

## *Decision Making in U.S. History*

# **Imperialism and Progressivism**

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# INTRODUCTION

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## **RATIONALE: Hindsight versus Foresight**

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

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

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

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

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

# OVERVIEW

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The lessons in *Decision Making in U. S. History* are to be used independently within a standard U.S. history course in middle school, high school, or college. Each book in this series comprises between eight and thirteen lessons. Each lesson includes the following:

1. Introduction: includes an overview of the topic, content vocabulary, and decision-making skills emphasized in the lesson.
2. Lesson plan: includes suggestions for how to use the handouts, how to focus on decision-making skills, how to connect the decision to the larger historical context, how to use video and other supplementary sources, and how to troubleshoot problems, should any arise.
3. Suggested answers: this section features teacher notes about outcomes (student versions of the outcomes are also provided—see number 6 below), references to historians’ interpretations of the topic, decision-making analysis, and suggestions for further research.
4. Sources: includes the specific sources used in the lesson.
5. Problem(s): reproducible handouts used by students to read and analyze the problem.
6. Historical outcome of the problem: what people in history actually did and the consequences thereof.
7. Primary sources and visuals (if any): these are integrated into the lesson itself and are not included merely as window dressing.

Each individual decision-making challenge is referred to as a “problem.” Some lessons have one problem to challenge students, while others contain numerous problems. The handouts for each lesson are reproducible; teachers can also decide to use only selected parts of the handouts, if so desired.

While decision making is the main point of the books, historical content is also very important. These lessons focus on real historical problems that convey powerful lessons about U.S. history. The problems involve important issues relevant both to America’s past and its present: taxation, foreign intervention, regulation of businesses and individuals, immigration, welfare, war, and so forth. In addition, not all of the problems come from the perspective of political leaders: many ask students to consider the perspectives of ordinary Americans such as workers, voters, farmers, African Americans, business owners, Native Americans, and women. Including problems from the perspectives of ordinary people prepares students for their roles as citizens in a democracy and encourages empathy for unfamiliar groups.

Most of the problems are brief—some as short as one paragraph—and can be used as class warm-ups lasting no more than ten minutes. Even with the shorter problems, however, the outcomes can often be quite complex, running on for several pages. The problems may appear deceptively simple, but analyzing them can be complicated. You can best judge how much analysis to include for each problem, and for how long to run each problem and discussion.

On the other hand, some problems are more complicated. These problems deal with crucial turning points in the nation's history. Students will almost certainly need more background information before making decisions, and analysis of these problems could take several class periods. These more involved problems could form the organization for an entire unit of study. For example, in my classes the problem on the New Deal provides me with the bulk of the time and activities on my unit concerning the New Deal. Students learn about the basic New Deal programs, including their advantages and disadvantages, while simultaneously working to improve their decision-making skills.

## **DECISION MAKING**

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### **What is Decision Making?**

As explained in Student Handout 1, decision making involves making a choice when there is no clearly correct answer. Students can derive important lessons about decision making from encountering "messy" problems like these. Even where outcomes do not show a particular choice to be clearly right or wrong, students will still be surprised by some aspects of the outcomes and thereby gain insight into decision making.

### **Decision Making as Experience**

As argued in Student Handout 1, the most powerful way to teach good decision making is through experience. People learn to make good decisions just by making decisions, period. Bad decisions are more instructive, perhaps, in making us more skeptical decision makers, but that isn't stressed in Student Handout 1. Examples from the teaching profession illustrate this negative-reinforcement aspect of decision making. Teachers who just put students into groups without giving specific directions quickly learn not to do it again. Lessons that don't work well are dropped or modified the next time around. Good teaching is basically good decision making, and good decision making is shaped rapidly by previous decisions.

Ordinary people, including students, have an optimistic tendency simply to assume their decisions will result in positive outcomes, rather than making an estimate of the probabilities of certain outcomes. Decision-making experts, on the other hand, have a much more realistic view of these probabilities, due in part to their greater experience with the types of problem with which they often deal. Experience teaches us to be more realistic about outcomes.

Just encountering the problems and outcomes in these books, therefore, can help students improve their decision-making skills in general.

