

Reversing Isolationism: Contending Narratives, U.S. Politics, and the Creation of the United Nations

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With the United Kingdom's move to withdraw from the European Union, claims that NATO is "obsolete" and the UN is "irrelevant"—it appears that international organizations are under attack in places that were once supportive. These sentiments are compounded by rising trade protectionism, concerns over sovereignty, and nativism. These dynamics echo those of a century earlier just prior to the creation of the League of Nations. How did the architects of the UN manage to move both political elites and public opinion away from nativist impulses? Who encouraged the UN endeavor and how did they convince reluctant publics and domestic actors of the need for a universal-based international organization? This article explores the transformative path the U.S. took from rejecting the league in 1919 to championing the UN in 1945. It compares the domestic dynamics and narratives surrounding the path toward acceptance of the UN.

With the United Kingdom's move to withdraw from the European Union, claims that NATO is "obsolete," and the UN is "irrelevant," it appears international organizations are under attack in places that were once supportive. These sentiments are compounded by rising trade protectionism, concerns over sovereignty, and nativism. Yet, this is not the first time these sentiments and fears have come together. In the atmosphere leading up to the creation of the UN in the 1930s and early 1940s we find similar streams of isolationism and rejection of international organizations. How did the architects of the UN manage to move both political elites and public opinion away from nativist impulses? Who encouraged the UN endeavor and how did they convince reluctant publics and obstructionist domestic actors of the need for a universal-based international organization? These questions hold relevance today as sectors within the UK and the U.S., including prime ministers, presidents, members of both Parliament and Congress, and civil society organizations, are growing increasingly skeptical and even hostile toward international organizations.

These current dynamics present an opportunity to look back at the UN's founding and the confluence of events that brought many leaders and their citizens to champion its creation. In hindsight, the 1945 creation of the UN was an extraordinary event as over fifty countries came together and agreed on a design for the peaceful resolution of conflict, a multilateral venue for global policy creation, and a move toward promoting peace and security collectively. For the U.S., this was particularly remarkable as twenty-five years earlier the country dismissed a similar project. In 1919, despite President Woodrow Wilson's appeals, the "Irreconcilables" (a group of senators driven by isolationism, and fear of losing U.S. sovereignty, and nationalism) banded together to defeat the ratification of the Treaty of Versailles and U.S. membership in the League of Nations. The story of the rejection of the league and the creation of the UN is a story of U.S. domestic politics with all the drama of entrenched isolationism, fears of loss of sovereignty, a fickle U.S. public, and a politicized relationship between the president and Congress.

The history of the creation of the UN presents an important case study of how one country moved away from divisive partisanship, nativism, inter-agency competition, and robust

skepticism of international organizations. This article presents a comparative study that examines the U.S. domestic political dynamics prior to the ratification of the League of Nations with those prior to the ratification of the UN Charter. It builds on a most-similar systems approach (Seawright and Gerring 2008; Tarrow 2010) and surveys the dynamics (at the domestic level) that led to very different outcomes.

This article explores what turned the U.S. domestic political environment to champion the creation of the UN in 1945. From idealism and notions of “a new global Magna Carta of Democracy” to the pragmatic call for an “international agency,” the historical analysis surveys the main actors within the U.S. and their positions and rhetoric as they forged a path toward the San Francisco Conference in 1945. This focus draws attention to the two-level game that political elites, led by President Roosevelt, played, as they quietly nudged forward a domestic initiative to create the UN without compromising negotiations with the European powers and the Soviet Union (Putnam 1988). In an analysis that compares the political dynamics surrounding the failed league efforts with the more successful route leading up to the 1945 San Francisco Conference, we find a fascinating interplay between U.S. public opinion, the president, Congress, and civil society.

Party Politics, Sovereignty, and the League of Nations

Within the U.S., one of the earliest calls for collective approaches to security emerged during the 1902 State of the Union Message to Congress. Republican President Theodore Roosevelt proclaimed, “The increasing interdependence and complexity of international political and economic relations render it incumbent on all civilized and orderly powers to insist on the proper policing of the world” (Roosevelt 1902, XXII). At the same time, Roosevelt recognized the difficulties of the state relinquishing some aspect of its self-defense, “Each nation must keep well prepared to defend itself until the establishment of some form of international police power, competent and willing to prevent violence as between nations” (Roosevelt 1910, 308–09). He looked to counter power politics with legal instruments that could assist with conflict resolution between states. The creation of the Permanent Court of Arbitration in 1899 and the 1901 Conference of the Union of American Republics (now Organization of American States) encouraged these ideas. Four years later in a series of magazine articles, Roosevelt recommended a “World League for the Peace of Righteousness” (Cooper 1983, 281). He also maintained that the U.S. had to take a leadership role in procuring such international security.

Early support for such an organization was based on several pillars: a moral call to prevent “the destruction of the human inheritance,” hope that an organization could prevent the interruption of international commerce, and finally, optimism that world politics could change and peace emerge as “the normal condition of nations” (Goldsmith 1917, xii–xv). Within the U.S., many of these ideas resonated with political and economic elites. To advocate for the creation of an organization, prominent leaders and members of the business community created the League of Peace (LEP). The idea was that groups of like-minded countries could dissuade both members and nonmembers from using force. The group, led by former President William Howard Taft, symbolically met in Independence Hall in Philadelphia to adopt a resolution proclaiming, “We believe and solemnly urge that the time has come to devise and create a working union of sovereign nations to establish peace” (*New York Times* 1918). However, opposition emerged in the debate over an organization: First, many were concerned over the structure and powers of such an arrangement; second, issues arose concerning who would hold membership; and finally, controversy over the U.S. role derailed the conversations.

