



OFFICE OF THE MAYOR  
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**MAYOR EMANUEL INTERVIEWS MICHAEL BESCHLOSS ON "CHICAGO STORIES" PODCAST**

What makes a great president? What makes a great war president? Can presidents be great without a war?

On this week's episode of "[Chicago Stories](#)," Mayor Emanuel sat down with presidential historian Michael Beschloss to tackle these questions and more in a rollicking discussion that stretches from the birth of our constitution to the Vietnam War, and how the lessons of the past continue to inform our present day.

Born in Chicago, Michael Beschloss has spent his career exploring presidents in war and peace, from President Kennedy's brief but pivotal leadership during the Cold War, to the transition of power from President Roosevelt to President Truman during World War II.

He's now out with his ninth book, [Presidents of War](#), which examines both the performance of presidents during war and confronts a central question about our democracy: has the President of the United States assumed the very war-making powers our Founding Fathers had sought to avoid?

"When the Founders wrote the constitution in 1787, one of the things they were most worried about was that this new job of President of the United States might begin to resemble the dictators and the kings of Europe," Michael told Mayor Emanuel. "The king would fabricate a reason for war, the country would go to war, and everyone would unite behind the king, and everyone would love the king again."

The Founding Fathers wanted to make sure that didn't happen in their young nation, and the solution they found was to give war-making powers not to the president, but to Congress.

"They wanted to make sure that presidents only took America into war if there was an absolute necessity—if Congress was totally united behind it and the people were too," Michael said. "That was the way it was supposed to be. Then we fast forward to our own time and as you know these days, it's not the Gulf of Tonkin, not the wars of our own time. For good or ill, a president can now take us into war almost single-handedly and almost overnight."

But that was just the tip of the iceberg when it came to Michael and Mayor Emanuel's conversation. During their discussion they touched on:

- Assessing presidential moral strength: *“The most supreme test of presidential leadership skills is how you deal with the question of possibly sending young Americans into harm’s way.”*
- The “peace dividend” and how wars shape and are shaped by domestic policy: *“The great presidents use the fact that they have this increased impact with the American people and with Congress to do the things that a president should in any time.”*
- How wars fought for less-than honest reasons impact public support: *“If the president wants us to go to a war in the future for honorable reasons, people are going to be much more skeptical for those reasons.”*

And even their favorite books on the Kennedy Administration, such as “Lessons In Disaster: McGeorge Bundy and the Path to the Vietnam War”—which Mayor Emanuel recommended to both President Obama, Vice President Biden, and David Axelrod as they deliberated over their policy in Afghanistan.

Not to mention countless other presidential anecdotes and stories, including some of Mayor Emanuel’s own.

Be sure to listen to the entire episode as Michael gives Mayor Emanuel his take on everything from President Wilson’s self-induced failures following WWI, the role of President Lincoln’s evolving moral leadership during the Civil War, and—to Mayor Emanuel’s appreciation—the truth in “never letting a good crisis go to waste.”

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