RAY SUAREZ: Does an expansion of presidential powers go hand in hand with war? Some historical perspective now from NewsHour regulars: presidential historians Doris Kearns Goodwin and
Michael Beschloss; journalist and author
Haynes Johnson; historian and director of the Robert Dole Institute at the University of Kansas, Richard Norton smith; and Roger Wilkins, professor of history at George mason University.

RAY SUAREZ: Richard Norton Smith, is it almost automatic that power flows to a president at time of war?

RICHARD NORTON SMITH: It is almost automatic– not always. The Constitution is quite specific and rather narrow in enumerating what a president’s powers are, but in fact, the Constitution didn’t anticipate events like September 11. And in fact, you could almost see the moment when George Bush’s presidency was transformed, not only when it took on more power, but when it gained immeasurably in moral authority, and that’s what any successful president needs, particularly to fight a war. And that was on that Friday after the attack. He spoke at the
National Cathedral very movingly, but that, of course, was by its very nature a choreographed event. Then he flew to New York and he stood there on the rubble at ground zero, threw his arm around a firefighter, and he said that pretty soon those who had knocked down these towers would hear from all of us. And it was one of those extraordinary moments, which thanks to television, was brought into all of our lives, and I don’t think our lives, and I certainly don’t think this presidency, has been the same since.

RAY SUAREZ: Haynes, it sounds like rather than enumerated powers; it’s perceived power, from Richard… From what Richard said.

HAYNES JOHNSON: It is. I mean, the presidency is a weak office inherently, except in a crisis, and not just war. When Franklin Roosevelt took office in 1932, the country was in a great Depression, and people feared that he was a dictator because he was assuming these great powers over the whole nation during our Depression. So the presidency does expand, and that’s always been the problem. You need to protect your security, but the enumerated powers… the president can’t declare war. He can’t raise taxes. He can’t raise standing armies. He can’t even get his appointments through unless Congress sets it up. But in war, it becomes
RAY SUAREZ: With the support of the people, Doris?

DORIS KEARNS GOODWIN: Absolutely. I mean, I think one of the most important things that changes when there is a unity in the country after an attack like September 11, is the perception that the president is representing all of the people. And that public support not only gives the president power within the Congress, in the country at large, within the world at large, but it probably gives him confidence, which is so important for a leader.

You look at the way George Bush is handling himself right now, and even though he may have had confidence from growing up, his temperament needed to be reinforced by experience. And to the extent, as Richard said, he did well in those early days and then kept building and building, he becomes a more forceful leader. And then even within the Washington community, to the extent that he’s done a good job with the war, that means that the opponents are less likely to cross him. Think, even just four or five months ago, they were worried about Senator Jeffords and the fumbling on Capitol Hill. There was a perception that a quarter of the people only thought his agenda there was their agenda, and now he’s got that confidence, that communication ability— we’re no longer joking about the way he talks— and all of that is part of the sense of purpose and the unity that a crisis provides, if you handle it well, which he has.

RAY SUAREZ: Michael, how much of that power
flow is inherent in the office and not in who the particular occupant is at a point in time during an American crisis?

MICHAEL BESCHLOSS: Well, you know, it happens with presidents, and Doris is absolutely right: It’s almost the law of physics that when there is a war, the American people say, "we look to our president to defend us." There are certain things that a president can do that 535 members of Congress can’t do, or other members of our government or our system. And the other thing is that the barriers to presidential power are things like Congress has to say, "we will not pass your bills," and the American people who say, "we will not listen to you," or the courts that overrule the kind of things a president wants to do.

In wartime, all of those forces are a lot weaker, and they’re much more inclined to give presidents the benefit of the doubt. The other thing is that presidents always use this opportunity oftentimes to overreach. In the case of Dwight Eisenhower, during the Cold War, he said, "I want an interstate highway system. I’ll justify it by saying, ‘these things are needed for national defense.’"

Even Kennedy and Johnson in the ’60s, they argued for civil rights, as they should have. One of the arguments they used was, "unless we fix our racial problem in the United States, we’re going to be at a disadvantage against the Russians because third world nations will say, ‘we do not want to be like you.’"

