“Crossroads in History:”
The Senate Debates the Panama Canal Treaties
Guiding Questions:

• What insights about the Senate’s role in American foreign policy can students gain from studying the Panama Canal Treaty debates of 1977-1978?

• What do the Panama Canal Treaty debates reveal about American politics and political culture in the late 1970s?
What is the Senate’s Role in American Foreign Policy?
What powers does Article II, section II of the U.S. Constitution give to Senate?
WE ENTER TODAY UPON A NEW ERA, AND
WE SHALL FACE IT TOGETHER. WE ARE IN THE
201st YEAR OF THE LIFE OF THE UNITED
STATES. AS MEMBERS OF THE 95th CONGRESS,
IT IS OUR PRIVILEGE AND RESPONSIBILITY
TO BEGIN OUR DUTIES AS THIS NATION ENTERS
ITS THIRD CENTURY. LIKE THE MEN AND
WOMEN WHO HAVE PRECEDED US IN NINETY-FOUR
PREVIOUS CONGRESSES, OUR TASK WILL BE TO
PLAY A MAJOR ROLE IN SHAPING THE EVENTS

Senate Majority
Leader Robert C.
Byrd

Address to the
Senate
Democratic
Caucus, U.S.
Capitol,
Washington, DC

January 4, 1977
What core constitutional issue is Senator Byrd discussing in his speech?

While the main responsibility for foreign policy leadership devolves from the Constitution upon the President himself, the Senate also has a constitutional role which cannot and will not be avoided.
THE LEGISLATIVE BRANCH WILL CONTINUE TO FULFILL ITS RESPONSIBILITIES AND EXERCISE ITS RIGHTFUL POWERS UNDER OUR CONSTITUTIONAL SYSTEM OF CHECKS AND BALANCES. THE GREAT OBJECT FOR US TO SEEK HERE IS TO MAKE THIS SENATE A STRONG SENATE, AND, WHEN THE OCCASION DEMANDS, AN INDEPENDENT SENATE — NOT ONLY BECAUSE IT WAS SO INTENDED BY THE FOUNDING FATHERS, BUT BECAUSE IT IS THE NEED FOR THE PRESENT THAT MATTERS.
Topic II:

Reimagining American Foreign Policy in the Post-Vietnam Era

Air America Helicopter Crew Helps Evacuees Flee Saigon, April 29, 1975 (Hugh Van Es, UPI)
Revisiting the Push for the Panama Canal

William Allen Rogers

“Theodore Roosevelt and His Big Stick in the Caribbean”

1904
Charles Green Bush

“Go Away Little Man”

1903
“An Administrative Elephant”

Clifford K. Berryman

Washington Post

June 25, 1905
What does the political cartoon indicate about the relationship between American foreign policy and American commerce?
Panama Canal Timeline

- January 23, 1903 – United States signs the Hay-Herran Treaty with Colombia but Colombia does not ratify it.

- Nov. 18, 1903 – United States and Panama sign Hay-Bunau-Varilla Treaty granting the U.S. exclusive canal rights across the Isthmus of Panama in perpetuity in exchange for $10,000,000 up front, $250,000 annually beginning in 1912, and guarantees of protection.

- August 3, 1914 – First passenger ship (S.S. Cristobal) passes completely through the canal.

- June 1962 – President Kennedy meets with Panamanian President Roberto Chiari in secret to discuss unrest in the Canal Zone.

- January 9, 1964 – 6 killed, 91 wounded during protests in canal zone after students attempt to raise Panamanian flag.

- 1964 – Negotiations begin on a new treaty
The Panama Canal Treaties

- September 7, 1977 – President Jimmy Carter and General Omar Torrijos sign the new Panama Canal Treaties (Torrijos-Carter Treaties)

- March 16, 1978 – U.S. Senate ratifies the “Neutrality Treaty,” establishing the permanent right of the U.S. to defend the canal from any threat that would interfere with its neutral service to ships of all nations. (Senate Vote: 68-32)

- April 18, 1978 – The U.S. Senate ratifies “The Panama Canal Treaty” authorizing that Panama assume full control of the canal and canal zone at noon on December 31, 1999. (Senate Vote: 68-32)
How does this cartoon relate to the Constitution?

What does this cartoon suggest about how American foreign policy is made?

James Dent, “SALT!” Charleston Gazette, October 27, 1979
What core idea does the artist convey through this image?

What does this cartoon suggest about the Senate’s prerogatives in foreign policy?

Does this image paint the Senate in a positive light?

Charles Erkman, “Leading Them to the Water Was the Easy Part, Jimmy”
Charleston Daily Mail
ATTENTION THE PANAMA CANAL
Like Jonah in the belly of the whale
The Panama Canal is being tossed about,
We Americans can keep her
Or vomit her out
Into the waiting, willing hands of the
= Communists =
They lurk in the shadows of their
brain washed lands
And teach their students
Right here in AMERICA!
What fools are we
If we cannot see
Their Center for Marxist Education
156 Fifth Avenue in New York City.
This way of living is not for me
I am a proud and loyal American.
I pray, Dear God I pray
America, Americans will always be free.
On what grounds does the letter writer oppose the ratification of the Panama Canal Treaties?

What can we infer about American political culture from the letter?
1. What will be your Government's attitude and conduct in regard to the treatment of the Zonians, particularly in matters of police protection, judicial action, and employment; if the treaties are ratified?

2. What are your current and prospective relations with Cuba and do you feel that the Cuban political and economic system has any applicability for Panama?

3. What are Panama's current and prospective relations with the Soviet Union?

4. What can we expect in regard to the evolution of the political system in Panama? We are interested in knowing what your plans might be for 1978, when your current term expires.

5. Human rights are a matter of great concern in our country. We understand you have invited a delegation from the Organization of American States to observe human rights conditions here. Would you comment on this issue?

6. Drug trafficking is a matter of major concern in the United States. What is your attitude and your government's attitude about this problem?

7. Considering the importance of the statement of understanding made by you and President Carter, do you believe this is adequately understood by the Panamanian people and do you continue to stand behind the statement?
What is the basis for Senator Byrd’s support for the Panama Canal Treaties?
How is Senator Byrd framing the Senate’s vote on the Panama Canal Treaty?

What can we infer about the Senate’s role in foreign policy from this passage?