

# **The U.S. Recognition of Israel: A Bureaucratic Politics Model Analysis**

**Nilay Saiya  
Political Science  
Villanova University**

*The outsider believes a Presidential order is consistently followed out. Nonsense. I have to spend considerable time seeing that it is carried out and in the spirit the President intended. Inevitably, in the nature of bureaucracy, departments become pressure groups for a point of view. If the President decides against them, they are convinced some evil influence worked on the President: if only he knew all the facts, he would have decided their way. –Richard Nixon<sup>1</sup>*

The bureaucratic politics model holds that each bureaucracy in the federal government has institutional beliefs it is seeking to maximize. The competition is based upon relative power and influence. I seek to examine how these competing bureaucracies helped influence U.S. foreign policy toward Israel during the Truman administration. Specifically I hope to address the following question: How does the bureaucratic politics model explain the United States decision to recognize Israel?

According to bureaucratic politics theory, decisions are determined not by rational choice or chief actors but through a give-and-take bargaining process conducted by various parties of the government. Rather than unitary actors, this model maintains that governmental decisions are the result of individuals or organizations vying for position and power. Therefore, the outcomes are a direct result of bureaucratic competition. Prominent scholars of the bureaucratic politics model David Kozak and James Keagle identify twelve defining characteristics of the model drawing on the work of others: (1) since the end of World War II, non-elected officials have become increasingly important in making public policy; (2) bureaucratic decisions can be affected by circumstances exogenous to the agencies' internal environment, namely interest groups; (3) bureaucrats are driven by agency self-interest in order to maintain political power; (4) national security policy is often the result of these struggles for power between competing

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<sup>1</sup> Sault Pett, "Henry A. Kissinger: Loyal Retainer or Nixon's Svengali," p. B-3.

bureaucracies; (5) individuals positioned in a bureaucracy will naturally adopt that agency's goals; (6) because of their expertise, implementation responsibilities, and longevity, elected officials are often dependent on bureaucrats in the realm of policy making; (7) notwithstanding times of national crisis, bureaucratic politics is characterized by bargaining, competition, and compromise; (8) by maintaining support for the existing bureaucratic structure, clientele groups gain influence in bureaucratic politics; (9) as clientele groups provide bureaucracies with information, bureaucracies, in turn, provide information to political institutions, allowing agencies both to influence policy and defend their own interests; (10) the executive plays a fundamental role in bureaucratic politics by coordinating and weighing bureaucratic interests; (11) bureaucratic agencies' primary goal is self-preservation; therefore, these agencies will seek structural alterations to maximize their own political benefit; and (12) bureaucratic politics theory raises questions as to its appropriateness in a system that is supposed to be run by elected officials.<sup>2</sup>

My goal is to examine if, and to what extent, these defining characteristics shaped policy during the Truman administration. Specifically, I will examine how competing pressures influenced the President's decision to recognize Israel. In the case of the U.S. formal recognition of Israel, the primary competing actors were the State and

Defense Departments and the president. During Truman's tenure as president, the highest-level officials in the White House and State Department often engaged in acrimonious and intense squabbling over this sensitive issue. Historically, the State Department has considered itself the chief foreign policy-making body, transcending the scope and longevity of various presidents; it has also resented the presence of domestic considerations in the formulation of foreign policy. This is important insofar as the Jewish vote and American sympathies toward the Jewish people were concerned. The problem, of course, is that in our democratic society, foreign policy is to be executed through an elected representative—namely the president of the United States. The majority of this paper will examine the interplay between these two competing factions up to Truman's official recognition of the state of Israel.

Some scholarly works like John Snetsinger's *Truman, the Jewish Vote, and the Creation of Israel* argue that Truman's decision to recognize Israel was based solely on political calculations.<sup>3</sup> Others like Michael Benson's *Harry S. Truman and the Founding of Israel* maintain that despite domestic and international strategy considerations, Truman's decision was based on "moral, emotional, and

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<sup>2</sup> These points are summarized and adapted from David Kozak, and James Keagle eds., *Bureaucratic Politics and National Security: Theory and Practice* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1988), pp 5-10.

<sup>3</sup> John Snetsinger, *Truman, the Jewish Vote, and the Creation of Israel* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1974), p. 140.

sentimental sympathy.”<sup>4</sup> Benson deals with the role of personal belief and religious background—support for Western democracy and Biblical solidarity with the Jews—on Truman’s foreign policy toward Israel. I contend that Truman was driven by both political strategy and humanitarian concerns, but neither argument by itself was a sufficient impetus for the President’s eventual decision. I will examine the administration’s choice by considering the various stakes different bureaucracies had in a Jewish state in the Middle East. While President Truman had to deal with Jewish friends and advisors, the Jewish electoral vote, and the moral justification behind Zionism, the State Department argued their case mainly on the basis of U.S. national interests.

### **U.S.-Jewish Relations 1917-1947**

In a 1917 statement issued by the British government, the British Empire initiated a plan to consider the creation of a Jewish homeland in Palestine, provided it would not interfere with the rights of pre-existing inhabitants. Known as the Balfour Declaration, the statement was, in part, compensation for Jews who helped the British defeat the Turks during World War I. The League of Nations ratified the statement in 1922 and gave Britain a mandate in Palestine. The Balfour Declaration spawned the migration of Jews from all over Europe to Palestine, and, in the process, aroused the fears of neighboring Arabs to the possibility of a future Jewish state. Unable to quash sporadic outbreaks of violence between the Jews and Arabs, Great Britain issued a ‘white paper’ in 1939 which severely restricted further Jewish migration to Palestine.