RAY SUAREZ: Well, Roger, some people don’t even like the sound of the phrase, "presidential power." Implicit in its use quite often is the assumption that there is a problem with it.
ROGER WILKINS: Well, in the beginning, when they created the office, the Americans at the 1787 Constitutional Convention were terrified of creating a new King George over here. They had obsessed about overreaching tyrannical power, and I think probably the only reason that they were comfortable having a single president, not knowing how it was going to work out, was, "Well, George will do it and George will know what to do." And in fact, he did. But I want to go back to the point that Michael was making.

Presidents do get a huge boost out of a crisis, but then they’ve got to keep it. We saw Lyndon Johnson with a crisis: Came in with a huge, huge backing of the American people after the death of President Kennedy. He lost it in the way that… That Dwight Eisenhower lost some of his authority, by not telling the truth. And as Eisenhower said, the thing that the president needs most is his credibility. That’s what gives him power. If you don’t level with the people, it starts to flow away.

HAYNES JOHNSON: That’s a very important point because you remember Harry Truman, who was this popular president when FDR died. He comes into office, and then all of a sudden later on, Korea comes along, and it was not a popular war. And they ran against him, and it was the idea: Crime, Korea, and communism. And so the power… If you don’t do well, or the public doesn’t think you’re doing well, or it goes on too long, or it’s inconclusive, or somehow it doesn’t feel right, then the president pays the price.

DORIS KEARNS GOODWIN: If I could add to that… If I could add to that, it seems to me that when we look at the crisis of the Depression, it’s
important to remember that Herbert Hoover was president when the stock market crashed, and three years into that worst depression, and yet because of his firmly held beliefs against the government as a federal institution taking control and mobilizing the country, he was unable to deal with the Depression, the same Depression that gave the opportunity for Franklin Roosevelt to be remembered in history. The antislavery crisis that was turbulent in the 1850s provided an opportunity for Buchanan to do something, but he failed, and then Lincoln came along and was able to succeed. So crisis gives an opportunity for greatness, but it doesn’t always provide it unless the president or the leader takes advantage in the right way of it.

RAY SUAREZ: So are there peaks and valleys? Is this a sort of a pendulum swing? If we assume that power comes from somewhere, do those somewheres— institutions, Congress, the people themselves— take it back when the crisis is passed? Richard?

RICHARD NORTON SMITH: Oh, absolutely. I mean, a great example of that is Woodrow Wilson. You know, the one law that war obeys the law of unintended consequences. Wilson was elected in 1912 on a reform program called the "New Freedom", and yet ironically, when we did go into the war, the man who was a great champion of self-determination overseas practiced something approaching one-man rule here at home. There was something called the Committee on Public Information that basically herded journalists. Historians were enlisted to write what were called "red, white, and blue" books. Filmmakers ground out such propaganda
vehicles as "The Beast of Berlin." I mean, about the only people who were liberated were women.

Wilson undertook a campaign to collect scrap metal, and so women were liberated from the steel corset. The result was that we built three battleships. But somewhere along the way, war fever became war hysteria. Eugene Debs, the great socialist leader, was thrown into jail. His crime was criticizing conscription. Emma Goldman, the anarchist, was deported for similar reasons. And in 1918, on the very eve of the armistice, the great American victory, if you will, Wilson appealed to the electorate to give him a democratic Congress, and they did exactly the opposite. They turned the Congress over to the Republicans, to Henry Cabot Lodge, and the rest was tragic history.

RAY SUAREZ: Well, what happens when the emergency passes? We have the example of Wilson. What about with the elder George Bush? His war was over well before his term was. Michael?

MICHAEL BESCHLOSS: It was. And the Cold War: Perhaps even more important, because the Cold War ended finally exactly ten years ago this month, December of 1991. And President Bush the elder has said the difference between being president in 1991 and 1992 was very great because once the Cold War was finally over, the Congress, the American people no longer looked at the president as someone who might be the one who could defend their lives. Once again, he was almost a president like those in the late 19th Century, dealing with mainly domestic issues. And much of Bill Clinton’s frustration as president came from the fact that he didn’t have
the lift that gave about a dozen Cold War presidents that extra influence.

