



**THE VETERANS AND  
CITIZENS INITIATIVE**

Moving Forward Together

# Americans' Memories of the Afghanistan War

August 2022

## THE VETERANS AND CITIZENS INITIATIVE

The Veterans and Citizens Initiative (VCI) launched in 2020 to serve as a connective tissue to elevate civic work being done by veterans and military family organizations and build connections between such organizations and the broader field of nonpartisan civic renewal efforts. Anchored in More in Common, a nonpartisan research and civic nonprofit, the VCI leads national research and engages with partners to elevate ways for veteran and military family organizations, and civil society groups, to come together around nonpartisan work that strengthens our democracy and builds a stronger shared sense of belonging.

### VCI Partners



# RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

## US Citizen Survey

*Results are shown as “US Average”.*

More in Common partnered with international polling company YouGov to conduct online survey interviews with N=1,000 adult US citizens from July 21 to July 25, 2022. The data was weighted to be representative of American citizens using propensity scores, with score functions including gender, age, race, education, and region. The weights were then post-stratified on 2020 Presidential vote choice, and a four-way stratification of gender, age (6-category), race (5-category), and education (4-category). The margin of error is +/- 3.1 for the US average and is higher for subgroups.

The survey also included open-ended survey questions. Open-ended responses to this survey question were coded manually by YouGov into comprehensive thematic categories that have been abridged in the presentation. Total responses do not sum to 100 percent since survey respondents provided multiple answers to each question.

## Americans in Conversation

*Results are shown as “American respondents”.*

In 2022, More in Common stood up an online community representative of the American general population. From June 2 to June 8, we engaged these respondents in an activity similar to a focus group about their views on American wars in the Middle East. A total of N=291 American respondents completed the activity. Quotes from the respondents are included in this report.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### 1. Americans appear to lack a strong set of shared memories about the Afghanistan War.

When asked to list important events from the war, many Americans can only identify one or two events. The most cited events include the September 11 attacks, the killing of Osama bin Laden, and the withdrawal of American troops from the region. Americans' memories of the Vietnam War appear to be even more fractured: there is no event from the Vietnam War that was cited by more than 10 percent of respondents. In contrast, there are six events from World War II that were cited by 10 percent of respondents or more.

### 2. Americans' feelings towards the Afghanistan War are similar to their feelings towards the Vietnam War.

Americans feel quite negatively towards both the Afghanistan War and the Vietnam War. They are more likely to see both wars as mistakes that did not make the country safer and that were justified by politicians' lies. In contrast, Americans express positive views towards World War II. With World War II, there is some variation in views across generations, with older Americans more likely to express positive sentiments towards the war, but majorities of all generations hold positive feelings towards the war.

When asked to identify which other wars from America's history are most similar to the Afghanistan war, Americans point to the Iraq War (2003-2011), the Gulf War, and the Vietnam War.

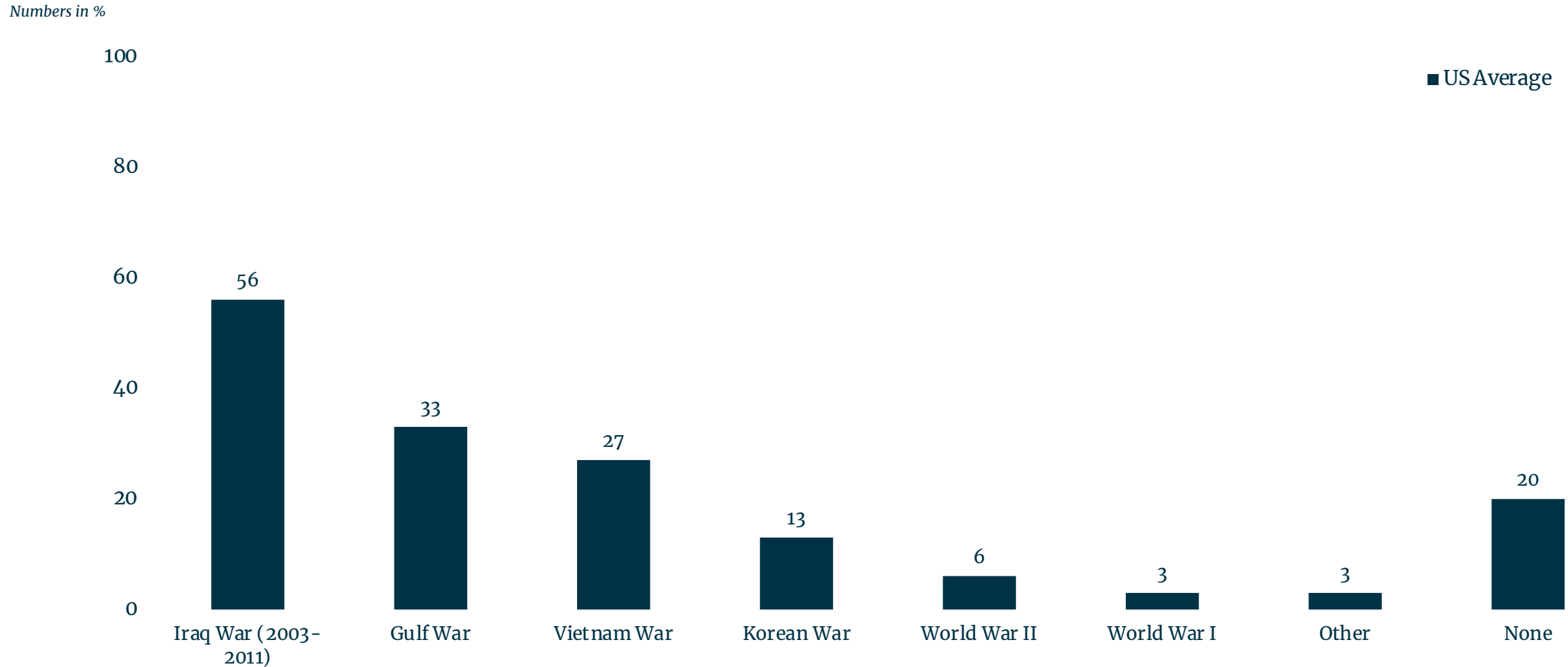
### 3. Americans are unsure whether veterans of the Afghanistan War are similar to veterans of the Vietnam War, but feel they are different from veterans of World War II.

When asked whether veterans of the Afghanistan War are more similar to or more different from veterans of the Vietnam War and from veterans of World War II, Americans are conflicted about the comparison with Vietnam. A slight majority sees more differences than similarities between Afghanistan veterans and veterans of World War II.

# The Afghanistan War and Earlier Wars

Most Americans connect the Afghanistan War to the Iraq War (2003–2011), to the Gulf War, and the Vietnam War. A fifth of the country feels the Afghanistan War is not similar to any of the other conflicts.

*Which of the following wars do you think is most similar to America's Afghanistan War? (select up to 3...)*



Those who say Afghanistan reminded them of Vietnam mostly mention the type of warfare, the length of the conflicts, the way the wars ended, and political interference.

### American Respondents

*“Sort of reminds me of Vietnam just because the opponent is not a normal one in terms of warfare, they're fighting in caves or jungles etc. but also it depends on who's in office whether they know how to handle things or are complete dumpster fire.”*

*“A lot of guerilla tactics from people who have fought wars forever. No way to win it.”*

*“It was a long war and seemed mostly unnecessary and the US eventually pulled out of both and seen as losing those wars.”*

*“We didn't fight to win in either case, too much political interference.”*

*“Underestimating the will of the opposing forces, fighting a protracted war with little hope of ‘winning’, failure to achieve desired results after withdrawal.”*

*“The hubris of the US thinking it could defeat any enemy and the failure to admit defeat after decades of no progress.”*

*“Lasted forever like the Vietnam war and everything we helped with reverted right back to what it was before we even started.”*

*“It was an action where the insurgents had high support in the non-urban areas and the insurgency outlasted the will of the American people to continue to support the war.”*

Survey question: When you think about the Afghanistan war, does it remind you of other wars that America has previously fought? If yes, why does the Afghanistan war remind you of them?

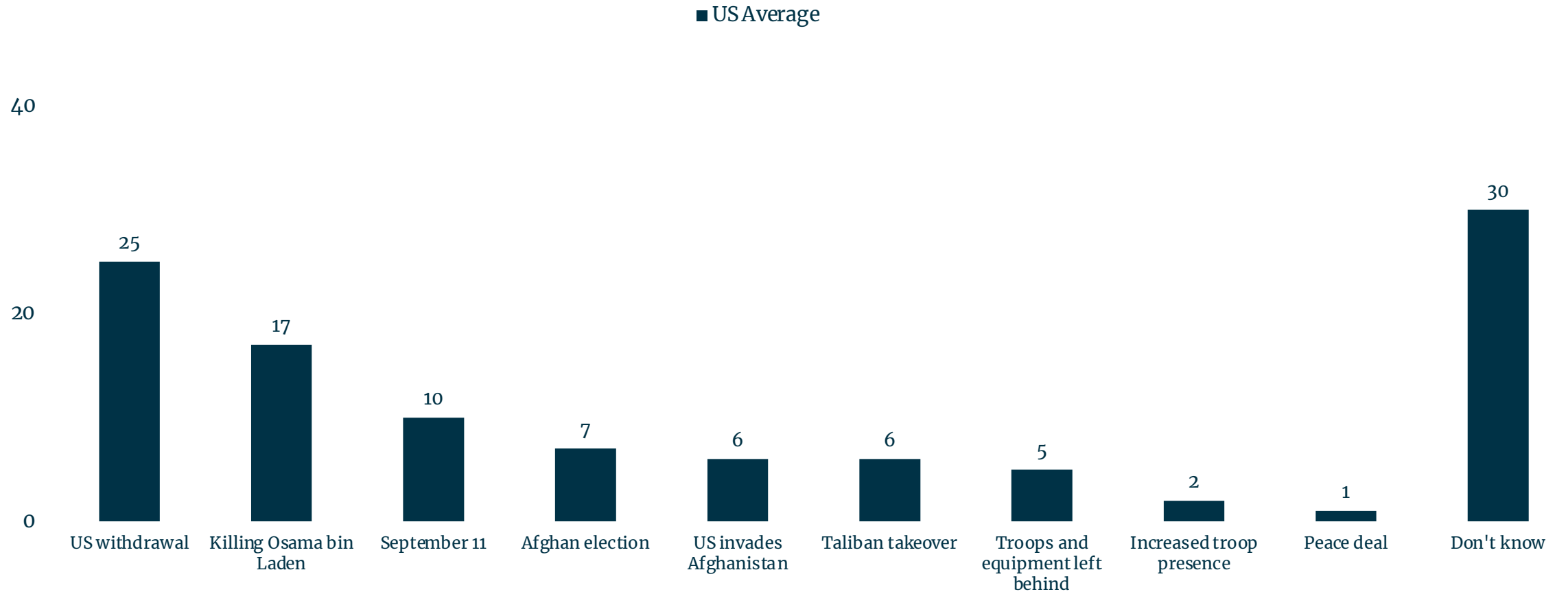
# Memories of Wars: Afghanistan, Vietnam, and WWII



# The most important events of the Afghanistan War that Americans identify are the withdrawal, killing Osama bin Laden, and the September 11 attacks. Many Americans cannot name five important events from the war.

*In the spaces provided below, please list the FIVE most important events of America's Afghanistan War, in your opinion. You may list them as they come to mind, in any order [Open-ended].*

Numbers in %

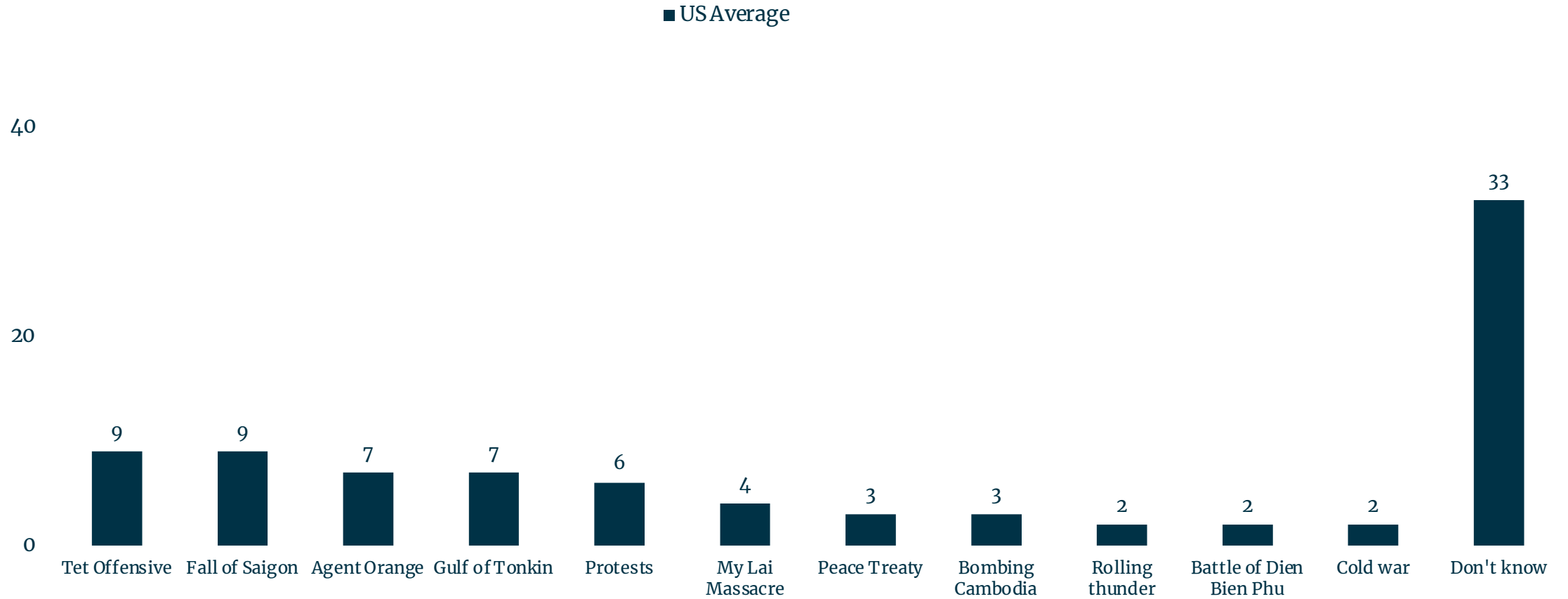


*Open-ended responses to this survey question were coded manually by YouGov into comprehensive thematic categories that have been abridged here. Total responses do not sum to 100 percent since survey respondents provided multiple answers to the question. Not shown: "Other" responses: 58%.*

Thinking back to the Vietnam War, Americans recall the Tet offensive, the fall of Saigon, the use of Agent Orange, protests, and the Gulf of Tonkin incident. Many Americans cannot name five important events.

