was still within his firing range, but the hussar had moved further away. Ferguson pointed his gun at the officer with the expectation that the officer would face him and either surrender or fight. The officer glanced his way, but then resumed riding on. Ferguson later recalled in his journal how, “[Ferguson] could have lodged half a dozen balls in or about [the officer], before [the officer] was out of [his] reach, but it was not pleasant to fire at the back of an unoffending individual...so [he] let [the officer] alone.” (Ferguson 2020). If Ferguson had not let Washington go, American history could have been forever changed.

**Abraham Lincoln - July 11, 1864 - Civil War**

At this time, the majority of Union General Grant's troops were deployed near Petersburg, Virginia, fighting against Confederate General Lee's troops. To relieve pressure off of his own forces, General Lee ordered Confederate General Early and his respective troops to head through the Shenandoah Valley (a valley located in West Virginia and Virginia) and head into Maryland. This would hopefully cause General Grant to divert troops from the battle in Virginia towards General Early instead. After his victories in central Maryland, General Early decided to go further south and attack Washington D.C., the Union's capital. The ensuing battle would later be called the Battle of Fort Stevens.

On July 11, 1864, Early's troops crossed the Potomac River and began the third major incursion of Confederate troops on Union soil during the Civil War. The Union frantically called upon every man available to help defend D.C., from hobbling convalescing soldiers to armed government clerks. Interestingly enough, 1864 was also an election year. If D.C. was captured, it would surely have been embarrassing to Lincoln at the elections, possibly adversely affecting his election chances.



*A picture of the battle with President Lincoln  
(Klein 2014)*

Grant, having anticipated General Early's progress into Maryland, had ordered two units to travel overnight from Virginia to come to the aid of D.C., which coincidentally was on the same day Early's men arrived near D.C.

President Lincoln rode out to greet the two units personally on the front lines.

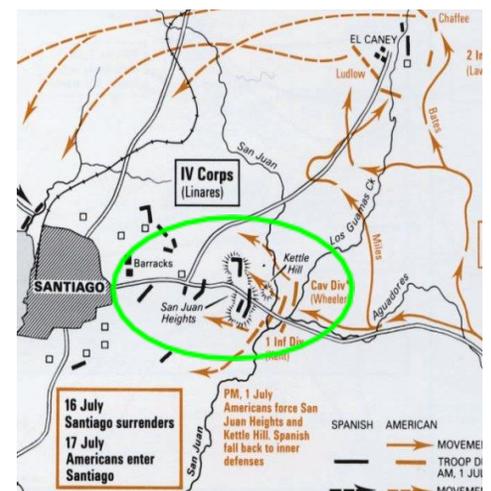
Early had snipers trained on the two divisions. Lincoln was within range of the snipers and one bullet even whizzed past him. What happened next is described by Lincoln's secretary, John Hay, who wrote about the event: "a soldier roughly ordered [Lincoln] to get down or he would have his head knocked off." (Klein 2014) Lincoln complied.

Even after this experience, Lincoln returned the next afternoon with his wife, to help support wounded soldiers and bolster the spirits of doctors. As Lincoln climbed the parapets, which are low walls built to protect soldiers from enemy fire, a shot whistled through the air three feet to the right of Lincoln. It wounded a Union surgeon, causing the surgeon to fall to the ground. Even so, Lincoln was reluctant to remove himself from the line of fire. It took multiple requests to take cover and repeated threats to forcibly remove him from the battlefield before Lincoln could be coaxed into taking cover. As a consequence, Lincoln is considered to be the only president to come under enemy fire on the battlefield while in office.

### Theodore Roosevelt - July 1, 1898 - Spanish-American War

At this point in the war, American forces had landed near the city of Santiago de Cuba, which was located in southern Spanish-ruled Cuba. American forces wanted to capture San Juan Heights, which are a series of linked hills on the eastern side of Santiago de Cuba.

The American forces saw San Juan Heights as the central point of Spanish fortifications, which spread across the many hills that surround Santiago de Cuba. If the Americans were to



*Map of the Santiago Campaign; circled in green are San Juan Heights and Kettle Hill*

*("The Spanish-American War Part 3: Cuba & Puerto Rico" 2012)*

successfully take San Juan Heights, the Spanish would be forced to move back and be surrounded.

One of the units fighting was Theodore Roosevelt's aptly nicknamed unit The Rough Riders (it is even considered to be the first volunteer cavalry unit in America, as they formed in response to President McKinley's need for additional volunteers in the war).

The Rough Riders were composed of college athletes, cowboys, miners, the Texas Rangers (a unit created in Texas to protect newly settled families who had just arrived from Native American attacks), and even Native Americans. At this time, the Rough Riders had been ordered to attack the Spanish forces on Kettle Hill. The Rough Riders were successful and soon found themselves out of the main action, which was taking place on nearby San Juan Hill (this battle was later aptly called the Battle of San Juan Hill). They had no orders as to what they should do next.

True to his nature, Roosevelt wanted to join the fighting and assist. He chose to lead a charge of his Rough Riders to San Juan Hill, as Kettle Hill was roughly  $\frac{1}{4}$  mile away. As the story goes, only a few in the unit actually heard Roosevelt's call for a charge, and after leaving, he found himself alone and exposed to enemy fire with only five of his men with him. Roosevelt quickly turned around and led the charge a second time (this time *with* the entire unit behind him). They were joined by the 10th Cavalry, a traditionally segregated African-American unit. The Americans were successful.

In 2001, 82 years after his death in 1919, Roosevelt became the only president to be awarded a Medal of Honor for his acts of bravery, in recognition of his role in the battles he fought in Cuba.

## George H.W. Bush - Sept 2, 1944 - WWII



*A photograph of George H.W. Bush (center) with Joe Reichert (left) and Leo Nadeau (right) during WWII*

*(Siegel 2018)*

During WWII, Lt. George H.W. Bush was a torpedo bomber pilot who flew the naval airplane Avenger. His target on September 2, 1944 was to hit a Japanese radio transmitter on the island of Chichijima. The island was a base for communications and supplies for the Japanese. It was heavily guarded.

As Bush's plane approached the island, the plane was hit by Japanese fire. Choking on smoke from his burning aircraft, Bush nevertheless continued to pilot his plane so that he could drop his plane's bombs onto the target. After doing so, Bush then turned his plane away to get out of the island's airspace in an attempt to save the crew. Bush knew that American fliers who were captured were likely to be executed by the Japanese, thereby making it an unsafe option to parachute onto the island. The only possible place to parachute down safely for potential rescue would be into the water away from the island.

Two parachutists left the plane; only Bush's parachute opened successfully. The wind hit Bush hard enough as he parachuted down that it forced him backwards to hit the tail of the plane. This bruised his head and eye. Nevertheless, Bush was able to land in the water and then swim to a life raft fifty feet away to save himself.

Once he had finally reached the life raft, Bush was still not safe. There were Japanese naval boats nearby heading towards him. Luckily, American fighter planes in the area strafed the Japanese boats with their gunfire, which kept the Japanese boats away for four hours. This gave

an American submarine time to arrive and rescue Bush. This mission was the reason why Bush was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for heroism under fire.

George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt, and George H.W. Bush all exposed themselves to enemy fire with these brushes with death. And yet, their fighting spirit shone through, as these men went on to become some of the most famous presidents of America. This fighting spirit has emboldened all Americans -- immigrants, Native Americans and the Presidents themselves to persevere when faced with confrontation. With respect to the challenges we face in these uncertain times, one thing can be certain: we can rely on the American fighting spirit to get us through.

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