

Cultivating Critical Thinking: Five Methods for Teaching the History of U.S. Foreign Policy

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CRITICAL THINKING is defined more by what it is not than what it is. It is not rote memorization of dates, facts, and events. Instead, it involves delving into the meaning of historical developments—interpreting, comparing, theorizing, and evaluating—often with the aid of primary sources and multiple secondary sources. Students learn to ask questions about historical information, including how historians have framed that information. My purpose in this article is not to examine theories of critical thinking nor to review the scholarly literature on the subject, but to offer a synopsis of five methods I have successfully used in teaching about U.S. foreign policy in college-level U.S. history courses.¹

I begin the semester by establishing a context for critical thinking—the idea that participation in a democratic society requires critical thinking about the past. On the first day of class, I ask students, “Why study history?” Invariably, one of the first answers is, “To learn from our mistakes.” I then ask, “What mistakes has our nation made in the past? Can you identify any lessons we have learned?” In the ensuing discussion, it becomes clear that all students do not agree as to what constitutes a mistake or what lessons should be learned. I note that historians similarly do not all agree on these points and that it is up to them to draw their own conclusions about history. I emphasize that citizens as well as leaders are responsible for the policies of a nation. “What would happen,” I ask, “if citizens took

no responsibility for the policies of their government?”

In cultivating critical thinking over the course of the semester, I routinely use five methods or approaches: (1) analyzing historical developments in terms of policymaking decisions; (2) examining public and Congressional debates over policymaking; (3) comparing official rationales and policy results; (4) examining U.S. foreign policies through the eyes of other nations and peoples; and (5) identifying patterns and frameworks for understanding foreign policies. There are undoubtedly other methods for encouraging critical thinking, but I have found these five easy to use and remember. I include them in lessons plans and apply them in “teachable moments.”

1. Analyzing historical developments in terms of policymaking decisions. Behind the memorable events and developments of history, people make decisions. Wars, in particular, do not simply erupt like volcanoes, I tell students, but are the consequence of decisions made within particular national and international contexts. Upon what information, experiences, and assumptions do leaders based their decisions? What are the different policy options? I draw the following schema on the board:



Inputs in the area of foreign policy include such factors as ideological orientations, policy doctrines, domestic public opinion, political party positions, relations with other nations (allies and adversaries) and international agencies, lessons learned from the past, and potential repercussions of proposed actions. Policy options refer to the choices at hand advocated by different parties. In looking at how the U.S. got involved in Vietnam, for example, I employ this schema for both the Eisenhower administration in 1954 and the Johnson administration in 1964. In 1954, inputs pushing the U.S. toward military intervention were the Truman Doctrine (and the demand for U.S. support for “free peoples”), the memory of Munich and World War II (and the argument that only force can stop aggressive totalitarian regimes), the victory of communist-led forces in China in 1949 (and the advancement of domino theory), and the desire to maintain good relations with the French. Inputs inhibiting U.S. involvement were the unpopularity of the recent Korean War, the failure of the U.S. to win that war, the lack of British and international support for U.S. intervention, and the fact that Vietnam was not a vital area in Cold War geopolitics. President Eisenhower decided in the end against aiding the French. In 1964, many of the inputs were the same, except that the U.S. had committed itself to

maintaining a separate South Vietnam for the last ten years and President Johnson did not want to break that commitment. On the inhibiting side, Johnson promised not to send “our boys into another Asian land war” in the 1964 presidential election campaign and many citizens voted for him as the “peace candidate.” In the end, Johnson chose to go to war.²

This schema can be applied to most major foreign policy decisions, from the Senate debate over joining the League of Nations in 1919 to the Bush Administration’s decision to go to war against Iraq in 2003. Used consistently, this schema promotes the idea that history involves choices and decisions. It highlights the relevance of lessons we draw from the past, as these are typically applied to current and future decisions (whether correctly or not). This simple design can be used in classes from grade school to graduate school, with higher levels undertaking more sophisticated analyses of the international and domestic environments, the policymaking bureaucracy, individual and social psychology (public opinion), and public discourses.³ Students at higher levels can explore more thoroughly the selected inputs (e.g., how realistic was the “domino theory”?) and policy choices (e.g., was it possible to achieve a compromise in Vietnam similar to that of Laos in the early 1960s?).

2. Examining public and Congressional debates over policy. The second method for cultivating critical thinking builds on the first by examining domestic debates over foreign policy—the leaders, parties, and movements advocating different policy options. Most history textbooks offer only a meager sampling of the rich debates that have taken place over U.S. foreign policies and wars. Drawing students into the policy debates *of the time* reinforces the theme of democratic participation and helps make history come alive for students. Oftentimes, “lessons” we draw from the past are prefigured in debates at the time, with one side or the other warning ominously of certain policy choices and predicting debilitating effects.