*In the spaces provided below, please list the FIVE most important events of America's Vietnam War, in your opinion. You may list them as they come to mind, in any order [Open-ended].*

Numbers in %

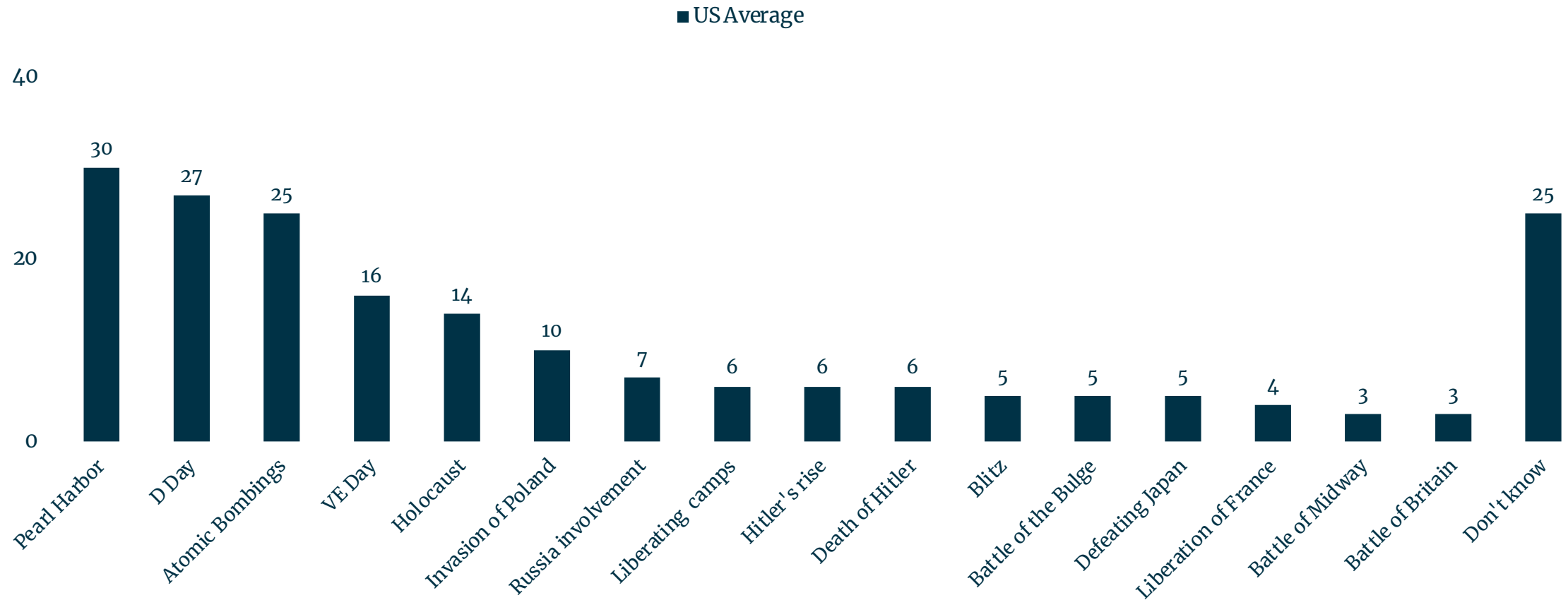


*Open-ended responses to this survey question were coded manually by YouGov into comprehensive thematic categories that have been abridged here. Total responses do not sum to 100 percent since survey respondents provided multiple answers to the question. Not shown: "Other" responses: 63%.*

# Americans recall more events from World War II relative to the Vietnam or Afghanistan War, mentioning Pearl Harbor, D-Day, the atomic bombs, the Holocaust, the invasion of Poland, and defeating Hitler.

*In the spaces provided below, please list the FIVE most important events of America's World War II, in your opinion. You may list them as they come to mind, in any order [Open-ended].*

Numbers in %



*Open-ended responses to this survey question were coded manually by YouGov into comprehensive thematic categories that have been abridged here. Total responses do not sum to 100 percent since survey respondents provided multiple answers to the question. Not shown: "Other" responses: 51%.*

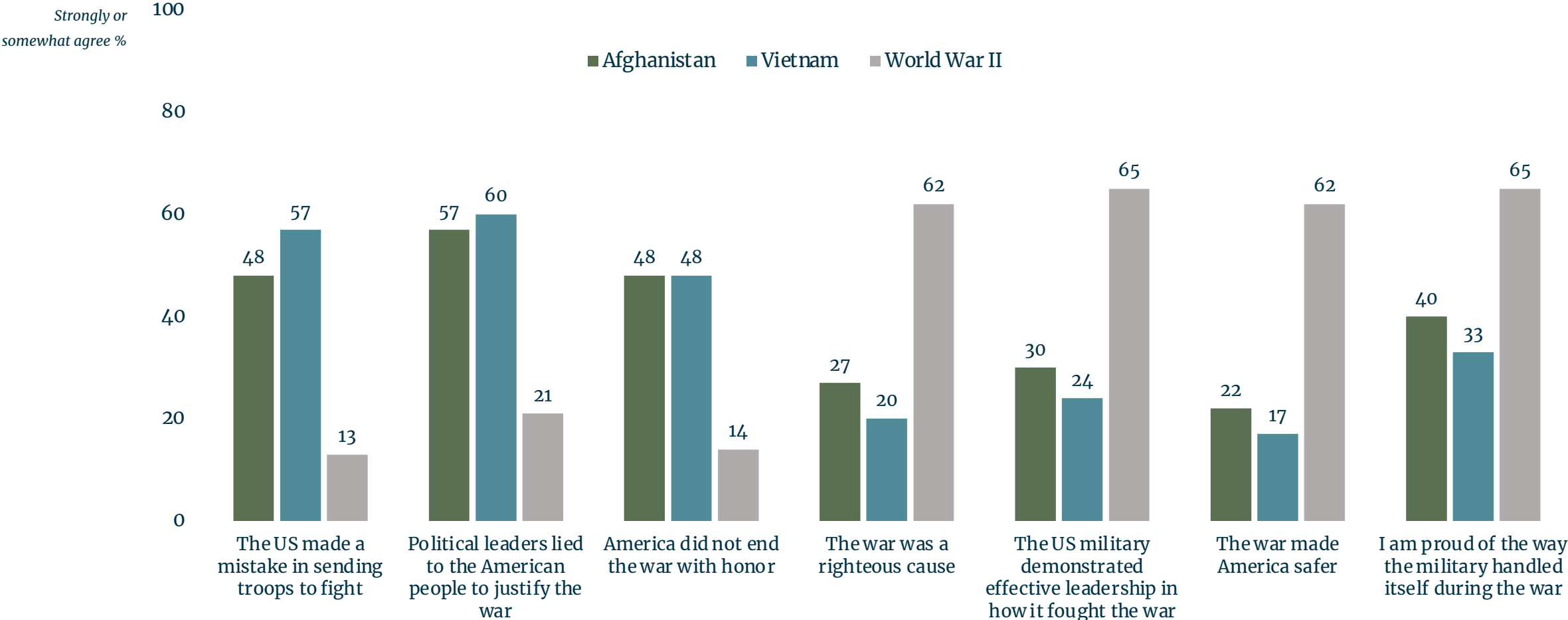
# Feelings towards Wars: Afghanistan, Vietnam, and WWII

Americans hold more negative feelings towards the Afghanistan War and the Vietnam War relative to how they feel towards World War II. Across seven descriptions of the wars (four positive and three negative), Americans hold remarkably similar views towards Afghanistan and Vietnam, indicating that they feel the wars are analogous in many ways.

This analogizing between Afghanistan and Vietnam risks reinforcing simplistic narratives of both wars. If such narratives take hold with Afghanistan in particular, it will prove difficult to have a healthy debate about what we should learn from the conflict and how it has impacted us as a nation.

# Americans view the Afghanistan War and the Vietnam War with similar pessimism, but have strong positive views on US involvement in World War II.

Thinking about US military action in the [Afghanistan War/Vietnam War/World War II], to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements:



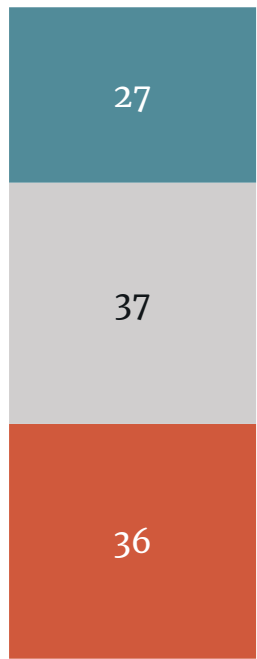
# Feelings towards Wars: Afghanistan

More Americans disagree than agree with positive statements about the Afghanistan War, except when asked about the way the US military handled itself, where there is a more positive sentiment.

Thinking about US military action in the Afghanistan War, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements:

■ Disagree      ■ Neither agree nor disagree      ■ Agree

*The war was a righteous cause*



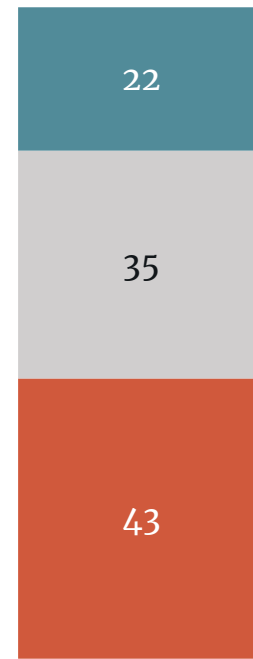
US Average

*The US military demonstrated effective leadership in how it fought the war*



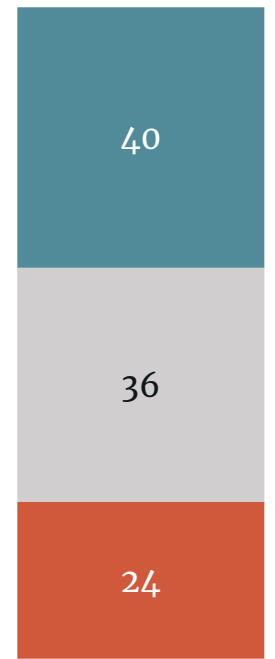
US Average

*The war made America safer*



US Average

*I am proud of the way the military handled itself during the war*



US Average

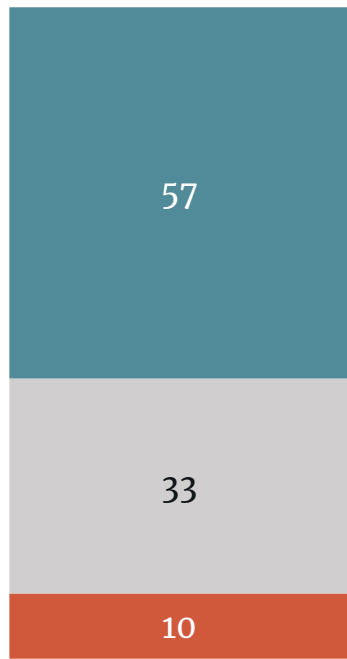


A plurality of Americans feel that America made a mistake in sending troops to fight in Afghanistan and a majority feel like political leaders lied to justify the war.

