

STRATEGIES FOR TEACHING  
"AMERICA SINCE 1945"

Thomas Ladenburg  
Brookline (MA) High School  
Geoffrey Tegnell  
Driscoll (MA) School

"The only fair election possible in Poland is one organized by the London Poles."

"What about England holding free elections in India?"

"They are not ready for it. They are not well educated. We are looking for India's best interests and we feel they have far more rights than Poles under communist rule."

"We, the Russians, have just as much right to determine the government of Poland as England has to rule India and white America has to prevent Blacks from voting in Mississippi. I don't think there should be any problem with us having a free hand in Eastern Europe."

"Why should you oppress the people of Poland? They were happy before."

"No one has spoken of oppression yet. I see no examples . . ."

"All the Polish officers--what happened? There was a massacre in the Katyn Forest--you killed the opposition."

"If the United States is interested in retaining any control over Italy, Greece, and Belgium, they should give us control over Eastern Europe. I see no reason why this isn't a fair compromise."

"Should there be a compromise with the rights of people who were in the government already and had an organized government, but were knocked out by Nazi Germany?"

"America has a buffer zone in Mexico and Canada. I mean, why can't we have a buffer zone in Poland?"

"But we haven't forced our way on Mexico and Canada."

"If they wanted to turn communist, would you let them?"

"That's a hypothetical question--they don't want to turn communist."

This undiplomatic dialogue is not a recently disclosed record of secret debates by low-level aides at the Yalta Conference. It is, instead, a transcribed tape of seniors at Brookline High School, Massachusetts, in a course called "America Since 1945," simulating the Yalta Conference in their classroom. The Yalta simulation is but one activity in this senior history course designed to have students think through, from the perspective of participants and historians, many of the important decisions made by Americans during these crucial years since the end of World War II. This course, we believe, utilizes a method that can make American history far more relevant to high school students than the more traditional fare that has contributed, at least in part, to the much lamented decline in student interest in this important subject.

In this article we will describe the Yalta simulation in more detail and show how it relates to a unit on foreign policy in the post-war world. We will also outline some other units in the course, and demonstrate how the methods employed in these units incorporate a pedagogical approach that can prepare

students to make intelligent decisions about complex political and social questions.<sup>1</sup>

### The Yalta Simulation

As the leaders of our Yalta simulation delegations return to the room, the class sits silently in their seats. Their teacher had just finished explaining the agreement actually hammered out at Yalta to the rest of his students. How close, both the class and the delegation leaders want to know, have they come to the actual decisions made in the Crimea? The leaders then stand before the class and recount the Treaty they had worked out. They report that Germany had been temporarily divided into three occupation zones, free elections under international supervision were guaranteed to Poland, Germany would have to pay a \$20 billion reparation bill, and Russia would declare war on Japan shortly after Germany's defeat in exchange for bases in Manchuria and restoration of lost territories. Furthermore, Russia would join the United Nations, provided that she receive sixteen votes in the General Assembly. The class is impressed. Except for zonal occupation and U.N. membership, there were no significant differences between the simulation results and the actual agreement.

This similarity was no coincidence. The students had been thoroughly prepared to participate in the Yalta simulation. They had spent some ten to fifteen minutes reviewing the information that supported their views, with the balance of the class given to arguing their ideas with members of other delegations. By the time the leaders met on the second day of the simulation, each side knew approximately what it realistically could expect to accomplish. Each also could surmise what it had to surrender in order to achieve national objectives. The Treaty arrived at in the simulation reflected this careful preparation.

Following the revelation of the Conference outcome, students were asked to reflect upon their negotiations and the actual Yalta agreement. They were then asked to consider each of the following interpretations by reputable historians:

- a. Yalta, like Munich seven years earlier, was a case of appeasement, where concrete territorial concessions were made in exchange for empty promises.
- b. The United States did about as well as could be expected at Yalta, surrendering nothing of importance that Russia could not have taken anyway.
- c. The Yalta agreement was a diplomatic triumph for the United States.

The class was then broken into groups of no more than four students. Each group was instructed to decide with which of these three interpretations it agreed, and told to list the facts supporting that conclusion. The last ten minutes of the class were spent arguing the decision reached by these groups. At the end of the period, when students filed out of the room handing their statements to the teacher, they were still debating their interpretations. Somewhat to the teacher's consternation, the majority had decided that Yalta was a case of appeasement. Still, the method of instruction--simulated debate followed by the revelation of actual events and a discussion of different historical interpretations--had created a sense of excitement and facilitated learning.