World War I and its immense destruction motivated leaders to search for a mechanism to enhance cooperation between countries and find nonviolent venues for conflict resolution. The idea that an international organization could serve as a panacea to war emerged in the U.S. national dialogue. In Woodrow Wilson’s 1918 speech to Congress, he outlined a framework for such an approach. In the address, Wilson translated the domestic values of the U.S. into a

foreign policy agenda as he advocated for global relationships based on democracy, transparency, free-trade, and self-determination. He encouraged institutional multilateralism in the last of his Fourteen Points when he called for “a general association of nations” (Wilson 1918). In this way, Wilson was instrumental in combining two often disparate ideas—U.S. exceptionalism and internationalism (Moore and Pubantzq 1999).

Wilson held that a balance of power system was inherently unstable and would lead to war. He insisted a new model based on collective security would escape the vicious cycle of conflict, explaining, “There must be, not a balance of power, but a community of power; not organized rivalries, but an organized common peace” (Wilson 1917, 9). His view went beyond a venue for institutional governance; it was a reform of the entire system of international relations. In addition, he bundled the League of Nations proposal with the plan to end World War I. In some respects this maneuvering proved strategic, at the same time, it was also ruinous.

The U.S. president struggled with the Congress over the ratification of the League of Nations in the Treaty of Versailles. Domestic opposition to the league came from both ends of the political spectrum as pacifists rejected the continued use of force, while nationalists feared the imposition on sovereignty and believed the U.S. would be obligated into arbitration concerning its foreign pursuits. At one point, thirty-five of the forty-nine Republicans in the Senate agreed to vote in favor of ratification of the treaty with some provisions. Those advocating for conditions broke into two camps: strong reservationists and mild reservationists. Of the strong reservationists, William Jennings Bryan, who had recently left his post as secretary of state, presented a vision that elevated U.S. interest and exceptionalism. For Bryan, the league threatened the sovereignty of the people. He was also wary of a “Council controlled by Europeans” and was reluctant to commit U.S. lives or resources for the “settlement of European disputes” (Bryan 1917, 138, 154). His position was largely based on an assumption of the United States’ unwavering capacities and tended toward an intolerant nationalism as U.S. policies were seen as inherently righteous.

With similar opinions, Henry Cabot Lodge, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations committee, led the opposition to the League of Nations in the Senate. Despite Lodge’s earlier support of collective security, he feared entangling alliances and threats to U.S. autonomy. He warned, “The United States is the world’s best hope, but if you fetter her in the interests and quarrels of other nations, if you tangle her in the intrigues of Europe, you will destroy her power for good and endanger her very existence (Lodge 1919, 3780). A core group of fourteen Republicans and two Democrats composed of ardent nationalists and isolationists dubbed the “Irreconcilables” joined Lodge and held firm to their opposition and demands for significant limitations on the league (Kennedy 2009, 63).

The Republican Party was initially divided and included both isolationists and internationalists. The ratification process brought these disparate viewpoints together. As one observer remarked, “It is clear that the reservations policy had the great advantage of providing for the unity of the Republican Party and enhancing its electoral prospects” (Mervin 1971, 207). Lodge’s concerns over loss of sovereignty (represented as finite and zero-sum—all or nothing) resonated deeply. President Wilson did not work with the Republican controlled Senate effectively and rejected any negotiations about the reservations. In the end, he recommended that Senate Democrats (within his own party) not vote for the treaty’s passage—posturing that the Republicans would be blamed for U.S. failure to join the league. Wilson was offered a compromise deal; however, guided by frustration, anger, and a feud between him and Lodge, he rejected the modified proposals. After fifty-five days of often heated debate in a 38–53 vote, the Senate rejected membership in the league.

The issue lingered on the U.S. agenda and in 1920, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, the vice-presidential nominee for the Democratic Party, claimed the League of Nations was “the dominant issue of the campaign” (Schlesinger 2003, xvi). By 1932 the issue faded, and the U.S.

turned inward. In January 1935, despite Roosevelt's urging, the Senate voted 52–35 to reject membership in the Permanent Court of International Justice—isolationism kept the U.S. out of yet another international organization.¹

The Quest for “A Permanent Peace”

In the ashes of World War I and the failure of the League of Nations, the U.S. remained skeptical of two things: first, the value of pursuing global peace, and second, the need for U.S. contributions to such efforts. President Roosevelt's “Quarantine Speech” delivered in October 1937, reintroduced the idea about creating such peace when he pronounced, “It is, therefore, a matter of vital interest and concern to the people of the U.S. that the sanctity of international treaties and the maintenance of international morality be restored” (Roosevelt 1937). The statement addressed two prongs of growing isolationism—opposition to U.S. entry into the war and rejection of membership in an international organization. Roosevelt's combination of pragmatic national interest with essential U.S. exceptionalism brought together a formula of ethics and strategy, as he proclaimed, “There must be positive endeavors to preserve peace. America hates war. America hopes for peace. Therefore, America actively engages in the search for peace” (Borg 1957, 416). The idea was to go “after the root causes of war” (1947, 664). The notion of an international organization was key to this idea, and Roosevelt advocated for an international venue for countries to have structured debate and nonviolent mechanisms to resolve differences.