With no regional allies to turn, the Jews sought the help of the United States. President Franklin Roosevelt was rather ambivalent to the Jewish cause being preoccupied with World War II and the Great Depression. Wanting to retain good relations with Saudi Arabia, he promised the Saudi king that the U.S. would not make a decision on a Jewish state without first consulting the Arab states, though he did try to enlist Saudi support for Jewish immigration to Palestine.<sup>5</sup> The ambivalence ended with the election of Harry S. Truman. Due to the oppression the Jews incurred throughout the Holocaust, Truman’s sympathies were with the Jews and he supported the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine.

In 1946, Great Britain and the United States established the "Anglo-American Committee of Inquiry." The committee concluded that a Jewish state would continue to generate regional violence; but it also advised to allow

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<sup>4</sup> Michael Benson, *Harry S. Truman and the Founding of Israel* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1997), p. xi.

<sup>5</sup> Ami Isseroff. “President Harry S. Truman and US Support for Israeli Statehood,” available at [www.mideastweb.org/USrecognition](http://www.mideastweb.org/USrecognition).

unrestricted Jewish migration into Palestine, including the immediate admission of 100,000 refugees. Violence in Palestine continued, however; and the British, anxious to rid themselves of the problem, renounced the mandate by returning it to the United Nations. The U.N. Special Committee on Palestine (UNSCOP) advised that Palestine be portioned into two states. Reluctantly, the U.S. State Department acceded to Truman's request that it support the partition plan. The partition plan was accepted by the U.N. General Assembly on November 29, 1947. Although Truman supported the right of Jews to establish their own homeland under Woodrow Wilson's "self-determination" principle, the most difficult decision he faced in his presidency, according to Margaret Truman, was whether to recognize the creation of a Jewish homeland in Palestine.<sup>6</sup> Throughout the Roosevelt and Truman administrations, the War and State departments argued against recognizing a Jewish state for geo-strategic reasons. Despite objections raised by Secretary of State George Marshall—the appearance of pandering to the Jewish vote, unintentionally jeopardizing access to Arab oil, and driving the Arab states toward the Soviet Union—Truman elected to recognize the Jewish state immediately upon its inception. Truman's recognition of Israel, however, did not necessarily translate into support for the infant nation. It would take decades of wars between Israel and its Arab neighbors and decades of cold war between the U.S. and the Soviet Union before the two countries became *de facto* allies. During the period between Israel's establishment and the 1960's, the Middle East viewed the United States not as an imperial superpower but as a buffer against the exploitative, colonialist European authorities.

## **Truman's Stances Toward Israel**

The end of World War II allowed President Truman to address the Palestine question. It was a vital issue insofar as it extended beyond Near Eastern boundaries and exemplified the peculiar dynamics of a bi-polar world. Such a small piece of land gained the attention of major superpowers and international organizations. Truman had made plain his support for the Jewish cause prior to the war, but the revelations of Nazi atrocities towards Jews during the war provided him with a basis to enlist support for a Jewish state. Throughout his ten years in the Senate, he generally supported Zionist objectives by supporting a Jewish army in Palestine and endorsing the Balfour Declaration.<sup>7</sup> At a Chicago rally in 1944, then Senator Truman said,

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<sup>6</sup> Margaret Truman. *Harry S. Truman*. (New York: William Morrow), 1973.

<sup>7</sup> Bruce Evensen, "The Limits of Presidential Power: Truman at War with the Zionists, the Press, Public Opinion and His Own State Department Over Palestine, *Presidential Studies Quarterly* (1993) 23: 269.

"Today, not tomorrow, we must do all that is humanly possible to provide a haven for all those who can be grasped from the hands of Nazi butchers. Free lands must be opened to them."<sup>8</sup>

Though plainspoken and inexperienced in foreign affairs, Truman was an ardent supporter of presidential power in this realm. He believed that ultimately the responsibility of the nation's well being rested with the chief executive.<sup>9</sup> He was a man who believed the president should run state affairs, not his subordinates. The president felt compelled to keep his pledge to support a Palestinian partition. Truman, however, faced opposition on two fronts. He urged the British to amend their Palestine policy by allowing displaced Jews to emigrate there, but the war-beaten British were not ready to change their policy. He also attempted to enlist domestic support for Jewish emigration to Palestine, though he faced considerable opposition to the Zionist solution for the problem of displaced Jews.

