

# The History of the Twentieth Century

## Episode 414

### “The Teheran Conference”

#### Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

The Teheran Conference marked the first time the Big Three Allied leaders met face to face, and it was the most consequential meeting of world leaders since the Paris Peace Conference of 1919.

Winston Churchill, Franklin Roosevelt, and Joseph Stalin gathered together in a remarkably informal and convivial meeting, in which they decided the fate of the world.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening War Theme]

Episode 414. The Teheran Conference.

On July 28, 1943, Franklin Roosevelt gave a fireside chat. He spoke about the war, celebrated the pending liberation of Sicily, and reiterated the demand that Italy must surrender unconditionally. He praised the war efforts of the United Kingdom, Canada, the Free French, and the Soviet Union, and spoke of his vision for the post-war world.

In that spirit of growing confidence in victory, he broached the subject of post-war demobilization of the US economy and the US military services. “They must not be demobilized into an environment of inflation and unemployment, to a place on a bread line, or on a corner selling apples.”

To protect against that, Roosevelt proposed an ambitious program to provide education, training, and financial support for returning veterans. He submitted a proposal to Congress in the fall of 1943, and in June 1944, Congress unanimously passed the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act, though no one knows it by that name. Everyone calls it the G.I. Bill, G.I. being an American colloquialism for a member of the American armed forces, especially the US Army.

And yes, I said it passed unanimously. In both houses of Congress. Despite the increasing opposition Roosevelt faced from ever-growing numbers of Republicans in Congress and conservative Southern Democrats who had had their fill of the New Deal.

Can you imagine such a thing happening today?

The G.I. Bill offered returning veterans subsidized loans to buy a home, a farm, or a business. It offered medical care and unemployment benefits while the veteran looked for work.

Perhaps most important of all, it offered four years of federal support for a college or university education or vocational training.

In the pre-war United States, a college education was expensive and scholarships were few and hard to come by. Many young Americans, especially in rural parts of the country, did not have access to a public education at the level required to prepare them for college. For these reasons, a college or university diploma was generally the mark of a privileged upbringing, and less than 5% of the American population held a degree from a college or university.

Roosevelt intended to change that. The G.I. Bill was the most radical new US government program since Roosevelt's first term. After the war, more than a million veterans earned degrees through the G.I. Bill. In the peak year, 1947, half of all college and university students in America were veterans of the war, drawing on their G.I. Bill benefits.

Many of these veterans went on to lives of achievement, success, and comfort beyond anything their parents could have hoped for. The G.I. Bill increased America's level of education, its upward mobility, and its self-esteem. In Canada, the government enacted a similar bill, and Canadian veterans enjoyed comparable benefits.

The G.I. Bill did have its down side. Like some other New Deal programs, it largely left behind African-American veterans. This was not because of anything in the letter of the act, but because it aggravated existing racial disparities. Most banks didn't write mortgages to African Americans and many homeowners would not sell to African Americans, so the loan subsidies were of no use. Most African Americans lived in the South at this time, and most colleges and universities in the South did not admit African Americans as students, so the G.I. Bill's educational supports were likewise useless.

There was America's network of historically Black colleges and universities, but at this time they tended to be small and underfunded. They took in as many veterans as they could and the increased revenue helped them to expand, but they couldn't accommodate everyone who wanted to go college. About 100,000 African-American veterans applied for G.I. Bill education benefits, but only 20% of them enrolled in a college.

In spite of these obstacles, the G.I. Bill did increase home ownership and the number of college degrees among African Americans, but it increased these numbers much more for white

Americans. In effect, the bill widened the gap between white and Black Americans. For these reasons, one modern American historian has called the G.I. Bill “affirmative action for white people.”

Neither were G.I. Bill benefits available to those who served in the Merchant Marine, even though they were otherwise considered military personnel and the US Merchant Marine suffered more casualties, in percentage terms, than any other service branch. This aspect of the Bill is well known in my family, because my father served in the Merchant Marine during the war.

Back in episode 333, I told you the story of Undersecretary of State Sumner Welles, a close advisor to President Roosevelt, who got drunk and propositioned a porter while on a train trip with the President and his entourage. Roosevelt valued Welles as an advisor and chose to dismiss the incident as a momentary lapse caused by excessive drinking.