The idea of creating a “new league” gained momentum, both at the domestic and international levels in the months prior to the outbreak of World War II. To move from concept to policy, Roosevelt and Secretary of State Cordell Hull traveled to Argentina to lobby for an agreement with Latin American states at the Buenos Aires Conference of 1936. Roosevelt was the first U.S. president to make an official visit to South America and did so in pursuit of a multilateral approach to prevent the extension of the hostilities brewing in Europe (Hart 2013). For the U.S. president, these efforts held several components: tackling economic and financial structures, restricting the growth in armaments, and creating international political machinery to promote political solutions and avert war. While the approach was regional, the president hoped it would provide an example for the rest of the world.

In 1937, U.S. Representative Norman Davis introduced the idea of a conference to address the grievances in Europe. Both the British and France seemed interested and even Hitler and Mussolini suggested they would consider participation in such an international organization (Borg 1957, 409). Neville Chamberlain, British prime minister at the time, indicated the UK's focus would remain on establishing a foundation for peace and the global economic structures—given the threat environment, he signaled that armament reduction should wait. For the U.S., the focus was on non-coercive mechanisms including collective neutrality, economics, and disarmament. The U.S. wanted to leave the more contentious political conflicts to be settled by the Europeans. As events began to snowball toward war in Europe, these efforts were sidelined. Nonetheless, Roosevelt continued a quiet campaign to sway the U.S. away from isolationism, courted congressional support, and nudged European governments toward an institutional blueprint (Borg 1957, 416).

Civil Society and Public Opinion

By the 1940s, Roosevelt's approach evolved from collective neutrality to a model where great powers within an alliance would serve as an international police force. For the U.S., he shied away from reference to an international organization and any hint of Wilsonian idealism. Domestically there were many hurdles to clear; Roosevelt needed to move the U.S. away

1. It is important to note that although the U.S. was not a member, it was represented at the League of Nations in Geneva in part with support from the Carnegie Foundation.

from rising isolationism in the face of Axis aggression. As Schlesinger explained, “isolationist attitudes were . . . deeply embedded in the fabric of discourse” (2003, 29).

Roosevelt was sensitive to public opinion and engaged in a subtle campaign designed to prevent popular backlash and perhaps coax the isolationists from their protective shell. In a September 1939 “Fireside Chat,” he declared the U.S. would seek “a final peace which will eliminate . . . the continued use of force between nations” (Roosevelt 1939). Two years later, his “Four Freedoms” speech to Congress further tried to inch the public away toward internationalism. Still, Roosevelt’s view retained U.S. exceptionalism as he proclaimed American values were relevant for global politics, and he called for “a world founded upon four essential human freedoms.” Like Wilson before him, the U.S. political model and American values were projected as unquestionably relevant for all others.

Within civil society, early advocates of an organizational approach begin to surface in fall of 1939 and the Commission to Study the Organization of Peace (CSOP) formed with James T. Shotwell at the helm. Advocates for the creation of a new league included the Council of Foreign Relations and the Federal Council of Churches of Christ of America (Hilderbrand 2001). The CSOP organized community leaders and academics to both research and advocate for solutions and the creation of a “durable peace.” The CSOP acknowledged that public support was foundational and promoted a radio campaign endorsing the need for “A Lasting Peace” throughout the country. The commission also sponsored national broadcasts in which members of the group discussed foreign policy topics, including the creation of an international organization. It also sponsored student panels that aired on the radio, and the CSOP offered several \$600 prizes for the “best recommendation on how to organize peace” (Schlesinger 2003, 29; Simpson 1941, 318).

When France surrendered to Germany in June 1940, many Americans began to realize how serious the war was becoming, and economic elites were alarmed by potential costs of a German victory (Plesch 2011). In August 1941, the signing of the Atlantic Charter declared an alliance of “United Nations” between the U.S. and the British in seeking a post-war order. Yet, there was no specific mention of an organization. The December 1941 bombing of Pearl Harbor forced the U.S. out of its official neutrality and in 1942 China, the Soviet Union, the UK, and the U.S. joined twenty-two other countries and signed the “Declaration by United Nations.” The agreement combined the two goals of working toward a peaceful international political and economic system and progressed in Moscow, Cairo, Tehran, and Dumbarton Oaks.

In 1939, Gallup polled the U.S. people and asked, “Would you favor a conference of the leading nations of the world to try and end the present war and settle Europe’s problems?” Sixty-nine percent were in favor, but when asked whether the U.S. should participate, only 50 percent agreed (Gallup 1972, 187). The strain of isolationism ran deep, and international trade was viewed as a threat to U.S. jobs and autonomy. Roosevelt was pressured by groups like the “America First” movement, which claimed over 800,000 members from both sides of the political spectrum and wanted the U.S. to stay out of the war (Cole 1953). The America First Committee emerged in 1940 and called for a highly defensive and noninterventionist U.S. foreign policy. The group campaigned through newspaper advertisements and the distribution of over a million pamphlets, handbills, and radio broadcasts. Members of the organization held strong skepticism of the UK, and U.S. intervention into the war was perceived as potentially disastrous. Although the movement largely focused on World War II, it was more generally noninterventionist and rejected multilateralism. Other civil society organizations and popular figures, like aviationist Charles Lindbergh, also campaigned against involvement in the war and entrenching U.S. interests with those of other countries.