HAYNES JOHNSON: This ebb and flow is absolutely fascinating. The power goes out, then it comes in. And what Roger was saying, when we set up this system, we didn’t want a king, we didn’t want an emperor, we didn’t want anybody, any potentate in there. And the country and the politics and the whole… And the press, they checked them. When we were talking about the imperial presidency, back in… The worries, the fears about that– Lyndon Johnson and so forth, Cold War– all of a sudden, Johnson is out with the war, as Michael knows better than anybody. And it just… There it is, this give and take, give and take. That’s built into the system.

ROGER WILKINS: Well, even now, with the president doing as well as all of us have said he’s doing, there are people who are saying, "don’t overreach. Your military tribunals don’t look fair to us. Your attorney general is… Looks panicky to us." And the people are talking back. That’s the tension. And it’s a correct tension. It’s a wonderful tension. So that… And the president feels it. You can see the administration reacting to this.

RAY SUAREZ: Well, Doris, what changes if the war becomes a low-level war with no clear end? Many administration officials have been warning the American people for months now that this could go on for a very long time. Does a presidency hold on to that added power, operate in its shadow? What happens?

DORIS KEARNS GOODWIN: Oh, it’s obviously much harder. I mean, to the extent that we’re
close to the memory of September 11 and it mobilized us as a nation and created a sense of being Americans that we may not have felt as emotionally before, to that extent, that was part of the power that George Bush has. As time goes away from that, as we move perhaps away from Afghanistan, if he does try to move us into other areas, whether it be Somalia or Iraq, he’s going to have to build that coalition in the country all over again. And I hope he realizes that that communication that he was able to succeed with in getting us to agree with the action that he did on Afghanistan has to be built from the bottom up if we go somewhere else.

And the trouble with a low-lying continuation… I mean, one of the things that Johnson didn’t prepare us for was that long war. There was that sense of a promised light at the end of the tunnel, so that as the war dragged on with no end in sight, then that’s when the support started diminishing. This is different, I think, because September 11 is so powerful in our memory. But it doesn’t mean that ten years from now, if we’re still roaming around the world without much purpose, that that same sense of unity will still be there unless the president builds it.

HAYNES JOHNSON: That’s going to be the test, because they’re saying to us regularly, and I think rightly, "this could go on for years, maybe decades," as the struggle against terrorism. It’s not like the Cold War exactly, because you have the specter of the nuclear holocaust; you had one enemy clearly defined, the Soviet Union. This is murkier. It’s more difficult. So maintaining the presidency’s power to appeal to the public to stay with it, and it’s going to be many presidents if
they’re right. That’s an incredible challenge for leadership in the country.

RAY SUAREZ: And then more taxing, because we are not a patient people.

HAYNES JOHNSON: Yes.

MICHAEL BESCHLOSS: We’re not, and the horrible reality is, god forbid that we should ever have future attacks anything like what happened in September, but if that is the case, it’s going to be more difficult for George Bush because then you’re not immediately welded together. People don’t immediately say, "we’re in an emergency. We’re scared. Let’s give presidents the power." That’s when we’re going to see the test of his leadership.

RICHARD NORTON SMITH: But remember, we have all been through September 11 together. It’s as if there has been this enormous foxhole conversion, and that is part of our collective experience, and I don’t think subsequent events are going to change that. It’s no accident, you know, that we’re not debating the wartime leadership of James Madison or William McKinley. I mean, McKinley’s war department killed more Americans in Cuba than did Spanish bullets. It’s Abraham Lincoln, it’s Franklin Roosevelt, who, along with, say, a Winston Churchill, demonstrated that the great war leaders have a touch of creative ruthlessness in them.

RAY SUAREZ: Richard, Doris, gentlemen, thanks a lot.