

U.S. Support for Birth of Israel (1948)

Introducer: "This is the man who helped create the State of Israel."

Truman: "What do you mean, 'helped to create'? I am Cyrus. I am Cyrus."

Harry Truman replying to introduction
by his friend Eddie Jacobson, November 1953

What was the core dilemma facing the United States regarding Palestine after World War II?

Britain, drained by revolt and cost, asked Washington to help decide Palestine's fate. President **Harry S. Truman**, moved by Holocaust survivors, urged admission of **100,000** Jewish DPs, yet his team also weighed **oil, bases**, and Arab stability. By mid-1947 the immediate choice was whether to back **UN partition** creating Arab and Jewish states. Humanitarian urgency, imperial logistics, and the **early Cold War** collided. Supporting partition promised refuge and moral credit; opposing it promised calmer Arab relations and steadier access to petroleum. Either course risked American interests. The dilemma: reconcile relief for Jews with security needs and superpower positioning as Britain prepared to quit.

What were the primary arguments against partition and immediate recognition of a Jewish state?

State and War professionals opposed partition and immediate recognition. **James Forrestal (Defense Secretary)** warned demographics and logistics favored Arab armies, risking U.S. entanglement. **Loy W. Henderson (Near East director at State)** argued partition violated majority rule and **UN** ideals by creating a discriminatory, quasi-theocratic state while Arabs were the local majority. **George C. Marshall (Secretary of State)** feared a regional war imperiling oil, air routes, and bases. Analysts called the plan **unworkable**, predicting disorder and a possible U.S. "quagmire." They urged **UN trusteeship** or a **binational federation** to buy time, reduce passions, safeguard access to petroleum, and avoid driving Arab governments toward the **Soviet Union**.

What were the main arguments for supporting partition and promptly recognizing a Jewish state?

Harry S. Truman and Clark Clifford (White House counsel) favored partition and swift recognition. **Humanitarian** duty after the Holocaust argued for a haven; American opinion was strongly supportive. Backing the **UN plan** restored U.S. credibility after mixed signals and aligned with earlier support for a Jewish national home. Strategically, a democratic Jewish state might be a **reliable ally** and foothold. Clifford minimized oil retaliation, claiming producers needed revenue more than Washington needed deference. Politically and strategically, delay risked a **Soviet** first-mover advantage: Moscow backed partition and might recognize first, winning influence unless the United States acted promptly.

Describe the “extraordinary confrontation” in the Oval Office on May 12, 1948.

On 12 May 1948, the Oval Office hosted a remarkable clash. **Clifford** argued for immediate recognition; **Marshall** and **Robert A. Lovett (Undersecretary)** opposed, citing UN truce efforts, Arab backlash, and U.S. credibility. Marshall, revered wartime chief, charged Clifford with domestic politicking and delivered an astonishing warning: if Truman followed Clifford’s course, “**if I were to vote, I would vote against you.**” The room fell silent. The exchange laid bare a rift between presidential authority and departmental realpolitik, and risked a public break with America’s most respected soldier-statesman.

How did President Truman ultimately make his decision to recognize Israel, and what factors influenced him most?

Truman ordered **de facto recognition** minutes after Israel’s proclamation on 14 May 1948. Four forces drove him: **moral conviction** after the DP crisis; **domestic politics** in an election year with strong public and party backing; **Cold War** calculus—hesitation risked a Soviet first-mover; and the **absence of alternatives** as trusteeship collapsed and independence loomed regardless. Fighting already raged; Jewish leaders would proceed with or without Washington. Truman judged alignment with the **UN partition** decision and humanitarian aims the sounder course. Presidential authority overrode State and Defense; he accepted Marshall’s displeasure to act on conscience and strategy.

What were the immediate consequences and reactions to Truman’s decision to recognize Israel?

Recognition came **eleven minutes** after Israel’s declaration. **State Department** officials at the UN, still pushing a truce or trusteeship, were blindsided and angry; **Marshall** never reconciled with **Clifford**. Domestically, Truman won praise from Jewish organizations and political allies, reinforcing support for November 1948. Internationally, the **USSR** recognized quickly; many states followed, while on 15 May Arab armies invaded—validating State’s war warning. Several Arab governments downgraded relations with Washington. The decision simultaneously delivered moral symbolism, electoral benefit, and strategic ambiguity: a new U.S.–Israeli relationship was born even as a regional war began and Arab estrangement deepened.

How did U.S. policy evolve between supporting partition, reversing to trusteeship, and finally recognizing Israel?

Policy lurched through three phases. **Partition (Nov 1947):** the U.S. lobbied and voted yes at the UN. **Trusteeship (Mar 1948):** as civil war surged, **Marshall** and **George F. Kennan (Policy Planning)** steered a reversal—suspend partition for a UN trusteeship; Truman acquiesced. **Recognition (May 1948):** trusteeship collapsed; Britain departed; Israel prepared to declare. After the **May 12** clash, **Truman** chose immediate recognition. The arc reflects bureaucratic–presidential conflict, shifting facts, and **Cold War** timing: events outran planning, leaving recognition as the only executable choice when sovereignty changed hands and military realities set the pace.

What lessons can be drawn from this case study in U.S. foreign policy decision-making?

Trade-offs: moral duty, domestic politics, and strategy collided; no option satisfied all.

Authority: a determined **President** can override a cohesive bureaucracy. **Forecasting:** State rightly anticipated immediate war and Arab estrangement; the White House bet—correctly—on a lasting democratic ally. **Process:** rapid shifts (partition → trusteeship → recognition) eroded coherence but reflected changing facts. **Domestic mobilization** and elections matter in foreign policy. **Cold War framing** shaped choices: preempting Soviet advantage became decisive. Above all, high-stakes decisions under uncertainty demand clarity about ends, candor about risks, and acceptance that costs will be incurred regardless of choice.

Timeline

- **1946: Anglo-American Committee** urges trusteeship and immigration; **Truman** presses Britain to admit **100,000** Jewish DPs.
- **Mid-1947: UNSCOP** recommends ending the Mandate and **partition** into Jewish and Arab states.
- **September 22, 1947: Loy Henderson** memo to **Marshall** argues partition is unworkable and against U.S. interests.
- **October 1947:** White House—**Weizmann** channel bypasses State; Truman's support hardens.
- **November 29, 1947: UNGA 181 passes** (partition); U.S. lobbies hard for a “Yes.”
- **Early 1948:** Civil war in Palestine intensifies; Britain sets **Mandate end by May**.
- **February 24, 1948:** **Kennan** warns partition implies foreign troops and risks Soviet moves.
- **March 6 & 19, 1948: Clifford memo** urges pressing on with partition; **U.S. publicly pivots** to a **UN trusteeship** (Austin at UNSC).
- **April 1948:** Haganah (Jewish proto-army) gains make partition a de facto reality on the ground.
- **May 12, 1948: Oval Office showdown**—Marshall opposes immediate recognition; **Clifford** argues for it.
- **May 14, 1948: Mandate ends; Israel declares independence; U.S. recognizes de facto 11 minutes later** (USSR on May 16).
- **January 1949:** U.S. extends **de jure recognition**; **1949 Armistice Agreements** conclude fighting.

Report by the Policy Planning Staff on Position of the United States With Respect to Palestine

Cover memorandum by George Kennan,
Director of the Policy Planning Staff,
to the Secretary of State (excerpts)¹
January 20, 1948

At the meeting of the Consultants of the National Security Council on December 12, 1947,² it was agreed that the State Department should prepare, on a priority basis, the initial draft of a National Security Council report on the position of the United States with respect to Palestine, taking into consideration U.S. security interests in the Mediterranean and Near East areas and the recommendation of the UN General Assembly on the partition of Palestine.³

I attach a paper⁴ prepared in the Policy Planning Staff in response to the above request. This paper has been prepared in close collaboration with Mr. Henderson,⁵ and has his general approval. The tenor of the recommendations has also been discussed at length with Mr. Rusk,⁶ who has voiced no objection to their presentation by the Staff but has not seen the final draft or committed himself to it....

I recommend that the paper be approved as the Department's initial position for further discussion in the National Security Council.

George F. Kennan

Report by the Policy Planning Staff on Position of the United States With Respect to Palestine⁷

top secret
January 19, 1948

The Problem:

1. To assess and appraise the position of the U.S with respect to Palestine, taking into consideration the security interests of the U.S. in the Mediterranean and Near East areas, and in the light of the recommendation of the General Assembly of the United Nations regarding the partition of Palestine.³

Analysis

2. Palestine occupies a geographic position of great strategic significance to the U.S. It is important for the control of the eastern end of the Mediterranean and the Suez Canal.⁸ It is an outlet for the oil of the Middle East; which, in turn, is important to U.S. security.⁹

Finally, it is the center of a number of major political cross-currents; and events in Palestine cannot help being reflected in a number of directions. For these reasons, and particularly in view of the Soviet pressure against the periphery of that area, and Soviet infiltration into the area,¹⁰ it is important that political, economic, and social stability be maintained there.

Because of the present irreconcilable differences between Arabs and Jews in Palestine, great danger exists that the area may become the source of serious unrest and instability which could be readily exploited by the USSR unless a workable solution can be developed.

