



Historical Background
Office of the Historian
Bureau of Public Affairs

The United States and the Founding of the United Nations, August 1941 – October 1945

The impetus to establish the United Nations stemmed in large part from the inability of its predecessor, the League of Nations, to prevent the outbreak of the Second World War. Despite Germany's occupation of a number of European states, and the League's failure to stop other serious international transgressions in the 1930s, such as Japan's invasion of Manchuria, many international leaders remained committed to the League's ideals. Once World War II began, President Franklin D. Roosevelt determined that U.S. leadership was essential for the creation of another international organization aimed at preserving peace, and his administration engaged in international diplomacy in pursuit of that goal. He also worked to build domestic support for the concept of the United Nations. After Roosevelt's death, President Harry S. Truman also assumed the important task of maintaining support for the United Nations and worked through complicated international problems, particularly with the Soviet Union, to make the founding of the new organization possible. After nearly four years of planning, the international community finally established the United Nations in the spring of 1945.

Origins of the United Nations

The concept of creating a global organization of member states dedicated to preserving international peace through collective security increased in popularity during World War I. The bloodshed of the "Great War" persuaded President Woodrow Wilson, and a number of other American and international leaders, to seek the creation of an international forum in which conflicts could be resolved peacefully. The 1919 Treaty of Versailles that ended World War I, which Wilson negotiated on behalf of the United States, contained a framework for a League of Nations, intended to maintain peace and stability. However, despite Wilson's efforts to gain the domestic support of political leaders and the American public, he was unable to convince the United States Senate to approve U.S. membership in the League. This was due to strong isolationist sentiment and partisan conflicts, stemming in part from his failure to include any prominent Republicans in the peace negotiations. The League's opponents criticized it as a threat to American sovereignty and security, and objected most stridently to Article Ten of the League Charter, which committed member states to protect the territorial integrity of all other member states against external aggression. Many American lawmakers argued that Article Ten might obligate the United States to take part in wars in defense of dubious, often contested, colonial boundaries. After considering membership in the League with reservations, the Senate ultimately prevented the United States from joining the League. The absence of the United States weakened the League, which was also hindered in its efforts to resolve disputes by the widespread economic crises of the 1930s, its inability to compel states to abide by its decisions, and its requirement that many decisions—including those involving a response to aggression—be decided unanimously. The fact that member states involved in a dispute were granted a seat on the League's Council, thereby allowing them to prevent unanimous action, meant that the League eventually resorted to expelling aggressor states such as Japan and Italy, with little effect.

Proposing the United Nations Concept

President Roosevelt recognized the inherent weaknesses of the League of Nations, but faced with the reality of another world war, also saw the value of planning for the creation of an international organization to maintain peace in the post-World War II era. He felt that this time, the United States needed to play a leading role both in the creation of the organization, and in the organization itself. Moreover, in contrast to the League, the new organization needed the power to enforce key decisions. The first wartime meeting between British Prime Minister Winston Churchill and President Roosevelt, the Atlantic Conference held off the coast of Newfoundland in August 1941, took place before the United States had formally entered the war as a combatant. Despite its official position of neutrality, the United States joined Britain in issuing a joint declaration that became known as the Atlantic Charter. This pronouncement outlined a vision for a postwar order supported, in part, by an effective international organization that would replace the struggling League of Nations. During this meeting, Roosevelt privately suggested to Churchill the name of the future organization: the United Nations.

The governments of the United States, the Soviet Union, the United Kingdom, and China formalized the Atlantic Charter proposals in January 1942, shortly after the United States entered the war. In the Declaration of the United Nations, these major Allied nations, along with 22 other states, agreed to work together against the Axis powers (Germany, Japan, and Italy), and committed in principle to the establishment of the United Nations after the war.

Learning from Woodrow Wilson's failure to gain Congressional support for the League of Nations, the Roosevelt Administration aimed to include a wide range of administration and elected officials in its effort to establish the proposed United Nations. The State Department played a significant role in this process, and created a Special Subcommittee on International Organization in the Advisory Committee on Postwar Planning to advise Congress. The subcommittee reviewed past efforts at international cooperation, and by March 1943 had drafted a formal proposal to establish a new, more effective international organization. Secretary of State Cordell Hull took the proposal to members of Congress in an effort to build bipartisan support for the proposed postwar organization. Consultations between Congress and the Department of State continued into the summer of 1943, and by August, produced a draft United Nations Charter. Congress repeatedly passed resolutions declaring its support for the establishment of an international organization—and for United States membership in that organization.

