

History in Action: Teaching Diplomatic History to Diplomats

Melissa Jane Taylor and Alexander R. Wieland

For more than three years, the Office of the Historian at the U.S. Department of State has been providing diplomatic history modules for each new class of Foreign Service Officers (FSOs) that is trained through the Foreign Service Institute (FSI). Our main goal in teaching history to FSOs-in-training, many of whom already possess advanced degrees in international relations, political science, and other related disciplines, is not to impart a set body of knowledge but to prepare them to deal with the practical situations they will face during their diplomatic careers. To that end we have designed interactive historical scenarios that highlight common foreign policy dilemmas and thereby underline the importance of history as a guide to policymakers. Each of us has created a role-playing exercise in which the students are asked to put themselves in the shoes of historical actors. In the first exercise, the students are cast as consular officers assigned the task of constructing appropriate diplomatic responses to the immigration crisis of the 1930s; in the second, students are Washington-based Department of State bureau officials charged with formulating a U.S. response to the events of the 1956 Suez Crisis.

Immigration Crisis, Vienna 1938: The Implications of Policy for Consular Officials

Over the past year, Melissa Jane Taylor designed and taught a course in which FSOs are placed in Vienna during the summer of 1938, shortly after Austria's annexation to Germany. Her personal scholarly research focuses on immigration from Vienna during the late 1930s and lent itself well to developing an interactive module. Many of the new FSOs will serve at consular posts at some point in their careers, so it seemed appropriate to introduce an interactive module on immigration history to those who might

eventually be asked to implement U.S. immigration policy.

In preparation for the class, the students are asked to read two briefings that Taylor prepared: one describing the situation facing Viennese Jews in the immediate aftermath of the March 1938 annexation of Austria and a second describing the restrictionist U.S. immigration policy of that period. In addition, the students are given two Department of State documents from that time that further outline how immigration policy was to be implemented by consular officials. At the beginning of the module, the students are placed into small groups. Each group is given an immigrant visa application to evaluate and must determine whether a visa would be granted or rejected and on what grounds. Taylor utilizes six different immigration cases for each class. The students will eventually learn the actual outcome of three of those, which are real cases drawn from her research; the other three are invented, keeping in mind historical accuracies. The class is divided into twelve groups, and two groups work on each case. The students are also told that each case must be evaluated based upon what they know about Vienna in 1938 and not on what they know about the subsequent deportation of the Jews or the Holocaust and its atrocities.

Visa applicants range from a middle-aged Jewish confectioner with a wife and nine children to an elderly Jewish widow who wishes to join her children in the United States. Applications include as many different types of people as possible (single, married, widowed; students, professionals, laborers, intellectuals, retirees; political dissidents and Jews) with varying strengths and weaknesses in the supporting documentation necessary for the issuance of visas. After the students have had sufficient time to discuss and evaluate their cases, each group is asked to present its case to the class

and explain its decision. The situation replicates as much as possible that of a consular officer in the late 1930s: there is some but not a lot of time in which to make a decision; in some instances there are questions that are not answered in the documentation; and there is a fixed quota of applications that can be approved in a given month. It is clear in each class that the students are struck and challenged by the constraints upon them; consular documentation from the period makes it clear that U.S. consuls felt the same way.

The beauty of this exercise is that there are no right or wrong answers. A strong case can be made to accept or deny each applicant. The first time this module was taught, all but one immigrant visa received contradictory responses, and in subsequent iterations this trend has continued. Some groups are very restrictionist in their implementation, which is appropriate for 1938; some make an effort to find valid reasons for granting a visa to an individual or family. The divided responses generate a wealth of discussion and resonate with the students, who acknowledge that either answer could be accepted as valid within the constraints of policy. Moreover, the differing outcomes underline the degree of autonomy consular officials possessed in the late 1930s when adjudicating visa applications.

After the exercise is complete and there has been plenty of time for discussion, the students are challenged to consider the case of John Wiley, American consul general in Vienna from July 1937 to July 1938. Wiley witnessed the annexation of Austria and the wave of virulent anti-Semitism that ensued, and he had to deal with the masses of individuals, primarily Austrian Jews, who flooded the American consulate in a desperate attempt to secure an American immigration visa. Wiley was deeply affected by the plight of the Jews, as his actions indicate, and he encouraged the

consuls under his charge to issue visas to as many qualified applicants as were allowable under the law. Unlike his counterparts throughout Germany, Wiley did not implement restrictionist immigration policy, nor did he create additional barriers for applicants.