3. The UN General Assembly on November 29, 1947, recommended the partition of Palestine into separate Arab and Jewish sovereign states, substantially as proposed by the majority report of the UN Special Committee on Palestine.¹¹ The partition plan provides for an economic union of the two states, administered by a Joint Economic Board, and for the city of Jerusalem to be placed under international trusteeship.¹² The mandate for Palestine would be terminated by August 1, 1948 and the newly created states and special regime for Jerusalem would come into" existence by October 1, 1948. Provision was made for a five-member UN Commission to take over progressively the administration of Palestine and to establish Provisional Councils in each new state.¹³
4. The boundaries of the proposed new Arab and Jewish states do not satisfy Zionist aspirations from either the political or the economic viewpoint, and the whole plan of partition with economic union is totally unacceptable to the Arabs. Although frequent reference has been made to "sacrifices" accepted in the interest of compromise, the partition plan was strongly supported by the Jewish Agency for Palestine and by various Zionist organizations favoring the establishment of a sovereign Jewish political state in Palestine. It did not, however, have the support of the Irgun, the Revisionists or the Stern gang (the so-called leftist groups),¹⁴ whose influence among the Jews of Palestine appears to be increasing.
5. The Arabs of Palestine and the Arab states have uniformly and consistently maintained their unequivocal opposition to any form of partition. The Arabs of Palestine have indicated their determination not to establish a separate government in the Arab area of Palestine designated by the UN, and to boycott all activities of the UN Commission charged with the transfer of authority from the British to the new Arab and Jewish states. Even if partition were economically feasible, the Arab attitude alone renders it improbable that any economic union could be effected between the two new states.

The General Assembly, in adopting the recommendation for partition, left unanswered certain questions regarding the legality of the plan as well as the means for its implementation. Nor did the General Assembly, in the circumstances prevailing at the

time, have an opportunity to explore the last minute announcement by the Arab States on November 29 of their willingness to accept the principle of a Federal State in Palestine¹⁵ which they had previously opposed. There was no indication of any real effort by the UN toward conciliation between the Jews and the Arabs.

6. The U.S. and USSR played leading roles in bringing about a vote favorable to partition. Without U.S. leadership and the pressures which developed during UN consideration of the question, the necessary two-thirds majority in the General Assembly could not have been obtained. From this there has grown a belief that the United States has a heavy responsibility for seeing that partition works. It has been shown that various unauthorized U.S. nationals and organizations, including members of Congress, notably in the closing days of the Assembly, brought pressure to bear on various foreign delegates and their respective home governments to induce them to support the U.S. attitude on the Palestine question. Evidence to this effect is attached under Tab A.¹⁶
7. The decision of the U.S. Government to support the UN Special Committee's majority plan was based primarily on the view, expressed to the GA by Secretary Marshall on September 18 [17], 1947, that "great weight" should be accorded the majority opinion of a UN Committee.¹⁷
8. Strong nationalistic and religious feelings were aroused throughout the Arab world as a result of the UN recommendation on Palestine. Widespread rioting has followed. In Palestine, the outbreaks have consisted of armed clashes between Arabs and Jews; in certain of the Arab states, there have been attacks on Jewish quarters and demonstrations directed primarily against the U.S. These manifestations of popular feeling have not so far represented organized Arab resistance to partition, although a "jihad" (holy war) against the Jews of Palestine has been proclaimed by Moslem leaders in most of the Arab states and has been joined by Christian leaders in Syria.¹⁸
9. As British forces are progressively withdrawn from Palestine and as steps are taken with a view to implementing the UN decision, organized large scale opposition by the Arabs is to be expected. Irregular military units are now being organized in Iraq, Syria, Egypt, Transjordan and Saudi Arabia to fight in Palestine. There are strong indications that at an appropriate moment at least some of these units will move into the Arab portion of Palestine as defined by the UN. That these forces will come into violent conflict with the Haganah or other Jewish military bodies operating from the Jewish state is probable.¹⁹
10. In order to protect themselves and to secure the establishment of a Jewish state, Zionist representatives will seek armed support from the U.S., for without substantial external assistance the proposed Jewish state cannot be established or exist. This may take the form of an attempt (a) to obtain money, arms and volunteers in the U.S. and/or (b) to induce the U.S. Government to assist in organizing an international armed force under the UN to

enforce partition.²⁰

11. The UN decision did not provide for outside armed forces to impose the partition scheme, either in maintaining law and order in the two new states or in affording protection to the five-member UN Commission which is to implement the decision. The UN Commission is almost certain to meet with armed Arab opposition in seeking to discharge its functions. Palestine police authorities have declined to assume responsibility for its safety outside of Tel-Aviv. There can be no assurance that in the present and foreseeable circumstances, local security forces will be able to maintain law and order; rather may their failure to do so be confidently predicted.²¹
12. The U.S. has suspended authorization for the export of arms, ammunition and other war material intended for use in Palestine or in neighboring countries.²² If we resist pressure by the Zionists to alter this position, the question then arises whether we should send troops to Palestine as part of an international force under the UN. It may be assumed that the Soviet Union would, in certain circumstances, be prepared to contribute troops to such an international force. If the USSR should do so, it would be awkward for the U.S. to decline to take similar action. If Soviet troops are sent to Palestine, further opportunities would be provided for the exercise of Russian influence in the whole Near Eastern area.
13. U.S. support of partition has already brought about loss of U.S. prestige and disillusionment among the Arabs and other neighboring peoples as to U.S. objectives and ideals. U.S. support of the principles of self-determination was a basic factor in the creation of the Arab states out of the Ottoman Empire after World War I. U.S. officials, missionaries, and educational institutions in the Near East have built successfully on this foundation, and U.S. businessmen have reaped the benefit of the widespread belief that the U.S. had no political motives in the area inimical to Arab welfare.²³
14. The position of Saudi Arabia in the Palestine question is of particular importance. King Ibn Saud values the friendship between his country and the U.S. and recognizes the significant financial aid to Saudi Arabia derived from oil royalties. He is reluctant to sever political and economic ties with the U.S. Nevertheless, he is under strong pressure from other Arab states to break with the U.S. Prince Faisal, his son and Foreign Minister, departed for Saudi Arabia from the UN General Assembly in a bitterly anti-American mood and may give strength to a faction of less moderate elements which will force the King's hand. Important U.S. oil concessions and air base rights will be at stake in the event that an actively hostile Government should come into power in Saudi Arabia.²⁴
15. In view of the evident determination of the Arabs to resist partition with all the means at their disposal, it may be anticipated that, if an attempt is made to carry out the UN decision (with or without U.S. assistance), the more moderate and intellectual leaders of the Arab states, most of whom have ties with the west, will be swept out of power by

irresponsible elements. Leaders such as Azzam Pasha, Secretary General of the Arab League, would be displaced by extremists such as the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem. Hatred of the Zionists or of those identified with Zionism might be extended to include all westerners in direct proportion to the latter's support of Zionist armies in general and of partition in particular.²⁵

16. Any assistance the U.S. might give to the enforcement of partition would result in deep-seated antagonism for the U.S. in many sections of the Moslem world over a period of many years and would lay us open to one or more of the following consequences:
 - (a) Suspension or cancellation of valuable U.S. air base rights and commercial concessions, cessation of U.S. oil pipeline construction, and drastic curtailment of U.S. trade with that area.
 - (b) Loss of our present access to the air, military and naval facilities enjoyed by the British in the area, with attendant repercussions on our overall strategic position in the Middle East and Mediterranean.
 - (c) Closing or boycotting of U.S. educational, religious and philanthropic institutions in the Near East, such as the American University at Beirut established in 1866 and the American University at Cairo.
 - (d) Possible deaths, injuries and damages arising from acts of violence against individual U.S. citizens and interests established in the area. Official assurances of the Arab Governments to afford protection to U.S. interests could not be relied on because of the intensity of popular feeling.
 - (e) A serious threat to the success of the Marshall Plan. The present oil production of the Middle East fields is approximately 800,000 barrels a day. To meet Marshall Plan requirements, production must be raised to about 2,000,000 barrels a day, since no oil for Europe for this purpose could be provided from the U.S., from Venezuela, or from the Far East. Before the current disturbances, U.S. oil companies had made plans for the required development in the Middle East, with which it will be impossible to proceed if the present situation continues.²⁶
17. The USSR stands to gain by the partition plan if it should be implemented by force because of the opportunity thus afforded to the Russians to assist in "maintaining order" in Palestine. If Soviet forces should be introduced into Palestine for the purpose of implementing partition, Communist agents would have an excellent base from which to extend their subversive activities, to disseminate propaganda, and to attempt to replace the present Arab governments by "democratic peoples' governments". The presence of Soviet forces in Palestine would constitute an outflanking of our positions in Greece, Turkey and Iran, and a potential threat to the stability of the entire Eastern Mediterranean area.²⁷

18. It is not certain, however, that the USSR would choose to send its forces into Palestine. To do so would be to place those forces in an exposed position, far from a base of supply, and without suitable lines of communication. Rather than risk the enmity of the Arab world by such action, the Soviet Union might prefer to have U.S. forces bear the brunt of enforcement and incur the odium of the local population and Moslems everywhere as a result.
19. Other choices are open to the USSR besides the furnishing of troops. Evidence is accumulating that the USSR may be covertly or indirectly supplying arms not only to the Jews but to the Arabs, thus aggravating the friction in the Near East. From the Soviet viewpoint, it might be preferable to exploit in this manner the explosive character of the situation created by partition rather than to enter the area in a military sense.