The major Allied Powers—the United States, the Soviet Union, the United Kingdom, and China—reiterated their commitment to forming an international organization in the Moscow Declaration of October 30, 1943, and more concrete international planning for the structure of the new organization commenced. Representatives from these four countries met at Dumbarton Oaks in Washington, DC, from August 21 through

October 7, 1944, and the four Allied powers issued a statement of Proposals for the Establishment of a General International Organization, largely based on the draft charter formulated by the State Department's Subcommittee on International Organization, in consultation with the U.S. Congress.

The Department of State undertook a public relations campaign to build support for the United Nations. As part of that effort, the Department printed over 200,000 copies of the Dumbarton Oaks proposal and an informative, eight-page guide to the draft United Nations Charter. The Department worked in concert with interested groups to inform the public about the United Nations and even dispatched officials around the country to answer questions on the proposed organization. By the end of the effort, the Department of State had coordinated almost 500 such meetings.

Creation of the United Nations

The basic framework for the proposed United Nations rested on President Roosevelt's vision that the United States, the Soviet Union, the United Kingdom, and China would provide leadership in the postwar international system. It was these four states, with the addition of France, that would assume permanent seats in the otherwise rotating membership of the United Nations Security Council. At the Anglo-American Malta Conference in early 1945, the two sides proposed that the permanent members of the Security Council would have a veto. Immediately thereafter, at the Yalta Conference, the United States, the Soviet Union, and the United Kingdom agreed on veto power for the permanent members of the Security Council. This crucial decision essentially required unanimity between the five permanent members on the pressing international decisions related to international security and use of force that would be brought before the Security Council.

Churchill and Roosevelt also made an important concession to Soviet leader Josef Stalin's request that the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic and the Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic be seated in the United Nations General Assembly, thus increasing the Soviet Union's seats in that body to three. Stalin had originally requested seats for all sixteen Soviet Socialist Republics, but at Yalta this request was turned down, and the compromise was to allow Ukraine and Byelorussia into the United Nations. The United States originally had countered Stalin's proposal with the request to allow all fifty American states into the United Nations, a suggestion that encouraged Stalin to agree to the compromise. At Yalta, the United States, the Soviet Union, and the United Kingdom also drafted invitations to a conference beginning in April 1945 in San Francisco that would formally establish the United Nations.

After Roosevelt's death on April 12, 1945, days before the scheduled San Francisco Conference, Vice President Harry S Truman took the oath of office and immediately announced that the Conference should go forward as planned. Moved by Roosevelt's death, Stalin, who had initially planned to send Ambassador Andrei Gromyko as the Soviet representative to the San Francisco conference, announced that he would send Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Molotov as well. This news heartened American officials, who had been concerned about maintaining Soviet interest and participation in the United Nations after a number of disagreements over the extent of Soviet influence in Eastern Europe and the fate of Germany in the postwar period. In an address to Congress shortly thereafter, Truman called upon Americans "regardless of party, race, creed or color, to support our efforts to build a strong and lasting United Nations organization."

The San Francisco Conference, formally known as the United Nations Conference on International Organization, opened on April 25, 1945, with delegations from fifty countries present. The U.S. delegation to San Francisco included Secretary of State Edward R. Stettinius, Jr., former Secretary of State Cordell Hull, and Senators Tom Connally (D-Texas) and Arthur Vandenberg (R-Michigan), as well as other Congressional and public representatives. Among the most controversial issues at the San Francisco Conference was the seating of certain countries, in particular, Argentina, the Ukrainian and Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republics, and Poland. The vote to seat Argentina was particularly contentious because the Soviet Union strongly opposed Argentine membership arguing that Argentina had supported the Axis during the war. However, the other Latin American states refused to support the Ukrainian and Byelorussian candidacies if Argentina were blocked. The United States supported Argentina's membership, but also defended the Ukrainian and Byelorussian seats in order to maintain the Soviet Union's participation in the United Nations. The makeup of the Polish government was a continuing source of tension between the wartime allies, and thus a Polish delegation was not seated until after the conference.