*Thinking about US military action in the Afghanistan War, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements:*

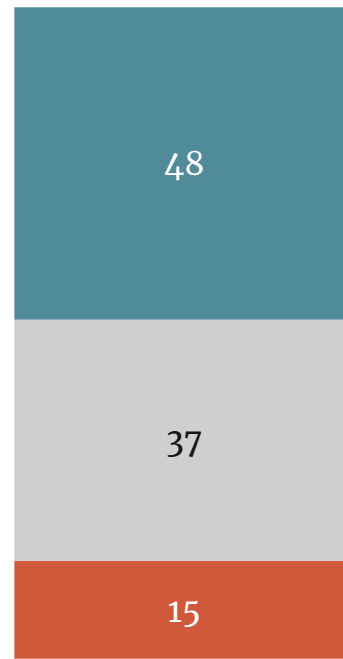
■ Disagree      ■ Neither agree nor disagree      ■ Agree

*Political leaders lied to the American people to justify the war*



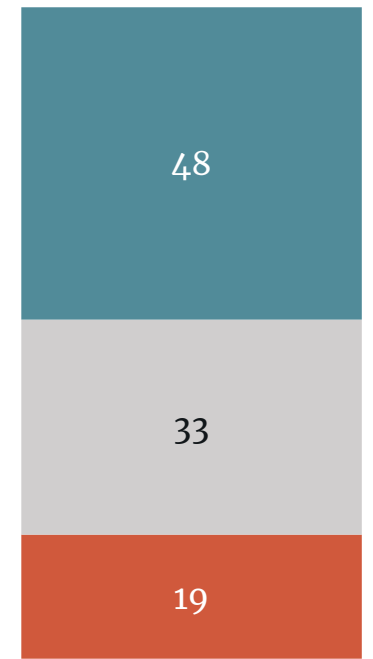
US Average

*America did not end the war with honor*



US Average

*The US made a mistake in sending troops to fight*



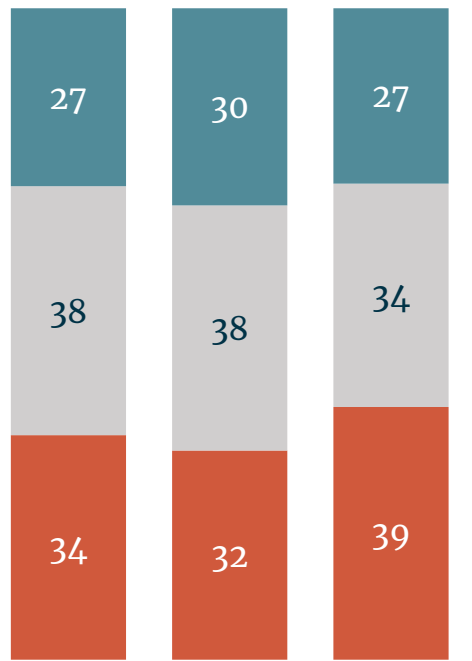
US Average

Political parties are roughly similar in responses, though Republicans are most likely to be proud of how the military handled itself during the war.

*Thinking about US military action in the Afghanistan War, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements:*

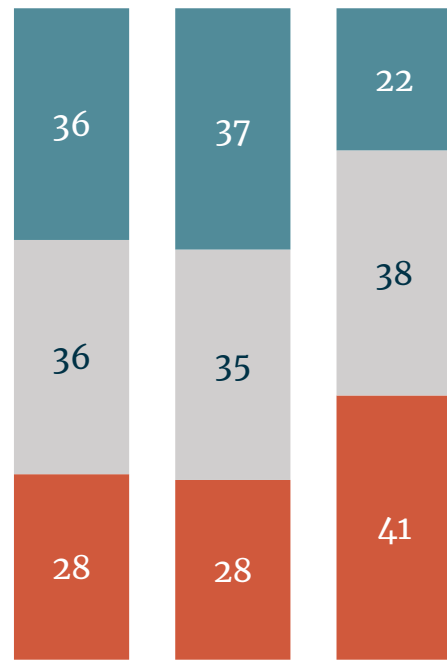
■ Disagree
 ■ Neither agree nor disagree
 ■ Agree

*The war was a righteous cause*



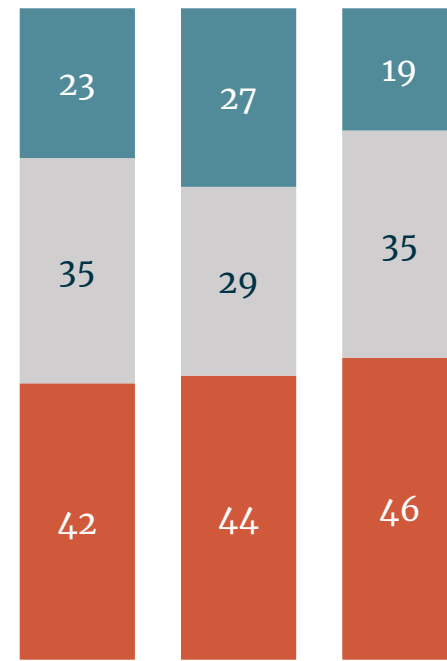
Democrat Republican Independent

*The US military demonstrated effective leadership in how it fought the war*



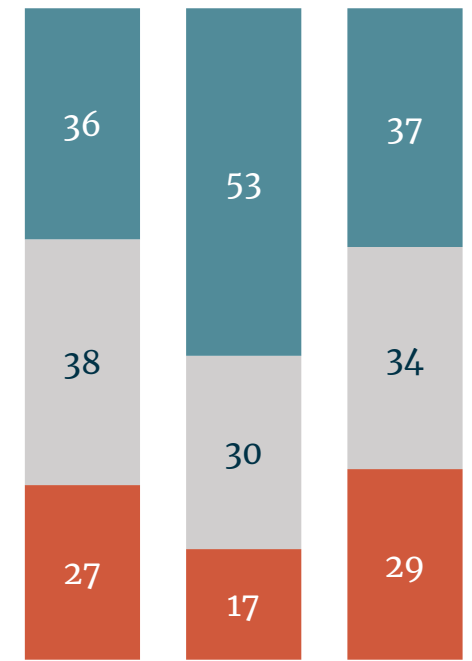
Democrat Republican Independent

*The war made America safer*



Democrat Republican Independent

*I am proud of the way the military handled itself during the war*



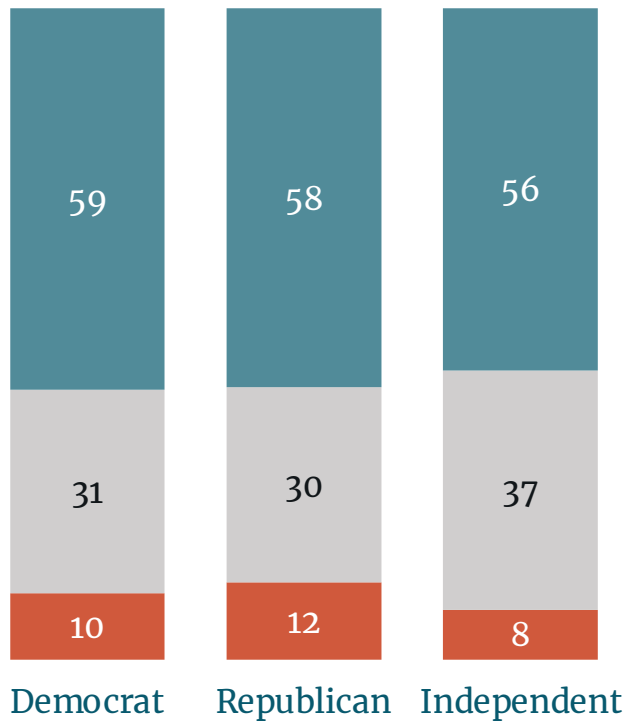
Democrat Republican Independent

Americans across the political spectrum think the war was justified on the basis of lies. Republicans are especially critical of how America ended the war in Afghanistan.

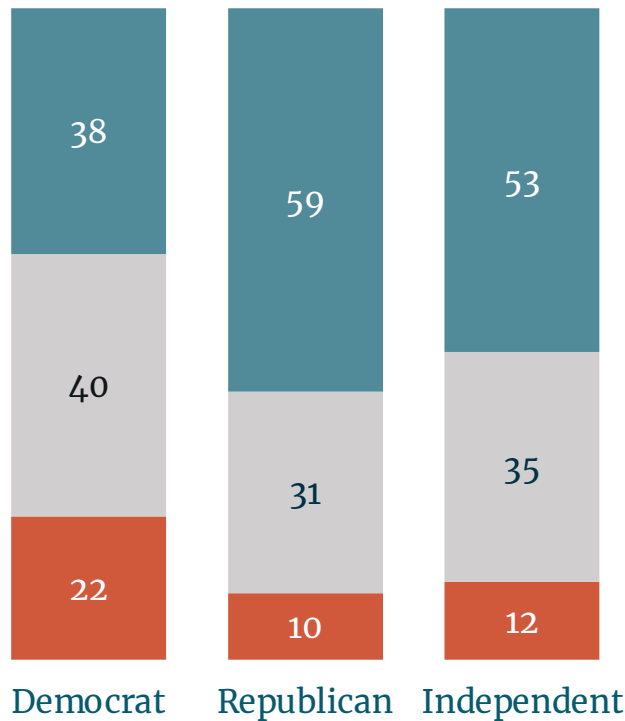
*Thinking about US military action in the Afghanistan War, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements:*

■ Disagree      ■ Neither agree nor disagree      ■ Agree

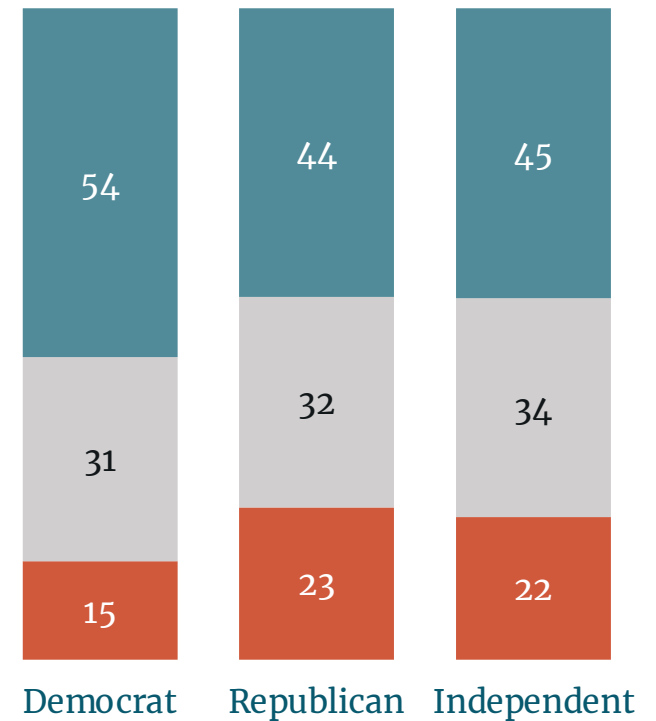
*Political leaders lied to the American people to justify the war*



*America did not end the war with honor*



*The US made a mistake in sending troops to fight*



In general, older generations are more likely to hold negative views towards Afghanistan, except with respect to how the military handled itself during the war.

*Thinking about US military action in the Afghanistan War, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements:*

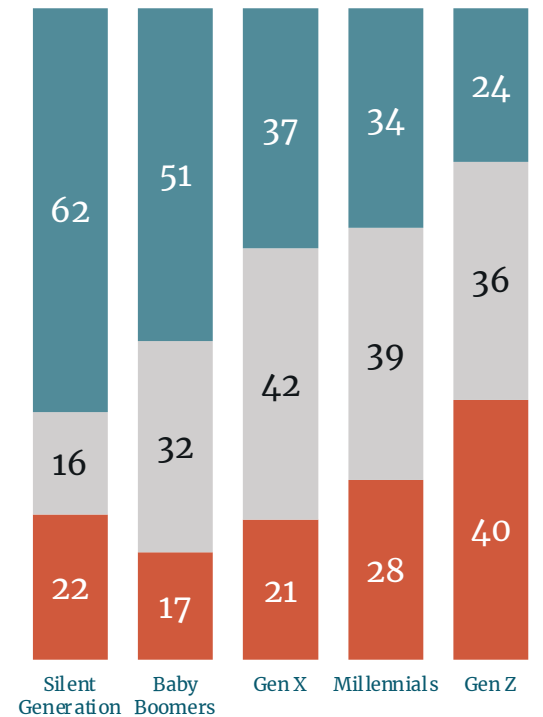
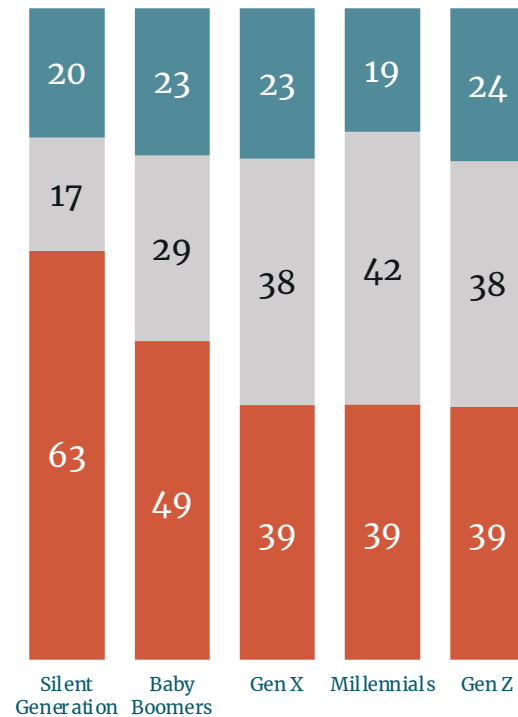
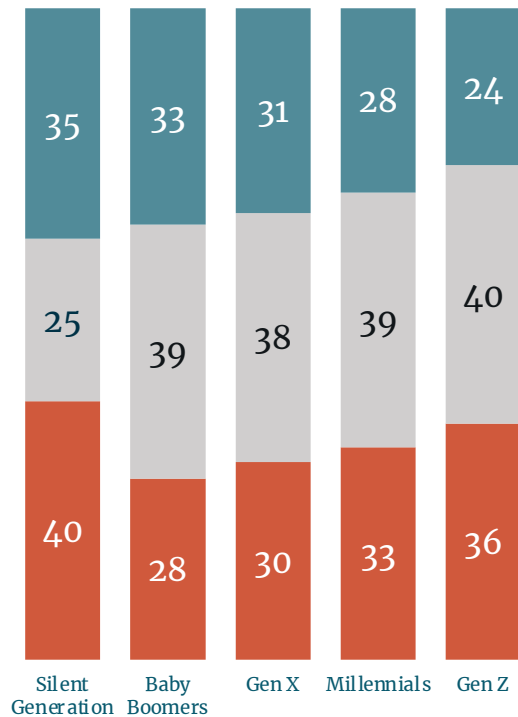
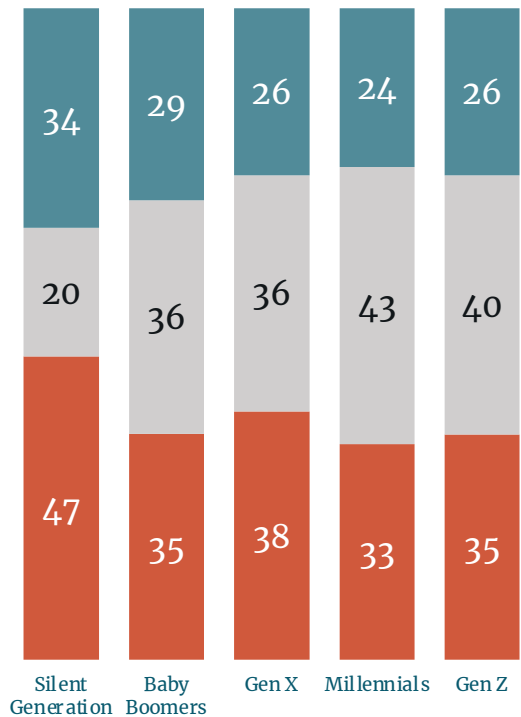
■ Disagree      ■ Neither agree nor disagree      ■ Agree