Within the U.S., the economic isolationism of the 1930s had been costly. By 1940, the U.S. viewed trade as less of a threat to U.S. jobs. At the same time, Roosevelt’s preliminary initiatives to craft a new league were clandestine and remained largely within the Department

of State. Hilderbrand wrote that early on “Roosevelt . . . did not want to make it too clear that actual plans were being formulated. . . . Nor did he wish to alarm the large number of Americans who then opposed U.S. participation in a new world body” (2001, 8). He was reluctant to use terms like organization or institution “for fear of stirring up the isolationists” and instead promoted a “permanent system of general security” (Schlesinger 2003, 37). In 1942, Roosevelt quietly created the Advisory Committee on Postwar Foreign Policy within the Department of State. This group moved to draft the document presented at the Dumbarton Oaks Conference. At the time, U.S. efforts focused on reviving an institutional blueprint created by South African Jan Smuts, and included a permanent secretary, a large representative body, and an executive council. Through discussions, the mandate for the organization grew from international security to international justice, economic well-being, human rights, and a trusteeship for post-colonial territories.

Forging Consensus in Congress

In terms of the U.S. Congress, many of the ghosts of the league debate lingered as concerns about “surrendering U.S. sovereignty” and undermining legislative war powers remained. Although there was bipartisan support for “permanent peace,” many Republicans firmly opposed an organization. Congressman Walter Judd, a Republican congressman from Minnesota, explained, “The Republican Party was still substantially dominated by people who thought that to be sound and conservative domestically meant that you had to be isolationist internationally” (Judd 1970). The 1942 congressional elections provided the Republicans a gain of fifty-three House and Senate seats and re-election for many of the core isolationists (Hoopes and Brinkley 1997). The message to Roosevelt and the Democrats at the time was that the U.S. was not ready for an international organization and supporting such endeavors would be politically costly. One leading Republican, Senator Arthur H. Vandenberg, was a staunch isolationist who led efforts in the Senate to block U.S. entry into World War II. However, Pearl Harbor changed Vandenberg’s view, and he began advocating for a more active role in global affairs. Vandenberg described his change of heart, “In my own mind, my convictions regarding international cooperation and collective security for peace took form on the afternoon of the Pearl Harbor attack. That day ended isolationism for any realist” (Joyners 1963, 72). And yet, the Republican Party remained divided. Traditional isolationists, like Senators Robert Taft (Republican from Ohio) and presidential candidate Thomas E. Dewey, held opposing views to internationalists like Wendell Willkie (also a presidential candidate) who advocated assisting European powers.

By 1942, public opinion began to change, there were “two deep currents” as portions of the U.S. public began supporting the idea of an organization to “promote a permanent peace” (1942). Supreme Court Justice Owen Roberts argued in a *New York Times* article that the U.S. had to relinquish some sovereignty or “let the world roll on into chaos” (1943c).

A Turn toward Internationalism

The year 1943 marked a key year in America’s turn toward internationalism, with support growing in Congress, the U.S. public, and more overtly from the White House. “Roosevelt’s World Blueprint” published in the *Saturday Evening Post* made it clear that the plan for peace included “no blanket surrender of sovereignty.” The discussion of sovereignty was essential to calm the fears about the potential of an intrusive organization. The article discussed how imperative bipartisan support was for a permanent peace but did not mention a formal organization (Davis 1943, 109).² Presidential elections were a year away, and with a hesitant public, discussions about the U.S. joining an organization had to be judicious.

2. Forrest Davis, author of several *Saturday Evening Post* articles, was invited by Roosevelt to interview the president who then reviewed drafts of the articles before they appeared in print.

Congress, reacting to changes in public opinion, became a key player. A poll of members of the Senate in April 1943 found twenty-four supportive of “a world police force,” forty uncommitted, and thirty-two opposed. A newspaper claimed, “The evidence is that the American people are farther along than the Senators” (1943a). By early 1943 there was significant media coverage of the move toward planning for the UN, and Congressman Fulbright (D-AK) claimed that a majority of those in the House of Representatives supported such an arrangement (1943b, 33).

Although bipartisan support was growing, many in the Republican Party remained firmly opposed to the idea of membership in an international organization. Senator Vandenberg described his concerns that lack of U.S. consensus would again undermine ratification of membership in an international organization. He wrote, “I am hunting for the middle ground between those extremists at one end of the line who would cheerfully give America away and those extremists at the other end of the line who would attempt a total isolation which has come to be an impossibility” (Vandenberg 1952, 55). In a pivotal moment, the Republican Party leadership met in August 1943 at the Mackinac Island Conference to discuss their platform regarding post-war plans. There was significant debate between the two factions of the party over the term “sovereignty” and “organization.” The primary sticking point centered on the idea of relinquishing sovereignty. Although many held a fatalistic perspective, there were also those like Senator Austin from Vermont who held a less zero-sum view of the sovereignty issue.

In the end, the Republicans accepted the call for an organization in an agreement that far exceeded any original commitment to “post-war cooperation.” The leadership issued a declaration in support of a “postwar cooperative organization among sovereign nations to prevent military aggression and to offer permanent peace with organized justice in a free world” (Meijer 1993, 19). In fact, for some the statement fortified U.S. independence in its call for “sovereign nations.”

Also in the summer of 1943, a handful of senators and congressmen came together to initiate a grass-roots campaign and draft legislation in support of a collective security organization (Judd 1970). The bipartisan group included Senator Harry S. Truman who would later become vice president in 1944 and assume the presidency three weeks before the 1945 San Francisco Conference. The senators were labeled the “B2H2” group based on the initials of their last names. The first two, Joseph Ball (Minnesota) and Harold Burton (Ohio), were Republicans, and the last two, Carl Hatch (New Mexico) and Lester Hill (Alabama), were Democrats. The group launched a nationwide speaking tour laying out the strategic and moral arguments in favor of a future organization.