At this point, President Truman was somewhat indisposed to the concept of a Jewish *state* insofar as he believed it would rely almost exclusively on U.S. support for defense. The president ardently hoped that the Palestine problem would be settled through the medium of the United Nations, not U.S. military force. At no point did Truman favor sending U.S. troops to enforce the partition. The fear was any partition would have to be enforced either by American troops, or worse, the Red Army. In a letter to Senator Joseph Ball of Minnesota, Truman stated:

...It is a very explosive situation we are facing and naturally I regret it very much but I don't think that you, or any of the other Senators, would be inclined to send a half dozen Divisions to Palestine to maintain a Jewish State. What I am trying to do is to make the whole world safe for Jews. Therefore, I don't feel like going to war for Palestine.<sup>10</sup>

Both practical and political considerations molded his policy toward Palestine. According to Bruce Everson, these considerations limited Truman's ability to exercise his policy in the region; they, in fact, limited his presidential leadership abilities.<sup>11</sup> Some of his diary entries even seem to imply that Truman was becoming rather exasperated with Jewish demands:

The Jews, I find are very, very selfish. They care not how many Estonians, Latvians, Finns, Poles, Yugoslavs or Greeks get murdered or mistreated as D[isplaced] P[ersons] as long as the Jews get special

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<sup>8</sup> Isserof, *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Robert Donovan, *Conflict and Crisis: The Presidency of Harry S. Truman, 1945-1948* (New York: Norton, 1977).

<sup>10</sup> Monte Poen., ed. *Strictly Personal and Confidential* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1982), 49.

<sup>11</sup> Bruce Evensen, "The Limits of Presidential Power: Truman at War with the Zionists, the Press, Public Opinion and His Own State Department Over Palestine, *Presidential Studies Quarterly* (1993) 23: 269.

treatment. Yet when they have power, physical, financial or political neither Hitler nor Stalin has anything on them for cruelty or mistreatment to the under dog. Put an underdog on top and it makes no difference whether his name is Russian, Jewish, Negro, Management, Labor, Mormon, Baptist he goes haywire. I've found very, very few who remember their past condition when prosperity comes.<sup>12</sup>

Nevertheless, despite the fact that the president no longer wished to visit with supporters of the extreme Zionist cause, he felt obliged to meet with certain individuals to whom Truman believed he owed a debt of gratitude. In his memoirs, the president recounts secret meetings with Dr. Chaim Weizmann—a chief proponent of a Jewish state in Palestine.<sup>13</sup> This illustrates the point that when a public official is hesitant to side one way or another on an issue of national importance but is nevertheless believed to be predisposed to a certain ideology, individuals from the private sector representing that ideology will seek to involve that official in the issue.<sup>14</sup>

### **State Department Opposition**

The State and Defense Departments were generally against the notion of a Jewish state, and sought to deter Truman from the notion of a partition plan. It remained convinced that the creation of a Jewish state would spur Saudi armies to attack Israel and jeopardize the flow of oil from the Gulf. Moreover, the potential for a third world war required the U.S. to maintain good relations with the oil-rich Gulf states. Advocating a Jewish state might permanently damage otherwise cordial relations with Middle Eastern countries and reduce America's position in the region. Moreover, the U.S. desperately needed oil to continue the Marshall Plan in Europe and its own domestic industrialization. Within the larger context of the Cold War, if the United States were to continue its rise as a global superpower, it could not imperil vitally important Arab oil; doing so equated to giving the Soviets a stranglehold on the Middle East. To continue the Marshall Plan—that is, protect Europe from the communist threat—meant that losing access to oil could imperil *two* regions of the world. To many in the State and Defense departments, maintaining the flow of Arab oil keeping the Soviets at bay

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<sup>12</sup> Harry Truman, Diary entry for Monday, July 21. Available at [www.trumanlibrary.org](http://www.trumanlibrary.org).

<sup>13</sup> Harry Truman, *Memoirs. Vol. II: Years of Trial and Hope*, (Garden City, New York: Doubleday), 160-61.

<sup>14</sup> Morton Halperin, *Bureaucratic Politics and Foreign Policy*, (Washington D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1974), 131.

necessarily meant establishing military bases in the region.<sup>15</sup> It was, therefore, the State Department's policy to appease the Arabs and maintain the regional status quo by considering Palestine a vital entity of the Arab world. A mass emigration of Jews to Palestine would greatly aid in destabilizing a critically important region of the world and would spawn a dire political crisis in the region. Oil was the major consideration of the State Department's Palestine policy, its greatest fear being alienating Ibn Saud. Indeed, the State and Defense Departments and National Security Council considered Ibn Saud's well-being to be paramount in regards to international stability and vital to U.S. national interests.<sup>16</sup> Additionally, the State Department tended to equate Zionists with Communists; therefore, the establishment of a Jewish state would drive the Jews into the Soviet sphere of influence thereby creating a foothold for the Soviets in the Middle East. According to Loy Henderson, "We know very well that all Jews are communists. If we let them come to Palestine, we will have a Soviet fifth column there."<sup>17</sup> The argument seemed to be based on the fact that communism was an inherently European ideology that appealed to the urban proletariat (i.e., Palestinian Jews). Furthermore, many Jewish emigrants to Palestine had lived behind the iron curtain and had been exposed to communist ideology. The fear was that this exposure might form the basis for their new government. Even if the Zionist-Communist link was exaggerated, there remained potential for the Soviets expand their influence in the Middle East on two fronts: (1) a simple approval of a Palestine partition plan coupled with continued American ambiguity might naturally lead to a Soviet-Israeli alliance, or (2) if the U.S. supported a partition, the U.S.S.R. might seek to use Arab animosity against the U.S.

As mentioned above, I believe the State Department overstated its case. The fact remained that a Jewish state backed by the U.S.S.R. and neglected by the West would be more inclined to view the Soviets favorably. If this occurred, the U.S.S.R. could make strategic inroads into the Middle East, the very thing the State Department sought to avoid. On the other hand, Zionist supporters argued that a U.S. and British-supported Jewish state would be a democratic stronghold in a region categorized by backward dictatorships. After all, a stated tenet of American foreign policy had been the promotion of democracy throughout the world as evidenced by the Marshall Plan and Truman Doctrine.