*The war was a righteous cause*

*The US military demonstrated effective leadership in how it fought the war*

*The war made America safer*

*I am proud of the way the military handled itself during the war*

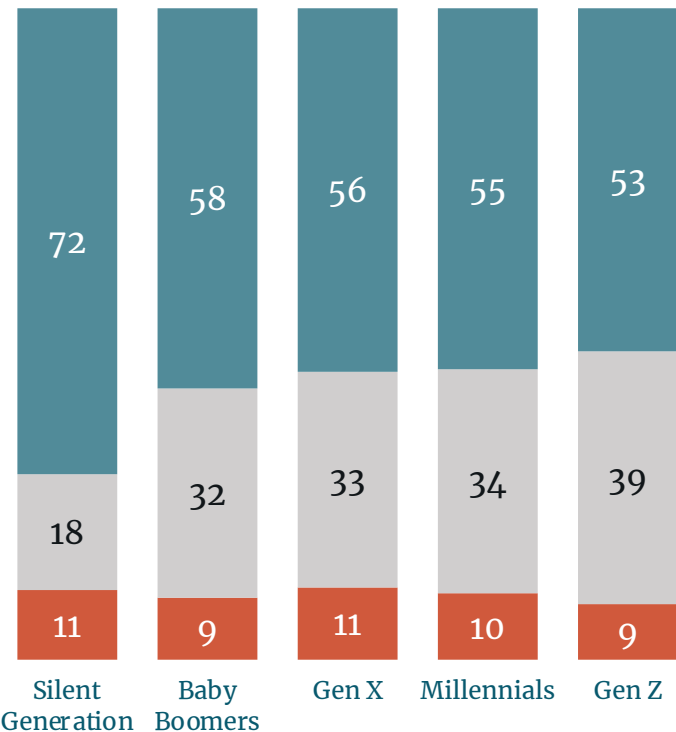


# Younger generations are more unsure of how they feel towards the Afghanistan War.

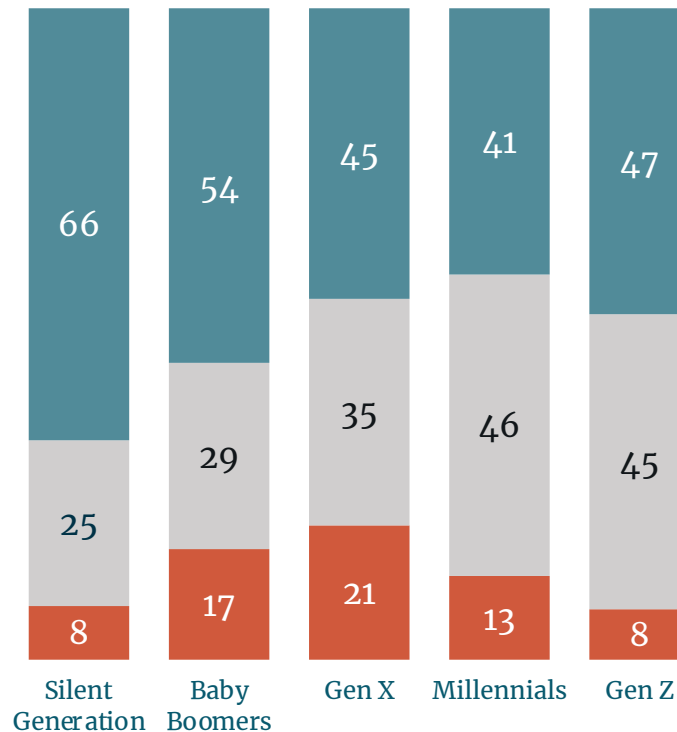
Thinking about US military action in the Afghanistan War, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements:

■ Disagree ■ Neither agree nor disagree ■ Agree

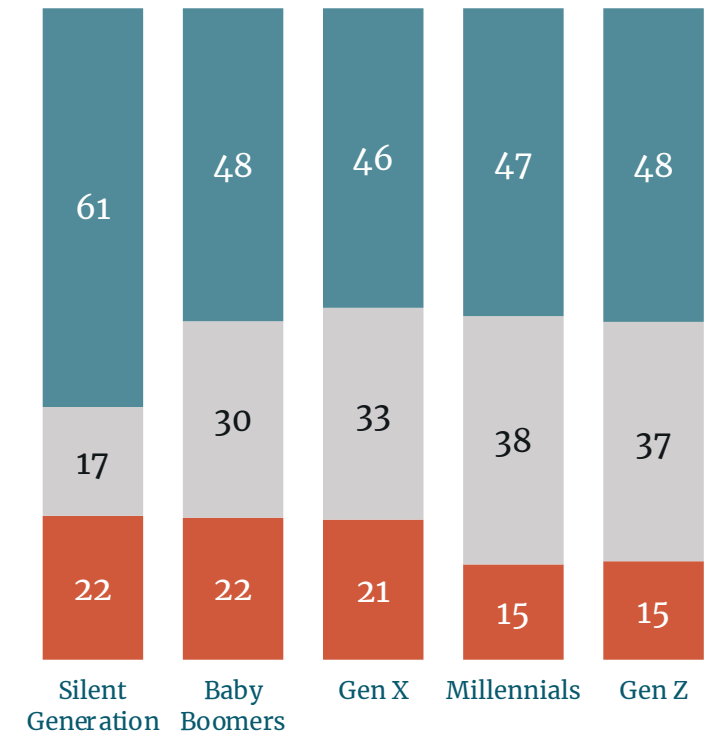
*Political leaders lied to the American people to justify the war*



*America did not end the war with honor*



*The US made a mistake in sending troops to fight*



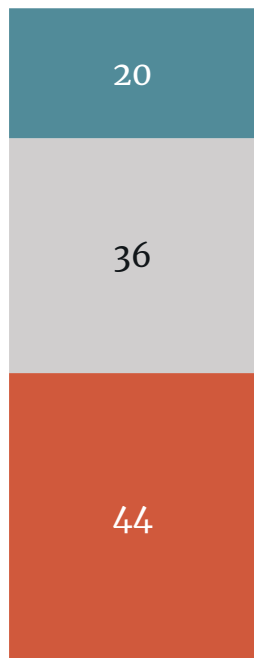
# Feelings towards Wars: Vietnam

Though large numbers of Americans are unsure about their views towards the Vietnam War, more Americans disagree than agree with positive statements about the war, except on the military's performance.

*Thinking about US military action in the Vietnam War, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements:*

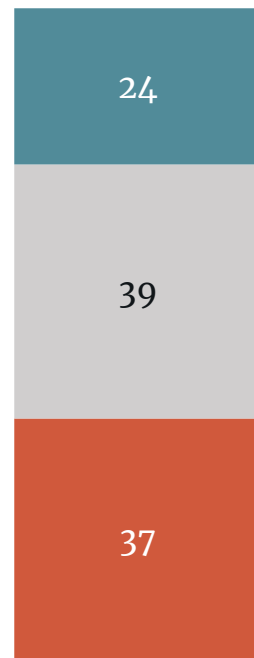
■ Disagree      ■ Neither agree nor disagree      ■ Agree

*The war was a righteous cause*



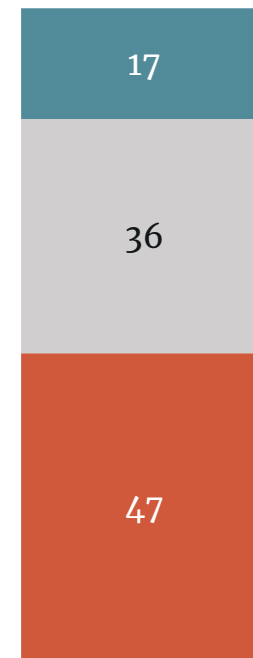
US Average

*The US military demonstrated effective leadership in how it fought the war*



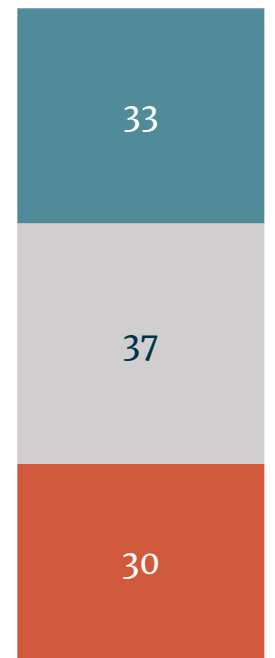
US Average

*The war made America safer*



US Average

*I am proud of the way the military handled itself during the war*



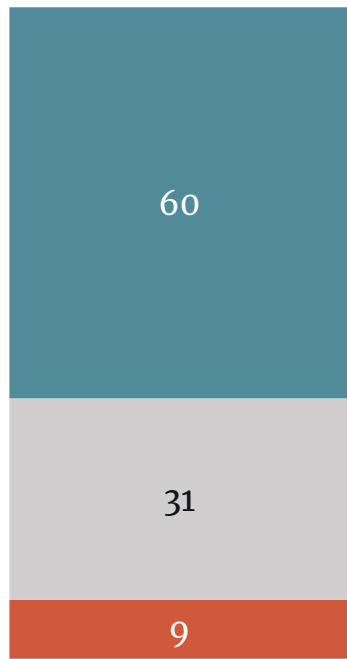
US Average

# Most think that political leaders lied to justify the war and feel it was a mistake to enter the conflict.

Thinking about US military action in the Vietnam War, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements:

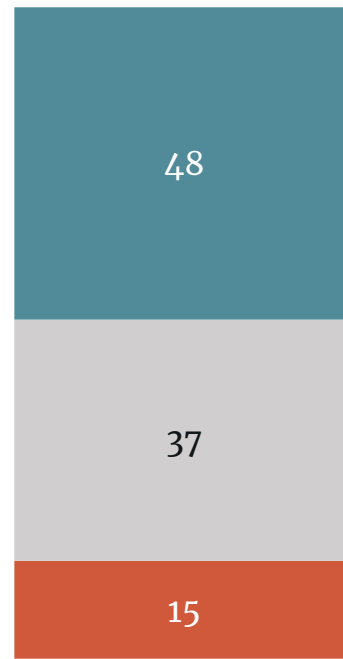
■ Disagree      ■ Neither agree nor disagree      ■ Agree

*Political leaders lied to the American people to justify the war*



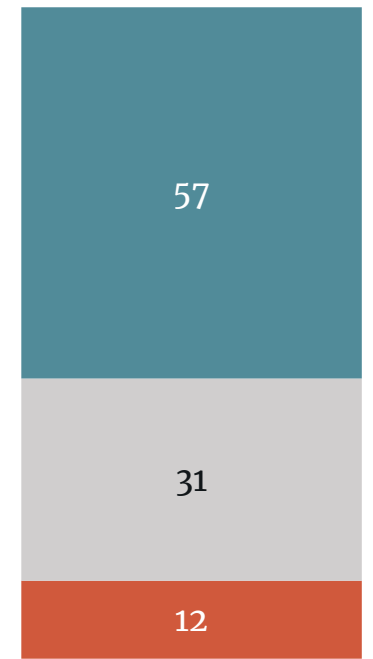
US Average

*America did not end the war with honor*



US Average

*The US made a mistake in sending troops to fight*



US Average

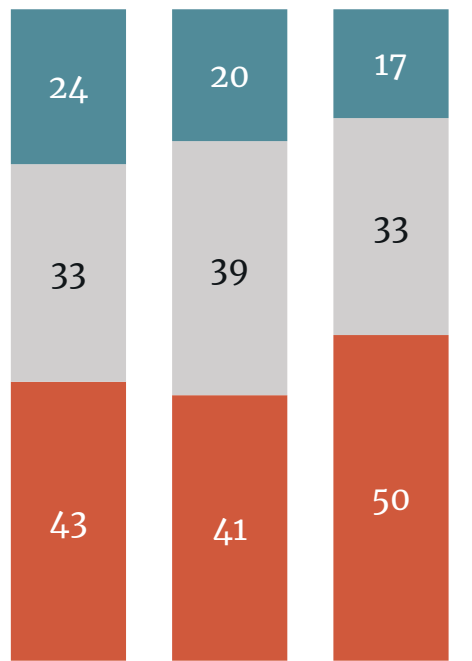


Americans across the political spectrum think the Vietnam War did not make America safer. Republicans are most likely to be proud of how the military handled itself during the war.