There were at least a couple of other people though, who wanted to see Welles gone. One was former US Ambassador to France William Bullitt, whom we’ve met before. Bullitt helped negotiate the peaceful surrender of Paris to the Germans in 1940, but Roosevelt disapproved of his efforts. All the other ambassadors in Paris had left for Bordeaux when the French government did, and Roosevelt believed that had Bullitt gone to Bordeaux, he might have been able to persuade the French government to continue the war against Germany from Algeria, as some in the French cabinet wanted to do. Roosevelt appointed a new Ambassador to represent America at Vichy and Bullitt, who was hoping for a promotion into the State Department, was out of a job.

Another was the Secretary of State, Cordell Hull. Hull had for years resented how important a role Sumner Welles played in major foreign policy decisions. When the President met with Winston Churchill, it was Welles, not Hull, who sat in on the meeting. Hull had had just about enough of being shunted aside in favor of an official who supposedly worked under him.

Hull and Bullitt got together and leaked the story about Welles’s 1940 indiscretion to Republican Senator Owen Brewster. Brewster suggested a Senate investigation into Welles’s behavior and, more important, Roosevelt’s decision to keep him in a sensitive position in the State Department for years afterward.

In August 1943, just before Roosevelt was to leave for the summit with Winston Churchill in Québec, Hull met with the President, advised him of Brewster’s planned investigation, and demanded Welles be fired, or else Hull would resign. Brewster would then publicize the story, and the Roosevelt Administration would be embroiled in a serious scandal.

Because back in those days, sexual misconduct by high-ranking government officials was considered scandalous.

Later that same day, Roosevelt asked Welles for his resignation. Later, William Bullitt would approach the President to ask to be appointed Undersecretary of State, the position Welles had

vacated. Roosevelt told him, “Bill, if I were Saint Peter and you and Sumner came before me, I would say to Sumner, ‘No matter what you have done, you have hurt no one but yourself. I recognize human frailty. Come in.’ But to you I would say, ‘You have not only hurt another human being, you have deprived your country of the services of a good citizen, and for that you can go straight to Hell.’”

Needless to say, Bullitt did not get the job. Cordell Hull asked Roosevelt to give him another diplomatic post. Roosevelt offered him ambassador to Saudi Arabia, which in the US Foreign Service at the time was considered the absolute worst posting. Bullitt declined and tried instead to get a commission in the US Army. When that request was turned down, Bullitt, who was fluent in French, joined the Free French forces. Charles de Gaulle was delighted to have him and gave him a commission in the Free French military.

This experience soured Roosevelt on Hull and on the State Department generally. Hull was politically useful because he was a Southerner and therefore helpful as a liaison to the conservative Southern Democrats in Congress, so he kept his job, but in the future, when important foreign policy questions came before Roosevelt, Hull and the State Department were not consulted.

[music: Rimsky-Korsakov, *Scheherazade*.]

Saturday evening, November 11, 1943, Armistice Day, President Roosevelt left Washington for Cairo, where he would meet with Winston Churchill and Chiang Kai-shek, and then on to Teheran, where he and Churchill would meet with Stalin.

This was not made public in advance, for security reasons, as was the case when Roosevelt left to attend the Casablanca Conference at the beginning of the year. The President and his staff traveled by motorcade to the US Marine Corps base at Quantico, Virginia, where they boarded the presidential yacht *Potomac*. To all appearances, it was a weekend fishing trip, nothing out of the ordinary for Roosevelt.

But when *Potomac* reached the Chesapeake Bay, it drew alongside USS *Iowa*, America’s newest, and biggest, battleship. *Iowa* had been commissioned in February 1943, and spent September and October stationed at Argentia, Newfoundland, on guard against the possibility of *Tirpitz* leaving Norway to raid Allied shipping. *Iowa* was bigger and faster than Germany’s largest battleship. It also had bigger guns with longer ranges and was capable of firing shells that weighed more than a ton.

*Iowa* was the pride of the US Navy, and so it was chosen for the honor of transporting the President across the Atlantic. The Navy had to install a special bathtub aboard the ship for the President’s use. Sailors take showers, not baths, but Roosevelt wasn’t able to use a shower because of his disability.