At San Francisco, the delegates reviewed and often rewrote the text agreed to at Dumbarton Oaks. The delegations negotiated a role for regional organizations under the United Nations umbrella and outlined the powers of the office of Secretary General, including the authority to refer conflicts to the Security Council. Conference participants also considered a proposal for compulsory jurisdiction for a World Court, but Stettinius recognized such an outcome could imperil Senate ratification. The delegates then agreed that each state should make its own determination about World Court membership. The conference did approve the creation of an Economic and Social Council and a Trusteeship Council to assist in the process of decolonization, and agreed that these councils would have rotating geographic representation. The United Nations Charter also gave the United Nations broader jurisdiction over issues that were "essentially within" the domestic jurisdiction of states, such as human rights, than the League of Nations had, and broadened its scope on economic and technological issues.

Determining the extent of the veto power of the permanent members of the Security Council proved a more serious potential obstacle to agreement on a United Nations charter. The Soviet Union advocated broad use of the veto, viewing it as a possible tool to curb discussion on conflicts involving a permanent member. Such an interpretation worried the smaller states, which were already hesitant about the permanent veto. In order to gain Soviet agreement to modify such an expansive interpretation of the veto, Truman directed Harry Hopkins, who had many wartime discussions with Stalin, to travel to Moscow and negotiate with the Soviet leader on the issue. After bilateral Soviet-American negotiations in Moscow, the Soviet Union eventually agreed to a less extensive veto power. While the permanent members retained veto power with respect to non-procedural matters, the Security Council would not require a unanimous vote to act, and would have the power to take decisions that would be binding on Member States.

Following the resolution of most outstanding issues, the San Francisco Conference closed on June 26, 1945. In a show of support, Truman attended the final session for the signing of the United Nations Charter, and congratulated the delegates for creating a "solid structure upon which we can build a better world." However, Truman still needed to secure Senate ratification of the Charter. Both he and Stettinius urged the Senate to give its advice and consent to ratification; Truman said, "I want to see the United States do it first." In a testament to the sustained wartime efforts to build support for the United Nations, the Charter was approved in the Senate on July 28, 1945, by a vote of 89 to 2, with 5 abstentions. (The U.S. ratification followed that of Nicaragua and El Salvador.) The United Nations officially came into existence on October 24, 1945, after the United States, the Soviet Union, the United Kingdom, China, and France, as well as a majority of the other signatories, had ratified the United Nations Charter.

Early Challenges and Future Changes

At its first session, on February 14, 1946, the United Nations General Assembly voted to establish its permanent headquarters in New York City. In a world emerging from the overwhelming conflict of World War II, the United Nations seemed to represent hope that such devastation would not recur. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the General Assembly in 1948, symbolized this optimism and idealism. Yet the first true test of the United Nations' ability to prevent widespread international conflict came in June 1950, when North Korea invaded South Korea. In response, the United Nations Security Council initiated military sanctions against North Korea, an action made possible by the absence of the Soviet representative, who had walked out in protest against the Council's refusal to seat representatives of Communist China. This allowed the Security Council to assist South Korea in repelling its attackers and maintaining its territorial integrity.

Other issues brought before the United Nations in its early years included the Greek and Turkish dispute over Cyprus and the Cuban Missile Crisis. However, as relations between the East and the West deteriorated in the Cold War era, the Yalta decision to grant all permanent members of the Security Council veto power frequently stymied the Security Council. This increased the profile of the General Assembly, where no state enjoyed a veto. As issues pertaining to international security remained deadlocked in the Security Council during the Cold War, the increasingly active General Assembly expanded the focus of the United Nations to include economic development, famine relief, women's rights, and environmental protection, among other issues.

With the end of the Cold War, the United Nations has taken on increasing security responsibilities, negotiated peaceful resolutions to conflict, and deployed peacekeeping forces around the world. In recognition of the organization's significant contributions, the United Nations and United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan were awarded the 2001 Nobel Peace Prize. The Norwegian Nobel Committee declared in its award citation, "Today the organization is at the forefront of efforts to achieve peace and security in the world, and of the international mobilization aimed at meeting the world's economic, social and environmental challenges...the only negotiable route to global peace and cooperation goes by way of the United Nations."

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