Whether or not Soviet forces should assist in implementing partition, the UN decision is favorable to Soviet objectives of sowing dissention and discord in non-communist countries. The partition of Palestine might afford the USSR a pretext on the basis of "self-determination of minorities" to encourage the partition of areas in Iraq, Iran, Turkey and Greece, with a view to setting up separate [Kurdish?] Azerbaijani, Armenian and Macedonian states enjoying the support of the USSR.²⁸

All in all, there is no way of telling in exactly what manner the USSR will attempt to turn partition to its advantage. It must be assumed, however, that Moscow will actively endeavor to find some means of exploiting the opportunity.

20. Various other factors would enter into the situation if an attempt is made to enforce the UN recommendation. The foregoing is intended merely to suggest the principal elements in the problem. So numerous would be the ramifications of mounting Arab ill will, of opening the door to Soviet political or military penetration, and of generally chaotic conditions in Palestine and neighboring countries that the whole structure of peace and security in the Near East and Mediterranean would be directly or indirectly affected with results impossible to predict at this stage in detail but certainly injurious to U.S. interests.

Conclusions

21. As a result of U.S. sponsorship of UN action leading to the recommendation to partition Palestine, U.S. prestige in the Moslem world has suffered a severe blow and U.S. strategic interests in the Mediterranean and Near East have been seriously prejudiced. Our vital interests in those areas will continue to be adversely affected to the extent that we continue to support partition.
22. The original U.S. premise in supporting the partition of Palestine was founded on the belief that, with certain modifications in the majority proposals of the UN Special Committee on Palestine, a just and workable plan could be devised immediately which

would receive broad international support, provided always that there was cooperation between the parties concerned. A study of the present plan raises serious doubts as to its workability because of the artificial and arbitrary political subdivision of a complicated economic area. Events have demonstrated that the Arab inhabitants of Palestine will not cooperate even to endeavor to make the partition plan work. Therefore, one of the major premises on which we originally supported partition has proved invalid.

23. The United States should not send armed forces to Palestine, either on a volunteer or contingent basis, for the following reasons: (a) This would represent a political or military commitment of which the dimensions, both in time and space, cannot be calculated or foreseen and which might carry us into actions of a major character, out of all proportion to the foreign policy objectives involved; and (b) to do so would invite the possibility of the movement of Soviet armed forces to the strategic Near Eastern and Mediterranean area. For similar reasons, the U.S. should oppose the sending of armed forces of any nationality to Palestine.
24. While the governments in Arab countries have partially succeeded in restraining demonstrations against the Jews within their borders, in the case of open conflict major massacres of Jews in Moslem countries would seem to be inevitable, despite efforts of the governments of those countries to control popular feeling. Moreover, a basis would be provided for anti-Jewish agitation in other parts of the world. The process of assimilation or integration of the individual Jew in the life of the country of which he is a citizen, which has been strongly advocated by World Jewry in the past, would be made more difficult and he would be singled out for attack as an alien political factor. In the U.S., the position of Jews would be gravely undermined as it becomes evident to the public that in supporting a Jewish state in Palestine we were in fact supporting the extreme objectives of political Zionism, to the detriment of overall U.S. security interests.
25. Unless an effort is made to retrieve the situation, the prestige of the UN itself will be at stake because of the notoriety and resentment attendant upon the activities of U.S. pressure groups, including members of Congress, who sought to impose U.S. views as to partition on foreign delegations. Furthermore, the probable abstention by the Arab states from active participation in many UN activities may further weaken the effectiveness of the UN and the U.S. position within the UN, as has Soviet abstention in certain other activities.
26. The U.S. Government should face the fact that the partition of Palestine cannot be implemented without the use of force, and that the U.S. would inevitably be called upon to supply a substantial portion of the money, troops and arms for this purpose. The British have made it clear that they would not accept any role in the enforcement of partition. No other nation except Russia could be expected to participate in such implementation to any appreciable extent.

26a. It must be concluded that the partition of Palestine will not be possible of attainment without outside assistance on a substantial scale. If the U.S. is determined to see the successful establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine (either as proposed or as may be geographically modified because of Arab noncooperation in the proposed economic union), the U.S. must be prepared to grant economic assistance, together with aid to the Jewish authorities through the supply of arms, ammunition and implements of war. Ultimately the U.S. might have to support the Jewish authorities by the use of naval units and military forces. It should be clearly recognized that such assistance given to the Jewish state, but withheld from the Arabs and the Arab States, would in Arab eyes be a virtual declaration of war by the U.S. against the Arab world. It is improbable that the Jewish state could survive over any considerable period of time in the face of the combined assistance which would be forthcoming for the Arabs in Palestine from the Arab States, and in lesser measure from their Moslem neighbors. The preparations now being made for intensive guerrilla warfare by the approximately 400,000 Arabs resident in the proposed new Jewish state are alone giving rise to serious doubt as to whether the Jewish people in Palestine could themselves control the situation.

Recommendations

27. We should take no further initiative in implementing or aiding partition.
28. We should oppose sending armed forces into Palestine by the UN or any member thereof for the purpose of implementing partition. We should also oppose the recruitment of volunteers for this purpose.
29. We should maintain and enforce our embargo on arms to Palestine and neighboring countries.
30. We should endeavor as far as possible to spread responsibility for the future handling of this question, and to divest ourselves of the imputation of international leadership in the search for a solution to this problem.
31. When and if the march of events has conclusively demonstrated that the effort to carry out the partition plan as prescribed by the UN General Assembly offers no reasonable prospect for success without the use of outside armed force, we should then take the position that we have been obliged to conclude that it is impracticable and undesirable for the international community to attempt to enforce any form of partition in the absence of agreement between the parties, and that the matter should go back to the UN General Assembly,
32. Thereafter, our position in the UN should be that we would cooperate loyally in working

out and implementing any proposals designed (a) to encourage pacific settlement between the Palestine Arabs and Palestine Jews or (b) to investigate the possibilities of any other suggested solution such as a federal state or trusteeship, which would not require outside armed force for implementation.

33. We should oppose referring to the International Court the question of the UN recommendation on Palestine on the grounds that the fundamental issue, i.e. whether the two communities involved will cooperate to make the partition plan effective, is not a proper question for the Court.²⁹

Notes

1. **Kennan** was Director of the State Department's **Policy Planning Staff (PPS)**, created in **1947** to draft long-range strategy.
2. A consultative group advising the new **National Security Council (NSC)** on urgent matters.
3. **UN General Assembly Resolution 181 (II)** (29 Nov 1947): recommending **partition** with **economic union** and an **international regime for Jerusalem**.
4. The attached "**Report by the Policy Planning Staff ...**" drafted as the initial U.S. position for **NSC** discussion.
5. **Loy W. Henderson**, the Department's leading **Near Eastern** specialist and skeptic of **enforcing partition**.
6. **Dean Rusk**, then head of **UN Affairs** (later **Secretary of State**), involved in UN liaison.
7. The paper that follows; marked **Top Secret**.
8. **Sea-lanes and Suez Canal control** were central to Western strategy from **Gibraltar to Suez**.
9. **ERP/Marshall Plan**: U.S. and European postwar recovery depended on **Middle Eastern oil** expansion.
10. U.S. concern that **Moscow** would exploit instability on the **southern Soviet flank**.
11. **UNSCOP** (summer 1947) recommended **partition by majority**; a **minority** favored a **federal unitary state**.
12. **UNSCOP**'s plan envisaged **Jerusalem** under a special **international trusteeship** and a **Joint Economic Board** for customs, currency, and infrastructure.
13. The five-member **UN Palestine Commission (UNCOP)** was to assume functions as **Britain withdrew**.

14. **Irgun / Revisionists / Stern (Lehi)**: militant **Zionist** factions **outside Jewish Agency control**.
15. On **29 November** Arab delegates floated a last-minute **federal-state** idea; the Assembly proceeded to vote **partition** that day.
16. PPS compiled accounts alleging last-minute **lobbying** by private U.S. actors and some **Members of Congress** on foreign delegations.
17. **Secretary of State George C. Marshall** told the **GA** (17 Sept 1947) that “**great weight**” should be given to **UNSCOP’s majority** recommendation.
18. Late-1947/early-1948 disturbances included **riots** in Arab capitals and **communal clashes** in Palestine; some clerics called for **jihad**.
19. The **Haganah** was the main **Yishuv** defense force; **British withdrawal** accelerated parallel **Arab and Jewish mobilization**.
20. Anticipated **Zionist** efforts to secure **U.S. matériel** and/or **UN enforcement**.
21. **British authorities** limited protection of the **UN Commission** largely to **Tel Aviv** amid security collapse elsewhere.
22. **U.S. arms embargo** of **5 December 1947** covered **Palestine and neighboring states**.
23. The U.S. had cultivated an image of **disinterest** and support for **self-determination** in the Arab world since **WWI**.
24. **Ibn Saud’s** stance mattered for U.S. oil concessions (**ARAMCO**) and **air routes**; **Prince (later King) Faisal** was then **Foreign Minister**.
25. **Azzam Pasha** (Arab League Secretary-General) versus **Hajj Amin al-Husayni** (ex-Mufti) symbolized **moderate vs. extremist** poles in U.S. analysis.
26. PPS linked Middle East **oil output** (rising from **~0.8** to **~2.0 million b/d**) to **Marshall Plan** feasibility.
27. U.S. fear that **Soviet troops/agents** in Palestine would **outflank Greece–Turkey–Iran** and aid **subversion**.
28. Illustration of U.S. worry that **Moscow** would cite “**self-determination**” to foment separatisms (**Azeri, Armenian, Kurdish, Macedonian**) around **Turkey/Iran/Iraq/Greece**.
29. PPS argued the legal question masked a political one—workability depends on **Arab–Jewish cooperation**—hence not apt for adjudication by the **International Court**.