Therefore, the State Department's Palestine policy was driven by geo-strategic considerations, not humanitarian concerns. This is not to say that they

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<sup>15</sup> Michael Benson, *Harry S. Truman and the Founding of Israel*, 83.

<sup>16</sup> Irvine Anderson, *Aramco: The United States and Saudi Arabia, a Study of the Dynamics of Foreign Oil Policy, 1933-1950* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), p. 202.

<sup>17</sup> Benson, *Harry S. Truman and the Founding of Israel*, p. 61

were in any way anti-Semites; rather, they viewed the world through the lens of Cold War realities. To these individuals, the creation of a Jewish state posed a direct threat to U.S. national security interests; to support a partition meant governing its implementation. The problem was that the president had surrounded himself with individuals diametrically opposed to his Palestine policy. His closest advisors—Secretary of State George Marshall (who had been General of the Armies, the highest ranking officer during World War II, and perhaps the most popular man in the United States at the time<sup>18</sup>) his successor Dean Acheson, Undersecretary of State Robert Lovett, Secretary of the Navy James Forrestal, Director of the Near East Agency (NEA) Loy Henderson, and other high-ranking individuals—all sided against the Zionist solution (and consequently against Truman). Furthermore, these men were all highly educated, while Truman was the only president never to have graduated high school. While some prominent advisors (like Dean Acheson) backed Truman's policies despite personal objections to his solution to the Palestine question, many others (like Marshall and Henderson) were not so supportive of the president.<sup>19</sup> Truman, however, did not view the Palestine quandary in solely strategic terms. When reminded that the potential outbreak of war required U.S. dependence on Saudi Arabian oil, the president famously responded that he would handle the situation in light of justice, not oil.<sup>20</sup>

The president was especially frustrated with the State Department's resolve in handling the Palestine issue without executive interference.<sup>21</sup> He felt the State Department did not trust his ability to handle foreign affairs in any area of international relations, especially Palestine: "The striped pants boys warned me, in effect, to watch my step [on Palestine]. They thought I really didn't understand what was going on over there."<sup>22</sup> Indeed, Truman's plain-spokenness and nascent experience in international affairs did not help him win over his critics at the State Department. Furthermore, some in the State Department believed this inexperience rendered Truman vulnerable to domestic interest groups, namely the Jewish lobby. Therefore, Truman's Near East policy was confounded by the State Department on three fronts: (1) its belief that the State Department was the sole custodian of American foreign policy, (2) its insistence that the Zionist solution was antithetical to U.S. strategic interests, and (3) its distrust of the president to adequately handle foreign affairs. Evidence shows that

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<sup>18</sup> Alfred Lilienthal, "Remembering General George Marshall's Clash With Clark Clifford Over Premature Recognition of Israel," *Washington Report on Middle Eastern Affairs*, June 1999, 49-50.

<sup>19</sup> Dean Acheson, *Present at the Creation: My Years in the State Department*, (New York: Norton, 1969.), p. 104

<sup>20</sup> Harry Truman, *Memoirs. Vol. II: Years of Trial and Hope*, (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1955.), p. 172.

<sup>21</sup> Merle Miller, *Plain Speaking: An Oral Biography of Harry S. Truman*, (New York: Berkley, 1974.), p. 202.

<sup>22</sup> Miller, *Ibid.*



this sentiment was strongest among those at the Near East division, headed by Loy Henderson.<sup>23</sup> In a memo to Marshall on Sept. 22, 1947, Henderson forewarned the Secretary of State that a partition of Palestine would lead to severe troubles for the U.S. in the future. Less than one month after the UNSCOP recommendation to partition Palestine, Henderson maintained that nearly all in the State Department who were knowledgeable in Near Eastern affairs opposed the plan.<sup>24</sup> According to Henderson, the policy being pursued by the government was detrimental to the long-term interests of the United States and would entangle the country in acrimonious conflict around the world. Among his chief concerns were lack of law enforcement in Palestine, wide-scale violence, and the violation of democratic principles:

The UNSCOP Majority Plan is not only unworkable; if adopted, it would guarantee that the Palestine problem would be permanent and still more complicated in the future...The proposals contained in the UNSCOP plan are not only not based on any principles of an international character, the maintenance of which would be in the interests of the United States, but they are in definite contravention to various principles laid down in the Charter as well as to principle on which American concepts of Government are based...These proposals, for instance, ignore such principles as self-determination and majority rule. They recognize the principle of a theocratic racial state and even go so far in several instance as to discriminate on the grounds of religion and race against persons outside of Palestine...We are under no obligations to the Jews to set up a Jewish state. The Balfour Declaration and the Mandate provided not for a Jewish state, but for a Jewish national home. Neither the United States nor the British Government has ever interpreted the term 'Jewish national home' to be a Jewish national state.<sup>25</sup>

Clark Clifford, Truman's White House Council worked closely with Truman on the Palestine question and was chief architect of the administration's pro-partition policy. (Clifford went on to be personal lawyer to President Kennedy and secretary of defense for Lyndon Johnson). Whereas Loy Henderson was chief representative of the State Department's pro-Arab/pro-oil milieu, Clark