*Thinking about US military action in the Vietnam War, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements:*

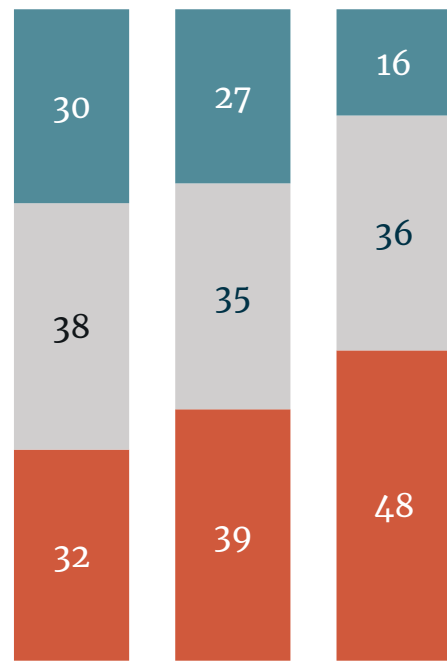
■ Disagree      ■ Neither agree nor disagree      ■ Agree

*The war was a righteous cause*



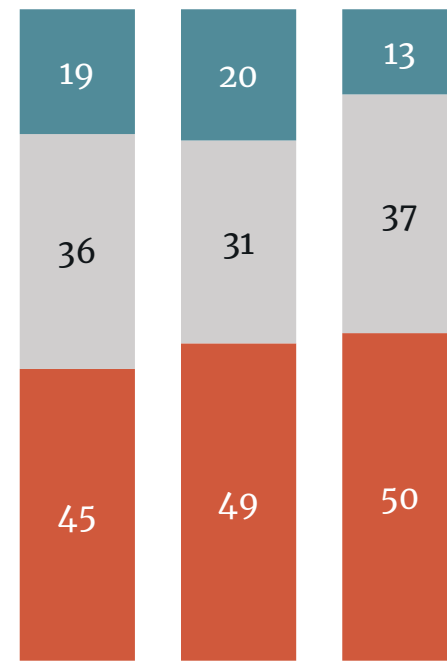
Democrat    Republican    Independent

*The US military demonstrated effective leadership in how it fought the war*



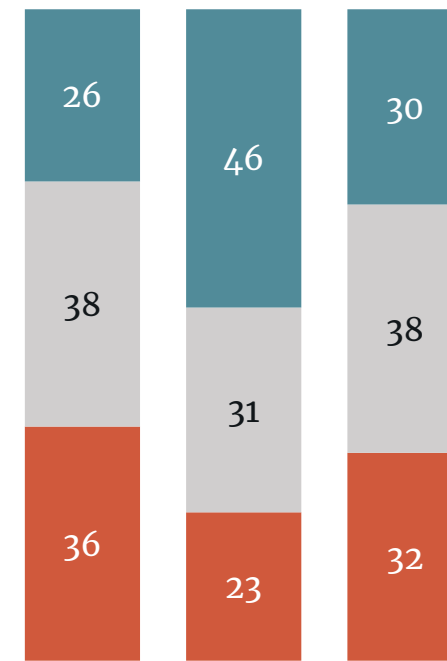
Democrat    Republican    Independent

*The war made America safer*



Democrat    Republican    Independent

*I am proud of the way the military handled itself during the war*



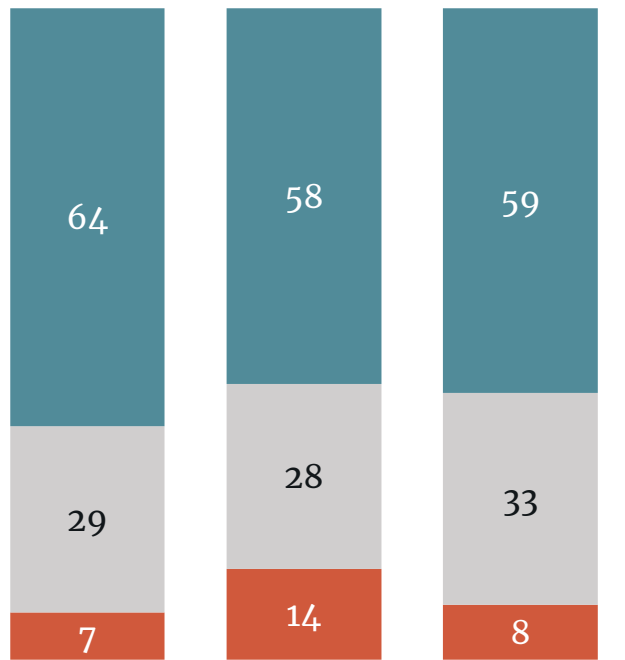
Democrat    Republican    Independent

Little variation across political identity, with majorities or pluralities feeling that lies helped justify the war, that America did not end the war with honor, and that it was a mistake to fight the war.

*Thinking about US military action in the Vietnam War, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements:*

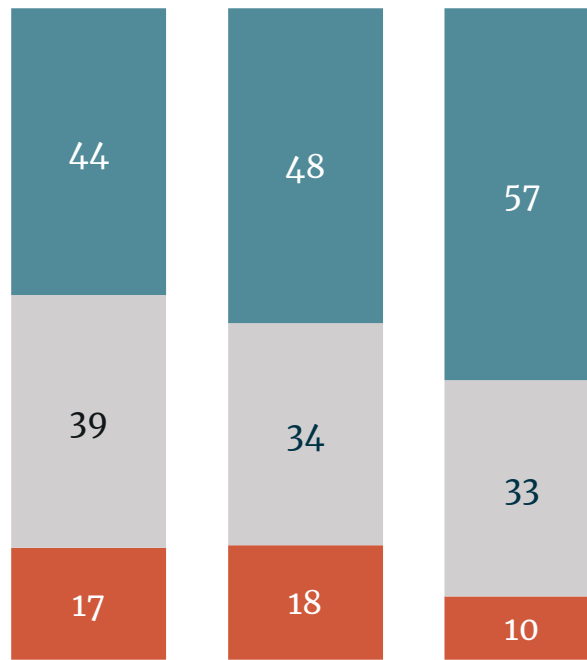
■ Disagree      ■ Neither agree nor disagree      ■ Agree

*Political leaders lied to the American people to justify the war*



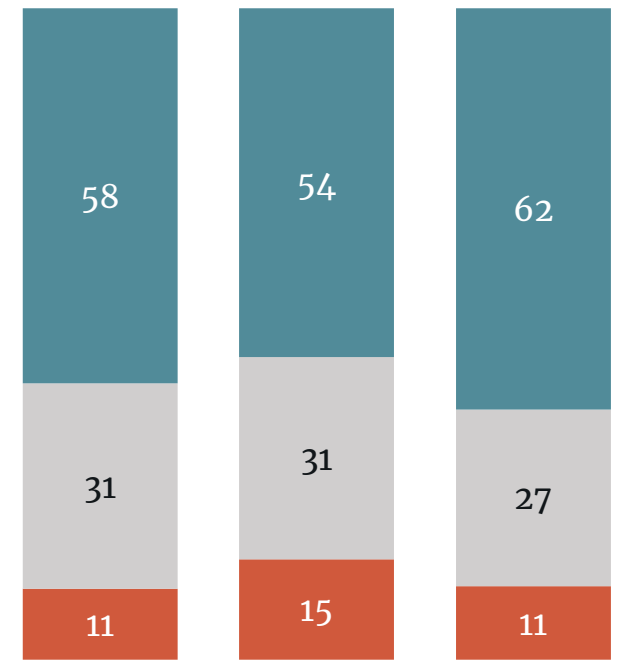
Democrat    Republican    Independent

*America did not end the war with honor*



Democrat    Republican    Independent

*The US made a mistake in sending troops to fight*



Democrat    Republican    Independent

Older generations are more likely to feel the war was not a righteous cause and that it did not make America safer. Younger generations are more likely to choose “neither agree nor disagree”.

*Thinking about US military action in the Vietnam War, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements:*

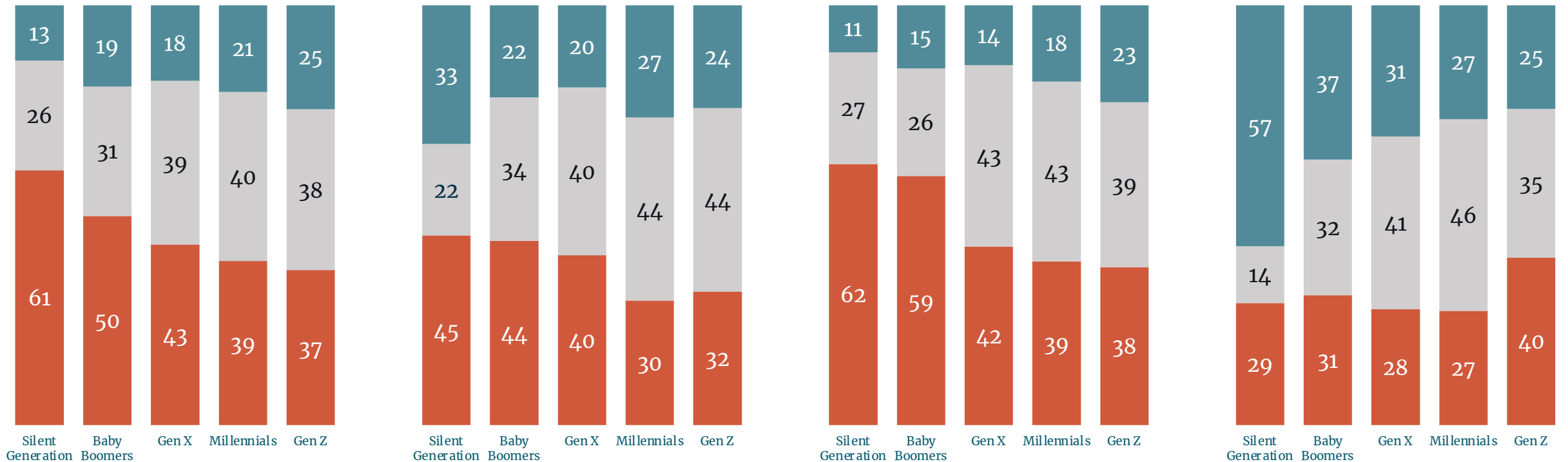
■ Disagree      ■ Neither agree nor disagree      ■ Agree

*The war was a righteous cause*

*The US military demonstrated effective leadership in how it fought the war*

*The war made America safer*

*I am proud of the way the military handled itself during the war*

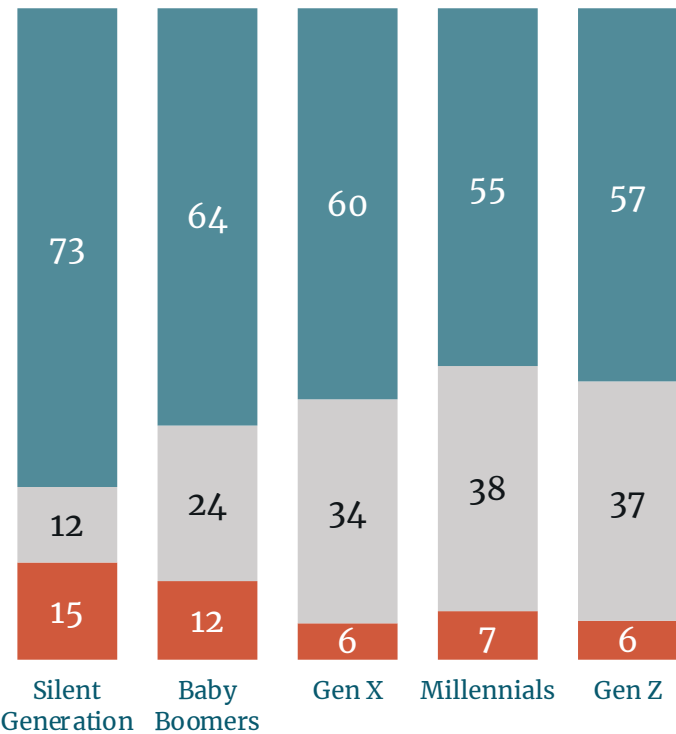


# Older generations are most likely to agree with negative statements about the war's justification, ending, and overall merit.

