

PBS Newshour AMERICA'S FOREIGN WARS

By Lisa Desjardins, [@LisaDNews](#) | Aug 18 2021

Correspondent

Depending on your definition of “war,” the United States has been in as many as [93 wars](#) in its 245-year history. That is the long list, including international fights over piracy, battles with Native Americans, standoffs with the early Mexican Republic, the Civil War and conflicts of the 20th and 21st centuries.

Another list, from the [Congressional Research Service](#), [takes a more narrow lens, naming 11 wars](#), or groups of operations, in America’s history.

As the United States and much of the world watches the withdrawal from Afghanistan, we thought it might be useful to look at where America’s longest war fits in our country’s history of foreign warfare.

Declared and undeclared foreign wars

Only Congress has the power to declare war on behalf of the United States, something it has done [in five conflicts](#). That distinction has acted as a dividing line in terms of how America entered major wars and the general outcomes.

Here are the wars declared by Congress, all of which ended in U.S. victory, (or, as the British may argue about the War of 1812, at least a draw):

- War of 1812
- 1846 war with Mexico
- Spanish-American War
- World War I
- World War II

These are the major undeclared wars, only two of which ended in victory for the U.S. (Persian Gulf and Iraq Wars):

- Korean War
- Vietnam War
- Persian Gulf War, 1991
- Afghanistan War
- Iraq War

Long and short wars

In general, America's longer wars have been more recent and less successful. Here are the lengths, per a [Washington Post calculation](#). (We updated their number on Afghanistan.)

The longest wars:

- Afghanistan War: 237 months
- Vietnam War: 122 months
- Iraq War: 105 months

The (relatively) shorter wars:

- World War II: 44 months
- Korean War: 27 months
- World War I: 19 months
- Spanish American War: 8 months
- Persian Gulf War: 7 months

American casualties

If looking at America's major wars in terms of the scale of U.S. casualties, three categories emerge: wars leading to more than 100,000 deaths, those causing tens of thousands of fatalities and those, including Afghanistan, leading to fewer than 10,000 American deaths. Here are the figures, [according to the Congressional Research Service](#).

Civil War: 364,511 deaths
 WWI: 116,516 deaths
 WWII: 405,399 deaths

Mexican War: 13,283 deaths
 Korean War: 36,574 deaths
 Vietnam: 58,220 deaths

American Revolution: 4,435 deaths
 War of 1812: 2,260 deaths
 Spanish-American War: 2,446 deaths
 Persian Gulf War: 383 deaths
 Iraq War: 2,189 deaths

[Afghanistan](#) (through April): 2,448 troops and 3,846 U.S. contractors, as calculated by the Associated Press.

Afghan casualties in the U.S-Taliban war

Finally, we think it important to look at the strife and toll of the conflict upon Afghanistan itself. According to the [Associated Press](#), these are the Afghan casualties since the U.S.-led war with the Taliban began in 2001:

- Afghan military and police: 66,000
- Afghan civilians: 47,245

- Taliban and opposition fighters: 51,191