Memorandum by the Policy Planning Staff

top secret

February 11, 1948

PPS/21¹

Alternative Courses of Action

Generally speaking, there are three possible courses which the U.S. might now pursue with respect to the problem of Palestine:

- (a) Fully support the partition plan with all the means at our disposal, including the use of armed forces under the UN.²
- (b) Adopt a passive or "neutral" role, taking no further steps to aid or implement partition.
- (c) Alter our previous policy of support for partition and, through a special session of the General Assembly³, seek another solution to the problem.

1. Full Support of the UN recommendation for partition, based on a determination to see the successful establishment of a Jewish State in Palestine

Under this course of action, we would take steps to grant substantial economic assistance to the Jewish authorities and to afford them support through the supply of arms, ammunition and implements of war⁴. In order to enable the Jewish state to survive in the face of wide scale resistance from the Arabs in Palestine, from the neighboring Arab States, and possibly from other Moslem countries, we would be prepared ultimately to utilize our naval units and military forces for this purpose.

In the Security Council⁵, we would seek to give effect to the UN recommendation that "any attempt to alter by force the settlement envisaged" by the resolution should be regarded as a threat to the peace, breach of the peace or act of aggression in accordance with Article 39 of the Charter⁶. Thereafter we would assist in implementing the recommendation by sending armed forces to Palestine either as part of an international force under Article 43⁷ or on a volunteer contingent basis to enforce partition. Since it is clear that no other nation except Russia could be expected to participate in such implementation to any appreciable extent, we would supply a substantial portion of the money, troops and arms for this purpose. If Russia participated, we would at least have to match the Russian effort in this respect.

Any aid to the establishment of a Jewish state such as described above, and withheld from the Arabs, would be construed by the Arabs as a virtual declaration of War against the Arab world. U.S. assistance in any form to the enforcement of partition, particularly by the use of armed forces, would result in further deterioration of our position in the Middle East and in deep-seated antagonism for the U.S. in many sections of the Moslem world over a period of many years. We

would be threatened with

- (a) Suspension or cancellation of air base rights, commercial concessions, and oil pipeline construction, and drastic curtailment of U.S. trade in the area;
- (b) Loss of access to British air, military and naval facilities in the area, affecting our strategic position in the Middle East and Mediterranean;
- (c) Closing of our Near East educational, religious and philanthropic institutions;
- (d) Possible deaths, injuries and damages arising from acts of violence against individual U.S. citizens and interests in the area; and
- (e) A serious impediment to the success of the European Recovery Program⁸, which is dependent on increased production of Middle Eastern oil.

2. Adoption of a passive or “neutral” role, taking no further steps to aid or implement partition

The adoption of this course of action would involve the maintenance and enforcement of our embargo on arms to Palestine and the neighboring countries⁹. We would give no unilateral assistance to either the Jewish or Arab Palestine States financially, militarily or otherwise. In so far as possible, we would require an attitude of neutrality to be observed by all persons or organizations under U.S. jurisdiction. We would oppose sending armed forces into Palestine by the UN or any member thereof for the purpose of implementing partition, and we would oppose the recruitment of volunteers for this purpose.

Such a course of action would rest on the assumption that implementation of the General Assembly resolution was a collective responsibility of the UN and that no leadership in the matter devolved upon the United States. We would take the position that the UN machinery created by the partition plan should handle the question of implementation, and that the five-man Palestine Commission¹⁰ should proceed with the task entrusted to it of taking over control from the British. We would leave it to the peoples in Palestine to give effect to the General Assembly resolution.

This course would have the advantage that it would not be necessary for us to become embroiled in the Middle East through active support of the partition plan. At the same time we would not have to alter our original basic policy of support for partition.

The consequences of such a policy, while not further embittering our relations with the Arab world, would not however prevent the situation in Palestine from deteriorating even further. It would not be possible to prevent the arming of Jews and Arabs by ardent sympathizers on the one hand and profit-seeking arms smugglers on the other, or Communist assistance to both sides. Disorder and bloodshed on a large scale would take place when the British withdrew from Palestine. The strongest kind of pressure would be brought on the U.S. to act in the chaotic

situation which would ensue. Even if we should oppose any move in the Security Council to send armed forces there would remain the possibility that the USSR might intervene actively in behalf of the Zionists.

Politically, this passive attitude would be extremely difficult to maintain in the United States. It would, moreover, make impossible any possible future intervention on legal or moral grounds in Greece or Italy, for example. The confusion and chaos which would result in the Middle East in the light of a passive attitude by the United States would be exploited by the Communists and might develop into a serious threat to our national security.

3. Altering our previous Policy of Support for Partition and seeking another Solution to the Problem

The special report of the UN Palestine Commission on security phases of the problem will emphasize the need for an international armed force if the partition plan is to be carried out or even if a complete state of chaos in Palestine is to be avoided at the termination of the British Mandate on May 15¹¹. If we should determine that it would be inadvisable to join in the carrying out of the UN resolution on this basis, our course of action would call for a special session of the General Assembly to consider the situation anew. Abandoning our support of partition as impracticable and unworkable in view of the demonstrated inability of the people of Palestine to assume the responsibilities of self-government, we would under this course of action attempt to seek a constructive solution of the problem.

As a first step in this direction we would seek to have the Security Council explore other avenues of a peaceful settlement when the Palestine case comes up for its consideration. Specifically we would endeavor to bring about conciliation or arbitration of the problem. We would propose that while working for such conciliation or arbitration, a special session of the General Assembly be called to consider a new solution in the form of

1. An international trusteeship¹² or
2. A federal state,

with provision for Jewish immigration provisions in either case.

A trusteeship could take one of several forms: a three-power trusteeship of the U.S., UK and France, a joint U.S.-UK trusteeship either with or without some of the smaller states, or a general UN trusteeship with the Trusteeship Council as administering authority¹³. Alternatively, a federal state with cantonization¹⁴, a plan which the British originally favored as having the greatest chance of success, could be discussed. We would make it clear that we did not favor the introduction of an international armed force for the implementation of any such solution.

This course of action would encounter strong opposition from the Zionists. It would, however, probably have the support of the Arab States and of world opinion in general. Our prestige in the Middle East would immediately rise and we would regain in large measure our strategically important position in the area. Our national interests would thus be served and our national security strengthened, notwithstanding the disfavor with which such a procedure would be viewed by Zionist elements.

Notes

1. **PPS/21:** Internal designation for a **Policy Planning Staff** paper; the PPS, led by **George F. Kennan**, drafted long-range strategy for the State Department.
2. **“Armed forces under the UN”:** Contemplates deployment under **UN Charter** authority (e.g., **Articles 39 & 43**).
3. **Special session of the General Assembly:** A **UNGA** session convened outside regular meetings to reconsider Palestine if partition proved unworkable.
4. **Economic/military aid to the Yishuv:** U.S. material support (money, arms, ammunition) to Jewish authorities contrasted with withholding aid from **Arab states**—seen as a **virtual declaration of war** by the Arabs.
5. **Security Council:** The UN organ responsible for international peace and security; could label attacks on partition a “**threat to the peace**” under **Article 39**.
6. **Article 39 (UN Charter):** Empowers the **Security Council** to determine threats/breaches of the peace/acts of aggression and decide measures.
7. **Article 43 (UN Charter):** Framework for **member states to provide armed forces** to the UN by special agreements (never fully implemented in this era).
8. **European Recovery Program (ERP/Marshall Plan):** U.S. economic aid program for Europe; planners tied its success to **expanded Middle Eastern oil** output.
9. **U.S. arms embargo (Dec 5, 1947):** Covered **Palestine and neighboring states**, affecting both Arab and Jewish forces and raising asymmetry concerns.
10. **Five-man Palestine Commission (UNCOP):** Implementing body created by **UNGA 181** to assume functions as **Britain** withdrew.
11. **British Mandate termination (May 15, 1948):** UK exit date created a looming **security vacuum**, heightening urgency for a UN-arranged transition.
12. **International trusteeship:** Placement of Palestine under **UN Trusteeship** (e.g., **three-**

power U.S.–UK–France, joint U.S.–UK, or UN Trusteeship Council administration).

13. **Trusteeship Council:** UN organ overseeing trust territories; one mooted vehicle for administering Palestine in lieu of partition.
14. **Federal state with cantonization:** A single Palestine with **autonomous cantons** (ethno-territorial units)—a concept the **British** at points had considered likelier to succeed than partition.



George Kennan, 1947

**Memorandum by Clark Clifford, the President's Special Counsel
to President Truman¹**

March 8, 1948

It seems to me that much of the discussion about our foreign policy—and specifically the Palestine issue—does not touch the fundamentals of the problem. I am, therefore, taking the liberty of presenting to you my own views.

