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Decision Making in U.S. History

Modern America

Kevin O'Reilly

Justin Coffey, Editor
Kerry Gordonson, Editor
Starr Balmer, Editorial Assistant
Amanda Harter, Graphic Designer
Dr. Aaron Willis, Project Coordinator

Social Studies School Service
10200 Jefferson Blvd., P.O. Box 802
Culver City, CA 90232
<http://socialstudies.com>
access@socialstudies.com
(800) 421-4246

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10200 Jefferson Blvd., P.O. Box 802
Culver City, CA 90232
United States of America

(310) 839-2436
(800) 421-4246

Fax: (800) 944-5432
Fax: (310) 839-2249

<http://socialstudies.com>
access@socialstudies.com

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kevin O'Reilly is History Department Chair at Hamilton-Wenham Regional High School, where he has taught for 29 years. He was National Council for the Social Studies/*Time* Magazine Secondary Teacher of the Year, Kidger Award Recipient, Richard Farrell National Teacher of the Year, NASDAQ/National Council on Economic Education National Grand Prize Winner, and American Historical Association Beveridge Teaching Prize Winner. He has authored 11 other books, over 30 articles in professional journals, a history videotape, and two Internet-based simulations. He has conducted more than 100 professional workshops on critical thinking and decision making in history.

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HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Be sure to use these lessons:

1. **BEFORE students read about or study the topics.** If students read about the topics before they do the problems in each lesson, they may know which options worked well or poorly. That will spoil the whole decision-making experience!
2. **INDIVIDUALLY.** These are stand-alone lessons. They are meant to be plugged into your U.S. history curriculum wherever you see fit. They are not intended as part of a sequence.
3. **FLEXIBLY.** Each lesson can either be used as a quick introduction to a historical topic or unit, or alternatively as a lengthier in-depth study of the topic.
4. **FOR SKILLS as well as history CONTENT.** These lessons focus on real historical problems, and are often accompanied by pages of historical context; as such, they provide situations to challenge students' decision-making skills along with the historical background necessary to understand those situations.

INTRODUCTION

RATIONALE: Hindsight versus Foresight

When we study history, it is all too easy to sit in judgment of those who came before us. We read it after the fact; we see it in hindsight. Given the benefit of such 20/20 hindsight, some historical figures seem to have been very misguided or downright silly in their decisions. Why didn't they anticipate the consequences of their choices? How could they have been so shortsighted? Sports enthusiasts call this sort of analysis "Monday morning quarterbacking."

However, it's not so easy to laugh at the follies of past decision makers if we are confronted with decisions in history before we learn the actual results. In such a situation, we find ourselves making some of the same mistakes that historical characters made, and we sometimes commit new errors they did not make. This method of studying history, which we might call "foresight history", is far more challenging—and engaging—than the traditional retroactive method to which we are inured.

In short, when we learn history by hindsight we risk becoming more arrogant and complacent. If, on the other hand, we learn history by *foresight*, by casting ourselves in the role of those historical figures and making decisions as they did—without knowing the outcome—we can learn humility and gain a great deal of empathy for them. Students in my classes constantly exclaim, "This is hard!" as opposed to, "This is boring!"

Foresight history also helps students improve key decision-making skills they will use again and again as citizens. Schools of law, medicine, business, and nursing, along with the military and many other institutions, use case-study methods, where students are forced to make decisions about a particular case and then analyze their thinking. If each of these varied disciplines values decision making so much, shouldn't we be training all our future citizens how to make good decisions?

History provides many benefits for those who study it. Historical knowledge can be liberating all by itself, letting us draw back the veil of ignorance and see the present with eyes enlightened by the past. The more knowledge of history we possess, the better we understand our societies and ourselves. Study and evaluation of primary sources, discussions of motives, debates about significance, analyzing causes and effects, and many other strategies are vital to history courses. The lessons here on decision making are meant to support and enhance these other methods of studying history, not to replace them with a more "practical" type of history.

MODERN AMERICA

Introduction

OVERVIEW

There are seven lessons in this volume: three focused on foreign policy and four on domestic issues. Six of the lessons concern presidential decisions: two by President Carter, two by President Reagan, one by President Clinton, and one by President George W. Bush. As in the other volumes, no effort is made to cover all the major topics in this time period. Rather, lessons were chosen around interesting decision-making problems.