By fall 1943, two resolutions calling for the creation of an international organization passed in Congress. The first bill was a House resolution sponsored by Congressman Fulbright (H. Cong. Res. 25, 78th Cong., 1st sess.). In government records on the discussions, Fulbright noted the legislation would arouse public interest, strengthening the president’s capacities to negotiate with the Allies, as well as push the Senate toward consensus (U.S. House of Representatives 1976, 20). The Senate resolution was controversial and Secretary of State Hull met with senators to smooth over concerns about relinquishing congressional powers and U.S. sovereignty. In November 1943, the Senate passed the Connally Resolution in an 85–5 vote calling for the creation of an international organization to maintain international peace. This was a key development in moving the U.S. toward supporting a future UN (Hull 1948, 1650).

President Roosevelt remained wary of the congressional initiatives; he wanted congressional support but worried it would trigger a counter movement from the isolationists. In addition, there were concerns that the legislation would interfere with negotiations with Stalin and Churchill—Roosevelt actually urged the B2H2 senators sponsoring the bill to delay their efforts (Hoopes and Brinkley 1997, 66).

At the diplomatic level, things were moving rapidly as the Soviet Union, the UK, China, and the U.S. signed the Moscow Agreement in late October 1943, acknowledging “the neces-

sity of establishing at the earliest practicable date a general international organization, based on the principle of the sovereign equality of all peace-loving states . . . for the maintenance of international peace and security” (1950). While the allies planned to defeat the Axis powers, they also began creating the architecture for a post-war peace and agreed to the “four policemen” approach in Tehran. While the British were mildly reluctant, the Soviets presented many hurdles to the creation of the UN. In 1940, the League of Nations expelled the Soviet Union for its invasion of Finland; this experience left Stalin highly skeptical about membership in a new organization. The domestic/international tensions were particularly visible surrounding voting proposals in the Security Council. The Soviets proposed an absolute veto on all matters, including substantive and procedural. In addition, Stalin demanded that sixteen of the Soviet Republics be granted membership. Roosevelt knew that these plans would not be palatable in the U.S. Senate (Schlesinger 2003, 50). His words express concern that the Soviet plan

would gravely alienate many sincere supporters of the Dumbarton Oaks Proposals, and would provide perfectionists and isolationists with a powerful weapon against American participation in the Organization. . . . These factors might well jeopardize our chances for adequate public and Congressional support in this country. (Foreign Relations of the United States 1945)

As the details of the organization began to take shape, controversies emerged and the Soviet’s demands threatened to crumble the momentum both within the U.S. and in terms of consensus building between the Allied powers. At the same time, a series of conferences moved the allies toward the creation of a blueprint for the organization and the number of countries at the table grew. Under the umbrella of “lend-lease” debates, thirty other countries were included in the conversations and built a practice of multinational collaboration evident in the first UN Conference on Food and Agriculture that met in Virginia (Plesch 2011).

Dumbarton Oaks and Bipartisan Politics

From 1941 to 1943, Roosevelt and Hull quietly cultivated bipartisan support in Congress and canvassed to turn public opinion. This changed in 1944, when the Department of State launched an extensive public relations campaign to secure support for the Dumbarton Oaks agreements (1944, 4; Schlesinger 2003). The first draft of the future UN Charter was crafted at the Dumbarton Oaks mansion in Washington in the fall of 1944. During the two-phase meeting, the Big Four (China, the UK, the U.S., and the USSR) reached an agreement on the mandate and structure of an institution that would focus on international security—yet also included economic development and international justice. In an effort to coopt the Republicans, Hull gave a radio broadcast in April 1944 and declared, “We are at a stage where much of the world of formulation plans for the organization to maintain peace has been accomplished. It is right and necessary that we should have the advice and help of an increasing number of Members of the Congress” (Hull 1944, 8). During fall 1944, presidential campaign partisan bickering threatened to derail the progress at Dumbarton Oaks. Yet Hull managed to keep the UN issue out of the presidential race by bringing Roosevelt’s opponent John Dewey into the discussions. In similar fashion to the league issue, Republicans were concerned that if the UN plan went through, Roosevelt would get credit for the win and the Democrats would benefit politically. One congressional member described the strategy used by the Roosevelt team to garner bipartisan support saying,

Mr. Roosevelt was very shrewd, not to grab it as just a Democratic measure because if they did, politics being what it is, some Republicans would say, “Well, we aren’t going to support it because it’s a Democratic proposal.” Very much in our mind when we developed this crusade; was whether our President after the next election was to be a Republican or a Democrat. The fact was, as I put it, we had to have an American foreign policy. (Judd 1970)

Robert Taft’s (R-OH) orientation provides insights into the anti-UN conservatism of the day. In the Ohio senator we find a strong advocate for American exceptionalism, libertarian ideas

about the role of government, and a commitment to maintaining American independence and sovereignty (Dyke and Davis 1952; Moser 2001). Part of Senator Taft's basic assumptions included denying significant international threats to American security. This narrative referred to Nazi Germany as a "bugaboo to scare the American people into war" (Congressional Record 1941). Nevertheless, with changes in public opinion, the attacks on Pearl Harbor, and trust in the idea of applying rule of law to countries, Taft came to support U.S. participation in the war and voted for ratification of the UN Charter (Taft 1951, 13).