The students are asked to consider the moral dilemmas that Wiley would have faced. Wiley responded to his own internal moral compass, but he also adhered to the legal limitation outlined in U.S. immigration law. Unlike so many of his counterparts, who implemented immigration law as strictly as possible, he chose to walk a fine line and in so doing, skillfully created a "middle ground." Fortunately his career did not suffer; he went on to serve four ambassadorships in Europe, the Middle East, and Central and South America.

The moral dilemmas faced by consuls when they implement immigration policy are not an artifact of World War II-era diplomacy. After World War II, refugee status was written into American immigration policy, but that action did not make the decisions of consuls easier. Consuls still face moral dilemmas daily, especially in regions of crisis, where immigration to the United States can be a life-or-death matter, just as it was for Jews who sought entry to the United States immediately prior to the Holocaust.

This interactive module drives home to students both the complexities and the moral dilemmas in immigration policy. While the assignment initially seems very clear-cut to students, they quickly realize the difficulties it entails: they must interpret immigration policy, come to terms with the moral predicaments found therein, and recognize the impact that their decisions will have on applicants' lives.

Suez, 1956: An Historical Crisis Diplomacy Exercise

Alexander R. Wieland has developed an interactive role-playing exercise in which students are assigned the task of developing U.S. policy within the context of the 1956 Suez Crisis. Specifically, the FSOs are asked to grapple with the situation as it existed on the morning of November 5, 1956—that is, at the moment U.S. policymakers learned of the landing of Anglo-French ground forces near the Suez Canal, a move which not only escalated hostilities in the crisis, but which also drew sharp criticism and veiled threats from the Soviet Union. In the course of the session the students

must devise and present concrete recommendations for how the Eisenhower administration should respond to the actions of its British and French allies.

In contrast to the immigration case exercise, the FSOs are asked to consider the situation from the perspective of policymakers at the Department of State in Washington, rather than that of officials "on the ground." Prior to the session, the class is divided into seven "State Department bureau" groups, each with a specific portfolio for which they are responsible. Two of the groups represent the European Affairs bureau, one concerned with U.S. relations with the Western Alliance, the other with U.S.–Soviet relations. Two Near Eastern affairs bureau groups are charged with representing the viewpoints of U.S. relations with Egypt and Israel, respectively. The final three bureau groups are responsible for analyzing the situation from the perspective of U.S.–United Nations relations, international public opinion, and international economic affairs.

Each group, regardless of bureau or portfolio, is assigned the same task: to make specific recommendations for U.S. policy vis-à-vis the British and French invasion while (ideally) maintaining the institutional perspective and interests of the group's individual portfolio. The groups are then asked to present their recommendations orally in a mock briefing session with an individual playing the role of Acting Secretary of State Herbert Hoover, Jr., who at the time was in charge of State in place of the hospitalized John Foster Dulles.

The purpose of separating the students into individual groups with distinct perspectives is to give them a sense of the bureaucratic rivalries that can exist within a policymaking body and the extent to which foreign policy recommendations can become divided because of the tendency of different groups to view the portfolios under their purview as the "most important" consideration for U.S. policy. While it is obviously unrealistic to expect students to be fully steeped in the institutional perspectives of their respective bureaus in a single session, particularly as the details of the Suez Crisis itself are often largely unfamiliar to them, efforts are made in this exercise to replicate the divisions these perspectives would have incalculated. The FSOs are given a series of documents to read in preparation for the exercise. All students are given a short general chronology of the events of the Suez

Crisis up to November 5, and the minutes of the National Security Council meeting of November 1, 1956, drawn from the *Foreign Relations of the United States* volume on the crisis, both of which are designed to provide context and setting for the students.