SKILLS GRID FOR THIS VOLUME

X = part of lesson

E = emphasized in the lesson

Skill	Lessons						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Underlying problem	X		X			E	X
Point of view	X	X	X	X	X		X
Assumptions/emotions		E	X	E			E
Ask—context	X	X	X	X	X	X	
Ask—sources					X		X
Ask—analogies	X	X			X		X
Goals? Realistic?	X		X	X	X	X	X
Options. Ethical?		X					
Unintended consequences	X	E	X	E	X		X
Play out options	E	X	X	E	X		X

LESSON 1: LATE-1970s ENERGY POLICY

Teacher Pages

OVERVIEW

Energy policy became the most important domestic policy issue for President Carter throughout his administration. In this lesson, students have the opportunity to decide for themselves what energy policies would work best for the country in the 1970s.

VOCABULARY

- Arab Oil Embargo—Arab countries stopped selling oil in 1973 to pressure oil-importing countries to stop supporting Israel
- Gas guzzler—A car that gets poor gas mileage, relative to a set standard
- “Moral Equivalent of War” speech—President Carter’s speech to gain support for his energy plan
- New Energy Plan—President Carter’s policy proposals for meeting the energy crisis
- Price regulation—When the government sets maximum prices for goods, in this case below the market price
- Rationing—System in which each person (or family) is allotted a limited amount of a scarce product
- Subsidies—Government help for certain businesses, usually in the form of money
- Windfall-profits tax—Tax on profits above a certain percentage (e.g., 10%)

DECISION-MAKING SKILLS EMPHASIZED

- Identify underlying problems
- Consider other points of view
- Ask about context
- Ask about analogies
- Set realistic goals
- Play out the options
- Predict unintended consequences

LESSON PLAN

A. IN-DEPTH LESSON (30–40 minutes)

Procedure:

Distribute Handout 1 and have students read it. Tell them to note anything confusing or that they don't understand. When they have finished reading, ask them to explain the situation in 1977 and each of the proposals, or at a minimum have them go over key concepts such as regulation, subsidies, and the windfall-profits tax. When you are satisfied that they understand the concepts and proposals, have students pair up to choose which they will support to solve the energy crisis. Circulate around the room to answer questions or clear up misunderstandings.

Bring the class back together and discuss their decisions for each proposal. After having students vote on the proposals, discuss their reasons for and against each one. Tell students to go back to their pairs to see if they will change any of their choices in light of the arguments they have heard. Bring the class back together and discuss the proposals further. How many of them have changed their decisions? Why? Distribute Handout 3 (Outcomes) and have them comment for homework.

OPTIONAL: Use Handout 2 to focus students on unintended consequences. Have them fill in the sheet and discuss, in pairs, possible consequences. Have groups volunteer their predictions for potential unexpected outcomes. Possible unintended consequences are outlined below in the “Decision-Making Analysis” section.

OPTIONAL: Use the Handout 4 (Primary Source) to analyze President Carter's famous “Moral Equivalent of War” speech to promote his energy plan. Suggested answers to Questions for Analysis include:

1. *How did President Carter frame the problem? What arguments did he use to convince Americans that the country needed a new energy policy?* President Carter framed the problem this way: we have an energy crisis, with real shortages; oil and natural gas are running out; we're increasingly dependent on foreign oil; there is still time to avoid catastrophe.
2. *How do you think the public reacted to the speech? Why?* The public would have noticed these elements to the speech: a negative tone to the problem, including an “unpleasant talk” and “unpopular sacrifices”; a call to national commitment; an honest assessment of a difficult situation. The public actually reacted favorably to the speech, but by the end of Carter's presidency, they blamed him for many of the energy problems.
3. *How reliable is President Carter's speech as a source?* Although Carter's speech is considered a primary source, he delivered it publicly, giving him reason to exaggerate certain aspects to get his energy program passed. This doesn't necessarily mean that the president was lying, only that historians can't accept what he said without questioning it.

Reflecting on Decision Making:

Ask students how well they did on decision making on this problem. Which decision-making skills were especially important in making these energy decisions? Which of the letters of **P-A-G-E** applied especially to this problem? (See the “Decision-Making Analysis” section below for ideas.) Ask students what they did well or poorly in terms of the **P-A-G-E** analysis of decision making. Discuss their answers.

Putting the Actual Decisions Into Historical Context:

Ask students whether President Carter’s energy plan resulted more from historical forces or from decisions by Carter and a few key advisors. (Some may argue that Carter freely chose to emphasize energy in his administration; others, that historical forces were more important—after the oil crisis of 1973, the natural gas shortage in winter 1976–77, made a plan to address the issue practically a necessity.)