Three days into the voyage, the destroyer USS *William D. Porter*, one of *Iowa*'s escorts, fired a torpedo at *Iowa*. *Iowa* was able to turn and dodge the torpedo, but there were some tense moments during the incident and afterward, when for a brief time it seemed possible that the torpedo had been launched by a German agent aboard the *Porter* in an attempt to assassinate Roosevelt, but the launch proved to be an accident.

Already aboard *Iowa* when the President arrived were America's top military planners, including George Marshall, Ernest King, and Hap Arnold, commanders of the US Army, Navy, and Army Air Forces, respectively. With everyone feeling that victory in the war was now only a matter of time, Roosevelt spent the voyage conferring with his military leaders over the shape of postwar Europe. "There is going to be a race for Berlin," he predicted, "and the United States should have Berlin."

The President then opened a map of Germany, taken from an issue of *National Geographic*, and sketched out what he believed should be the postwar occupation zones. The Russians would hold a small strip of territory east of Berlin, while the United States would control everything from Berlin west to the North Sea. The British would get southern Germany.

*Iowa* took Roosevelt and his entourage as far as the port of Oran in Algeria; the trip took eight days. Roosevelt met with Eisenhower and toured the ruins of Carthage before boarding a plane for Cairo, where he met with Churchill and Chiang Kai-shek. I already talked about the Cairo conference, so I'll only note that Roosevelt was reluctant to meet with Churchill in advance of the Teheran Conference; he didn't want it to appear to Stalin that the two Western leaders were coordinating their negotiating positions ahead of time. It was only after Chiang was invited to the meeting that Roosevelt felt comfortable attending.

Roosevelt spent Thanksgiving in Cairo at the US embassy, then on the following Saturday, it was off to Teheran by airplane for him and Churchill. When they arrived in the Iranian capital, they each settled into their respective embassies.

Stalin took the train from Moscow to Baku, and flew from there to Teheran. This conference would be the first time Roosevelt and Stalin would meet face to face. Stalin didn't like to travel and travel was awkward for President Roosevelt, owing to his disability. Winston Churchill, on the other hand, was an avid traveler. If you've been keeping track, you know that Churchill came to North America to meet with Roosevelt five times, the first being before America entered the war, and had also traveled to Moscow twice to meet with Stalin.

Stalin had another reason for putting off a face-to-face summit until now. In 1941 or 1942, the USSR would have been a supplicant. Stalin would have had nothing to say to the Western Allies, apart from asking them for help. Now, in November 1943, things were different. The tide of the war on the Eastern Front had plainly shifted. From Stalingrad to Kharkov to Orel to Smolensk to Melitopol, and all the other cities that had gotten artillery salutes in Moscow, the Red Army was

advancing from victory to victory. Now Stalin was in a position to look his allies in the eye and ask, “What are *you* doing to hasten the end of the war?”

Franklin Roosevelt had built a hugely successful political career on his ability to charm people, and hoped to apply that skill to Stalin. Both Winston Churchill and Averell Harriman, the US ambassador in Moscow, told Roosevelt Stalin was an uncommonly intelligent man, a quick learner with an incredible grasp of detail. Harriman would later say that Stalin was better informed than Roosevelt and more practical than Churchill, “perhaps the most effective of the war leaders.”

Roosevelt was eager to meet with Stalin. He believed he had discovered the key for successful negotiation with the *Vozhd*. All Stalin really wanted, in Roosevelt’s view, was respect. He wanted respect for the USSR as the nation that was carrying 75% of the war against Germany on its own, and respect for himself as the leader of a nation every bit as important as the US or the UK.

The British and the Soviets had agreed to hold all the meetings at the American embassy, because Roosevelt’s disability made it difficult for him to travel. The British embassy was near to the Soviet embassy, but the American embassy was across town, which immediately presented a security issue, due to the tricky drive required through the crowded streets of Teheran. Both Stalin and Churchill had invited Roosevelt to stay at their respective embassies, but Roosevelt was reluctant to accept either offer, for fear of favoring one ally over the other.