Yalta and the Cold War

The time in class spent on the Yalta Conference presented but a single sequence of lessons from a larger unit entitled, "From Hot to Cold War," the first of five units in a half-year course entitled "America Since 1945." Like its counterparts, this unit is organized around a major moral and philosophical problem. The larger motif in this case is the all too contemporary question: Over what issues should the United States be prepared to risk waging war? The unit starts with a lesson on the rise of Hitler, followed by one on the Munich Conference. In the second lesson, students decide whether to be confrontationalists or appeasers in correspondence with division in British politics at the time of the Munich crisis. The next day they are provided with a reading describing Germany's actions in Europe up to the invasion of Russia, and are asked to play the role of internationalists and isolationists in discussing the lend-lease issue. Other lessons--on Japanese economic sanctions and Pearl Harbor, the relocation of Japanese-Americans, and the war in Europe--precede the Yalta simulation. Following this exercise, the class debates the decision to drop the atomic bomb.

The balance of the unit is devoted to understanding the Soviet-American confrontations in Europe, and considering three possible American responses to Soviet actions: massive retaliation and liberation; containment; and neoisolationism. Among the areas covered in this examination are the communist incursions into Greece and Turkey, the Berlin Blockade, and the fall of Czechoslovakia. Another lesson investigates the U.N. intervention in the Korean War, and the decision to relieve General Douglas MacArthur of his command. The unit closes with the charges made by Senator Joseph McCarthy that America's setbacks in the Cold War were brought about by the "enemy within," rather than the "enemy without." Students examine the evidence supporting and refuting this charge. In a final essay question designed to help them form their own interpretation of this period, they must decide whether McCarthy's assumption really explains world transformations in the decade following World War II.

From Cold War to President Carter

Events since the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, it has been suggested, demonstrate the cyclical nature of history. The Cold War, President Jimmy Carter's critics charged, was heated up anew by his overreaction to the threat of Soviet expansion. Rather than comment on the substance of these charges, we wish to make a pedagogical and not a political point. Many issues of the past forty years do seem to come up again. One of the advantages of teaching this course during the past five years has been its increasing our awareness of how often one generation faces problems similar to those confronting earlier generations. This experience has helped us shape the "America Since 1945" course around major recurring philosophical issues while maintaining a basically chronological approach to the post-war era.

One of the five recurring themes of this course is the conflict between liberal and conservative ideologies. The second unit examines this theme in the context of the political battles fought out during the Truman and Eisenhower administrations. The issues, like those in the Cold War unit, are hauntingly familiar to all students of politics. They include the question of wage-price controls, the Taft-Hartley Act, civil rights, national health insurance, expenditures in the public and private sectors of the economy, deficit spending, inflation, offshore oil, and economic growth. These issues are introduced in domestic policy debates. Students must advise President Truman whether to ask for an extension of O.P.A. and for the power to draft strikers. Should Truman veto the Taft-Hartley Act? Should more expenditures be made in the public rather than the private sectors of the economy? Should



student electors from key states in the 1952 presidential election vote for Stevenson rather than for Eisenhower? For Nixon in 1960 rather than Kennedy? In the final exercise of this unit, students have to decide if the liberal policies of the Truman administration were more beneficial to the country than the conservative policies of Eisenhower Republicans.

In the third unit of this course, the focus of attention once more is on foreign affairs with students asked to examine the relationship between the United States and the Third World. The establishment of a communist government in Cuba, the agonizing Vietnam War, and America's involvement in Iran serve as key events in this unit. It essentially poses the question, "How should the United States respond to social upheavals in the Third World?" Some of the specific lessons cover the Bay of Pigs, the Cuban missile crisis, the strategic hamlet program, the Gulf of Tonkin resolution, My Lai, the restoration of the Shah, and Soviet intervention in Afghanistan. Through role plays, discussions, and debates, students consider if a social revolution was necessary in Cuba, if Vietnam was a heroic crusade, a well-intentioned mistake, or a despicable error, and if the United States was in any way responsible for misrule in Iran. As a concluding exercise, students are asked to write and act out a dialogue between pro and anti-American leaders of a Third World country, deciding whether their nation should be aligned with the U.S. or the U.S.S.R.

In keeping with the thematic approach, the fourth unit again turns to domestic affairs. It deals with the political and social unrest characteristic of the 1960s which questioned the predominant values of American society. Students first examine the civil rights movement, then women's rights, and finally the youth counterculture. The section on civil rights examines the issues raised by the Brown v. Topeka Board of Education Supreme Court decision as they apply to the controversy over busing Black students to achieve racial balance. Through the use of role plays and other techniques, it also explores the debate over the tactics of nonviolent versus violent protests to call the nation's attention to the long history of racism in America, and it raises the question of compensatory treatment for Black Americans. Students then learn the feminists' basic assumption concerning roles in our society, and discuss how these insights might have an impact on their own lives. Finally, the unit examines four aspects of the counterculture: Drugs, music, communes, and radical politics. Students discuss whether these alternatives present viable responses to the political and social problems raised during the 1960s and early 1970s. In the culminating exercise, students sort out their own responses to stances taken by civil rights activists, the women's movement, and the youth counterculture.

