

Lessons from History: Defining Moments in the American Presidency and Foreign Policy

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For much of American history, political leaders have stood by a principle that “politics stops at the water’s edge.” While political disagreements about domestic policies are seen as inevitable and even healthy, there has been a tradition of trying to avoid partisan disagreements over foreign policy. As a result, intense disagreements over foreign affairs have rarely been the focus of presidential election campaigns. This will not be the case in the upcoming 2008 presidential election.

As the presidential election draws near, students will be bombarded with a barrage of political rhetoric emanating from debates and the media coverage. For this reason, now is an opportune time to support our students in understanding the major issue in this election, foreign policy, by looking to the past.¹

College courses examining the United States presidency and foreign policy can span a semester. To narrow the scope of study, we can build a framework that allows students to compare what has happened with what is happening now by focusing on critical junctures and defining moments in foreign policy. This article will use primary source and other documents to examine two defining moments chosen from twentieth century presidencies to illuminate the complex issues surrounding foreign affairs: President Wilson’s support for the League of Nations and President Roosevelt’s agreement with Churchill and Stalin at the Yalta Conference. Looking through a historical lens will help students develop critical thinking skills that they can also apply to the analysis of the policies of the presidential candidates in the upcoming election.



Pragmatism and Idealism

Whenever presidents deal with foreign policy—either by choice or by necessity—they inevitably find themselves torn between pragmatism (a focus on what is possible) and idealism (a focus on what is best). Perhaps at opposite ends of this spectrum were the Democratic presidents who led the country during the two world

wars. Woodrow Wilson was very much an idealist, striving to create a community of nations in the ashes of the First World War that would deliberate instead of fight and that would substitute justice for revenge. He remained steadfast in his idealistic beliefs, refusing to compromise with American allies who wanted reparations from Germany or with members of

Congress who did not want the United States to give up some of its power to a League of Nations. His stubbornness led to the loss of much of what he fought for.

Conversely, Franklin Roosevelt was notably pragmatic in his negotiations with America's allies near the end of World War II. During intense negotiations at Yalta, Roosevelt made numerous accommodations to the Soviet Union's Joseph Stalin in exchange for Stalin's assistance in the war effort. Roosevelt was criticized heavily by his political opponents in the United States for making deals with Stalin, but to Roosevelt, defeating Hitler was the overriding concern.²

Thinking about the League of Nations

While teaching about Woodrow Wilson and the League of Nations, the historical context must be set on the international stage as well as in the national political arena. Through the primary and secondary sources, students can examine the formal (government) and the informal (public) narratives of history. A thorough examination of Wilson's words through speeches and journals reveals both the public and the private thinking of a president faced with conflict and compromise in his foreign policies. Through political cartoons, students can judge from the distance of time what public opinion had to say about this president's foreign affairs and perhaps the shaping of his subsequent decisions, or, in this case, what happened to the end goal of the formation of the League of Nations when a president did not compromise and ignored his critics' voices.

Introducing well-chosen sources and discussing the types of sources as well as the causes and the consequences of the events in the documents, provides students with multiple perspectives and supports the students' work in active historical engagement by uncovering the story of Woodrow Wilson and the League of Nations.

Before class begins on the first day of the lesson, the teacher should ask two strong readers each to read a quote (see the two boxes on this page). One is from a major speech by Woodrow Wilson supporting the League of Nations, and the other from a speech by Henry Cabot Lodge, Chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, in opposition to Wilson's policies. When class opens, the teacher can tell the students that they are about to travel through time, right into the middle of a powerful historical debate. The two students should stand and provide dramatic readings of the quotes.

After the readings, the teacher should hold a debriefing with the class, asking the students questions such as these:

- What did you hear in the two short quotes?
- What do you know about the speakers?
- What is the debate? Who wants what?
- What was the fear if the League was formed?
- What do we know about the League of Nations today?³

Contrasting Statements about the Proposed League of Nations

XIV. A general association of nations must be formed under specific covenants for the purpose of affording mutual guarantees of political independence and territorial integrity to great and small states alike.

In regard to these essential rectifications of wrong and assertions of right we feel ourselves to be intimate partners of all the governments and peoples associated together against the Imperialists. We cannot be separated in interest or divided in purpose. We stand together until the end. For such arrangements and covenants we are willing to fight and to continue to fight until they are achieved; but only because we wish the right to prevail and desire a just and stable peace such as can be secured only by removing the chief provocations to war, which this program does remove....