At the outset, let me say that the Palestine problem should not be approached as a Jewish question, or an Arab question, or a United Nations question. The sole question is what is best for the United States of America. Furthermore, one's judgment in advising as to what is best for America must in no sense be influenced by the election this fall. I know only too well that you would not hesitate to follow a course of action that makes certain the defeat of the Democratic Party if you thought such action were best for America. What I say is, therefore, completely uninfluenced by election considerations.

I

There are some who criticize your actions last fall in actively supporting partition in Palestine.² They argue that this embarked the United States on a new policy; that this new policy involves military commitments which we are unable to perform; and that, therefore, we should seek some other solution. This argument is completely fallacious.

Your action in supporting partition is in complete conformity with the settled policy of the United States. Palestine was Turkish territory prior to World War I. It was captured by the Allies. The **Balfour Declaration**³ favoring “the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people”, was made November 2, 1917. Its text had been submitted to President Wilson and approved by him before its publication. It was publicly endorsed by the French and Italian Governments in April 1920. The principal Allied powers decided that the mandate for the government of Palestine should be entrusted to Great Britain and that the mandatory power was to be responsible for putting the Balfour Declaration into effect. The substance of the Balfour Declaration has been restated by Presidents Harding, Coolidge, Hoover, Franklin D. Roosevelt and yourself. The Balfour Declaration was approved by joint resolution of Congress June 30, 1922. It was reaffirmed in the American-British Palestine Mandate Convention of December 3, 1924. The Balfour policy was again approved in a declaration by members of the Senate and the House of the 77th Congress, which was submitted to the President November 2, 1942, signed by 68 Senators and 193 members of the House.

In 1944 both the Democratic and the Republican National Conventions adopted resolutions favoring the establishment in Palestine of “a free and democratic Jewish commonwealth.”⁴

Under date of July 2, 1945, a letter was addressed to you signed by a majority of both Houses of Congress, stating "that the time for action is now" and urged "all interested governments to join with the United States toward the end of establishing Palestine as a free and democratic Jewish commonwealth at the earliest possible time." A letter to the same effect dated July 2, 1945 was addressed to you and signed by the governors of forty of the forty-eight states of the United States. On December 19, 1945, a concurrent resolution was adopted by Congress which resolved that the United States use its good offices towards the establishment of a democratic commonwealth in Palestine.

There are numerous other declarations of policy by the United States Government to the same effect. Your active support of partition was in complete harmony with the policy of the United States. Seldom has any policy of this government been so clearly and definitely established. Had you failed to support partition, you would have been departing from an established American policy and justifiably subject to criticism.

Partition unquestionably offers the best hope of a permanent solution of the Palestine problem that may avoid war.⁵ The policy of drift and delay urged by opponents of partition makes absolutely certain the very military involvements that they profess they want to avoid. Your action on partition in no wise extended the military commitments of the United States. It was a high-minded, statesmanlike adoption of the one course of action that may avoid military involvement.

II

Not only is partition in conformity with established American policy, not only is partition the only hope of avoiding military involvement of the United States in the Near East, but, in addition, partition is the only course of action with respect to Palestine that will strengthen our position vis-à-vis Russia.⁶

One of the most fundamental objectives of American foreign policy is that no aggressive military power shall establish itself on the shores of Western Europe. Germany became a real threat to the United States when she moved to establish herself in Channel ports. Twice we went to war to throw her back from these.

Britain likewise has no desire to see an aggressive military power establish itself in Western Europe. But Britain also has primary interests all over southern Asia and Africa. Britain, therefore, must consider her military position on those continents. Economic exhaustion has necessitated the limitation of her military forces. To compensate for curtailment of her military forces in Asia and the Near East, Britain is deliberately building up an alliance with the Moslem world.⁷ Such an alliance, she undoubtedly feels, will give her friendly populations from Pakistan west across Asia Minor and all along the shores of North Africa.

While the British-Moslem alliance is undoubtedly extremely important to Britain, a similar alliance between the United States and the Moslem world is much less important to the United States. Our primary interests demand alliances with the nations to the south of us and along the shores of Western Europe.

III

Events have proved that, for the present at least, “one world” is impossible of attainment—either within the United Nations or otherwise.⁸ Normally, the cohesive force that holds an organization together is opposition from the outside. The absence of such opposition from the outside tends to cause the organization to break into factions. The existence of the Axis military was the cohesive force that held the Allied Nations together during the war. With the military collapse of the Axis, unity among the Allied powers ceased. When all the nations of the world unite in a peace organization, there is no outside opposition. We are in no danger from attack from Mars. Therefore, a world organization tends to break into factions. This is what happened to the League of Nations. It is also happening in the United Nations. The United Nations is now dividing between the Soviet faction and the United States faction.

IV

The development of factions within the United Nations compels the United States to determine its course of action vis-à-vis the United Nations.

We must admit that the possibility of the United Nations affording adequate military protection to us becomes more and more remote. One course of action that the United States might follow would be to make less and less use of the United Nations machinery. This would inevitably lead ultimately to the collapse of the United Nations. Such a policy, in my opinion, would be tragic. In the first place, the United Nations is a God-given vehicle through which the United States can build up a community of powers in Western Europe and elsewhere to resist Soviet aggression and maintain our historic interests. It is the best conceivable mechanism to capitalize on the Marshall plan politically. We can cement alliances immediately through the United Nations mechanisms which could not be brought about by fifty years of diplomacy.¹⁰

Secondly, a jettisoning of the United Nations would be calamitous to American morale. The American people want peace. They fervently believe that the United Nations offers the best hope for peace. They would go to war to sustain the United Nations as an instrumentality for peace. The cruel fact is that American morale is collapsing right around us today because the American people feel that their government is aiding and abetting in the disintegration of the United-Nations—the one great hope of the American people for peace. Nothing has contributed so much to this feeling as Senator Austin’s recent statement.⁹ In large part, it seemed to be the sophistries

of a lawyer attempting to tell what we could not do to support the United Nations—in direct contradiction to your numerous statements that we mean to do everything possible to support the United Nations.

Not only do the American people see their government failing to back up the United Nation's position on Palestine but now they hear talk of our entering into military alliances with the powers of Western-Europe with no reference to such action coming within the framework of the United Nations. The American people grasped at the United-Nations, believing it would save them from being engulfed in World War III. Suddenly, they see what they thought was dry land begin to sink—sink because of what they regard as supineness of their own government.

All of this is causing a complete lack of confidence in our foreign, policy from one end of this country to the other and among all classes of our population. This lack of confidence is shared by Democrats, Republicans, young people and old people. There is a definite feeling that we have no foreign policy, that we do not know where we are going, that the President and the State Department are bewildered, that the United States, instead of furnishing leadership in world affairs, is drifting helplessly.

I believe all of this can be changed.

V

Proposed United States Policy

1. While recognizing that the United Nations will not afford us adequate military protection, we should nevertheless support it to the limit as an instrumentality for consolidating the anti-Soviet forces of the world. Here is an instrumentality already in existence which is well-nigh a perfect mechanism for such purpose.

Any military arrangement with Western European powers must be pictured as coming completely within the framework of the United Nations.¹⁰ If this is done, it will receive the support of the American people. If this is not done, we will see an isolationism develop in America that will make any military alliances or intelligent foreign policy well-nigh impossible within the foreseeable future.

2. In order to save the United Nations for our own selfish interests, the United States must promptly and vigorously support the United Nations actions regarding Palestine. We “crossed the Rubicon” on this matter when the partition resolution was adopted by the Assembly—largely at your insistence.¹¹ A retreat now will be a body-blow to the United Nations. We cannot hope to cement alliances in South America and Western Europe if we back out now. Those countries would justifiably discount the value of any commitments we might propose to make in the face of our repudiation of a commitment we only made last November.

3. The British have announced that they intend to withdraw from Palestine by May 15th.¹² Unless affirmative action is taken immediately by both the United States and the Security Council to preserve peace in Palestine, the withdrawal of Britain's military forces on May 15th will be followed by chaos and bloody war.
4. There is no more certain way of having Russia move into the Arabian Peninsula than for us to permit war to develop between the Jews and the Arabs—and this is as certain as the rising of tomorrow's sun, less we move promptly to prevent it.¹³ Furthermore, when this happens, Russia can move in unilaterally as the defender of world peace and champion of the United Nations. To permit this to happen would be disastrous.
5. It is argued that our Arabian oil supplies will be imperilled if we support the Assembly's resolution for partition of Palestine. The United States and Western Europe can only get oil from Arabia if there is peace in Arabia. Peace in Arabia can only be maintained by backing up the Arabs or by backing up the United Nations. The time for new solutions or compromises ended when the Assembly adopted the partition resolution. It is utterly unthinkable for the United States now to back the Arabs and openly oppose a decision of the United Nations Assembly, arrived at at your own insistence. The only alternative is, therefore, to back up the United Nations so that there will be peace in Palestine.
6. There are those who say that such a course of action will not get us oil, that the Arabs will not sell us oil if we back up the United Nations partition plan. The fact of the matter is that the Arab states must have oil royalties or go broke. For example, 90% of Saudi Arabia's revenues come from American oil royalties.¹⁴ The Arab states have no customer for their oil other than the United States:
 - a) they must have dollars and can get dollars only from the United States;
 - b) their social and economic structure would be irreparably harmed by adopting a Soviet orientation, and it would be suicide for their ruling classes to come within the Soviet sphere of influence;
 - c) Saudi Arabia possesses the greatest oil deposits in this area. King Ibn Saud has publicly and repeatedly refused even to threaten the United States with cancellation of oil leases, despite his dislike for our partition position.
7. America's security and its oil interests in the Middle East depend upon effective enforcement of the United Nations decision on Palestine. In terms of military necessity, political and economic self-preservation will compel the Arabs to sell their oil to the United States. Their need of the United States is greater than our need of them.
8. There are those who say that partition will not work and that another solution must be found. This comes from those who never wanted partition to succeed and who have been

determined to sabotage it. If anything has been omitted that could help kill partition, I do not know what it would be. First, Britain, the Mandatory Power, not only publicly declared she would have no part of it, but she has done everything possible to prevent effective action by the Palestine Commission.¹⁶ Next, we have placed an embargo on arms to Palestine, while Britain fulfills her “contract obligations” to supply arms to the Arabs.¹⁵ Thirdly, our State Department has made no attempt to conceal their dislike for partition. Fourthly, the United States appears in the ridiculous role of trembling before threats of a few nomadic desert tribes.¹⁷ This has done us irreparable damage. Why should Russia or Yugoslavia, or any other nation treat us with anything but contempt in light of our shilly-shallying appeasement of the Arabs. After all, the only successful opposition to the Russian advance has been in Greece and Turkey. You proclaimed a bold policy and stood your ground. The **Truman Doctrine**, so far, has been the one outstanding success in a disintegrating situation.¹⁸