Connecting to Today:

Ask students what policies the president and Congress today should pursue in terms of energy. What could political leaders learn from President Carter’s energy policies that might help them with successful policies today?

Troubleshooting:

Students must understand subsidies, regulation of prices, and the windfall-profits tax. You might want to review these economic concepts with students before starting the readings and decisions. Students must also understand the basics of supply and demand, and how prices are determined in markets.

B. QUICK MOTIVATOR (20 minutes)

Assign Handout 1 as homework and have students make their decisions. In class, ask for a show of hands for each of the 13 proposals. Discuss their reasons for five minutes. Distribute Handout 3 (Outcomes) and have students write about their reactions as homework.

TEACHER NOTES FOR EXPANDING DISCUSSION

(For Outcomes, see Handout 3)

President Carter’s energy plan was exceedingly complex, the summary of which comprised over 100 pages (See “Sources” for *The National Energy Plan*). Out of hundreds of proposals in numerous areas of energy production and consumption, this lesson deals with only a few, lest students become overwhelmed. Issues left out include a separate Department of Energy, a tax on imported oil, an expansion of synthetic fuels, and a strategic petroleum reserve.

In addition to the complexity of the plan, the energy debate unfolded in several phases. Congress passed a bill after 18 months of debate, rejecting most of Carter’s proposals. However, after several large price increases by OPEC, the president changed his position to support full deregulation, and Congress decided to pass a windfall-profits tax. Since the lesson doesn’t focus on the details of the political battle to get the legislation through Congress, they are not included. Rather, the Outcomes (Handout 3) concern what happened generally with each proposal and the merits of the decisions.

Likewise, President Carter’s leadership on energy policy has been the subject of debate. Most historians believe that he made serious mistakes, such as crafting the energy plan in secret, which made it more difficult to get Congress’s backing. Moreover, the struggle over the energy bill made for an object lesson in the power of lobbyists to reshape legislation. President Carter’s leadership and efforts to get the energy bill passed through Congress are highlighted in the “Decision-Making Analysis” section, but not discussed in the Outcomes (Handout 3). Hargrove (“Sources”) says that Carter learned from his mistake of excessive secrecy in the first energy proposal. In his second plan, in 1979, Carter sought the input of many different groups, including members of Congress, in the plan’s development.

Mileage standards for cars were passed in 1975, before Carter’s presidency. The proposal to tax gas guzzlers sought to add further incentive to buying more fuel-efficient cars.

The regulation of natural gas applied only to interstate trading, since the federal government couldn’t regulate trade within states. Prices were therefore higher for natural gas produced and sold in the same state. The result was a less-than-optimal distribution of natural gas, as producing states hoarded gas, and nonproducing states experienced shortages. Carter and his advisors proposed partly and gradually deregulating oil and natural gas prices (Proposal B). The government would still control prices, but allow them to rise until they eventually reached the world market price. This extremely complicated formula would have required a high level of government involvement in the market. It would likely have aggravated the shortage, since energy producers would have drilled for oil or gas, but waited to sell it until after the next scheduled price increase. Later, the president changed his position, supporting full deregulation.

President Carter’s energy plan placed a tax on oil as well as a standby increase in the national tax on gasoline at the pump, if consumption were to exceed target limits. This lesson combines these two taxes into one (Proposal E) for simplicity’s sake.

Commoner (“Sources”) argues that higher prices through deregulation essentially replaced the original focus of the energy plan—conservation, with an emphasis on renewable energy—which he feels made the plan a failure. Landsberg (“Sources”), meanwhile, believes the 55-mile-per-hour speed limit and the move to tax gas guzzling cars (though unsuccessful) had positive effects on Americans’ behavior. He faults President Carter, however, for not pushing harder for nuclear power.

DECISION-MAKING ANALYSIS

P = Problem

- * - Identify any underlying problem(s)
- * - Consider other points of view
 - What are my assumptions? Emotions?

A = Ask for information (about)

- * - Historical context (history of this issue; context in the world)
 - Reliability of sources
- * - Historical analogies

G = Goals

- * - What are my main goals? Are they realistic?
 - Generate options to achieve these goals. Are they ethical?