At around midnight on Roosevelt’s first night in Teheran, Soviet foreign minister Molotov contacted American and British representatives and told them the NKVD had learned of a German assassination plot, intended to kill all three Allied leaders. Otto Skorzeny, the SS officer who had recently pulled off that daring rescue of Benito Mussolini, was believed to be leading the team of assassins. Therefore, Molotov advised that Roosevelt move to either the British or Soviet embassies for their mutual safety, and offered the guest house at the Soviet Embassy for Roosevelt’s use. The Soviet embassy compound was large and had heavy security, making it a safer meeting place for the Big Three.

The Americans conferred. The consensus was that the assassination plot was a Soviet invention. Still, the head of Roosevelt’s Secret Service detail thought moving to the Soviet embassy would be prudent. Ambassador Harriman pointed out that if harm came to either Stalin or Churchill while they were traveling to the US embassy, blame would fall on the Americans for dismissing Molotov’s warning. Roosevelt decided to move to the Soviet embassy the next day. It would have the advantage of giving Roosevelt more access to Stalin and more opportunity to build a personal relationship.

Stalin had his own reasons for wanting to host Roosevelt, and security was only one of them. Before the Western leaders had arrived, Stalin had approached 19-year-old Sergo Beria, the son of NKVD chief Lavrentiy Beria, telling the teenager that he was entrusting him with “a mission

that is delicate and morally reprehensible.” It was to bug the guest house, monitor Roosevelt’s private conversations, and report on them daily to Stalin.

Shortly after Roosevelt arrived at the guest house, Stalin dropped in to welcome him, and the two leaders expressed their pleasure at being able to meet at last. Stalin apologized for not meeting with Roosevelt any sooner, explaining that he was “very occupied with military matters.” The two leaders pulled out all the stops in an effort to charm each other; only Stalin was successful.

Roosevelt attempted to build a relationship with Stalin by bringing up the subject of colonialism. He laid out America’s position that it was not in the war to preserve colonial empires, and reiterated that he wanted to see French Indochina and the East Indies and probably India too, free and independent states after the war. Neither the US nor the USSR were colonial powers, Roosevelt pointed out, so here was some common ground.

Stalin replied that he was reluctant to discuss such a touchy subject in a private meeting, but he did have harsh words for the French. The Free French in liberated Lebanon and Syria were already attempting to reassert control over those countries. Stalin judged most of the French to be German collaborators and declared they “must be punished.”

The first session of the conference was held that afternoon at the Soviet embassy. The conference room had been equipped with a round table, so there would be no hierarchy of seating, surrounded by twelve chairs, four for each of the three delegations. Diplomatic protocol demanded that Franklin Roosevelt open the conference, as he was the only head of state in attendance. He began on a light-hearted note, pointing out that he was the youngest of the three leaders present and was pleased to meet with his elders. Stalin, as host, welcomed the others and told them, “History has given us a great opportunity. Now let us get down to business.”

The tone was so informal that Roosevelt’s translator later said it was hard to believe the people sitting around this table were making decisions that would affect the lives of countless millions of people.

The leaders discussed the postwar world. Stalin and Roosevelt wanted to see Germany broken apart into at least five states, maybe more. Churchill would settle for splitting off Prussia, which he described as “the evil core of German militarism.” Stalin at one point suggested that peace could be guaranteed if after the war the 50,000 highest-ranking officers of the Wehrmacht were all put to death. Roosevelt took this as a joke and deadpanned that, well no, he thought 49,000 would be sufficient.

Churchill, on the other hand, took Stalin’s proposal at face value. He became angry, declared that the British Empire would never be party to such a dastardly act, and stormed out of the meeting until Stalin persuaded him it was only a joke.

After dinner and martinis, mixed by Roosevelt, Winston Churchill raised the subject of the post-war borders of Poland. Stalin said he was not yet prepared to discuss Poland, but asked what Churchill had in mind. Churchill said that Britain was committed to the restoration of Poland after the war—this was the reason Britain had entered the war in the first place—but proposed that Poland east of the Curzon Line be ceded to the USSR. (Do you remember the Curzon Line?) Poland would be compensated with territory from German Pomerania and Silesia, all the way to the River Oder.

Roosevelt said he had no objection to such a plan, but was not prepared to discuss Poland either. The US would have a Presidential election in less than a year, he pointed out, and though he did not personally want to run for a fourth term, he felt he would have to if the war hadn't yet ended. There were millions of Americans of Polish extraction living in the US, and Roosevelt did not want to lose their votes. Stalin said he understood and would do nothing to complicate Roosevelt's re-election. He said to Churchill that the world would be better off if Roosevelt were re-elected and Churchill agreed.