In case you are interested, I am sending you herewith a separate memorandum detailing suggestions for action in the Palestine situation.

[Annex]
Summary of Proposals for American Policy in Palestine

Vigorous American support of UN’s Palestine decision is the only policy which is in American interests in the Middle East.

1. **American Security and Peace in Palestine:** American security and our vital interests in the Middle East’s oil depend upon peace in Palestine. UN’s failure to enforce its Palestine plan will bring bitter warfare between Arabs and Jews. Peace in Palestine depends on firm UN action, which is impossible without American leadership.¹⁹
2. **American Security and Russian Penetration into Middle East:** UN abdication in Palestine leaves a military vacuum there after May 15 when Great Britain withdraws. Unless UN implements its Palestine decision, Russia may intervene unilaterally in the guise of preserving world peace and defending the UN Charter.²⁰
3. **American Security and Middle East Oil:** The Arab States will continue to sell oil to the United States. The Arabs need us more than we need them. They must have oil royalties or go bankrupt. 90% of Saudi Arabia’s governmental revenues derive from American oil royalties, and King Ibn Saud has publicly refused even to threaten cancellation of United States oil leases despite his dislike of our partition position.¹⁴
4. **American Security and Jewish Palestine:** Jewish Palestine is strongly oriented to the United States, and away from Russia, and will remain so unless a military vacuum in Palestine caused by collapse of UN authority brings Russian unilateral intervention into

Palestine.

5. **American Security and UN's Palestine Decision:** Collapse of a UN decision taken at the insistence of the United States would cause serious loss of American prestige and moral leadership all over the world. Arab league negation of partition is not only open defiance of UN, but also deliberate and insolent defiance of the United States which vigorously espoused partition.

American self-interest, American military security, American interests in Middle East oil, and American prestige in international affairs all demand effective implementation of the UN Palestine decision. The most effective way to prevent Russian penetration into the Middle East and to protect vital American oil interests there is for the United States to take the immediate initiative in the **Security Council** to implement the General Assembly's Palestine resolution.¹⁹

Notes

1. **Clark Clifford:** Special Counsel to **President Truman**; principal advocate in the White House for robust **U.S. backing of UN partition** and swift recognition of a Jewish state.
2. **UNGA 181 (II), 29 Nov 1947:** The **UN partition plan** for Palestine, recommending two states, **economic union**, and a **special international regime for Jerusalem**.
3. **Balfour Declaration (1917):** British pledge for “a national home for the Jewish people,” later echoed by U.S. presidents and embedded via the **Palestine Mandate**.
4. **U.S. political endorsements: 1922 Joint Resolution of Congress; U.S.–U.K. Mandate Convention (1924); 1942 Congressional declaration; 1944 party platforms; 1945 Congressional and governors’ letters** urging a Jewish commonwealth.
5. **Partition as best hope/no new U.S. military commitment:** Clifford’s claim that decisive implementation would avoid a wider war and **not** enlarge U.S. obligations.
6. **Countering the USSR:** He frames partition as strengthening U.S. posture against **Soviet expansion** in the Eastern Mediterranean/Middle East.
7. **British–Muslim alignment:** Clifford’s reading of **postwar British strategy** of cultivating ties with Muslim-majority states from **Pakistan** to **North Africa** amid imperial retrenchment.
8. **UN fragmentation:** Assertion that “**one world**” has dissolved into **U.S.–Soviet** blocs, limiting UN coercive capacity.
9. **Sen. Warren R. Austin (UN Ambassador):** Late Feb. **1948** remarks implying reluctance to enforce partition and floating **trusteeship**, criticized by pro-partition advocates.
10. **Alliances within the UN frame:** Foreshadows building **Atlantic security** ties (later **NATO**) while

maintaining U.S. public support by rooting them in **UN** mechanisms.

11. **“Crossed the Rubicon”:** Clifford argues the U.S., having secured **UNGA 181**, must now lead on implementation to preserve **UN credibility** and U.S. alliances.
12. **British exit date:** The UK set **15 May 1948** to end the **Mandate**, creating a security vacuum unless **UN/Security Council** acts.
13. **Soviet “peace” pretext risk:** Warning that **Moscow** might intervene unilaterally in Palestine under a **UN peace** mantle if a vacuum persists.
14. **Oil leverage and Saudi dependence:** Clifford’s assertion that **~90% of Saudi** revenues came from **U.S. oil royalties (ARAMCO)**, limiting credible embargo threats.
15. **Arms embargo asymmetry:** U.S. **regional arms embargo** (5 Dec 1947) hit both sides, while Britain continued some **pre-existing Arab arms** deliveries—seen as disadvantaging partition.
16. **UN Palestine Commission (transition body):** Five-member commission created by **UNGA 181**; Clifford blames **British non-cooperation** and U.S. hesitancy for hindering it.
17. **“Nomadic desert tribes”:** Clifford’s jab at perceived U.S. **timidity** toward Arab threats, while multiple Arab states were mobilizing forces for Palestine.
18. **Truman Doctrine (Mar 12, 1947):** Aid to **Greece and Turkey** as a model of resolve; Clifford invokes it as a successful counter to Soviet pressure.
19. **Security Council initiative:** Clifford urges immediate **U.S.-led action in the UN Security Council** to implement **UNGA 181** before the British withdrawal.
20. **UN vacuum and Soviet gain:** In Clifford’s logic, **UN abdication** would invite **Soviet** unilateralism, harming U.S. interests.
21. **Primacy of U.S. interests:** Clifford insists the Palestine question be judged solely by what advances **U.S. strategic, political, and economic interests**, not by sectarian or electoral considerations.

**Memorandum of Conversation (excerpt) by George Marshall
Secretary of State¹**

top secret

May 12, 1948.

Participants: The President²

The Secretary of State³

The Under Secretary of State⁴

Messrs. Clark Clifford, David Niles, Matthew Connelly—The White House⁵

Fraser Wilkins (NE)—State Dept.⁶

Robert McClintock (UNA)—State Dept.⁷

The President said that he had called the meeting because he was seriously concerned as to what might happen in Palestine after May 15.⁸

Mr. Lovett gave a lengthy exposition of recent events bearing on the Palestine problem....

The President then invited Mr. Clark Clifford to make a statement.⁵ Mr. Clifford said that he had three main suggestions to offer, based upon consultation with colleagues of the White House staff.

Mr. Clifford said that he objected to the first article of our draft resolution which would place the General Assembly on record as reaffirming support of the efforts of the Security Council to secure a truce in Palestine.⁹ He said this reference was unrealistic since there had been no truce and probably would not be one. He said that on March 24, Mr. Rusk at a White House conference⁴ had estimated that a truce could be negotiated within two weeks but this goal was still not in sight. Instead, the actual partition of Palestine had taken place “without the use of outside force”.¹⁰

Mr. Clifford’s second point was strongly to urge the President to give prompt recognition to the Jewish State after the termination of the mandate on May 15.¹¹ He said such a move should be taken quickly before the Soviet Union recognized the Jewish State.¹² It would have distinct value in restoring the President’s position for support of the partition of Palestine.

Mr. Clifford’s third point was that the President, at his press conference on the following day, May 13, should make a statement of his intention to recognize the Jewish State, once the provision for democratic government outlined in the resolution of November 29 had been complied with, which he assumed would be the case.¹³ The proposed statement would conclude: “I have asked the Secretary of State to have the Representatives of the United States in the

United Nations, take up this subject in the United Nations with a view toward obtaining early recognition of a Jewish State by the other members of the United Nations".

The rebuttal was made by Mr. Lovett. With regard to Mr. Clifford's reference to the article on truce, Mr. Lovett pointed out that the Security Council was still seized of this matter under its resolutions of April 1, April 17 and April 23.¹⁴ The United States in fact was a member of the Security Council's Truce Commission on Palestine.¹⁵ Surely the United States could not by its unilateral act get the Security Council to drop this matter and it would be most unbecoming, in light of our activities to secure a truce.