The final unit, entitled "From Camelot to Carter," with its close connections to the ever-changing daily news, is by far the most difficult to plan and to execute. As suggested in the title, its basic theme is the dashing of the 1960s faith that America's problems somehow could easily be resolved; that racism and poverty could be eliminated by government programs; that an infusion of money would miraculously restore the cities; and that patience and good will, along with a SALT Treaty, could dispel the arms race and bring forth an era of Soviet-American cooperation. Students examine this theme by reading Kennedy's inaugural address. They then advocate or criticize the domestic initiatives of the Kennedy-Johnson administrations in the area of civil rights, poverty, and urban renewal. The Peace Corps, SALT, Soviet military build-up, and Afghanistan are featured in the foreign affairs segment. The problem raised by Watergate, inflation, and the energy crisis are topics of separate lessons. The unit concludes with an exercise in which students draw up a comprehensive program for dealing with the many unresolved problems of the 1960s and 1970s and an explanation why their initiatives might be more successful than those of previous decades.

A Pedagogy for the 1980s

Both the contents of this course and the teaching methods it employs are intended to speak to the unresolved problems with which American society has been struggling over the past several decades. Since it is now a full 43 years since Hitler invaded Poland, we can no longer halt our American history courses with an examination of the New Deal's alphabetic agencies. Nor can we be satisfied with relying exclusively on the "chalk and talk" approach to teaching. Those who are now calling for a return to the basics fail to realize that the methods that generally were unsuccessful with too many "Johnnys" of the 1950s are less likely to succeed with their far more troubled progeny. Rather than returning to the old fashioned charms of Muzzeys' American History, we have opted for a more dynamic approach.

A good teaching methodology must be designed to help teachers reach the goals at which their curriculum is aimed. Our most important goal is to help students understand the political, social, and economic world in which they live; to grasp the key concepts making that world comprehensible; and to know the important facts needed to discuss these concepts intelligently. They should have the ability to evaluate and analyze new information about their world, and to make a rational commitment to sound values from which they can form principled moral judgements. The methodology described in this paper is intended to develop this kind of a citizen.

The mini-unit on the Yalta Conference provides a model depicting the techniques that will help create an individual capable of critical thinking and forming independent judgments. The simulation first called for careful preparation. Students had to know the position of various armies, be familiar with the geography of Western Europe and Asia, and understand the various objectives of the three nations at the Conference. In the direct negotiations, students were forced to use this knowledge in order to substantiate their nation's claims. After learning what really happened and how various historians viewed the Conference, students re-examined these same events from a new perspective and evaluated what happened.

The methodology employed throughout the course is similar to the technique used in the Yalta simulation. Students are given information regarding a particular problem. Through discussions and role playing they decide how the problem should be resolved. Then they learn how in fact it was decided. In the culminating activity at the end of each unit, they review the problem from a new perspective and evaluate the actual solution.

In designing this course, the authors were able to evolve a number of guiding principles which helped them to prepare suitable materials and plan individual lessons. While these principles apply most particularly to the course described in this article, they could also serve other teachers designing their own curriculum:

1. Units should be conceptualized around philosophical issues that transcend the particular period being studied.

In this way the topics in these courses will always be current and individual lessons would more easily be related to underlying themes.

2. For the most part, daily lessons should be self-contained episodes related to the larger problem-issue.

This will help students understand how what they are studying on a particular day relates to the unit.

3. Lessons should present problems for students to resolve, and not reveal the historical solution. Students should learn what happened only after they have thought the issue through for themselves.

The advantage here is that they form judgments without being influenced by decisions made by historical persons, and they become far more interested in what actually happened.

4. Simulations and other activity-centered approaches should be used extensively.

This helps students understand the position of historical figures, heightens excitement, and facilitates learning.

5. Culminating exercises should require, from a new perspective, a re-examination of material already learned.

This not only reinforces learning, allows students to form their own conclusions, and helps them develop a more mature and objective evaluation, but also enhances their ability to analyze.

In an evaluation of the course just described, one student wrote: "Mr. Ladenburg's class structure of reading about situations and then discussing them was the main reason I wanted him as a teacher again." The same student wrote that "one of the best things to do was when you were forced to take a role you were against . . . I feel this is where I learned the most." In a college application, another student described what she said was her first political discussion outside of the classroom. "I suddenly became aware," she wrote, "that I was using the skills I had learned in any history class. Now I am sure that I am capable of carrying on a political conversation. I can organize things in my mind using my moral judgment and I direct myself very well." We believe that these comments fittingly express the success of this course and the methodology it employs.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Copies of units used in this course may be purchased from Dissemination Center, 115 Greenough Street, Brookline, MA. 02146.