Public Support for an International Organization

In early 1945, several essential factors that were key to the U.S. ratification of the charter came together. First, public opinion changed dramatically. By April 1945 when Gallup asked, "Do you think the United States should join a world organization with police power to maintain world peace?" 81 percent supported this endeavor—moving from a tepid 56 percent in 1936 (Gallup 1972, 497). The progression in public opinion is evident in Table 1. Overall support moves from 56 percent in 1936 to 72 percent in April 1945, and opposition shrinks from close to 50 percent to a meager 13 percent. The changes in public opinion are significant; the growing support of the UN project was the result of Roosevelt's quiet campaign and the vocal support of diverse civil society organizations who advocated for an international organizational approach to avert war.

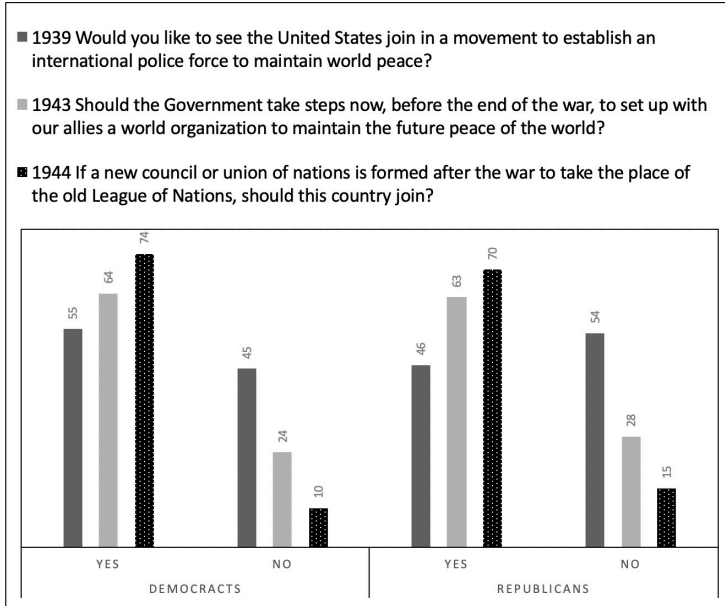
Table 1. U.S. Public Opinion on the Creation of a Universal International Organization 1936–45

DATE	QUESTION	Percent respondent indicating Yes	Percent respondent indicating No	No opinion
December 1936	Should the countries of North and South America form their own League of Nations?	56	44	
September 1939	Would you like to see the U.S. join in a movement to establish an international police force to maintain world peace?	53	47	
August 1941	Would you like to see the U.S. join a League of Nations after the war is over?	61	23	16
December 1942	Should the government take steps now, before the end of the war, to set up with our allies a world organization to maintain the future peace of the world?	64	24	12
March 1943	Should the government take steps now, before the end of the war, to set up with our allies a world organization to maintain the future peace of the world?	64	24	12
May 1943	Should the government take steps now, before the end of the war, to set up with our allies a world organization to maintain the future peace of the world?	64	24	12
June 1943	Should the countries fighting the Axis set up an international police force after the war is over to try and keep peace throughout the world?	76	14	12
September 1943	Taking in account the arguments for, and those against, how do you yourself stand—are you for or against an international police force?	75	17	8
May 1944	Should the government take steps now, before the end of the war, to set up with our allies a world organization to maintain the future peace of the world, or should we wait until after the war is won?	73	18	
April 1945	Do you think the U.S. should join a world organization with police power to maintain world peace?	72	13	15

Source: Gallup, George H. 1972. *The Gallup Poll: Public Opinion 1935–1971*. Vol. I. New York, NY: Random House.

Furthermore, as is noticeable in Figure 1, the support for the UN project is bipartisan. In 1939, when polled about “joining an international police force,” 55 percent of those who identified as Democrat replied “yes” with 45 percent indicating “no.” For those who identified as Republican, 46 percent indicated “yes” and 54 percent reject the idea. However, only five years later, there is strong bipartisan support as 74 percent of polled Democrats and 70 percent of Republicans favored U.S. membership in a new “Union of Nations.” Opposition from self-identified Republicans drops dramatically from 54 percent in 1939 to 15 percent in 1944.

Figure 1. Public Opinion 1939–44 by Political Party Identification



Source: Gallup, George H. 1972. *The Gallup Poll: Public Opinion 1935–1971*. Vol. I. New York, NY: Random House.

In addition, the political elite, most importantly members of the U.S. Senate, were no longer riddled with fear about lost sovereignty and isolationism. Roosevelt’s unexpected death on 12 April 1945 also had the potential to end the U.S. leadership in the formation of the UN. However, Truman also held Roosevelt’s commitment to the creation of an international organization and as a senator had co-sponsored a resolution calling on Roosevelt to support a global body. In addition, Truman had participated in B2H2 speaking tours advocating the merits of an organization like the UN. In a careful and considered effort to promote bipartisan support, the San Francisco delegation included both Democrats and Republicans.

In San Francisco, 300 delegates from fifty countries drafted the UN Charter in June 1945. Former Secretary of State Cordell Hull won the Nobel Prize for his efforts in creating the institution, giving extensive credit to Leo Pasvolosky, who called the UN Charter “one of the great milestones in man’s upward climb toward a truly civilized existence” (Hoopes and Brinkley 1997, 204). Truman left both the idealism and the domestic fumbles of Wilson behind.

After the drafting process at San Francisco, Senate ratification cast a cloud over global optimism. American isolationism and sovereignty protectionism had the potential to derail ratification once again as lingering hold outs appeared in the Senator Foreign Relations Committee. However, unlike 1919, President Truman went forward with a keen eye to the Senate’s temperament and leveraged Roosevelt’s campaign to make the UN project a bipartisan one. Truman’s drive in the Senate was well organized, backed by public opinion, and contained

significant bipartisan support.³ In a ringing endorsement, the Senate ratified the UN Charter in a resounding 89–2 vote.