On the question of premature recognition, Mr. Lovett said that it would be highly injurious to the United Nations to announce the recognition of the Jewish State even before it had come into existence and while the General Assembly, which had been called into special session at the request of the United States, was still considering the question of the future government of Palestine.¹⁶ Furthermore, said Mr. Lovett, such a move would be injurious to the prestige of the President. It was a very transparent attempt to win the Jewish vote but, in Mr. Lovett's opinion, it would lose more votes than it would gain. Finally, to recognize the Jewish State prematurely would be buying a pig in a poke. How did we know what kind of Jewish State would be set up? At this stage Mr. Lovett read excerpts from a file of intelligence telegrams and reports regarding Soviet activity in sending Jews and Communist agents from Black Sea areas to Palestine.¹⁷

Mr. Lovett also failed to see any particular urgency in the United States rushing to recognize the Jewish State prior to possible Soviet recognition.

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.¹⁸

Mr. Lovett and I told the President that naturally after May 16 we would take another look at the situation in Palestine in light of the facts as they existed. Clearly the question of recognition would have to be gone into very carefully. A paper presenting the legal aspects of the problem had been prepared in the Department and would be promptly sent to Mr. Clifford.¹⁹

The President initialed the draft resolution and the underlying position paper of May 11, and terminated the interview by saying that he was fully aware of the difficulties and dangers in the situation, to say nothing of the political risks involved which he, himself, would run.²⁰

Notes

1. **Author & provenance:** Memorandum by **Secretary of State George C. Marshall**, recording an Oval Office meeting on U.S. policy as the **British Mandate in Palestine** neared termination.
2. **The President: Harry S. Truman**, whose administration had backed **UNGA 181 (Partition)** in Nov. 1947 and was weighing recognition of a Jewish state.
3. **Secretary of State: George C. Marshall**, advocating caution about timing/conditions for recognition and deference to UN procedures.
4. **Under Secretary of State: Robert A. Lovett**, Marshall's deputy; a principal interlocutor with **Clark Clifford** and **Dean Rusk** on Palestine.
5. **Clifford, Niles, Connelly (White House):** Senior aides—**Clark Clifford** (Special Counsel), **David K. Niles** (domestic/ethnic affairs), **Matthew Connelly** (Appointments Secretary)—pressing for **immediate U.S. recognition** of a Jewish state.
6. **Fraser Wilkins (NE):** Officer in **Near Eastern Affairs** (State), representing regional bureau input.
7. **Robert McClinton (UNA):** Officer in **United Nations Affairs** (State), handling UN procedural/substantive issues.
8. **“After May 15”:** The UK had announced termination of the **Palestine Mandate effective 15 May 1948**, creating a security/political vacuum.
9. **Draft GA resolution & SC truce efforts:** The U.S. had helped convene the **Second Special Session of the UNGA (Apr–May 1948)**; the **Security Council** had adopted **truce-related resolutions** and created a **Truce Commission for Palestine**.
10. **“Partition … without the use of outside force”:** Clifford's contention that on-the-ground realities (Yishuv control areas; Arab–Jewish fighting) were overtaking UN machinery, undercutting expectations of a negotiated truce.
11. **Prompt recognition:** Clifford urged **de facto recognition** of the **proclaimed Jewish state** immediately upon British departure; in fact, the **U.S. recognized Israel de facto on May 14, 1948**, minutes after its declaration of independence.
12. **Soviet recognition concern:** Clifford warned that **Moscow** might recognize the new state first; the **USSR recognized Israel de jure on May 17, 1948**.
13. **“Provision for democratic government … Nov 29”:** **UNGA 181** required each prospective state to issue a declaration safeguarding **rights, equality, and democratic governance** as a condition for UN membership/recognition.
14. **SC “seized” & April resolutions:** The **Security Council** addressed Palestine cease-fire/truce on

April 1, 17, and 23, 1948, urging cessation of hostilities and authorizing truce machinery.

15. **SC Truce Commission (Palestine)**: A three-member body (at that time drawn from **U.S., France, Belgium**) to supervise truce efforts on the ground in Jerusalem/Palestine.
16. **GA special session & timing of recognition**: Lovett/Marshall argued unilateral U.S. recognition during the **UNGA special session** (considering mediation/trusteeship) would undercut the **UN** and the U.S. convening role.
17. **Soviet infiltration reports**: Intelligence cables alleged **Soviet-facilitated movements from Black Sea ports** and **communist agents** infiltrating migration routes—used by Lovett to caution against haste.
18. **Marshall’s “I would vote against the President”**: Famous exchange underscoring Marshall’s view that **domestic politics** must not dictate **foreign policy**; later recounted as a dramatic moment of dissent.
19. **“Legal aspects” paper**: State’s **Office of the Legal Adviser** was preparing guidance on criteria/precedent for **recognition** and on the interplay with **UN processes**.
20. **May 11 draft & position paper**: Refers to the **U.S. draft GA resolution/position** for the special session (truce, mediation, future governance), which Truman initialed even as recognition timing remained under debate.



Clark Clifford, 1947

Memorandum of Conversation by Robert Lovett
Under Secretary of State

top secret

May 17, 1948

On Friday afternoon¹ following lunch Mr. Clifford told me that the President was under unbearable pressure to recognize the Jewish state promptly.²

He recalled that on Wednesday afternoon previously I had vigorously attacked the proposals then advanced by the President's advisers that the President should make a statement at his Thursday press conference promising recognition, etc.³ He stated that he felt the State Department criticisms had been persuasive and that the fact that General Marshall and I had opposed it had caused the President to change his mind and agree to a "postponement of recognition."

Clifford indicated that the most persuasive arguments were the fact that, by stating in advance of any request from the Jewish Agency that he would recognize the state, it would place this country in the position of being a sponsor and increase responsibility thereby; that while the UN special session was still considering the matter, this act by the President would be a grave breach of propriety and would be labelled a doublecross; that the boundaries were unknown and the President would be putting this country in the position of "buying a pig in a poke" without knowing who the Government was or anything about it. Clifford said the President was impressed by these facts as he had been, but that at six o'clock Friday night there would be no government or authority of any kind in Palestine. Title would be lying about for anybody to seize and a number of people had advised the President that this should not be permitted. The President had decided to do something about recognizing the new state if it was set up but that he would agree to wait until the request had been made and until there was some definition of boundaries. He would postpone the decision to the last until he was satisfied that the interests of this country would be adequately protected if such a step were taken. He asked the State Department to recommend language to put into effect recognition in the event the President decided upon it. He said that the White House had been informed that an appeal would be made for immediate recognition by the new state, which had been proclaimed that morning and which, according to information given the White House, proposed to live within the conditions of the November 29 General Assembly resolution and to restrict its claim to the borders therein defined.⁴

I replied to Mr. Clifford that the legal paper the Department had provided him with⁵ indicated that there was, strictly speaking, no legal bar to recognition. However, indecent haste in recognizing the state would be very unfortunate for some of the reasons I had mentioned on Wednesday. I therefore urged the President to delay action for a day or so until we could confirm the details of the proclamation. Clifford replied that he felt sure we would have adequate details to indicate a recognition of the provisional government but that the timing of the recognition was

"of the greatest possible importance to the President from a domestic point of view." I said that it was hard for me to believe that one day could make so much difference, and emphasized especially the tremendous reaction which would take place in the Arab world. I mentioned specifically that we might lose the effects of many years of hard work in the Middle East with the Arabs and that it would jeopardize our position with the Arab leaders and would probably bring our missions and consular representatives into personal jeopardy. Mr. Clifford replied that we should take every precaution against that and that he would hope that we could get messages out in time to forewarn the personnel and inform them of the situation.⁶

I said that we also ought to notify the head of our UN delegation, Senator Austin, and the British, French and Belgian Governments in advance, and asked if the President could not withhold the decision until the next day so that we could be sure that the messages would get through in time. Clifford said that the President could not afford to have any such action leak and that we should try to insure against it. I told him that it was manifestly impossible to time messages to arrive in a distant capital when we did not know when the decision would be made. Clifford said that he hoped the final answer would be given us in the late afternoon and that they were awaiting the formal request, which he again repeated they were sure would be received.

Telephone conversations continued during the afternoon on the subject and the White House was apparently advised by phone that the message was on its way. The general sense was given me by Mr. Clifford and we started to prepare a statement for Mr. (Charles) Ross to use in connection with our continuing efforts on the truce. The language to be used in the White House release was arrived at at a final conference in the middle of the afternoon in the Department prior to notice of the President's decision but based on the assumption that it would be in favor of recognition.

After the completion of this, sometime about 5:30, I called Mr. Clifford and told him that the General Assembly was in session and was winding up, and that it was our guess that it would be over by around ten o'clock that night. I asked him if he would endeavor to delay the announcement until after the General Assembly, but he said again that time was terribly important and that he did not feel that the President would do this although he would discuss it with him. I reminded Clifford that we had to have time to get the message to Senator Austin and asked him to let me know as soon as the final decision was reached. Mr. Clifford was with the President at the time and said that he would call me back after they had talked it over.

About twenty minutes to six I was told that the President was going to make the announcement shortly after six o'clock and that it was all right to call Senator Austin and tell him of the action. Mr. (Dean) Rusk called the Senator about a quarter to six and gave him the information. The various cables had been released on the basis of this action being possible so that they had gone out some time before.

