U.S. Periods of War

Barbara Salazar Torreon
Information Research Specialist
Knowledge Services Group

Summary

Many wars or conflicts in U.S. history have federally designated “periods of war,” dates marking their beginning and ending. These dates are important for qualification for certain veterans’ pension or disability benefits. Confusion can occur because beginning and ending dates for “periods of war” in many nonofficial sources are often different from those given in treaties and other official sources of information, and armistice dates can be confused with termination dates. This report lists the beginning and ending dates for “periods of war” found in Title 38 of the Code of Federal Regulations, dealing with the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). It also lists and differentiates other beginning dates given in declarations of war, as well as termination of hostilities’ dates and armistice and ending dates given in proclamations, laws, or treaties. This report will be updated when events warrant. For additional information, see CRS Report RL31133, Declarations of War and Authorizations for the Use of Military Force: Historical Background and Legal Implications.

War Dates

Congress, usually through a declaration of war, has often been the first governmental authority to designate the beginning date of a war or armed conflict. The President, or executive branch officials responsible to him, through proclamation, or Congress, through legislation, have been responsible for designating the war’s termination date. In some cases, later legislation is enacted to extend these beginning and ending dates for the purpose of broadening eligibility for veterans’ benefits. This report notes the variations in the dates cited in the Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) “periods of war” and those dates given in the declarations of war beginning and the proclamations, laws, or treaties terminating such conflicts. Adding to the confusion, during World War II, wars were


2 The American Legion also follows these dates closely in determining who is eligible for membership; the Veterans of Foreign Wars has its own much more elaborate list of dates.
declared and terminated with six individual combatant countries. Moreover, armistice dates are also often confused with termination dates.3

Title 38, Part 3, Section 3.2 of the Code of Federal Regulations (CFR), dealing with the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), lists official beginning and termination dates for most war periods from the Indian Wars to the present to be used in determining the availability of veterans’ benefits.4 The material below summarizes these dates. Where applicable, a summary of the Department of Veterans Affairs official beginning and termination dates is provided followed by a citation to the lettered CFR section. For some entries, this initial summary is followed by an explanatory note or declaration, armistice, cease-fire, or termination dates cited by other official sources.

**Indian Wars**

January 1, 1817, through December 31, 1898, inclusive. Service must have been rendered with U.S. military forces against Indian tribes or nations. Code of Federal Regulations, 3.2 (a).

**Spanish-American War**

April 21, 1898, through July 4, 1902, inclusive. If the veteran served with the U.S. military forces engaged in hostilities in the Moro Province, the ending date is July 15, 1903. The Philippine Insurrection and the Boxer Rebellion are included for the purposes of benefit determination under this CFR section. Code of Federal Regulations, 3.2 (b).


**Mexican Border Period**

May 9, 1916, through April 5, 1917. In the case of a veteran who during such period served in Mexico, on the borders thereof, or in the adjacent waters thereto. Code of Federal Regulations, 3.2 (h).

---


4 Title 38 of the CFR, titled “Pensions, Bonuses and Veterans’ Relief,” is not to be confused with Title 38 of the United States Code, titled “Veterans Benefits.” Laws enacted in each Congress are first collected as session laws, published in the Statutes at Large for each session. These laws are then codified by subject and published in the United States Code. The general guidance given by these laws results in the issuance of more detailed regulations to implement these laws. Such regulations are first published in the Federal Register and are then codified by subject in the CFR.
World War I

April 6, 1917, through November 11, 1918, inclusive. If the veteran served with the U.S. military forces in Russia, the ending date is April 1, 1920. Service after November 11, 1918, and before July 2, 1921, is considered World War I service if the veteran served in the active military, naval, or air service after April 5, 1917, and before November 12, 1918. 


World War II

December 7, 1941, through December 31, 1946, inclusive. If the veteran was in service on December 31, 1946, continuous service before July 26, 1947, is considered World War II service. 

Note: During World War II, war was officially declared with six countries. The war with each was not over until the effective date of the Treaty of Peace. Note also the confusion cited below over which day is the official Victory in Europe Day (V-E Day) and Victory Over Japan Day (V-J Day).


6 (...continued)

**Korean Conflict**


On June 25, 1950, North Korean Communist forces attacked South Korean positions south of the 38th parallel, leading to an immediate United Nations (U.N.) Security Council resolution calling for a cease-fire and withdrawal of the North Korean forces. On June 26, President Truman ordered U.S. air and sea forces in the Far East to aid South Korea. On June 27, the U.N. Security Council adopted a resolution asking U.N. members for assistance in repelling the North Korean armed attack and in restoring peace and security in the area. On June 30, the President stated that he had authorized the use of certain U.S. air and ground units wherever necessary. No declaration of war was requested of Congress. An armistice signed at Panmunjom, Korea, on July 27, 1953, between U.N. and Communist representatives (4 UST 234; TIAS 2782). No peace treaty ever signed.

**Vietnam Era**


**Tonkin Gulf Resolution.** No declaration of war was requested of Congress. Instead, there was a Joint Resolution of Congress to promote the maintenance of international peace and security in Southeast Asia stated in part that the Congress “approves and supports the determination of the President, as Commander in Chief, to take all necessary measures to repel any armed attack against the forces of the United States and to prevent any further aggression.” H.J.Res. 1145, P.L.88-408, August 10, 1964 (78 Stat. 384). Agreement Ending the War and Restoring Peace in Vietnam signed in Paris, January 27, 1973 (TIAS 7674). Joint communiqué implementing the agreement and protocols of January 27, 1973, signed at Paris and entered into force, June 13, 1973.

**Conflicts in Lebanon 1982-1983 and Grenada 1983**


**Persian Gulf War**

August 2, 1990, through April 6, 1991, when Iraq officially accepted cease-fire terms. Congress passed H.J.Res. 77, Authorizing the Use of Military Force Against Iraq, the same day it was introduced (January 12, 1991), and it was signed by the President on

Current Conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq

Shortly after the terrorist attacks in the United States on September 11, 2001, President George W. Bush called on Afghanistan’s leaders to hand over Osama bin Laden and other al Qaeda leaders and close their terrorist training camps. He also demanded the return of all detained foreign nationals and the opening of terrorist training sites to inspection.^11 These demands were rejected.

Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF). Operations began with U.S. military forces deployed on October 7, 2001, and are ongoing in Afghanistan and in other nations.

Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF). On March 17, 2003, in an address to the nation, President Bush gave Iraqi President Saddam Hussein and his sons a 48-hour ultimatum to leave Iraq.^12 On March 19, 2003, President Bush announced to the nation that the early stages of military operations against Iraq had begun.^13 In a May 1, 2003, address to the nation, President Bush declared that “... major military combat actions in Iraq have ended.”^14 U.S. and coalition forces remain in Iraq.^15

There are no termination dates for these current conflicts.

---


^8 Cease fire — “A command given to any unit or individual firing any weapon to stop engaging the target.” Department of Defense Dictionary, p. 65.


^13 Ibid., pp. 342-343.