We have spoken now, surely, in terms too concrete to admit of any further doubt or question. An evident principle runs through the whole program I have outlined. It is the principle of justice to all peoples and nationalities, and their right to live on equal terms of liberty and safety with one another, whether they be strong or weak.

—Woodrow Wilson

14 Point Speech to Congress, 1918

www.ourdocuments.gov

I am as anxious as any human being can be to have the United States render every possible service to the civilization and the peace of mankind. But I am certain that we can do it best by not putting ourselves in leading strings, or subjecting our policies and our sovereignty to other nations. The independence of the United States is not only more precious to ourselves, but to the world, than any single possession.

Look at the United States today. We have made mistakes in the past; we have had shortcomings. We shall make mistakes in the future and fall short of our own best hopes. But nonetheless, is there any country today on the face of the earth which can compare with this in ordered liberty, in peace, and in the largest freedom? I feel that I can say this without being accused of undue boastfulness, for it is a simple fact.

... I have never had but one allegiance—I cannot divide it now. I have loved but one flag and I cannot share that devotion and give affection to the mongrel banner invented for a league.

—Henry Cabot Lodge,

Chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee
Speech Objecting to the
League of Nations, 1919

memory.loc.gov



Although presidents are granted considerable deference by the American political system in shaping foreign affairs, they are still creatures of politics. They are concerned about their own standing and that of their party. As a result, public opinion plays an important role in American foreign policy.

Understanding the role of public opinion in American foreign policy helps us to see the impact that we all have on shaping our country's actions. While the president obviously has great power to negotiate treaties, deploy troops, etc., he is sensitive to shifts in public opinion and concerned about the next election and about his place in history. He is thus surprisingly accountable to Americans despite how few checks the Constitution places on his behavior. By calling attention to crises, average Americans can have considerable impact on their government.⁴

In another activity related to the League of Nations, students are seated so that they may look at a projected image of a political cartoon on a screen as well as a smaller reproduction provided. The cartoon, *Lamb from the Slaughter*, captured the reservations and concerns of the conservatives in the Senate by depicting Henry Cabot Lodge (whose opposition to the treaty was quoted on the previous page) escorting a battered figure of the peace treaty out of the "operating room" of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations.⁵ The full Senate returned the treaty to President Wilson with 45 amendments and reservations. President Wilson refused to accept any of the reservations and the treaty was eventually rejected on November 19, 1919.

The teacher's role is as a facilitator of discussion of the cartoon, with a student assistant recording the class responses on a

large sheet of paper. The purpose of the record of responses is to further analyze responses at the end of the lesson.

When analyzing political cartoons with students, it is best to structure the lessons by scaffolding the analysis into three levels: the aesthetic, the historical interrogation and the written analysis. Students who are unseasoned readers or are learning English as a second language can fully participate while analyzing images.

First Level (*Aesthetic*): Ask the students to respond to the image of the political cartoon subjectively. These responses capture the mood of the political cartoon. Prompt students by asking:

- What do you see?
- How does the image make you feel?
- What is the image and what is its use?

Second Level (*Historical Interrogation*): These questions guide students to discover the purpose or the message of the cartoon.

- Who created this image?
- What was the message of the cartoon? What is the evidence?
- Who was the intended audience?
- Was the cartoon effective? How do we know?

Third Level (*Written Analysis*): Ask students to form pairs and complete a chart using the following questions. This level forces a close, guided look at the image. Students will notice and identify aspects of the image that were overlooked in the other two levels.

List all the objects you see in the image.

- What activities do the images depict?
- Based on what you have observed above, list three things you might infer (guess) from the cartoon.
- What questions do you have about the League of Nations?
- Where could you find the answers?

Each of the three levels of image analysis is important to complete. Each requires the students to think in a different way and discover new information about historical political cartoons.

Other visual sources that might help to introduce students to the controversy over the League of Nations are photographs of Woodrow Wilson on his League of Nations Tour (www.woodrowwilson.org) and other political cartoons illustrating public opinion both pro and con the League of Nations (a collection is available at www.loc.gov).