The Formula for Success

In returning to the questions posed at the beginning of the paper, how did Roosevelt, and later Truman, convince a reluctant public and obstructionist Congress to accept membership in the UN? The successful passage of the UN Charter partly comes from interactive sources—changes in public opinion, bipartisan consensus, and changes in narratives about the structure of the UN versus that of the league. One of the essential components was the commitment of political elites themselves. Without Roosevelt’s campaign and then Truman’s commitment to moving forward with the San Francisco conference, the UN may never have materialized.

The second key attribute is how international organizations are presented to other political elites and the general public. The framing of the need for a general association of states changes considerably from Wilson to Truman and was still built on two key ideals that appealed to the United States. The first was rooted in idealism and the notion that the U.S. held an obligation to expand its system of governance. The people of the U.S. embraced exceptionalism almost universally. Narratives about the U.S. as a model state were invoked as a “folktale” and helped push reluctant publics and members of Congress into international engagement (Hartz 1955).

The second core appeal was based in realism and held the notion that membership in the UN was a strategic interest for the U.S., both reducing the threat of war and increasing U.S. influence through institutional restraint (Ikenberry 2000). Roosevelt avoided Wilson’s idealistic narratives that relied on good will to reform power maximizing states. Instead, he made his arguments on the pragmatic side—the military might of the great powers would check power politics and the impetus for war. Roosevelt’s emphasis on great powers distanced the key incentive structures of the league from that of the future UN. Moreover, where Wilson based his argument on moral claims with U.S. exceptionalism thrown in, Truman continued Roosevelt’s pragmatism. In a radio address to the San Francisco Conference, he proclaimed, “With ever-increasing brutality and destruction, modern warfare, if unchecked, would ultimately crush all civilization. . . . The essence of our problem here is to provide sensible machinery for the settlement of disputes among nations” (Truman 1945).

Another key factor within the changing narratives was branding isolationism as naïve and antiquated (Doenecke 1979, 11–12). In fact, many in Congress were advocates of internationalism and helped change the discourse about sovereignty. For example, Fulbright argued that “National sovereignty was in fact a trick, an illusion, especially in the world of airplanes, submarines, and atomic weapons” (Woods 1987, 29). Here Congress served an important role in legitimizing the idea of internationalism and advocating the specific parameters of the UN (U.S. House of Representatives 1976, 16).

Both Roosevelt and Truman cultivated bipartisan support for the UN. Membership in the UN was not politicized as membership in the league was in 1919. As a colleague and friend of Truman explained, “History has proved that it was an extremely wise step to make our effort bipartisan, and to include both executive and legislative branches, and both House and Senate. This made it impossible for the San Francisco Conference, for example, to be thrust into partisan politics, as the Versailles Conference had been” (Judd 1970, 25). Support within the Republican Party was also key as individuals like Wendell Willkie and Vandenberg effectively removed “the brand of isolationism from the Republican Party” (Hagerty 1942, 1).

Public acceptance reinforced the bipartisan support for the UN. Unlike Wilson’s eleventh hour crusade to garner support for the league, Roosevelt sowed the seeds of public approval years before the Senate vote on ratification of the UN Charter. He was

3. Some in the Senate accused the Truman administration of using public opinion polls to manipulate the process in the Senate. Luck describes the ratification process as so organized that some accused him of coercing the process (1999, 258–60).

deliberately illusive and vague to provide the political space to woo U.S. citizens as he worked out the details with the Allies. While one hand quietly lobbied the Soviets, British, and Chinese, the other hand forged a discreet public relations campaign. This was a balancing act requiring timing and restraint (Hoopes and Brinkley 1997). In addition, civil society helped to bolster the viability of the UN project. The National League of Women Voters provided its 600 chapters with a discussion guide while the Woodrow Wilson Foundation mailed 318,000 copies of the Dumbarton Oaks agreement. The American Legion sent 12,000 memos supporting the UN Charter (Robins 1971, 167). There was a series of radio programs by State Department officials. In a letter to many civic groups and public organizations regarding an “Educational Campaign,” Clark Eichelberger wrote, “We have a ‘second chance’ to establish such an organization” (Robins 1971, 178). Table 2 lists many of the organizations that actively supported the creation of the UN in 1944, as well as many of whom served as official consultants to the San Francisco Conference.

Table 2. Select U.S. Civil Society Organizations Supporting Membership in a Postwar International Organization

American Bar Association*
American Council on Education
American Farm Bureau Federation*
American Jewish Conference
American Legion*
American Unitarian Youth*
Catholic, Jewish and Protestant Declaration on World Peace*
Chamber of Commerce of the United States*
Congress of Industrial Organizations*
Council on Foreign Relations
Disabled Veterans of the World War
Farmers Union
Kiwanis International
Lions International
National Association for the Advancement of Colored People National
Association of Manufacturers*
National Congress of Parents and Teachers*
National Education Association
National Farmers Union*
National League of Women Voters*
Railway Labor Executives' Association Rotary International
Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States*

Source: Department of State study, “Public Attitudes on Foreign Policy,” Nos. 32 and 37, 16 August 1944 and 3 October 1944 (Robins 1971).
*Groups also serving as Official Consultants to the United Nations Conference on International Organizations in San Francisco.