Primary documents may be used effectively here. In the debate over the U.S.-Mexican War of 1846, for example, I utilize Senate speeches for and against President James K. Polk’s war bill, a resolution against the war adopted by the Massachusetts legislature, and the writings of John O’Sullivan, Walt Whitman, and Henry David Thoreau.⁴ I have developed a class exercise in which students read excerpts of the Senate speeches aloud (dramatic readings). I commission the class as the Senate of 1846 and require them to vote on Polk’s war bill and explain their reasons in writing. I have yet to see a unanimous vote. I encourage students to read their statements aloud in the interest of stimulating class discussion. I collect their papers, tally their votes, and in the next class, report the vote tally and highlight a selection of their arguments.

Focusing on historical debates helps motivate students to gather and organize information about a specific time period so as to make sense of the issue. For the debate over war preparedness that took place between August 1914 and April 1917, I ask students to work in pairs and write an editorial. “It is August 1, 1916, the second anniversary of the beginning of the Great War,” I write on the board. “Should America enter this war or stay out of it?” I provide a bulleted list of developments, three of which lean toward involvement and three of which favor neutrality. It is up to students to flesh out these points, organize and evaluate the information, and present a succinct (and opinionated) editorial (See Appendix I).

In encouraging student involvement in debates, the instructor must remain neutral, fully respecting the right of students to arrive at their own conclusions. The instructor must necessarily present a balance of information and viewpoints—from right to left, and pro-war to anti-war—for consideration. I personally am extremely careful not to be critical of any points-of-view, regardless of my own views. I furthermore encourage students to debate issues on their merits and to respect the views of others, as these are the building blocks of an intelligent democracy.

3. Comparing official rhetoric and policy results. A careful look at U.S. foreign policies often reveals a gap between official rhetoric and actual policies along with their results. I write on the board: “RHETORIC” and “POLICY/RESULTS,” setting up the comparison of words and deeds. The most common and longstanding rhetoric that has been used to justify U.S. foreign policies revolves around “freedom and democracy.” Although the U.S. champions these principles, it has acted like an imperial power more than a few times. This can be confusing to students, as many expect U.S. foreign policies to mirror “American” ideals. The first contradiction I discuss is the refusal of President Thomas Jefferson to aid the second anti-imperialist revolution in the Western Hemisphere, which took place in Haiti at the turn of the nineteenth century. The same contradiction with which students are familiar in regard to slavery and the *Declaration of Independence* is now highlighted in the foreign policy sphere, as U.S. slaveholding interests hoped to see this freedom revolution fail.

The use of primary documents is useful for examining official rhetoric. I include in my U.S. foreign policy classes Andrew Jackson’s State of the Union Address in 1830 (concerning Native American removal), the Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine of 1904, and the Truman Doctrine of 1947. I put these documents on the overhead projector and highlight and explain key passages. I ask questions such as, “What did it mean in practice for the U.S. to play the role of ‘international policeman’ in the Western Hemisphere, as set forth in the Roosevelt Corollary?” and “Who were the ‘free peoples’ to be protected under the Truman Doctrine?”

In the end, students become familiar with the idea that rhetoric must be examined in relation to practice. I use a writing exercise for the Roosevelt Corollary in which I provide students with a shortened version of Roosevelt's speech of December 1904 and a two-page synopsis of U.S. interventions in Caribbean and Central American nations between 1898 and 1934. I ask students to assess what "chronic wrongdoing" meant in practice in each case of U.S. intervention, whether U.S. actions in a country properly fell under the definition of "policeman," and what motives and interests may have influenced U.S. policy other than the duty to maintain order in the hemisphere and block European influence.

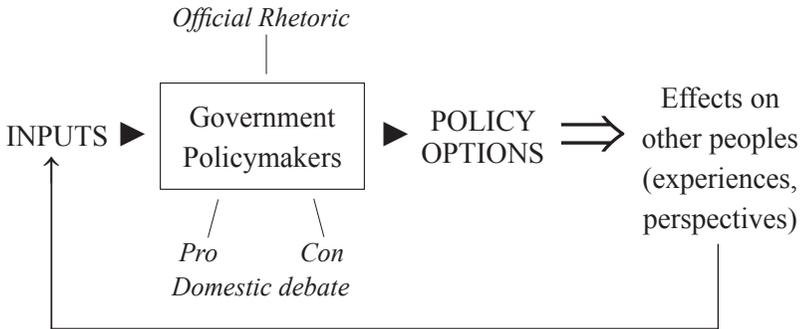
What is being cultivated here is an ability to pierce through the fog of official rhetoric and evaluate a range of policies applied to different countries. In regard to the Truman Doctrine, it may be seen that anti-communist ideology was used to justify both the protection of West Berlin from Soviet domination in 1947-1948 and U.S. support for French imperialism in Vietnam in 1950-1954. In the first case, U.S. rhetoric and actions may be judged as congruent, but in the second, a wide gap arguably existed between stated U.S. goals of promoting freedom and democracy, and the practice of aiding imperialism.