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<sup>23</sup> Foreign Relations of the United States, "The Director of the Office of Near Eastern and African Affairs to the Secretary of State," Sept. 22, 1947.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

Clifford represented the pro-Israeli stances adopted by the White House. Clifford and other prominent Jews in the White House contended that Israel could be an important strategic asset for the U.S. in the Middle East due to its unexpected military strength and its predisposition toward the West.<sup>26</sup> According to Clifford, the Arab nations—which Clifford argued relied on American money more than America relied on their oil—should not be allowed to dictate the foreign policy of the United States. He also felt strongly that European Jews deserved a safe haven after the atrocities of the Holocaust. Finally, he argued that a Jewish state would come into existence whether the U.S. supported it or not.<sup>27</sup> Besides Clifford, Truman also had two other key figures working on the Palestine question on the Zionist behalf: David Niles and Max Lowenthal, both of whom enjoyed a special relationship with, and had special access to, the president. Loy Henderson believed Niles to be the preeminent proponent of the Zionist cause in Washington, without whom the Jewish state would not have come into existence.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, Max Lowenthal also significantly influenced Palestine policy. (Clifford Clark employed Lowenthal to provide legal advice on the Palestine issue; Lowenthal designed the memoranda for Clifford to present to the State Department and Truman).<sup>29</sup> According to Truman, Lowenthal was the driving impetus behind the eventual U.S. recognition of Israel: “I don’t know who has done more for Israel than you have.”<sup>30</sup> In 1946, President Truman and British foreign minister Clement Attlee developed a bilateral commission known as the Morrison-Grady team, which formulated a plan acceptable to both the State Department and London. The compromise allowed for the entry of 100,000 refugees and also federalized Palestine into a small Jewish homeland and a larger Arab one. Though Truman, Undersecretary of State Dean Acheson, and Secretary of the Navy James Forrestal endorsed the plan believing it to be a fair compromise, Zionists were discontented with the small piece of land allotted to the Jews. The interesting dichotomy for Truman became whether to risk the Jewish vote over the Morrison-Grady proposal. Due to potential political repercussions, he chose not to support the plan. Indeed, domestic support for Israel was not only a function of American Jewish Zionists but also of broad-based support among the American public.

Truman sided with the Zionists, at least temporarily. On November 29, 1947, the U.S. voted for the partition of Palestine in the UN General Assembly.

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<sup>26</sup> Benson, *Harry S. Truman and the Founding of Israel*, p. 6.

<sup>27</sup> Clark Clifford, *Counsel to the President: A Memoir*, (New York: Random House, 1991).

<sup>28</sup> Michael Cohen, *Truman and Israel*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), p. 77.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 78.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

At the time of the U.N. General Assembly accepting a partition plan, the Palestine question was one of many foreign policy issues being dealt with by the Truman administration. The Cold War was raging on in the Third World, and the U.S. faced a crisis regarding if and how to limit Soviet influence in Eastern Europe and the Mediterranean. The State Department essentially argued that if the U.S. chose to counter the Soviet threat militarily, this could potentially result in another war, which would increase American dependence on Middle Eastern oil. Despite official support for the partition plan, the State Department remained largely opposed.

Truman believed an arms embargo in the Middle East would be a fair compromise: the U.S. would not sell Israel arms, but the embargo would not affect Arab-European arms contracts. The State Department argued that without the ability to purchase arms, the nascent state would be incapable of defending itself. Indeed, the Arab League and the Arab Higher Committee made it clear that it would prevent a partition by force if necessary. Any U.S. involvement on behalf of Israel risked engendering Arab animosity. To the State Department, the whole idea of a partition was impractical. Rather than gamble having to send troops to Palestine by diverting forces from Eastern Europe, it desired a trusteeship plan similar to the one promulgated by Loy Henderson or returning the issue to the U.N for further debate.

A trusteeship plan had, in fact, been approved by Truman in 1948. (This was after the White House had endorsed the UN partition plan of November 19, 1947). There was a considerable sense that the United States might abandon a partition plan in favor of a trusteeship proposal. Truman, however, never favored a trusteeship proposal in lieu of a partition, but rather as a precursor to it. For Truman, a trusteeship might create the preconditions necessary for a partition.

Warren Austin, the American delegate to the UN Security Council, recommended that partition be suspended and temporarily replaced with a trusteeship insofar as a partition could not be implemented peacefully. Austin wanted to convene a special session of the General Assembly to discuss the possibility of a trusteeship. Secretary of State Marshall instructed Austin that, in the case of a special session, the U.S. would support a trusteeship. The president approved a draft statement indicating recession from partition<sup>31</sup>; this approval led to one of the greatest debacles during Truman's presidency.

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 189.