E = Effects

- * - Predict unintended consequences.
- * - **Play out the options. What could go wrong?**

*Denotes topics emphasized in this lesson

- **Identify underlying problem(s):** First, Americans were paying artificially low prices for oil and natural gas, leading them to consume more than if the price reflected the true value of that energy (the world market price). Second, Americans had grown accustomed to abundant resources, including energy. Third, Americans had negative views of “Big Oil,” identifying oil companies with persons such as John D. Rockefeller and the Gilded Age “robber barons”; many Americans likely see this energy crisis as a conspiracy of oil companies. Fourth, as people’s incomes increase, they use more energy.
- **Consider other points of view:** Students should consider the points of view of other groups, especially taxpayers, the poor (who can’t afford higher heating costs), salespeople and people living in rural areas (who must drive long distances), oil investors, and people living in the northern part of the country (high heating costs).
- **Ask questions:** Students could ask a number of questions, including:
 1. *How does the public feel about the energy crisis?* Americans tend to want

lower prices and greater supply, two essentially contradictory beliefs. Some think the energy crisis resulted from a conspiracy by oil companies to control supply and raise prices (and profits). An ABC/Harris poll shows that 62% of those polled oppose the tax on gasoline.

2. *What are other countries doing in terms of energy?* Most developed countries have their citizens pay the full, world-market price for oil and natural gas, plus additional taxes on those products. Therefore, gasoline and oil cost more than twice as much in these countries. As a result, citizens there drive smaller cars and insulate their homes and workplaces to a greater extent than Americans.
- **Ask about analogies:** President Carter called the energy crisis the “moral equivalent of war,” comparing it to the American effort in World War II, for example. However, few Americans saw it as the same kind of crisis, one that required major sacrifice and full mobilization. Most Americans, according to polls, wanted prices low and supply plentiful. Proposal M (rationing) also harks back to WWII, when rationing of needed supplies for the war effort did work (as compared to seemingly arbitrary shortages). However, Americans would most likely not accept rationing in peacetime.
 - **Set realistic goals:** President Carter and his advisors stated a clear goal: reducing dependency on foreign oil. People disagreed as to its feasibility. Some argued that a significant conservation program would certainly have helped, and that coal could replace oil and natural gas in certain applications. Others asserted that nothing would change until special-interest groups, especially oil companies, found it in their own interest to support changes.
 - **Predict unintended consequences:** Handout 4 focuses on unintended consequences. Suggested answers for each proposal include:
 1. *Deregulate oil/natural gas prices*—Higher inflation; obscene profits for oil and natural gas companies; public anger at higher prices; Democrats suffer losses in the next election
 2. *Cut taxes on gas*—Increased use of petroleum products (the opposite of Carter’s goal)
 3. *Subsidize energy companies*—Taxpayers lose money; bigger profits for companies; higher income taxes or bigger deficit
 4. *Have electric companies use coal*—More pollution
 5. *Tax “gas guzzlers”*—Hurts American car companies, relative to foreign companies (“Why are we subsidizing foreign imports?”); also possibly leads to the Democrats’ defeat in the next election
 - **Play out the options:** President Carter did a poor job of getting his energy program passed in Congress. He started out by drafting the plan in secret, leaving relevant members of Congress out of the process; therefore, when he did present the plan to Congress, he had already created needless opposition. Eventually, he did become more effective at working with and influencing Congress.

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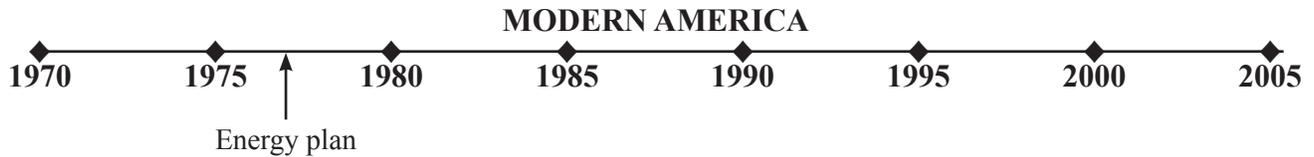
LESSON 1: LATE-1970s ENERGY POLICY

Vocabulary

- Arab Oil Embargo—Arab countries stopped selling oil in 1973 to pressure oil-importing countries to stop supporting Israel
- Gas guzzler—A car that gets poor gas mileage, such as ten miles per gallon or less
- “Moral Equivalent of War” speech—President Carter’s speech to gain support for his energy plan
- New Energy Plan—President Carter’s policy proposals for meeting the energy crisis
- Price regulation—When the government sets maximum prices for goods, in this case below the market price
- Rationing—System in which each person (or family) is allotted a limited amount of a scarce product
- Subsidies—Government help for certain businesses, usually in the form of money
- Windfall-profits tax—Tax on profits above a certain percentage (e.g., 10%)