Thus, in 1945, support for the UN project from the war weary public was robust. The media also supported political messaging through books like *One World* by Wendell Willkie (1943) and the 1944 film *Wilson* that sparked new interest in a civilizing organization to curtail the vices of world politics. Together, a commitment from the president, bipartisan support in Congress (which was bolstered by civil society), and a supportive public (cultivated through referring to such a project as “a permanent peace”) created a foundation to support both the creation of the UN and U.S. membership in the organization.

The Past as a Preview

Woodrow Wilson’s idealism, Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s pragmatism, and Harry S. Truman’s vision of a “Parliament of Man” culminated in a multilateral initiative to build an international forum for conflict resolution. Within the U.S., the idea of the UN became palatable as it was framed to promote U.S. strategic interests and values. Together the confluence of presidential leadership, public opinion, civil society, and bipartisan support in Congress created the unique conditions that resulted in robust support for the creation of the UN.

However, U.S. sponsorship of the UN is waning. The first pillar of public commitment from political elites is spotty at best. Furthermore, this tepid support undermines public backing. For over two decades, it is rare to hear a U.S. president or any elected U.S. official praise the UN. Presidents do not use the bully pulpit to bolster support for either the UN or international institutions in general. Bipartisan bashing from President Bill Clinton (pertaining to Rwanda, Bosnia, and Kosovo) to President George W. Bush's claim of UN "irrelevance" and to President Donald Trump's description of the UN as a "club for people to get together, talk and have a good time" continues to sow the seeds for declining approval. This is evident as over 60 percent of the U.S. public assessed the UN as doing a "poor" job in February 2018. This same Gallup Poll found that only 34 percent of U.S. citizens rated the UN as doing a "good job." Furthermore, the UN has lost its bipartisan support, again Gallup indicates a 54 percent approval rate from Democrats and a low 19 percent approval rating from Republicans (McCarthy 2018). While a Better World Campaign poll presents a more optimistic view and found that in October 2017, 79 percent of the Americans it surveyed agreed the UN "is an organization that is still needed today." It also reveals a partisan divide with self-identified Democrats at 91 percent and people who "voted for Donald Trump" recording 58 percent (Better World Campaign 2017).

As demonstrated in the creation of the UN, public support for U.S. engagement in international institutions is not intuitive and is prone to being undermined by nationalist rhetoric. Political elites must make the case if they want public support for international organizations. An argument that appeals to tactical consideration, pragmatic utility as well as national character seems to be an effective approach (Plesch and Weiss 2015). The recent "America First" campaign resoundingly echoes the 1919 conversation, because it promotes a view that fears loss of sovereignty and nationalism, and it takes a defensive approach to foreign relations. This narrative provides an over optimistic view of U.S. capacities, where international organizations merely serve as a venue for coercive bilateralism. At the time of writing, the sitting president of the U.S. expressed open disdain for the UN and framed strategic national interests in terms of autonomy, retrenchment, and rejection of alliances. Without the support of political elites, international organizations will falter.

Congressional support, another key element that led to the creation of the UN, is also fragmented. The rejection of multilateral approaches is reflected in the fact that the U.S. Senate has not ratified a multilateral treaty in over fifteen years—this is not news. This trend is part of a longer pattern of reluctance and skepticism (remembering, for instance, that it took forty years for the Senate to ratify the 1948 Genocide Convention). Overall, the U.S. ratification ratio of treaties is thirteen points lower than the global average and 30 percent lower than other G8 countries (Thimm 2016). This congressional posture has compromised U.S. financial support of the UN for decades. Together, congressional wariness and growing partisanship results in further damage to the UN system as in times of divided government, U.S. financial support for the UN is often politicized (Lyon 2016).

The history of the domestic politics of U.S. ratification of the UN Charter reveals an essential tension in ongoing relations between the UN and the U.S. Despite the gains made through participation in the UN (burden sharing, legitimacy, and expertise), factious political elites perpetuate fearful rhetoric about violations of sovereignty and UN designs to impede on U.S. domestic politics. While there is considerable evidence that international organizations can and do reduce global conflict (Doyle 2005; Fortna 2008; Oneal and Russett 1999; Oneal et al., 2003) public opinion and elite cues do not endorse the research. In addition, although there are civil society organizations supporting U.S. engagement with the UN, their voices are subdued compared to the vocal detractors (United Nations Association of the United States 2017). Some conservatives view international organizations as another layer of intrusive government control that is ineffective at best and corrupt and financially draining at worst. Again, in similar fashion to the post-WWI era, there is opposition from both ends of the political spectrum as

some liberals find the UN holds a persistent anti-Israel bias. Reminiscent of the league fight in 1919, echoes of the past resound today as “irreconcilable” voices in the U.S. demonstrate naiveté about international interdependencies, hold misinformation about the UN’s capacities, and at the same time, have unrealistic expectations. Once again an “America First” campaign has found popular support as crowds rally against free trade and global engagement.

Although the rhetoric surrounding the UN is typically designed for the domestic audience, it resonates beyond U.S. borders and disregards steadfast allies and rule bound approaches to promoting global security. As the U.S. increasingly shuns the UN, it leads the world back to the interwar years where use of force was the primary instrument of foreign affairs. The timing on this is unfortunate as the need for multilateral collaboration has never been higher, and the capacities of U.S. military tools to meet foreign policy goals are increasingly questionable. Beyond strategic interests, abandoning the UN also means the U.S. forsakes the ideals of democracy and human rights it has championed under both Democratic and Republican presidents. The words of Supreme Court Justice Roberts are still apropos, without support for global institutional restraint the U.S. may “let the world roll into chaos.” Discarding the UN, without a replacement, is not only reckless, it has the potential to render the global community essentially lawless.

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