This moment is notable because it is the first known instance in which Roosevelt indicated he was considering a run for a fourth term.

Churchill and Roosevelt had discussed Poland privately at the guest house. Churchill tried to persuade Roosevelt to adopt the British policy that the Polish government-in-exile in London was the rightful government of Poland and to oppose the alternative Polish government Stalin had set up in the Soviet Union. Roosevelt would not agree to this. He told Churchill that Britain had one government it wanted to put in place in Warsaw after the war, while Stalin had another. What was the difference?

Sergo Beria duly reported this conversation, which much delighted Stalin. The disagreement between his two allies meant he would be able to install his own choice of government to rule Poland, and the British would be able to do nothing about it in the face of American indifference.

He also expressed surprise that Roosevelt and Churchill would discuss such a sensitive subject so freely, as if the possibility that the room was bugged had never occurred to them. Could it be, he asked Sergo, that the Americans had found the hidden microphones and that Roosevelt and Churchill were deliberately staging a false conversation to mislead him? Sergo told him that was unlikely, as the microphones were small and carefully hidden. Stalin called it "bizarre."

The most important issue the Big Three discussed in Teheran was the matter of the second front. Stalin said that the USSR would join the war against Japan, but only after Germany was defeated and a reasonable amount of time given for the Red Army to redeploy to Asia. This was welcome news to Churchill and Roosevelt, as Soviet entry into that conflict would surely accelerate the defeat of Japan. But, Stalin continued, the Soviet Union expected its allies to do it the same favor. When could he expect an invasion of France?

Franklin Roosevelt believed that Churchill had already made a commitment to Operation Overlord back at the Québec Conference, to begin no later than May 1, 1944. But when Stalin raised the question, Churchill went on at length about the virtues of other approaches. Italy, for example. Or Rhodes and Turkey. Or the Balkans. Wouldn't an Allied invasion of the Balkans do more for the Red Army than would an invasion of France?

Stalin wouldn't consider any of it. "Russia is only interested in Overlord," he told Churchill.

Roosevelt backed him up. "We are all agreed that Overlord is the dominating operation, and that any operation which might delay Overlord cannot be considered by us." And he wanted to hold to the date of May 1.

Stalin replied that it didn't have to be May 1, so long as there was a definite date and a definite commitment. Then he surprised Roosevelt by asking him who would be put in command of Operation Overlord. Roosevelt told him that decision had not yet been made. Stalin replied that Overlord would never happen until an overall commander was in place. Soviet experience had taught that military operations could not be executed by committee. One single commander must have the power to make the decisions and be held responsible for the outcome. Roosevelt promised to choose a commander within a week following the end of the conference and inform Stalin promptly of his choice.

Churchill again brought up the value of operations in the Mediterranean. Stalin told him such operations might have some value, but they must be secondary. He asked Churchill pointedly, "Do the British really believe in Overlord, or are they only saying so to make us feel better?"

Roosevelt thought that was a good time to adjourn the meeting. That night, Roosevelt's close advisor Harry Hopkins dropped in on Churchill at the British embassy. We don't know whether Roosevelt sent him or he acted on his own, and we don't know much about the conversation. We do know that Hopkins impressed upon Churchill that Roosevelt and Stalin were both adamant about Overlord and the sooner the better, and Churchill would do well to yield on the question.

The next day, Churchill did exactly that. He pledged full British support for Overlord in May 1944, along with a smaller operation, Anvil, to invade the Mediterranean coast of France. Stalin promised the Red Army would begin a major offensive to coincide with Overlord, to make it impossible for the Germans to transfer large numbers of forces from the East to the West.

The Big Three conferred a bit on the Balkans, agreeing there would be no Allied military action in that region, and also agreeing that henceforth all Allied aid to the resistance in Yugoslavia would go to Tito's Partisans. The Allies also agreed to press Turkey to enter the war on the Allied side. Stalin offered to sweeten the offer by pledging that in the event Turkey joined the Allies and Bulgaria attacked it, the USSR would declare war on Bulgaria.