The FSOs are also given one- to three-page "briefing papers" specific to their portfolio, which were drafted by Wieland. The papers are shaped to reflect what U.S. policymakers would likely have known on the morning of November 5, 1956, rather than the subsequent historiography. In this way students are less likely to be influenced by the "correct" historical course of action ultimately adopted by the Eisenhower administration or by details that would have been largely unknown to the Americans at the time—e.g., the secret Anglo-French-Israeli Protocol of Sèvres. Each bureau group is assigned a different briefing paper tailored to focus on the implications of the Anglo-French landings for that group's portfolio: relations with the Western Alliance, U.S.–Egyptian relations, etc. The students are encouraged to read only their group's briefing paper in order to limit the amount of information available to them and to push them to shape their policy recommendations according to the relatively narrow emphasis of the group's portfolio.

During the class session, the students first meet with the other members of their bureau group in order to formulate their recommendations. The majority of the period, however, is devoted to a mock briefing of "Acting Secretary of State Hoover." After each group has had the opportunity to present its recommendations, Hoover asks the students numerous follow-up questions, often forcing them to justify their positions or to consider factors they may have overlooked. In the majority of cases, the groups have tended to present recommendations mirroring the decisions ultimately taken by the Eisenhower administration: apply pressure (publicly or privately) upon London and Paris to halt their operations, avoid any action that could be interpreted as hypocritical by the international community in light of Washington's criticism of the Soviets' concurrent intervention in Hungary, minimize alienation of Gamal Abdel Nasser, etc. The questioning by Hoover, however, has tended to push the students to consider alternatives to these options, thereby emphasizing the idea that the decisions taken were neither foreordained nor immediately

obvious to those making them and forcing the bureau groups to defend their individual portfolios. Wouldn't censure of Britain and France lead to fractures in the Western Alliance? If Nasser has already accepted weapons from the communist bloc, why should the United States worry about whether he stays in power? What is the Soviet capacity to follow through on its threats to use its military might to bring the British and French to heel? Is the Kremlin's threat credible? The session wraps up with a brief summation in which Wieland explores the course of action the Eisenhower administration adopted to bring the crisis to a close and examines some of the consequences, both positive and negative, these decisions had for the United States.

This historical role-playing exercise accomplishes a number of objectives. As with the immigration exercise, students are given the opportunity to deal with the type of high-pressure crisis situation they may encounter in the course of their diplomatic careers, when they may be forced to make concrete policy recommendations or decisions without the benefit of unlimited time or information. At the same time, the FSOs are presented with a number of conceptual dilemmas ranging from the political (what do policymakers do when confronted with allies who pursue actions contrary to U.S. foreign policy objectives?) to the practical (what role does institutional rivalry play in shaping foreign policy decisions?) in order to give them the experience of developing courses of action for the United States to take.

These exercises are only a couple of examples of the types of history-based sessions used by Department of State historians in their diplomatic history program for new FSOs. In addition to role-playing, the program also incorporates more traditional lecture-and-discussion sessions. Again, to make them more useful to the student-practitioners, these sessions have tended to be more thematic than strictly chronological. Examples from the course have included sessions on ideological debates in U.S. foreign policymaking during the era of the early republic, the history of the impact of public opinion and the media on U.S. foreign policymaking, the changing role that the use of force has played in the history of U.S. foreign relations, the history of foreign economic relations, and the historical growth of environmental concerns as a factor in international diplomacy. The overall objective of these sessions, and indeed of the diplomatic history program as a whole, is to reinforce

a sense of historical consciousness among the new FSOs: to give them a sense that history is relevant to the work they do, that many of the problems they will face as foreign policy practitioners are not entirely new, that their forerunners were sometimes compelled to make difficult decisions, and that these decisions did not always produce unqualified success for U.S. policy.

While these exercises were created specifically for FSOs, they could undoubtedly be implemented in undergraduate and graduate classrooms as well. All students enjoy the feeling of being on the front lines of history that role-playing brings. By giving them the opportunity to play an active role in historical scenarios, we can make history both more relevant and more accessible.

Melissa Jane Taylor and Alexander R. Wieland research and compile volumes in the Foreign Relations of the United States series in the Office of the Historian at the U.S. Department of State.

Note:

1. The views expressed here are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Office of the Historian, the U.S. Department of State or the U.S. government.

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