What led to the policy reversal? It appears as if the State Department influenced Truman's decision to retract his policy on partition. President Truman had always opposed sending troops to Palestine, and the Joint Chiefs of Staff warned him that anywhere from 80,000 to 160,000 troops would be needed to implement a partition.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, the fears of the State Department were coming true. By spring 1948, the situation in Palestine had degenerated into chaos and violence, and Truman felt forced to temporarily renounce the very resolution he had ardently supported a few months prior. Both Truman and the State Department believed that the mounting opposition in Palestine to a partition rendered the people there incapable of self-government. Rather than prematurely endorse a state that might lead to yet another war, he desired a slower, safer pace for Israel to achieve statehood. He shifted his focus to a trusteeship whereby Jews and Arabs could come to an agreement. In March of 1948, the President issued a statement saying he believed war in the Middle East was imminent. At the same time, he insisted that diplomats should be careful not to make it appear as if the U.S. was abandoning the partition.<sup>33</sup> Truman hoped that the Security Council itself would implement a trusteeship and suspend partition in Palestine so as to protect the U.S. from adverse domestic backlash that would inevitably occur if it renounced its very own partition plan.<sup>34</sup> In other words, Truman did not want anyone (either at home or abroad) to hold the U.S. responsible for the divergence in policy.

Clark Clifford, of course, argued against the reversal of policy. He maintained that continued support for the partition was in U.S. national interests. Turning the argument of the State Department on its head, Clifford maintained that the Soviets would take advantage of the inconsistency in U.S. policy and take it upon themselves to implement the initial UN resolution favoring partition. Additionally, reversing policy would serve to undermine the United Nations and severely injure its duty as an international policy-making body.<sup>35</sup>

Now the State Department feared that U.S. troops would have to be introduced into Palestine in order to restore order. George Kennan, director of policy planning at the State Department urged Truman against sending troops to Palestine, believing the situation to be an unmanageable quagmire:

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<sup>32</sup> Foreign Relations of the United States, "Gruenther to Departments of State and Defense," February 18, 1948.

<sup>33</sup> Foreign Relations of the United States, "Truman to Marshall," February 22, 1948.

<sup>34</sup> Michael Cohen, *Truman and Israel*, p. 181.

<sup>35</sup> Foreign Relations of the United States, "Memorandum by the President's Special Counsel," March 8, 1948.

The pressures to which this Government is now subjected are ones which impel us toward a position where we would shoulder major responsibility for the maintenance, and even the expansion, of a Jewish state in Palestine...If we do not effect a fairly radical reversal of the trend of our policy to date, we will end up either in the position of being ourselves militarily responsible for the protection of the Jewish population in Palestine against the declared hostility of the Arab world, or of sharing that responsibility with the Russians and thus assisting at their installation as one of the military powers of the area.<sup>36</sup>

The mixed signals continued as Truman continued to assure Zionist groups at home that the U.S. would support the partition. In response to the Palestine committee recommendation that partition be suspended in favor of a temporary trusteeship, on March 19, U.S. ambassador to the UN Warren Austin, under the direction of Secretary of State George Marshall, announced both on national radio and to the UN Security Council that the United States opposed the partition plan. Marshall believed this was consistent with Truman's policy (that the U.S. would support a trusteeship if the UN did so first) to which he had already given his approval previously. This occurred despite the fact that the president had never given his express consent to Austin's statement. Neither Austin nor Marshall conferred with the White House prior to the statement. Marshall made similar remarks the following day. Needless to say, the comments by Warren and Marshall infuriated the president as he articulated in his diary:

"The State Dept. pulled the rug from under me today. I didn't expect that would happen. In Key-West or en route there from St. Croix I approved the speech and statement of policy by Sen. Austin to U.N. Meeting. This morning I find that the State Department has reversed my Palestine policy. The first I know about it is what I see in the papers! Isn't that Hell! Now, I am placed in a position of a liar and double-crosser. I never felt so in my life...There are people on the third and fourth levels of the State Dept. who have always wanted to cut my throat. They've succeeded in doing so. Marshall's in California and Lovett's in Florida...What is not generally understood is that the Zionists are not the only ones to be considered in the Palestine question. There are other interests that come into play, each with its own agenda. The military is concerned with the problems of

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<sup>36</sup> Foreign Relations of the United States, "Report by the Policy Planning Staff," February 24, 1948,

defending a newly created small country from attacks by much larger and better trained Arab nations. Others have selfish interests concerning the flow of Arab oil to the U.S. Since they all cannot have their way, it is a perfect example of why I had to remember that "The Buck Stops Here."<sup>37</sup>

The domestic backlash against the Truman White House was immense. The State Department had made him look like a liar and betrayer of the Jews. In the words of Clark Clifford, "Marshall didn't know his ass from a hole in the ground...every Jew thought that Truman was a no good son-of-a-bitch."<sup>38</sup> Perhaps, it was the lowest point of Truman's political career. He knew he had no chance of reelection without Jewish support. Ironically, he had assured Chaim Weizman the day before the announcement that the U.S. favored partition; he was completely unaware of Marshall and Austin's intentions. At a press conference the following day, Truman attempted to reconcile the actions of Austin and Marshall to the official views of the White House:

Trusteeship is not proposed as a substitute for the partition plan but as an effort to fill the vacuum soon to be created by the termination of the mandate on May 15. The trusteeship does not prejudice the character of the final political settlement. It would establish the conditions of order which are essential to a peaceful solution.<sup>39</sup>

Matters came to a head on May 12 in the Oval Office. Two days before the termination of the British mandate, Clark Clifford, Robert Lovett, and George Marshall debated the possibility of the U.S. government recognizing a newly-established Jewish state. The meeting pitted President Truman and Clark Clifford against the U.S. Department of State. At this meeting, the United States officially withdrew its support for a trusteeship plan. Truman instructed Clifford to argue to the pro-partition case on His behalf. During his presentation, Clifford urged Truman to publicly announce that the U.S. would recognize Israel even before the British mandate ended, thereby creating a sense of pro-partition continuity on behalf of the U.S. in accordance with the UN resolution.<sup>40</sup> By this time the Jews had already made significant military advances in Palestine; and for all practical purposes, a Jewish state already existed in Palestine.