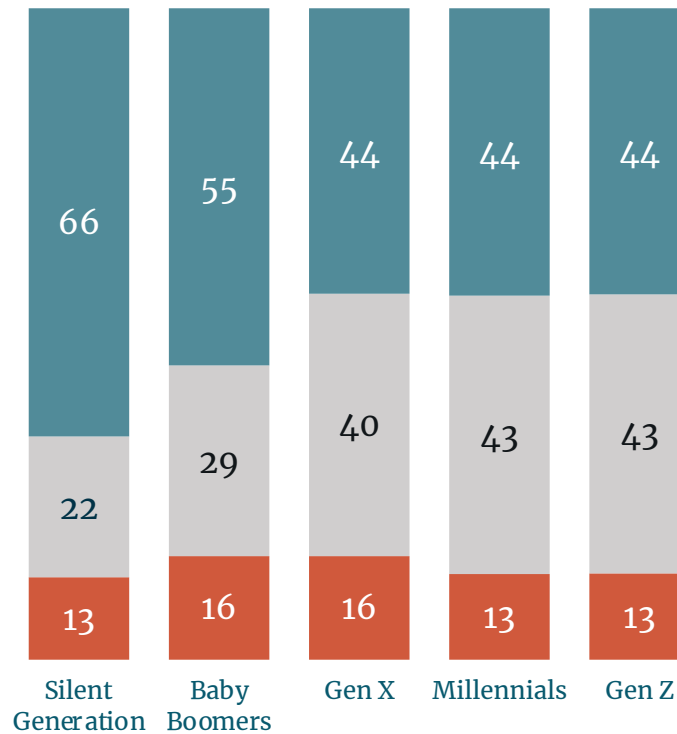
*Thinking about US military action in the Vietnam War, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements:*

■ Disagree      ■ Neither agree nor disagree      ■ Agree

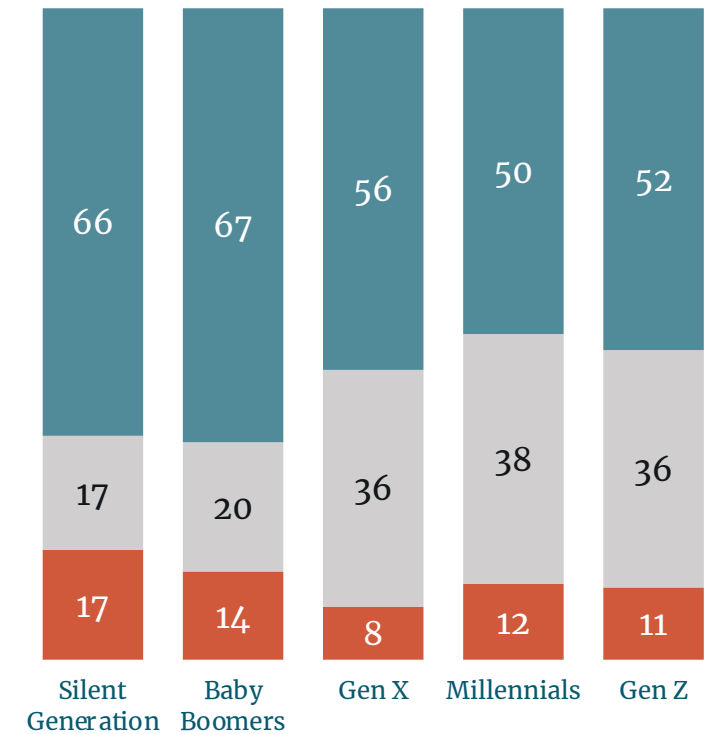
*Political leaders lied to the American people to justify the war*



*America did not end the war with honor*



*The US made a mistake in sending troops to fight*



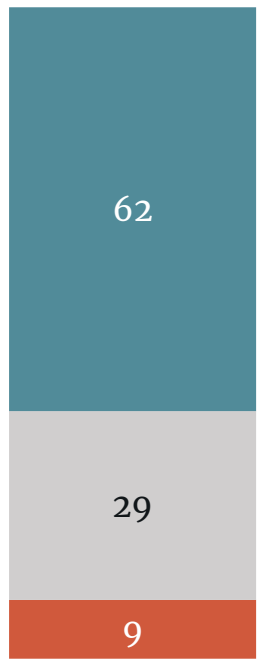
# Feelings towards Wars: World War II

# Most Americans think World War II was a righteous cause that made America safer. Most are proud of the military's handling of the war.

Thinking about US military action in World War II, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements:

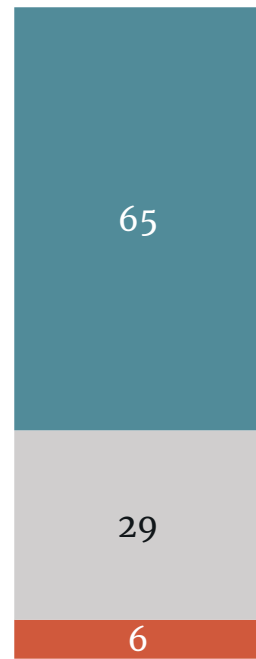
■ Disagree      ■ Neither agree nor disagree      ■ Agree

*The war was a righteous cause*



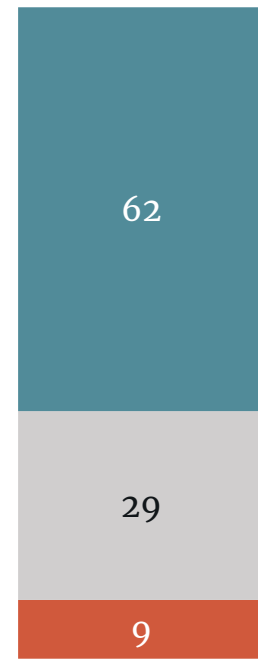
US Average

*The US military demonstrated effective leadership in how it fought the war*



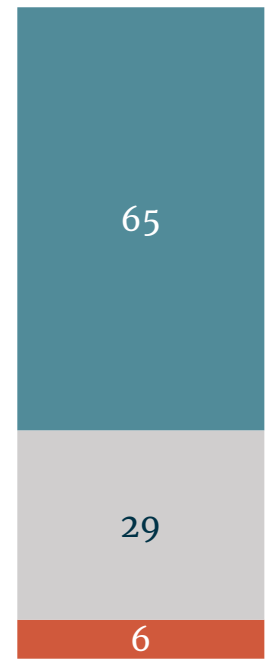
US Average

*The war made America safer*



US Average

*I am proud of the way the military handled itself during the war*



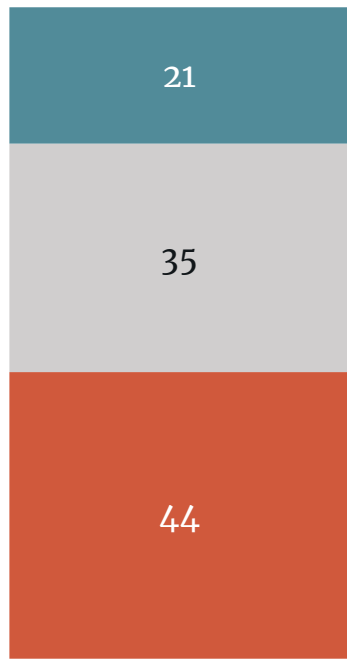
US Average

# Most do not have negative views of the war and think that the US did not make a mistake sending troops to fight.

Thinking about US military action in World War II, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements:

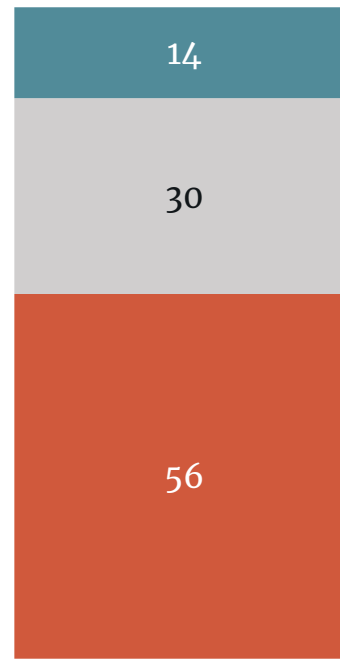
■ Disagree      ■ Neither agree nor disagree      ■ Agree

*Political leaders lied to the American people to justify the war*



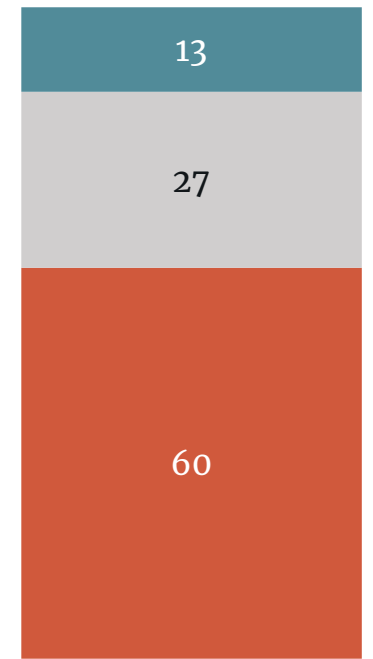
US Average

*America did not end the war with honor*



US Average

*The US made a mistake in sending troops to fight*



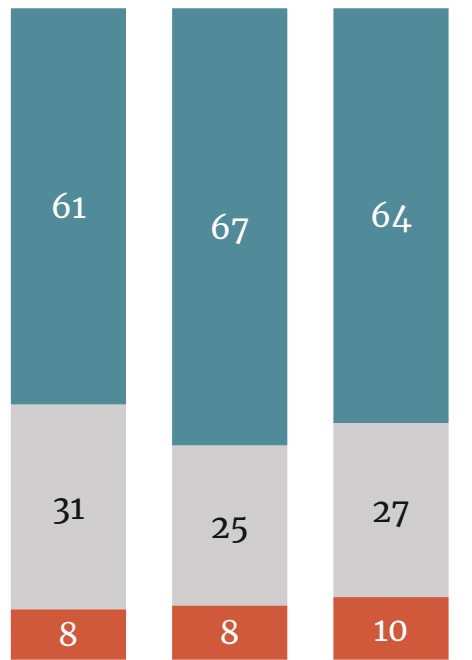
US Average

# Majorities across political identification have warm feelings towards America's role in the war.

Thinking about US military action in World War II, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements:

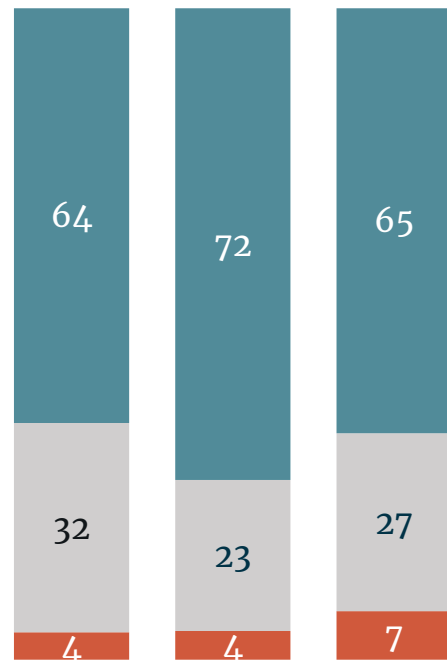
■ Disagree
 ■ Neither agree nor disagree
 ■ Agree