Franklin Roosevelt and the Yalta Conference

The Yalta Conference was a defining moment in history that helped shape the postwar world. U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill and Soviet Premier Joseph Stalin met during February 4-11, 1945, in the city of Yalta on the Crimean Peninsula to discuss the final stages of World War II. Unresolved issues between the “Big Three,” as those leaders were known, were also discussed. Of noted importance was the fate of postwar Germany, the nature of postwar governments in Eastern Europe and the establishment of a world organization to maintain the postwar peace.⁶

Entering Yalta, Roosevelt appeared to be a Wilsonian, an idealist aiming to end colonialism. He believed Soviet cooperation to be vital to world peace. Roosevelt came to Yalta lobbying for Soviet support in the Pacific War. This perceived importance of gaining Soviet support influenced his stance on Poland. Idealistically, Roosevelt wanted a liberated Poland, but the situation was complicated because Poland was already under the control of the Red Army. With Stalin’s firm stance, the Soviet need to have a buffer zone (Eastern Poland) and the Soviet promise of free elections in Poland, Roosevelt acquiesced in the cession of eastern Polish territory to the Soviet Union, for which Poland would be compensated by extending her western borders into Germany. Churchill’s concern with extending Poland’s borders so far into Germany was that Poland would cease to exist. “It would be a great pity to stuff the Polish goose so full of German food that it died of indigestion.”⁷ Poland is often quoted as a symbol of failure by the allied democracies during the Yalta Conference.

Stalin came to Yalta with an agenda of Soviet security and dominance. He believed that since the Soviets had born the brunt of the war with their immense casualties and destruction, they deserved to have many of their demands met. As the “Big Three” entered the conference, this fact had set precedence; Stalin’s military advantage may have led the other two powers to compromise more readily with the Soviets. Stalin hoped to establish a Soviet sphere of influence in Eastern Europe, which he effectively gained.

The United Nations was also the focus of much debate at Yalta, as Roosevelt was pushing for Soviet participation. He was able to finally receive a commitment from Stalin after agreeing that each of the five permanent members of the Security Council, including the Soviet Union, would have veto power. Roosevelt was subsequently accused by

conservatives of having “sold out” to Stalin on this point. It was agreed upon by all the powers that the United Nations would replace the failed League of Nations.

The last main point at Yalta was the Pacific War. The Soviets agreed to enter the war against the Empire of Japan 90 days



after the defeat of Germany. Upon the defeat of the Japanese, the Soviets would receive the Kurile Islands and the southern part of Sakhalin. Additionally, citizens of Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union were to be handed over to their respective countries. Citizens were handed over regardless of their consent.

At the conclusion of the Yalta Conference, the compromises made left each member of the Big Three with a portion of their objectives met. Roosevelt received a commitment of participation from Stalin to join the United Nations, although at the price of veto power for each member of the Security Council. He also committed Stalin to join the Pacific War, ceding Eastern power to Stalin. Yalta allowed for a Soviet sphere of influence in Eastern Europe, which was a gain for Stalin. Churchill left with the promise of free elections in Poland (on which the Soviet Union later reneged) and acceptance of a French zone of occupation in Berlin.

Yalta was hailed by *The New York Times* as a “milestone on the road to victory and peace.” But as the destruction and bloodshed of World War II neared the end, the impending Cold War was far from the minds of Churchill and Roosevelt. Subsequently, American conservatives accused Roosevelt of being a sick and weak negotiator, willing to appease Stalin. Defenders of the Yalta Agreement maintained that Roosevelt could not have obtained better terms because Soviet forces already controlled the territory that he conceded to Soviet influence.

To help students evaluate the Yalta Agreement, introduce them to the background to the conference by outlining the war objectives of the United States, Great Britain, and the Soviet Union. The website www.ibiblio.org is a good source for war-related primary sources, and offers useful documents that can provide students with historical background on the foreign policy objectives of the three countries going into and during the war. Among the suitable documents are Roosevelt's Four Freedoms Message to Congress of January 6, 1941 (www.ibiblio.org/pha/7-2-188/188-22.html); the Atlantic Charter of August 1941 (www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/Dip/Atlantic.html); the United Nations Declaration in 1942 (www.ibiblio.org/pha/policy/1942/420101a.html); and documents relating to the Nazi-Soviet Nonaggression Pact and the partition of Poland just before the war (www.ibiblio.org/pha/policy/pre-war/390823a.html).

Students will then judge whether Yalta was a success or failure. This exercise will take multiple class periods and should be completed in a computer lab or in the school library where multiple resources are available. This activity can also be utilized as homework assignments.