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<sup>37</sup> Diary entry for Saturday, March 20, 1948. Available at [www.trumanlibrary.org](http://www.trumanlibrary.org)

<sup>38</sup> Clifford interview with Daniels, Daniels Papers as cited in Cohen, *Truman and Israel*, 193.

<sup>39</sup> Press conference, March 25, 1948, as found in *the Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Harry S. Truman, 1948* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1964), pp.190-95.

<sup>40</sup> Clark Clifford, "The Unique and Inspiring Leadership of President Truman," in *Harry S. Truman: The Man from Independence*, ed. William F. Levantrosser (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986) p. 386.

The very fact that Clifford was present at the meeting irritated top-level officials in the State Department. Clifford was a domestic advisor to Truman, rarely engaging in foreign affairs. Marshall believed Clifford's presence indicated the White House desired to handle the issue on the basis of the domestic political landscape.<sup>41</sup> In his memoirs *Counsel to the President*, Clifford describes Marshall as being "red with suppressed anger as I set forth the case for the immediate recognition of the Israeli state...When I finished he exploded: 'Mr. President, I thought this meeting was called to consider an important, complicated problem in foreign policy. I don't even know why Clifford is here.'"<sup>42</sup> Lovett and Marshall, both opposing the partition, argued that the Zionist movement was replete with pro-communist sympathizers and that a Jewish state would rely exclusively on American military support. According to the State and Defense Departments, recognizing Israel might have positive ramifications domestically (as the Zionist cause had considerable support in the American public) but was bad foreign policy and could possibly jeopardize international security. It is widely documented that after the Oval Office meeting, the Secretary of Defense said that if he were an American voter and Truman elected to recognize the Jewish state, he would vote against the president:

I remarked to the President that, speaking objectively, I could not help but think that the suggestions made by Mr. Clifford were wrong. I thought that to adopt these suggestions would have precisely the opposite effect from that intended by Mr. Clifford. The transparent dodge to win a few votes would not in fact achieve this purpose. The great dignity of the office of the President would be seriously diminished. The counsel offered by Mr. Clifford was based on domestic political considerations, while the problem which confronted us was international. I said bluntly that if the President were to follow Mr. Clifford's advice and if in the elections I were to vote, I would vote against the President.<sup>43</sup>

Without doubt the upcoming election weighed heavily on Truman and Clifford. Truman became president upon the death of one of the most popular U.S. presidents, Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Polls showed that he was losing to the Republican nominee John Dewey, and Republicans attempted to portray Truman as opposed to the plight of the Jews. Some speculated that the President was so unpopular that he might not even win the Democratic Party nomination,

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<sup>41</sup> Morton Halperin, *Bureaucratic Politics and Foreign Policy*, p. 71.

<sup>42</sup> Clark Clifford, *Counsel to the President: A Memoir*, p. 214

<sup>43</sup> Foreign Relations of the United States, "Memorandum of Conversation, by Secretary of State," May 12, 1948.

let alone a second term in office.<sup>44</sup> Truman could not risk losing the Zionist vote; in the 1940's, there were hundreds of thousands of Jews living in America but very few Arabs. The president understood that specific decisions can gain leaders broad support from segments of the population particularly interested in foreign affairs.<sup>45</sup> As a popularly-elected president of a democratic nation, Truman felt obligated to represent the views of those for whom he stood. Unlike the State Department, the president thought that any Palestine policy required the support of the American public.<sup>46</sup> This also explains his abrupt change of mind in abandoning a trusteeship in Palestine: "Truman's handling of the Palestine problem suggests he was highly attentive to the public and press outcry which greeted his March 19, 1948 decision to abandon partition and support a UN trusteeship over Palestine."<sup>47</sup>

Nevertheless, the White House resented any implication that its Palestine policy was politically motivated. (Interestingly, Dean Acheson, one of the President's opponents on Palestine seems to concur on this point.)<sup>48</sup> Clark Clifford believed the State Department "tended to see impure motives in anyone, including the president, who did not agree with them."<sup>49</sup> Rather than the White House stance being motivated by domestic politics, Clifford believed that Israel's liberal economic and political policies would be good for the United States. Furthermore, a new nation devoted to democratic principles might be a stabilizing force in the Middle East.<sup>50</sup> The State Department, however, did not have to concern itself with political matters. Government officials are supposed to be above electoral pressures. Truman, on the other hand, had to compete with an already pro-Israeli Congress, electorate, and media, not to mention a Republican party that many considered favorable to the Zionist solution.<sup>51</sup>

On May 14, the UN passed a resolution declaring a Jewish state. At 6:15 EST, on May 14, 1948, President Truman elected to recognize the infant Jewish state minutes after it had been declared. The United States was the first country to recognize Israel as an independent nation. Despite objections from Lovett that the president wait to recognize the state, Truman signed a letter of recognition, granting Israel *de facto* recognition. Not until the official permanent elections

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<sup>44</sup> Donald Neff, "Truman Overrode Strong State Department Warning Against Partitioning of Palestine in 1947," *Washington Report on Middle Eastern Affairs*, September/October 1994.