LESSON 1: LATE-1970s ENERGY POLICY

Student Handout 1: Problem, 1977



It is 1977, and you are President Jimmy Carter. You won the 1976 election as an outsider who would bring new ideas to the White House. You think of yourself as a “New Democrat,” one who chooses the best policy for the country, not necessarily for the Democratic Party. You didn’t offer much on energy policy during your election campaign, but now, in the winter of 1976–77, the country faces an energy shortfall, especially of natural gas. Many Americans who heat their homes with natural gas can’t get it at any price—not enough exists for everyone who needs it. Schools and factories across the country have had to close. More than 400,000 workers have had to stay home for at least one day this winter. This energy crisis reminds Americans of the effects of the 1973 Arab Oil Embargo, when gasoline prices shot up and shortages occurred. Motorists often had to wait in long lines to get gas. Some people couldn’t afford to buy oil to heat their homes.



Cars waiting in line to buy gas

At this point, the federal government regulates the price of oil pumped within the U.S. (used to produce gasoline and heating oil), keeping prices far below those on the world market. Meanwhile, the U.S. buys the rest of its oil from other countries at the world-market (higher) price. The final price at the gas pump and of heating oil results from a combination of the lower-priced American oil with the higher-priced foreign oil. The price of gasoline in the U.S. is much lower than in European countries, where people pay the full market price, plus high taxes on gas. Nonetheless, Americans resent the significant increase in gasoline prices of the past few years. The federal government also prevents the price of natural gas (used for heating) from rising to the market price. However, since almost all of the natural gas comes from within the U.S., it isn’t mixed with higher-priced natural gas. As a result, natural gas prices lie even further below market prices.

Americans on the whole do not conserve energy. They drive heavy cars with big engines and low gas mileage. They don’t insulate their homes very effectively, and they keep their thermostats at whatever temperature is comfortable. It isn’t clear whether the public

perceives the situation as a “crisis,” but people do think there is a problem and want the government to do something.

Which of these proposals, if any, will you support? You may choose some, none, or all.

- A. Do nothing
- B. Deregulate the price of oil and natural gas: When prices rise to market rates, people will cut back on energy usage, lowering demand. Higher prices will also lead to greater exploration for new sources of oil, natural gas, and other energy sources. Getting the government out of the energy market will help Americans conserve energy.
- C. Pass a windfall-profits tax on energy companies, especially if the prices of oil and natural gas are allowed to rise (leading to huge profits for such companies). This tax would apply to 50% of any profits that exceed a certain amount, and would go to fund insulation, solar panels, and public transportation.
- D. Cut taxes on oil and natural gas to make it cheaper. People are being hurt by these high prices.
- E. Increase taxes on oil and natural gas (not just on excess profits) so that people stop using as much
- F. Give subsidies to coal, oil, and natural gas companies to lower their costs. With lower costs, these companies would expand and possibly be able to find new supplies of energy. The increased supply would then solve the shortage. Also, open new areas of the country to energy exploration, such as national parks and offshore areas.
- G. Require electric companies to use coal to generate their electricity, except for hydroelectric plants. Their switching from oil or natural gas would lower demand for both. America has a vast supply of coal and should double its use in the next five years to meet energy needs.
- H. Give subsidies for solar and wind energy. For example, people or businesses that install solar panels on their roofs would get money back in the form of a tax credit. Also subsidize the improvement of insulation for homes, or other energy conservation measures.
- I. Lower the speed limit to 55 miles per hour nationwide. Motorists would use less gasoline driving at 55 than at 65.
- J. Pass laws requiring automakers to produce cars that get a greater average of miles per gallon (mpg) of gasoline. For example, all car companies would have to meet an average of at least 23 mpg. Buyers of cars with a lower average mpg (i.e., lower fuel efficiency) would be subject to a “gas guzzler” tax, while purchasers of cars with a higher mpg (high fuel efficiency) would instead get money back from the government.
- K. Give subsidies to energy companies to build a large number of nuclear power plants. The government would continue to oversee nuclear-plant construction and operation to ensure their safety.
- L. Lead by example: Wear sweaters whenever you appear on TV to show people that they should turn down the heat and wear warmer clothing. Order that the

temperature be set lower in government buildings in the winter and higher in the summer. Install solar panels on the White House roof.

- M. Ration gasoline, heating oil, and natural gas. People would receive coupons for an allotted number of gallons of gasoline per month, for example. If they needed to use more than their limit, they would have to buy coupons from other people.