*The war was a righteous cause*



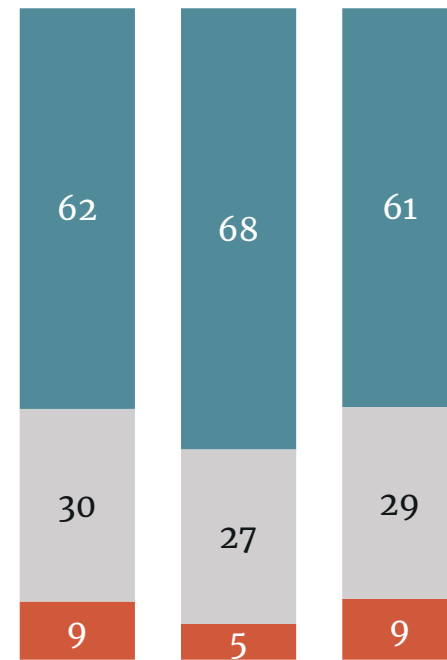
Democrat Republican Independent

*The US military demonstrated effective leadership in how it fought the war*



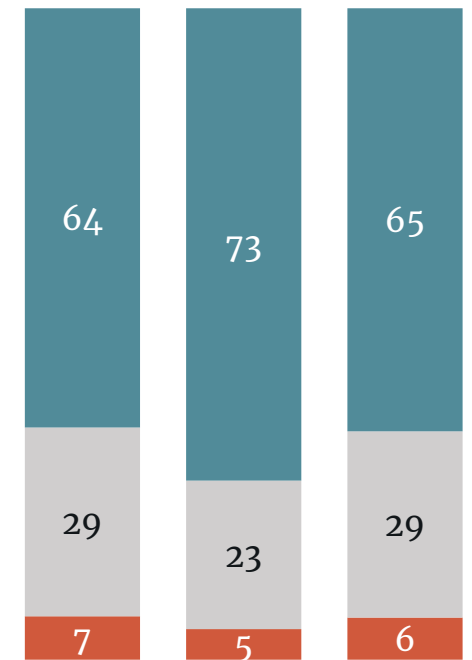
Democrat Republican Independent

*The war made America safer*



Democrat Republican Independent

*I am proud of the way the military handled itself during the war*



Democrat Republican Independent

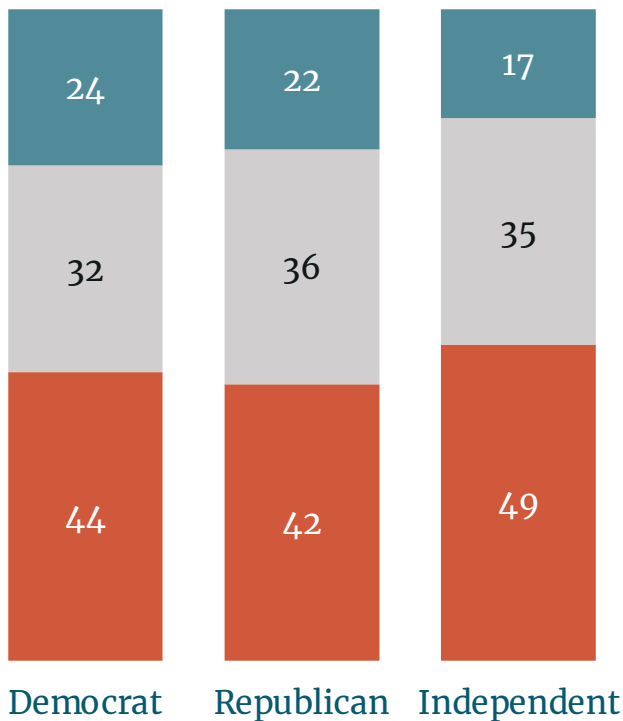


# Regardless of political identification, most reject negative statements about America's role in World War II.

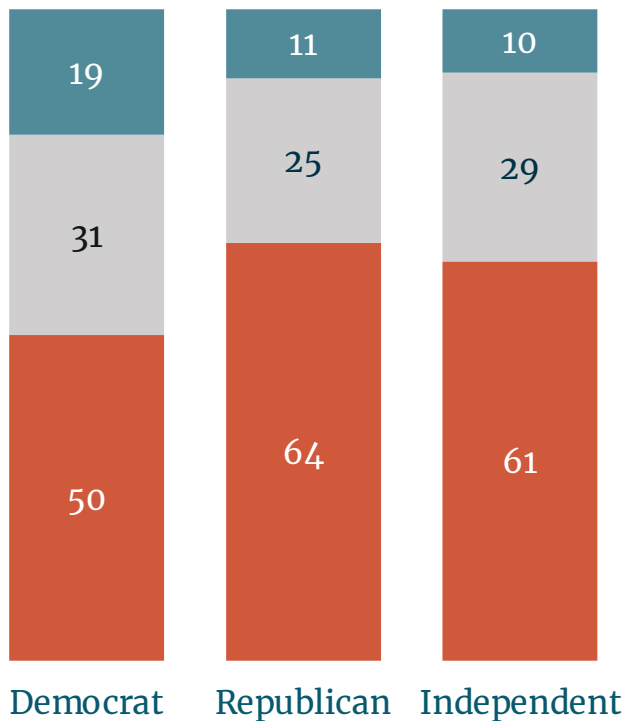
Thinking about US military action in World War II, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements:

■ Disagree
 ■ Neither agree nor disagree
 ■ Agree

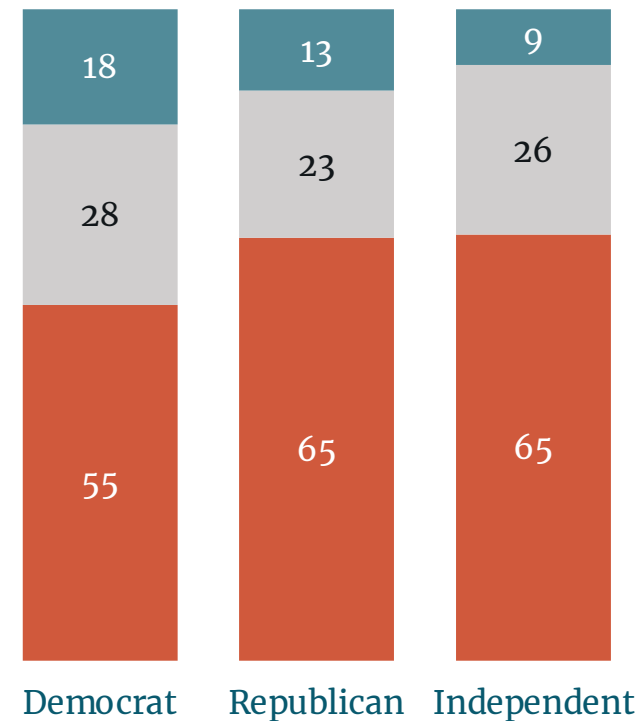
*Political leaders lied to the American people to justify the war*



*America did not end the war with honor*



*The US made a mistake in sending troops to fight*



Although majorities or near-majorities of all generations agree with positive statements about World War II, there is variation, with younger generations more likely to say they are unsure or to disagree with the statements.

*Thinking about US military action in World War II, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements:*

■ Disagree      ■ Neither agree nor disagree      ■ Agree

*The war was a righteous cause*

*The US military demonstrated effective leadership in how it fought the war*

*The war made America safer*

*I am proud of the way the military handled itself during the war*

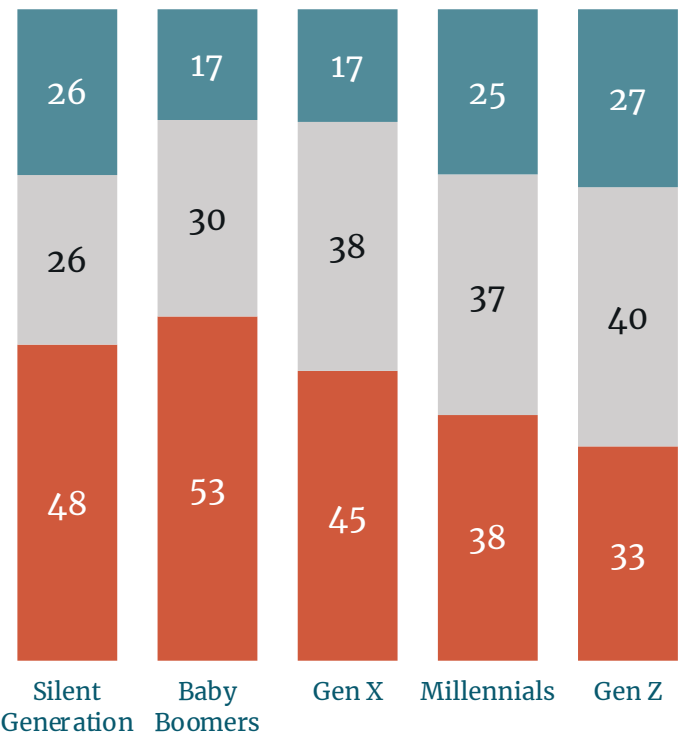


Similarly, when presented with negative statements about America's involvement in World War II, younger generations are more likely to express conflicted views or to agree with the statement.

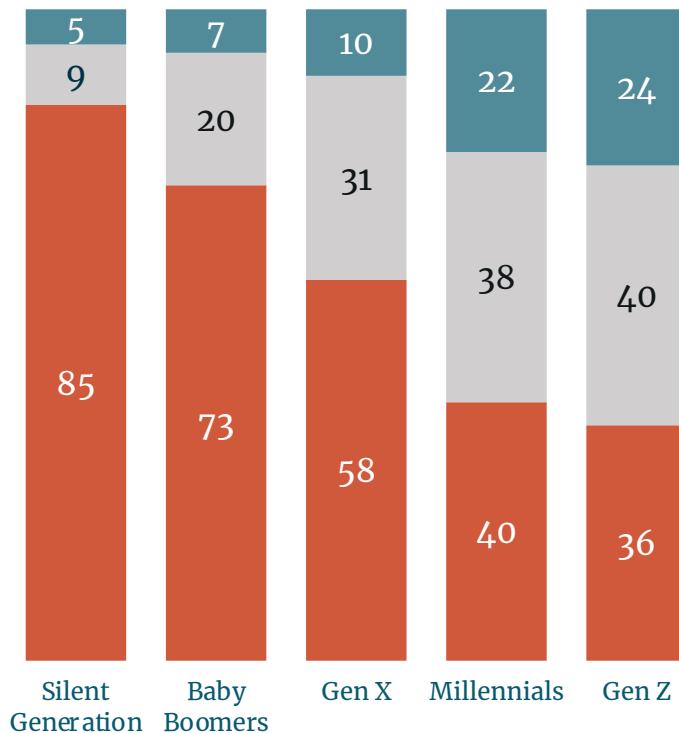
*Thinking about US military action in World War II, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements:*

■ Disagree                      ■ Neither agree nor disagree                      ■ Agree

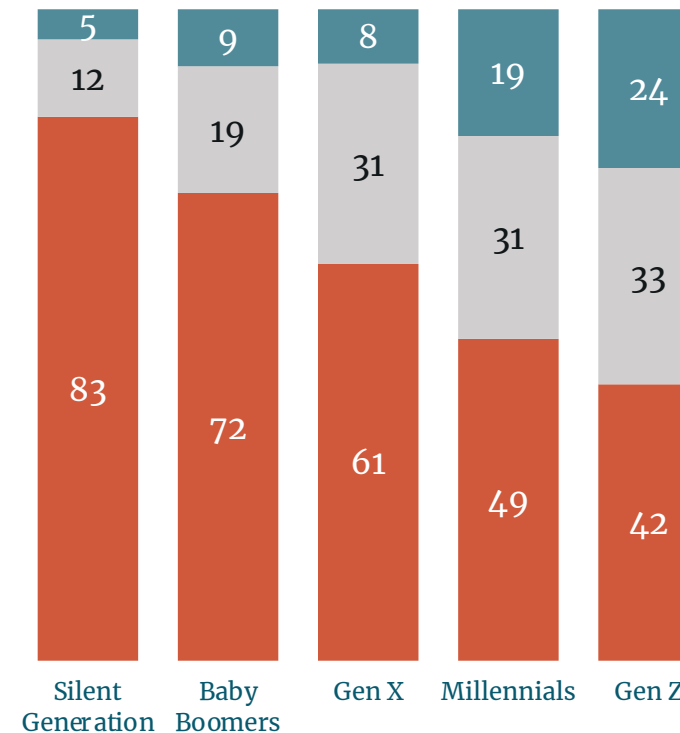
*Political leaders lied to the American people to justify the war*



*America did not end the war with honor*



*The US made a mistake in sending troops to fight*



# Veterans of the Afghanistan War and Veterans of Earlier Wars

Although Americans are unsure about how similar Afghanistan veterans are to Vietnam veterans, a slight majority of the country feels Afghanistan veterans are more different from World War II veterans than they are similar.

*Do you think the veterans of the Afghanistan War are more similar to or more different from veterans of the Vietnam War?*

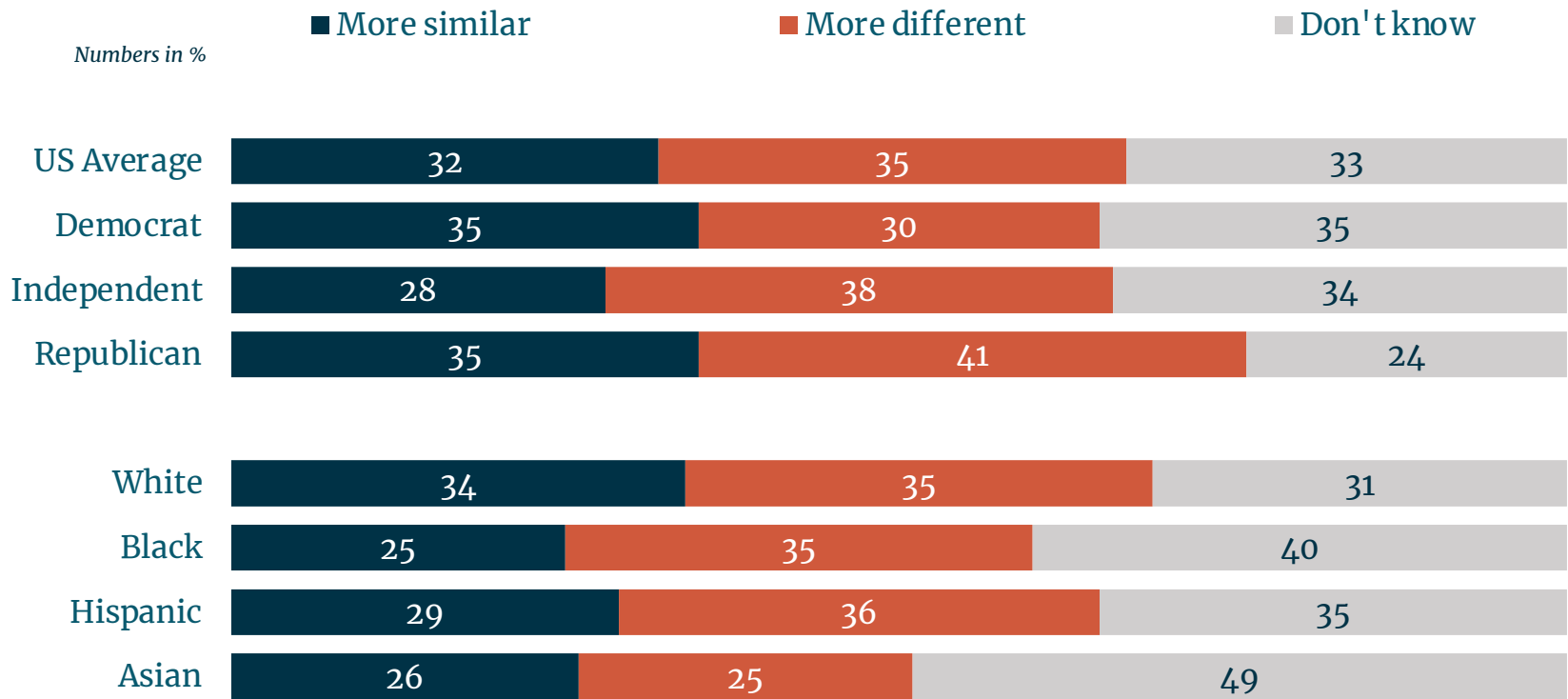


*Do you think the veterans of the Afghanistan War are more similar to or more different from veterans of World War II?*