### **Targeting Decision-Making Skills**

As mentioned in Student Handout 1, these books go beyond just decision-making problems and their outcomes. They also provide teachers with a decision-making model and strategies for teaching the skills involved in decision making. Students learn a simple

# GUIDE TO THOUGHTFUL DECISION MAKING

## Student Handout 1

### Welcome to “Foresight” History!

The problems in the *Decision Making in U. S. History* series will challenge you to make choices about events in United States history before you know what actually happened in those events. This is learning history in a foresighted way—first you decide, then you find out what really happened—rather than as hindsight history, where you just find out what happened. You will get at least two benefits from this method of learning history: First, you will improve your decision-making skills. Someday, when you avoid buying a “lemon” used car that would have wasted thousands of dollars, you can thank your history teacher for helping you build up your decision-making skills. Second, it’s fun to learn history as though it’s a cliffhanger mystery, where you’re eager to find out if your decision worked or ended in disaster. But don’t forget to concentrate on the actual historical decision that was made and how it turned out. You can learn a lot about your own decision making through these problems, but you’re mainly in class to learn history and to understand what really happened, not what could have happened.

### What is Decision Making?

You’ve learned about problem solving in other courses such as math and science, and you’ve encountered problem solving when you’ve tried to build something or fix something. Decision making resembles problem solving in some ways (for example, it involves defining a problem and thinking of alternatives), but it’s different from problem solving in that there is no one right answer. The lessons in this book involve “messy” problems: even long after the event, people often disagree about what the best decision was or should have been.

### Decision Making as Experience

Experience teaches you how to make good decisions. Every decision that you make—whether good or bad—better equips you to make good decisions in the future. For example, you would probably feel safer being treated by a doctor who had a lot of experience than by a brand new doctor. The historical problems your teacher gives you will provide you with experience in making decisions in general, and will help you become a better decision maker in your role as a citizen. You won’t just have learned about history, you will have experienced it! For some of these lessons, you will feel that you made good decisions; for others, you may feel that you’ve made errors in judgment. As you go along, try to reflect on your experiences as well as on your thinking about decision making.

## **P-A-G-E Guide to Decision Making**

While experience is the most important way to learn to make better decisions, it's also helpful to learn some basic decision-making skills so that you know what areas to target in order to improve your overall decision making. Handout 2 contains an acronym, **P-A-G-E**, that provides you with guidelines for making better decisions. These aren't rules you have to follow; they are just meant as helpful tips you can use to improve your thinking about decision making.

Handout 3 explains and gives examples for each part of the **P-A-G-E** guide to decision making. Keep it in your notebook for reference as you make decisions about situations in U.S. history. Every single **P-A-G-E** guideline will not necessarily apply to each decision-making problem you encounter. You (with the assistance of your teacher) will have to determine which guidelines will work best with which problems.



# LESSON 1: CRISIS IN CUBA, 1898

## Student Handout 1



### PROBLEM

It is April 1898. You are Republican President William McKinley, and the U.S. is facing a crisis in Cuba. For more than 300 years, the Spanish government has controlled Cuba as its colony, but for the past three years, Spain has faced an all-out rebellion on the island. The Cuban rebels, inspired by their martyred leader, José Martí (who was killed in battle in 1895), have destroyed coffee and sugar crops and disrupted the economy. They are waging a guerrilla war in which rebel soldiers blend in with the civilian population and deploy hit-and-run attacks on the Spanish. No longer a great world power, Spain has limited resources with which to fight the rebels.

Spain had been losing the fight when they put General Weyler in charge of Spanish forces in Cuba. Weyler moved civilians into concentration camps so that the rebels couldn't vanish into the general population. The camps posed a major dilemma for the rebel soldiers: if they joined the civilians in the camps, the camp guards would control them; but if the rebels remained in the countryside, Spanish soldiers could easily attack them without creating civilian casualties. The American press has strongly criticized the Spanish (many refer to General Weyler as "The Butcher") and has printed many articles favorable toward the Cuban rebels.

In 1897 you sent a close friend, William Calhoun, to Cuba on a fact-finding mission. Calhoun returned with a bleak report, saying the Spanish were mistreating civilians and