4. Examining U.S. foreign policies through the eyes of other peoples and nations. There is a strong tendency among students, and U.S. citizens in general, to view the world from a nationalistic standpoint, with global developments explained in terms of their effects on U.S. power and influence. Viewing U.S. policies through the eyes of other peoples allows students to view their own nation's policies more objectively. It is important for students to understand, for example, that many Latin Americans have viewed U.S. interventionism in their region as "Yankee imperialism." Such knowledge serves to disabuse students of the notion that the U.S. has always been, and must always be, helping other nations (and the idea of America as an exceptional nation). U.S. policies have merited praise from abroad as well, as in the cases of the Good Neighbor Policy and U.S. rebuilding efforts in Japan and Germany following World War II. Viewing the world through the eyes of other peoples and nations helps students see global developments from multiple, contrasting perspectives. The idea is to "put yourself in another's shoes."

I have found documentary film clips useful for this purpose. The first volume of "Vietnam: A Television History," for example, helps students understand how large numbers of Vietnamese came to support "communism" through Ho Chi Minh's leadership in the long struggle for Vietnamese national independence and his party's distribution of rice during times of famine. The conflict in Vietnam is thus seen not only from the vantage points of U.S. fears of communism and the "hawks versus doves"

debate within the U.S., but also from the vantage points of Vietnamese groups and Vietnamese history. Another useful video, “The Century: America’s Time,” reflects upon the devastating impact of the two world wars on Europe, which helps explain why Europe has taken steps to dilute nationalism and militarism since World War II.⁵

Such elements may be incorporated into the aforementioned diagram drawn in section number one as follows:



5. Identifying patterns and frameworks in U.S. foreign policy.

In studying different eras of U.S. history, it is necessary to connect them together. At the most basic level, timelines should be used to identify key foreign policy events and establish an orderly framework of succession. At the next stage of complexity, broad patterns and changes should be identified and discussed. In U.S. foreign policy, this includes European settlement patterns and conflicts with Native Americans, the end of westward expansion and beginning of overseas expansion in the late nineteenth century, the turn from “isolationism” to involvement in European wars in the first half of the twentieth century, the shift from U.S. interventionism in Latin America to non-interventionism in the 1930s, and the resumption of U.S. interventionism under the auspices of Cold War anti-communism. At a higher level, current developments may be examined for their historical precedents. For example, in regard to U.S. involvement in Afghanistan and Iraq, students might explore previous U.S. efforts at nation-building in countries such as the Philippines, Haiti, Dominican Republic, Nicaragua, Germany, Japan, and South Vietnam; or they might compare the experiences of other nations—e.g., Russia and Great Britain in Afghanistan—to those of the U.S. today, with an eye toward gleaning lessons from the past. The goal here is to encourage students to see historical investigation as a useful and necessary means of solving problems in the present. Facile analogies, of course, should be avoided.

All college students, especially advanced students, should become aware of different interpretive frameworks and historical perspectives. The connecting interpretive framework in most textbooks on U.S. foreign policy is the rise in U.S. military strength and global influence since the 1890s, but the more interesting question is how that power and influence have been used. Here we enter the ongoing historiographic debate between so-called traditionalists and revisionists. Historian John Lewis Gaddis offers a traditionalist view in asserting, “American imperial power in the 20th century has been a remarkable force for good, for democracy, for prosperity.” Historian Thomas G. Paterson takes on the revisionist perspective in calling attention to “the hypocrisy and immorality—and ultimate tragedy—of American foreign policy,” noting how the U.S. lent support to repressive regimes during the Cold War.⁶ The revisionist perspective, it should be noted, was most popular during the Vietnam War, when antiwar sentiments and critiques were at their height. Higher-level classes would do well to explore this debate in depth, perhaps reading contrasting studies of the Cold War: John Lewis Gaddis, *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History* (1997) and Edward Pessen, *Losing Our Souls: The American Experience in the Cold War* (1993).

In examining interpretive frameworks, students should become aware of the expanding scope of historical subjects considered relevant to foreign policy. The field of U.S. diplomatic history has broadened considerably over the last four decades, from studies mainly concerned with U.S. national security, high-level diplomacy, and the influence of economic interests and political parties, to studies exploring global developments, multinational perspectives (with multi-archival research), subaltern transnational relationships, domestic social change movements, and the influence of gender, sexual, racial, and class identities and discourses. Michael J. Hogan and Thomas G. Paterson’s edited volume, *Explaining the History of American Foreign Relations* (2004), offers an excellent introduction to the field.