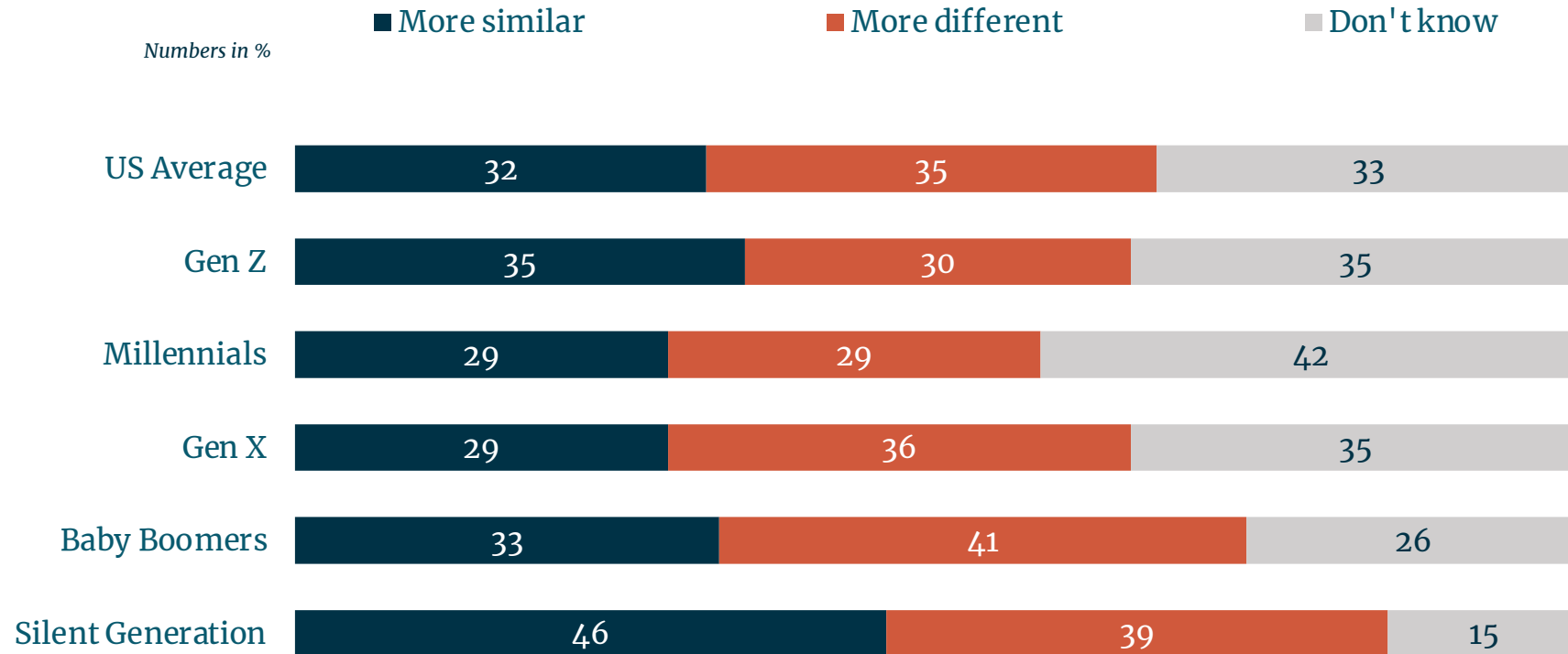
There is relatively little variation by political groups on whether Afghanistan veterans are more similar to or more different from Vietnam veterans.

*Do you think the veterans of the Afghanistan War are more similar to or more different from veterans of the Vietnam War?*



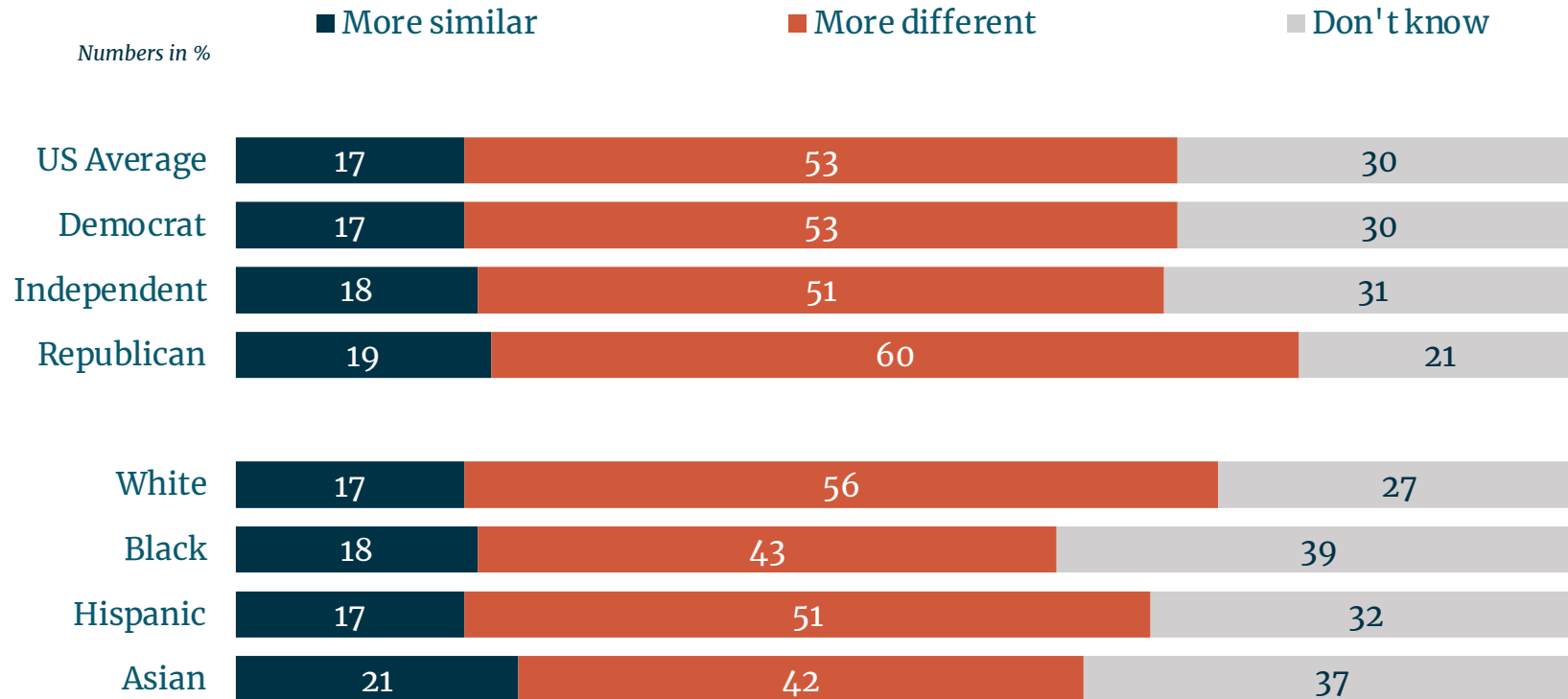
Members of the Silent Generation are most likely to say Afghanistan veterans are more similar to Vietnam veterans than they are different. Members of other generations are more split on the question.

*Do you think the veterans of the Afghanistan War are more similar to or more different from veterans of the Vietnam War?*



# Republicans are most likely to think veterans of the Afghanistan War are more different from veterans of World War II than they are similar.

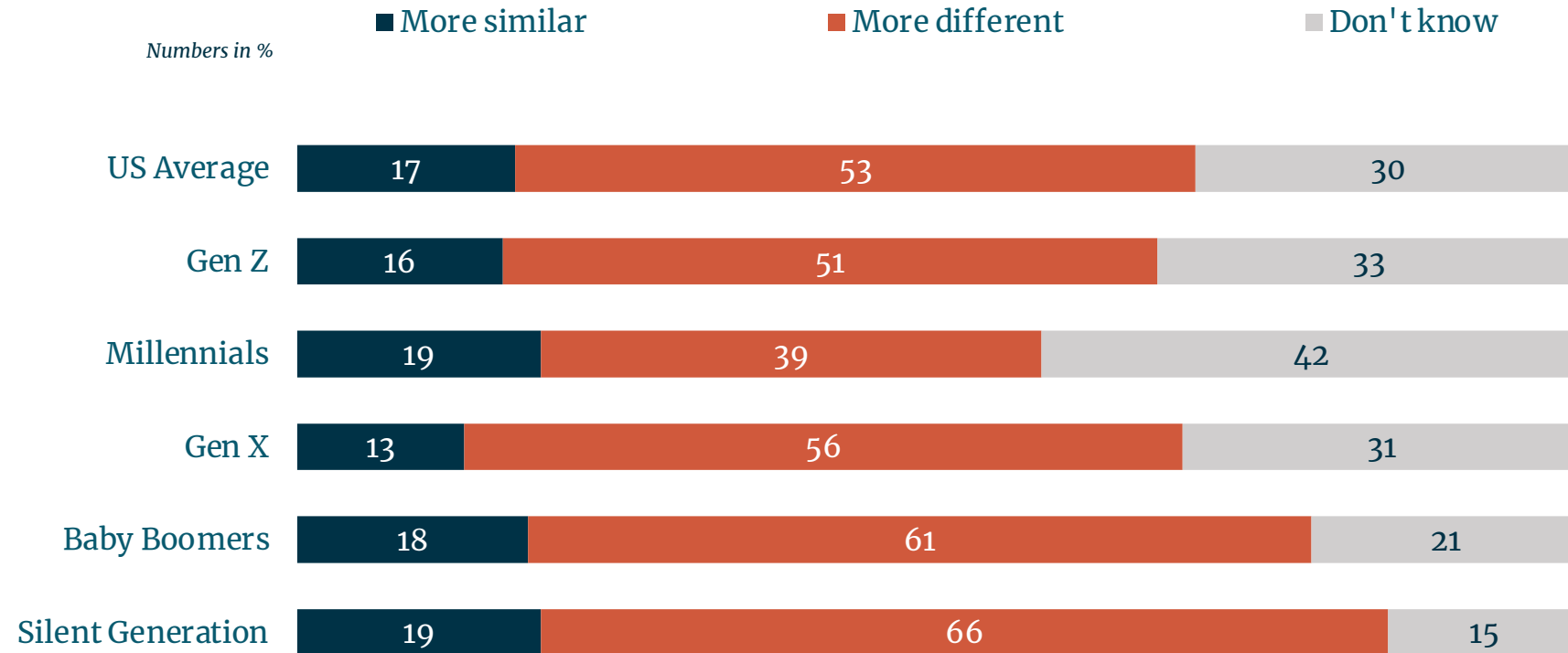
*Do you think the veterans of the Afghanistan War are more similar to or more different from veterans of World War II?*





## Older generations are most likely to think veterans of the Afghanistan War are more different from veterans of World War II than they are similar.

*Do you think the veterans of the Afghanistan War are more similar to or more different from veterans of World War II?*



## CONCLUSION

Over twenty years of conflict, the Afghanistan War was frequently compared with World War II and the Vietnam War. The comparisons to World War II were the dominant narrative at the start of the war; however, over time, comparisons with the Vietnam War were deployed more frequently.

Although Afghanistan is not the first conflict where Americans use earlier wars as reference points, our research indicates that Americans may not be forming strong shared memories of the unique events and dynamics of the war. Instead, a narrative of “another Vietnam” seems to be taking hold with many Americans. Such a narrative has the potential to both reopen painful divisions regarding the Vietnam War and to impede learning and healing from the Afghanistan War.

America still has time to change course with how the nation memorializes and remembers Afghanistan. The data in this report is intended to help spark conversation and action to do the hard work of remembering what we lost, what we gained, and how Afghanistan impacted all of us and the world we face now.



# THE VETERANS AND CITIZENS INITIATIVE

Moving Forward Together

# Thank you

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