In this memorandum of conversation I have omitted, for the sake of brevity, the long arguments

back and forth throughout the afternoon. My protests against the precipitate action and warnings as to consequences with the Arab world appear to have been outweighed by considerations unknown to me, but I can only conclude that the President's political advisers, having failed last Wednesday afternoon to make the President a father of the new state, have determined at least to make him the midwife.⁷

Notes

1. **Friday afternoon / chronology:** Refers to **May 14, 1948**, the day of British Mandate termination and of **Israel's declaration of independence** later that day (Tel Aviv time).
2. **“Recognize the Jewish state promptly”:** The U.S. extended **de facto recognition of the State of Israel on May 14, 1948, at 6:11 p.m. (Washington time)**, minutes after the proclamation.
3. **Press conference plan (May 13):** A floated White House idea for **advance commitment** to recognition; **Marshall** and **Lovett** argued it would prejudge UN deliberations and increase U.S. responsibility.
4. **“Conditions of the November 29 GA resolution”:** UNGA 181 required each state to issue a declaration guaranteeing **equal rights, religious freedom, minority protections, and democratic governance**, as a basis for UN consideration.
5. **State Department legal paper:** The **Office of the Legal Adviser** concluded there was **no legal bar to recognition** but urged caution on timing/procedure.
6. **Arab-world reaction:** Lovett warned of blowback—**diplomatic rupture, threats to U.S. missions/personnel, and loss of influence**—if recognition appeared precipitous.
7. **“Father ... midwife” quip:** Lovett's closing metaphor contrasts earlier advice to have Truman **announce** the new state (be “father”) with the ultimate U.S. role of **recognizing** it moments after birth (be “midwife”).

Excerpt from Clark Clifford's memoir, *Counsel to the President* (1991)

It had been a near-run thing, but the deed had been done. The U.S. had been the first to recognize Israel, as the President had hoped and wanted.¹ (The Soviet Union followed suit three days later.)² The struggle with Marshall, Lovett, Forrestal, and the entire foreign policy establishment had been contained – but only barely.³

Lovett never told me exactly what had passed between him and Marshall in those last two days.⁴ From his general comments, I concluded that Lovett had finally sat down alone with Marshall on Friday and said, in effect, that, having argued their position, they had an obligation to accept the President's policy or resign.

Although Marshall never forgave me, these events did nothing to impair my relations with Lovett. In fact, the curious combination of disagreement over substance and collaboration to solve the crisis had forged stronger and closer bonds between us.... [But] Lovett remained adamant for the rest of his life, however, that the President and I had been wrong – as did most of his colleagues. Nothing could ever convince him, Marshall, Forrestal, Acheson or Rusk otherwise.⁵ Like Marshall, Lovett made sure that historians would find a personal record of his views – something that he rarely did in his long and distinguished career. In a vivid closing paragraph of his memorandum, written three days after these events but classified top secret for almost thirty years, Lovett revealed his true feelings:⁶

In this memorandum I have omitted, for the sake of brevity, the long arguments back and forth through the afternoon [of May 14]. My protests against the precipitate action and warnings as to consequences with the Arab world appear to have been outweighed by considerations unknown to me, but I can only conclude that the President's political advisors, having failed last Wednesday afternoon to make the President a father of the new state, have determined at least to make him the midwife.

When I read this memorandum, I knew exactly whom Lovett meant when he referred to “the President's political advisors.” In the same memorandum, he quoted me as saying, “The timing of this action is of the greatest possible importance to the President from a domestic point of view.” It is regrettable that Lovett must have misunderstood some comment I had made. At no time did I suggest, or intend to suggest, that President Truman's major concern was domestic politics. During the luncheon we did discuss the election that would take place later that year, and three days later, when he dictated his record, it is possible that Lovett merged the two subjects. But his view that my desire to recognize Israel was motivated by political considerations was incorrect. Although domestic considerations are in fact a legitimate part of

any important foreign policy decision, I never rested the case for recognition upon politics.

It is now more than forty years since those “timeless moments” in May. I can still see General Marshall exploding in anger;⁷ Bob Lovett fixing a drink while testing our determination; Loy Henderson looking for every possible way to stop the President;⁸ Eliahu Epstein joyfully asking how to request recognition for his new, still-unnamed nation;⁹ and Dean Rusk telling me that the President’s decision contradicted American policy.¹⁰

But never once, in these forty-plus years, have I wavered in the conviction that what Harry Truman did was correct. Lovett had been right on one point – the U.S. was “midwife” to Israel’s creation. But he was wrong to ascribe this to the President’s “political advisors.” I believed in the advice we gave the President, but it was he who made the decision.

Under our system, political considerations are present in every important decision a President makes, but in this case it was in no way the central factor. The charge that domestic politics determined our policy on Palestine angered President Truman for the rest of his life. I shared his anger at the implication that the President and those Americans who supported the Zionists were somehow acting in opposition to our nation’s interests. In fact, though, the President’s policy rested on the realities of the situation in the region, on America’s moral, ethical, and humanitarian values, on the costs and risks inherent in any other course, and – of course – on America’s national interests.

What would have happened if President Truman had not acted as he did? History does not allow us to test alternatives, but, in my view, American recognition and the support that followed was vital in helping Israel survive. Had the U.S. continued to support trusteeship status for Palestine, Israel’s condition at birth would have been infinitely more precarious, and in the war that followed, the Israelis would have been at an additional disadvantage.¹¹ Emboldened by less American support for Israel, the Arabs might have been more successful in their war against the Jews. If that had happened, the U.S. might have faced a far more difficult decision within a year: either offer the Israelis massive American military support, or risk watching the Arabs drive the Israelis into the sea.

Because President Truman was often annoyed by the tone and fierceness of the pressure exerted on him by American Zionists, he left some people with the impression he was ambivalent about the events of May 1948. This was not true: he never wavered in his belief that he had taken the right action. He felt particularly warmly toward Chaim Weizmann, Israel’s first President, and David Ben Gurion, its first Prime Minister.¹² In 1961, years after he left the White House, former President Truman met with Ben Gurion in New York. Ben Gurion’s memory of that meeting is revealing:¹³

At our last meeting, after a very interesting talk, just before [the President] left me – it was in a New York hotel suite – I told him that as a foreigner I could not judge what would be his place in American history; but his helpfulness to us, his constant sympathy with our aims in Israel, his courageous decision to recognize our new state so quickly and his steadfast support since then had given him an immortal place in Jewish history. As I said that, tears suddenly sprang to his eyes. And his eyes were still wet when he bade me goodbye. I had rarely seen anyone so moved. I tried to hold him for a few minutes until he had become more composed, for I recalled that the hotel corridors were full of waiting journalists and photographers. He left. A little while later, I too had to go out, and correspondent came to me to ask, “Why was President Truman in tears when he left you?”

I believe that I know. These were the tears of a man who had been subjected to calumny and vilification, who had persisted against powerful forces within his own Administration determined to defeat him. These were the tears of a man who had fought ably and honorably for a humanitarian goal to which he was deeply committed. These were tears of thanksgiving that his God had seen fit to bless his labors with success.

Notes

1. The **United States recognized the State of Israel de facto on May 14, 1948 at 6:11 p.m. (Washington time)**, minutes after its Declaration of Independence.
2. The **USSR recognized Israel de jure on May 17, 1948** (three days later), following the U.S. de facto recognition.
3. The senior officials opposing immediate recognition included **Gen. George C. Marshall** (Secretary of State), **Robert A. Lovett** (Under Secretary of State), and **James V. Forrestal** (Secretary of Defense); they favored caution, truce efforts at the **UN**, or **trusteeship** over instant recognition.
4. The “last two days” refer to **May 13–14, 1948**, during which internal U.S. debates culminated in Truman’s recognition decision.
5. **Dean Acheson** (former Under Secretary of State; later Secretary of State) and **Dean Rusk** (Director, Office of UN Affairs; later Secretary of State) also opposed precipitous recognition at that time.
6. Lovett’s **May 17, 1948** memorandum (Top Secret; declassified decades later) records his objections and the “father/midwife” metaphor about the President’s advisers and the timing of recognition.
7. The confrontation on **May 12, 1948** in the Oval Office—when **Marshall** vehemently opposed Clifford’s recommendations—is a well-known episode illustrating the depth of the split in

Truman's team.

8. **Loy W. Henderson**, Director of **Near Eastern and African Affairs** at State, was a leading internal opponent of immediate recognition and pressed alternative courses (e.g., **UN trusteeship**).
9. **Eliahu Epstein** (later **Eliahu Elath**), representative of the **Jewish Agency** in Washington, transmitted the formal **request for U.S. recognition** on May 14, 1948.
10. **Dean Rusk** conveyed that immediate recognition conflicted with ongoing **UN General Assembly** deliberations and with State's position favoring truce/mediation.
11. The **U.S. trusteeship proposal** had been floated in **March–April 1948** as a way to avert war after Britain's withdrawal; Clifford argues that continued U.S. backing for trusteeship would have left Israel more vulnerable.
12. **Chaim Weizmann** became **Israel's first President** (Feb. 1949); **David Ben-Gurion** served as **the first Prime Minister** from May 1948.
13. Truman and **Ben-Gurion** met in **New York (1961)**; the anecdote, often retold by Ben-Gurion, underscores Truman's lasting emotional investment in his 1948 decision.



Harry Truman and David Ben-Gurion, 1951