<sup>45</sup> Morton Halperin, *Bureaucratic Politics and Foreign Policy*, p. 70

<sup>46</sup> Public Papers of the Presidents, 1947, 207-210.

<sup>47</sup> Evensen, "The Limits of Presidential Leadership." Also see Acheson, *Present at the Creation*.

<sup>48</sup> Morton Halperin, *Bureaucratic Politics and Foreign Policy*, p. 70.

<sup>49</sup> Evenson, *Ibid*.

<sup>50</sup> Liventhal, "Remembering General George Marshall's Clash with Clifford Clark," *Washington Report*, June 1999.

<sup>51</sup> Michael Cohen, *Truman and Israel*, p. 90.



held the following January, however, did the U.S. give Israel *de jure* recognition. When news of the recognition reached the head of the U.S. delegation at the UN Warren Austin, he left without reporting the president's decision to the rest of the delegates. There was fear that the rest of the U.S. delegates would follow in Austin's steps and tender their resignations as well.

### **Conclusion**

As I have shown, American foreign policy is not necessarily the product of reactions to foreign affairs. It is, in fact, a result of process. Decisions regarding foreign affairs arise from an interchange between different organizations, competing interest groups, and perceived roles in government.

Given the number of competing bureaucratic pressures Truman faced, his decision to recognize Israel was truly one of the most difficult yet important decisions he made during his presidency. On the one hand, he felt pressured by the State Department (personified by George Marshall and Loy Henderson) not to compromise the position of the U.S. in the Middle East. Furthermore, Marshall, Henderson and other top advisors believed (based mainly on personal biases) that the Zionist movement was highly communistic in nature and predicated upon socialist ideology. However, this assertion meant nothing if the Soviets recognized Israel and intervened on their behalf while the United States remained idle. They argued their case on the basis of "national interest" in terms of both international prestige and private domestic interests.

On the other hand, the president understood that not recognizing the state would be a political liability at home. He faced Jewish pressure emanating from both inside and outside the White House. From outside, Truman faced a constant barrage of Jewish lobbyists desiring to see a Jewish state. Inside, aides like Clark Clifford, David Niles, and Max Lowenthal worked tirelessly in support of a Jewish state. More importantly, however, Truman personally believed in the Zionist cause.

Bureaucratic politics resulted from differing considerations directing the White House and the State Department on Palestine. The subsequent clashes led to a rather ambiguous and at times incoherent Middle East policy. Truman had to consider the State Department, Defense Department, National Security Council, and Central Intelligence Agency. He had to hear requests from the Jewish lobby and the Washington oil lobby. He had to weigh reports from Niles, Clark, and

Lowenthall against advice from Marshall, Forestal, Acheson, and Henderson.

The trusteeship debacle exemplified the conflict in the Truman administration. Some (including Truman) have gone so far as to say that there was a State Department “conspiracy” against the President’s policy. He believed the State Department knew that Austin’s statement would be an electoral liability.<sup>52</sup> According to Michael Cohen, the real problem was that the State Department never informed the president when the announcement was to be made, maybe out of fear that the White House would retract its initial support for a trusteeship.<sup>53</sup> Truman, however, even admitted in his memoirs that the State Department’s trusteeship proposal was not contrary to his own policy.<sup>54</sup> Even though Truman was aware a partition was not conducive to ongoing hostilities in Palestine, he did not want to be blamed for abandoning the resolution for which he fought so hard. (This appeared to be the case because at the time of Austin’s statement to the General Assembly, the Security Council had not officially rejected the partition plan.) Perhaps the president’s immediate recognition of Israel was a form of reprisal against the tactics of the State Department.

The bureaucratic problems arising in the U.S. recognition of Israel stemmed from the State Department’s belief that a presidential decision did not necessarily settle a matter of national importance. All participants in an issue like this have different stakes and different viewpoints. Interests also come in to play in bureaucratic politics theory, whether they be personal, organizational or national. As career officials and political appointees continue to resist presidential decrees, modern presidents have responded by seeking to accumulate and centralize power in the White House.<sup>55</sup> The problem is summarized in Truman’s memoirs:

The difficulty with many career officials in the government is that they regard themselves as the men who really make policy and run the government. They look upon the elected officials as just temporary occupants. Every President in our history has been faced with this problem: how to prevent career men from circumventing presidential policy. Too often career men seek to impose their own views instead of carrying out the established policy of the administration. Sometimes they achieve this by

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<sup>52</sup> Harry Truman, *Years of Trial and Hope*, pp. 164-65. Also see Michael Cohen, *Truman and Israel*, pp. 196 & 198.

<sup>53</sup> Cohen, *Ibid.*, pp. 197-98.

<sup>54</sup> Harry Truman, *Years of Trial and Hope*, p. 163.

<sup>55</sup> Morton Halperin, *Bureaucratic Politics and Foreign Policy*, p. 245.

influencing the key men appointed by the President to put his policies into operation. It has happened in the War and Navy Departments that the generals and admirals, instead of working for and under the Secretaries, succeeded in having the Secretaries act for and under them. And it has happened in the Department of State.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Harry Truman, *Years of Trial and Hope*, p.165.

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