In fact, Churchill and Roosevelt had spoken with Turkish President Mustafa İsmet İnönü at the Cairo Conference just weeks earlier, but the Turkish President begged off entering the war until Turkey could rearm itself. Turkey would break diplomatic relations with Germany in the summer of 1944, but would not join the Allies until February 1945.

November 30, 1943, was Winston Churchill's 69<sup>th</sup> birthday. The British embassy hosted a gala in the PM's honor. Dinner was served with silver and sparkling crystal. The guest of honor sat between the President of the United States and Premier of the Soviet Union.

The dinner proceeded in a remarkably convivial atmosphere. Churchill toasted Roosevelt, praising his leadership of the United States during the crisis of 1933. Next he toasted Stalin, calling him one of the great heroes of Russian history. Stalin demurred, replying that it was the people of the Soviet Union who had earned Churchill's praise.

Many toasts later, Churchill was feeling merry enough to offer one to "the proletarian masses." Stalin replied with a toast to the Conservative Party.

Churchill told Stalin, "I believe God is on our side."

"And the devil is on my side," Stalin quipped. "Everyone knows the devil is a Communist—and God, no doubt, is a good Conservative."

As the party was winding down, Stalin called for one last toast: to the United States. He spoke of America's productive factories and expressed his gratitude for them. "The most important thing is this war are machines," he said, and "[t]he United States is a country of machines. Without those machines, through Lend-Lease, we would lose this war."

The communiqué the Allies issued after the conference was remarkably vague and left the German government puzzled. Josef Goebbels remarked that they could have published the full communiqué in the German press with little worry, since it said practically nothing that contradicted the Nazi viewpoint. An informer in the British embassy in Ankara eventually passed along some details to Berlin regarding the discussions in Teheran, but German officials were uncertain whether this information was part of some Allied ploy meant to misdirect them.

We'll have to stop there for today. I thank you for listening and I'd like to thank Jonathan for his kind donation, and thank you to Thomer for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Jonathan and Thomer help cover the costs of making this show, which in turn keeps the podcast available free for everyone always, so my thanks to them and to all of you who have pitched in and helped out. If you'd like to become a patron or make a donation, you are most welcome; just visit the website, [historyofthetwentiethcentury.com](http://historyofthetwentiethcentury.com) and click on the PayPal or Patreon buttons.

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composer, the performers, and a link to where you can download it, that would be the place to go. While you're there, you can leave a comment and let me know what you thought about today's show.

And I hope you'll join me next week, here on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we turn back to the Eastern Front as 1944 dawns and the Germans grapple with the very difficult situation they now find themselves in. Would They Obey You Any More Readily, next week, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. Roosevelt had promised Stalin he would appoint a commander for Operation Overlord within a week. At the time, it was widely believed that Roosevelt would choose George Marshall, the Army Chief of Staff, for this weighty assignment. Churchill and Stalin both expected that he would. Marshall and his wife apparently expected it too; they quietly began packing their things for a move to Europe.

But there were arguments against that choice. His fellow service chiefs, Ernest King and Hap Arnold, wanted Marshall to stay right where he was. They believed he was the best advocate for American strategic choices in debates with the British, and while Roosevelt by now had a substantial bloc of opponents in Congress, Marshall was widely respected across party and ideological lines. Also, Roosevelt's foes in Congress were suspicious that Roosevelt would use this transfer to clear the way to replace Marshall as Army Chief of Staff with a political ally, perhaps someone who would run as Roosevelt's Vice-Presidential candidate in 1944. Someone like Eisenhower, for instance. Though Dwight Eisenhower was studiously apolitical as a military commander, he was widely, though incorrectly, believed to be a closet New Dealer.

The 83-year-old John Pershing, still technically the senior commander of the US Army, was also opposed to appointing Marshall. He told Roosevelt that the Army had a solid and effective command structure in Washington and an equally effective one with Eisenhower in the European Theater, and to assign Marshall to Overlord would disrupt both of them.

Roosevelt had lunch with Marshall on December 5 and asked him whether he wanted the position. Marshall told Roosevelt that it was the President's decision and that he would cheerfully accept whatever choice the President made. Roosevelt told him, "Then it will be Eisenhower."

Stalin was informed of the decision that same day. This would prove to be the last major military decision Roosevelt would make as President.

[music: Closing War Theme]

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