Divide your class into small groups. Provide each group with three documents:

1. Roosevelt's *Report to Congress on Yalta* (see p. 53);
2. An excerpt from Harry S. Truman's *Memoirs on the Potsdam Conference* held after the defeat of Germany, in which the final delineation of Poland's western frontier, which was not resolved at Yalta, was discussed (see p. 54).
3. An analysis by Richard Eberling of the legacy of the Yalta Conference (see p. 54).

Provide students with the document evaluation sheet on page 53. Have them fill it in and present and discuss their answers in class.

Conclusion

History is a "user's guide" for the present. Looking back at the League of Nations and Yalta, we can examine the decisions made by two presidents, one idealistic and one more pragmatic.

By studying the League of Nations and Yalta, a critical lens can be applied to today's foreign policies. Instead of an onslaught of words during debates and media coverage, the past presidential decisions provide students with significant questions to consider: Is this candidate an idealist or a pragmatist? Will this candidate be more likely to compromise or stand firm while interacting with foreign governments? These are questions for students to consider as we listen closely to our upcoming presidential candidates and think about the direction we would like the United States to move forward in the next years. 🇺🇸



Notes

1. Dr. Seth Masket, *Conflict and Compromise: The Presidency* (Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO Publishing, 2007).
2. Ibid
3. Chris Mullen and Brett Piersma, *Conflict and Compromise: The Presidency* (Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO Publishing, 2007).
4. Masket.
5. The cartoon is reproduced here by permission of ABC-CLIO.
6. Masket.
7. Martin Kitchen, "Winston Churchill and the Soviet Union during the Second World War," *The Historical Journal* 30, no. 2, (1987).

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Each year, National History Day focuses on a theme. The 2007–2008 theme is Conflict and Compromise in History.

This article is derived from *Conflict and Compromise: The Presidency*, a book in a series developed in collaboration between ABC-CLIO and National History Day. The books in the series are:

Triumph and Tragedy in History: Immigration; Triumph and Tragedy in History: Nation Building; Triumph and Tragedy in History: Free Speech; Conflict and Compromise in History: The Presidency; Conflict and Compromise in History: The Women's Movement; Conflict and Compromise in History: Citizen Soldier

Each book contains introductory essays designed to provide context and background on the overall topic; a wealth of primary source materials, such as laws, poems, quotations, cartoons, speeches, journal entries, editorials, and photographs; reference materials related to the topic, and engaging classroom activities designed to encourage students to analyze and to evaluate a topic. Each book costs \$39.00.

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Document Evaluation Sheet

	Report to Congress	Truman's Memoirs	Covering the Map
What are the key points in the document and the date?			
Look at the dates of the documents and go to secondary resources to build the historical context. What was happening economically in the U.S., Europe, and the Soviet Union? What was happening politically?			
Analyze all three documents and prepare a debate: Was Yalta a success or a failure? Be prepared to provide evidence from your readings and lecture as well as the examination of primary sources.			

Roosevelt's Report to Congress on Yalta

March 1, 1945

We met in the Crimea determined to settle this matter of liberated areas. Things that might happen that we can't see at this moment might happen suddenly, unexpected, next week or next month. And I am happy to confirm to the Congress that we did arrive at a settlement—and incidentally, a unanimous settlement.

The three most powerful nations have agreed that the political and economic problems of any area liberated from Nazi conquest, or any former Axis satellite, are a joint responsibility of all three Governments. They will join together during the temporary period of instability after hostilities, to help the people of any liberated area, or of any former satellite state, to solve their own problems through firmly established democratic processes.

They will endeavor to see—to see to it that interim governing, and the people who carry on the interim government between occupation by Germany and true independence—

that such an interim government will be as representative as possible of all democratic elements in the population, and that free elections are held as soon as possible thereafter.

Responsibility for political conditions thousands of miles away can no longer be avoided, I think, by this great nation. Certainly, I don't want to live to see another war. As I have said, the world is smaller—smaller every year. The United States now exerts a tremendous influence in the cause of peace.