Cultivating critical thinking means encouraging students to wrestle with larger ideas and lessons of history. Secondly, it means preparing students to engage in the democratic debates over the direction of U.S. foreign policy. In this author’s view, there is a lack of basic knowledge about U.S. foreign policy among the U.S. citizenry and a related tendency among politicians and citizens to espouse glittering generalities rather than discuss realistic options for the future. The U.S. government has taken on an inordinate amount of responsibility in attempting to police the world for “terrorism,” and it spends considerable sums to maintain a global network of military bases and forces. It is questionable whether the U.S. will be able to maintain its predominance indefinitely, if indeed

this is advisable. Change is inevitable and an educated citizenry that is capable of understanding and intelligently debating alternatives is arguably the best hope for the future. College history classes should be places where knowledge and critical thinking are cultivated to produce a citizenry capable of meeting the demands of our time.

Notes

1. I developed and refined these critical thinking exercises while teaching some twenty courses on U.S. foreign policy at Tallahassee Community College (TCC) over a period of nine years. TCC divides its U.S. history survey courses into economic and social history, on the one hand, and foreign policy history (American Experience II: Institutions and Values in a World Setting), on the other.

2. An excellent film for examining Lyndon Johnson's agonizing decision to send U.S. troops to Vietnam is *LBJ*, Part Two, available from the PBS *American Experience* series. For a critical thinking exercise on the Vietnam War, see Wilson J. Warren, David M. Memory, and Kevin Bolinger, "Improving Critical Thinking Skills in the United States Survey Course: An Activity for Teaching the Vietnam War," *The History Teacher* 37, no. 2 (February 2004): <<http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/ht/37.2/warren.html>>.

3. There are many factors that bear on foreign policymaking. In *Explaining the History of American Foreign Relations* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2004), edited by Michael J. Hogan and Thomas G. Paterson, at least sixteen ways of approaching foreign relations are discussed, including traditional national security; international relations theories; world order approaches; global economics (dependency); ideology and rhetoric; and the influence of race, gender, culture, individual psychology, and other factors. Students interested in a particular approach should be guided toward the relevant literature.

4. Senate speeches on Polk's war bill, which took place on May 12, 1846, can be found in the *Senate Journal, 29th Congress, First Session*; "Massachusetts Legislature, Resolutions on the War with Mexico, 1847," in *Great Issues in American History, from the Revolution to the Civil War, 1765-1865*, ed. Richard Hofstadter (New York: Vintage Books, 1958), 343-346; "John O'Sullivan on Manifest Destiny, 1839," <<http://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/osulliva.htm>>; Walt Whitman, "The Mexican War Justified;" and Henry David Thoreau, "Civil Disobedience," in John H. Schroeder, *Mr. Polk's War: American Opposition and Dissent, 1846-1848* (Madison, WI: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1973), 47-54.

5. *Vietnam War: A Television History* (seven-volume series), "Volume One: Roots of War," produced by WGBH Boston Video; *The Century: America's Time* (six-volume series), produced by ABC News in conjunction with The History Channel. Two other useful videos that incorporate foreign perspectives are the *Crucible of Empire*, concerning the Spanish-American-Cuban War of 1898 and the U.S.-Philippines War of 1899, and *The Panama Deception*, concerning the U.S. invasion of Panama in 1989.

6. John Lewis Gaddis, "Kill the Empire? (Or Not)," *The New York Times Book Review*, 25 July 2004, p. 23; and Thomas G. Paterson, "Cold War Revisionism: A Practitioner's Perspective," *Diplomatic History* 31, no. 3 (June 2007): 394.

Appendix I: Sample Assignment

Editorial Writing Assignment – in pairs

Imagine that you are part of an editorial team working for an American newspaper (name your city).

It is **August 1, 1916**. Tomorrow marks the second anniversary the “Great War.” The managing editor has assigned you and your colleague to write an editorial of 150-250 words on the war. (An editorial usually offers a point of view in addition to information.) There is, at this time, an ongoing debate in the country as to whether the U.S. should enter the war on the side of the British or remain neutral. Take a side in your editorial and explain your reasons to your readers.

Consider the following items before writing your editorial (some may be interpreted to favor war, while others may be interpreted to favor continued neutrality):

- Arming Britain is presently good for American businesses and workers.
- If the British lose, will Germany dominate Europe?
- German submarines have sunk British passenger ships with U.S. citizens on board; however, in February 1916, Germany expressed regret and appears to have ceased such attacks on unarmed vessels.
- Neither Great Britain nor Germany has respected neutral trade rights (Britain has mined the North Sea harbors of Germany).
- America has a long traditional of isolationism from European wars.
- What would the U.S. gain in fighting a war in Europe? Millions of European young men had already been killed in the war. Should tens of thousands of Americans be added to the count?