What we people over here are thinking and talking about is in the interest of peace, because it's known all over the world. The slightest remark in either house of the Congress is known all over the world the following day. We will continue to exert that influence only if we are willing to continue to share in the responsibility for keeping the peace. It would be our own tragic loss if we were to shirk that responsibility.
history.sandiego.edu/gen/text/ww2/yaltareport.html

Recollections by Harry S. Truman of the Potsdam Conference

published in his *Memoirs* (Garden City, New Jersey: Doubleday Company, 1955): 312-314.
The Conference was held in Potsdam, Germany, from July 17 to August 2, 1945

Our discussion was resumed where it had left off the day before, with the question of Poland's western frontier and Prime Minister Churchill restating his reasons for refusing to accept Stalin's proposal to cede the eastern territory of Germany to Poland. Stalin, in turn, challenged the Prime Minister's reasoning with the same arguments he had previously advanced.

I then read a portion of the Yalta Declaration concerning Poland's western frontier and reminded them that this agreement had been reached by President Roosevelt, Marshal Stalin, and Prime Minister Churchill. I added that I was in complete accord with it and wished to make the point clear that Poland now had been assigned a zone of occupation in Germany without any consultation among the three powers. While I did not object to Poland being assigned a zone, I did not like the manner in which it had been done. Our main problem here, I repeated, was that of the occupation of Germany by the four authorized powers. That, I said, was my position yesterday, that was my position today, and that would be my position tomorrow.

Stalin said that if we were not bored with the question of frontiers he would like to point out that the exact character of the Yalta decision was that we were bound to receive the opinion of the Polish government on the question of its western frontiers. As we were not in agreement with the Polish proposal, we should hear the representatives of the new Polish government. If the heads of government did not wish to hear them, then the foreign ministers should hear them.

Stalin said that he wished to remind Mr. Churchill, as well as others who had been at the Crimea conference, that the view held by the President and Mr. Churchill with regard to the western frontier and with which he did not agree was that the line should begin from the estuary of the Oder and follow the Oder to where it is joined by the Eastern Neisse. He had insisted on the line of the Western Neisse. The plan proposed by President Roosevelt and Prime Minister Churchill, said Stalin, left the town of Stettin on the German side, as well as Breslau and the region west of Breslau.

Covering the Map of the World— The Half-Century Legacy of the Yalta Conference

www.fff.org/freedom/1095b.asp and www.fff.org/freedom/1195b.asp

by Richard M. Ebeling, October 1995. Professor Ebeling is the Ludwig von Mises Professor of Economics at Hillsdale College in Hillsdale, Michigan, and serves as vice president of academic affairs for The Future of Freedom Foundation.

At both the Teheran and Yalta meetings, Franklin Roosevelt practiced those very "expedients which have been tried for centuries." He gave his consent—as the president of the United States—for Stalin to view the countries and peoples of Eastern Europe as his own, to do with as he chose. He told Averell Harriman that "he didn't care whether the countries bordering on Russia became communized." He made his deals with Stalin for geographical spheres of influence—Roosevelt only asked that Stalin keep it a secret because FDR did not want to risk losing Polish votes in an election if the truth was made public.

When Harriman objected to FDR's secret protocol handing over Chinese territory to the Soviet Union, Roosevelt said that "he was not going to quarrel with Stalin" because the phrases used in the protocol were, after all, "just language." And words were meant for manipulation in the mind of the great "fireside-chat" communicator.

... The Yalta Conference formalized the configuration of the post-World War II era for almost half a century. It codified the division of Europe into East and West. It opened Asia to communist expansion. It assured the establishment of the United Nations and the idea of the global policeman. It heralded America's permanent and prominent intervention on the world stage of international politics. ...

Defenders of the Yalta accords have argued that the protocol devoted to a "Declaration on Liberated Europe" said nothing about a division of Europe into spheres of influence. Technically, this is true. The agreement required free, democratic elections to be held in the countries liberated from Nazi occupation, with each of these nations having the liberty to choose the political systems it desired. But for both Roosevelt and Stalin, public statements and formal agreements were only the cover and propaganda tools for behind-the-scenes understandings. ...

Behind the public promises at the Yalta Conference, FDR had made his private agreements with Stalin concerning the Soviet dictator's free hand to do what he wished in Eastern Europe, just as Churchill had made his own private agreements with Stalin behind Roosevelt's back about spheres of influence in the Balkans. Of course, unless the United States had been ready to go to war with the Soviet Union, Stalin was going to be able to do whatever he wanted in the countries "liberated" by the Red Army.

But what the Yalta accords gave the Red Czar was legitimacy. Using his own Marxian definitions of "democracy" and "freedom," Stalin—and later his Soviet inheritors—could claim the right to impose their own will and political order on the unfortunate people in this part of the world.