The Perils of Perfectionism: American Reaction to the Dumbarton Oaks Proposals

As representatives of the United States, United Kingdom, Soviet Union and China met at Dumbarton Oaks in the late summer of 1944 to draw up plans for a new international organization, the US government was already thinking about how to sell the organization to the American people. A promotion job was deemed to be vital as it had been less than three years since 1941, when a majority of Americans believed that wars in Europe and Asia were not theirs to fight. Despite the vast American investment in the war since the attack on Pearl Harbor, memories of the pre-war era loomed large, with the America First committee, Neutrality Acts, World Court rejection, and of course, League of Nations rejection at the end of the First World War. Governmental concern about a postwar return to ‘isolationism’ was significant, and another ‘great debate’ was expected.

Ultimately, there was no great debate as the American people accepted the need to join the new international organization. Nevertheless, the promotion job went ahead as the war dragged on, as concerns about popular opposition to the United Nations Organization (UN) remained. However, the debate that did occur revealed that the main fear about opposition to the Dumbarton Oaks proposals was not that the planned UN was a step too far, but that it did not go far enough. Isolationism per se was not the main fear in 1944 and 1945. Concerns that the US would not engage at all with the UN proved unfounded. Instead, the most active critics of the Dumbarton Oaks proposals were not those who wished to ignore the proposals, but those who wanted to perfect them. The bigger fear was not that the US would not join the UN, but that the UN was not going to be – to American eyes – perfect.

Of course, there was no formal ‘perfectionist movement’, yet calls for a more perfect international union came from across the political spectrum and for different reasons. There were those who could be characterized as old school ‘isolationists’, who sought to undermine the new
organization’s credibility by highlighting every possible limitation, but these were in a small minority. Of greater concern to the Roosevelt administration were Republicans who sought to make party political advantage of perceived flaws in the Dumbarton Oaks proposals. Such flaws included the ways the proposals appeared to uphold existing concepts of power politics. Less predictably, and more worryingly to the government, criticisms of the proposed organization’s imperfections came from those who were expected to throw their full support behind the Dumbarton Oaks proposals. Some internationalist leaders who saw themselves as the heirs of Woodrow Wilson and the League of Nations were disappointed at the limited nature of the organization’s powers. There was perfectionism on both sides of the debate, but between October 1944 and April 1945, the perfectionism from internationalists offered the greater threat to plans for world organization.¹

The Roosevelt administration clearly feared that perfectionism could undermine the proposed United Nations before it had even been created. Perfectionism, as it was understood in this context, represented an idealistic desire for an international organization that could, and indeed would, solve all the world's problems. Perfectionism meant an international organization that was superior to the League of Nations. It meant an international organization that would solve problems of global peace and security, ensuring no future wars. Yet it also meant that the organization would have to successfully deal with a number of other issues, such as decolonization and human rights. For the US government, creating a functioning organization including the Soviet Union was a challenge in itself, and there was fear that satisfying a diverse range of perfectionists would prove impossible. Whether the threat from perfectionism was significant or not, what matters is that it was perceived to be at the time, and was therefore taken extremely seriously. As Rowland Brucken has written, by the winter of 1944-45, ‘the most influential objections to joining the United Nations no longer came from those who felt the Dumbarton Oaks Proposals committed the nation to doing too much abroad; rather they came from those who believed they allowed the United States to not do enough.’²
Ultimately, even the president recognized that perfectionism was an issue that threatened the peace process. In his 1945 state of the union address, Franklin Roosevelt argued that ‘perfectionism, no less than isolationism or imperialism or power politics, may obstruct the paths to international peace’. Roosevelt drew historical lessons from the rejection of the League of Nations, when the United States declined to join the international organization despite the fact that a majority of Senators had favored entry in some form. Filled with fear of a repeat of 1919-20, the Roosevelt administration worked relentlessly to share the message of the Dumbarton Oaks proposals to the American people. The president spoke passionately about the need for the nation to join the UN. The State Department worked tirelessly, from the Secretary right down to its new Office of Public Affairs which cultivated links with existing private citizens’ organizations of all kinds. The broader administration was mobilized from the Department of Justice to the Department of Agriculture. The aim was to spread the word as widely as possible and educate the American people about the specific Dumbarton Oaks proposals and the broader need for the United States to seize a second chance at internationalism. But the message was mostly a cautious one, highlighting that while the proposed UN was not perfect, it was the best option for peace. After the war, Cold War critics suggested that the UN had been oversold. In fact, not only was the UN not oversold, considerable care was taken to ensure that was not the case. The government promoted the Dumbarton Oaks proposals in a way that highlighted their essential benefits but also acknowledged their imperfections. While this honest approach ran the risk of upsetting the perfectionists, it was the best way of managing public expectations.3

In an attempt to create a blueprint for a new international organization, the Dumbarton Oaks conversations ran from 21 August to 7 October 1944. The first part, which ran until 28 September,
included the United States, the United Kingdom and the Soviet Union. In the second part, which ran from 29 September until the end of the conversations, China replaced the Soviet Union. On the one hand, Dumbarton Oaks was a success. The discussions between the great powers represented a clear first step on the road to creating a new international organization. Despite mutual suspicions, the Soviet Union was willing to join its allies in an international organization to secure postwar peace. Led by a security council including all of the victorious powers, the proposed organization appeared to have more teeth than its predecessor, the League of Nations. The cooperation offered hope and optimism for the future.4

However, as the conversations progressed, it was clear that the atmosphere in the talks was not one of unanimity, and that there were areas of disagreement between the powers, especially between the United States and the Soviet Union. Most notable was the issue of unanimity in the proposed security council, as the Soviets insisted on the power of veto over all decisions, including those involving itself. No firm decision was taken on the issue at Dumbarton Oaks but the Soviets were increasingly insistent on holding veto power, much to the consternation of the American delegation. The possibility of veto power was not only against American plans, but it also suggested that the proposed new organization was little more than a carve up of the world between the great powers. It was against this growing backdrop of unease that the proposals had to be promoted to the American people.

On 9 October, the day the full proposals were published, Roosevelt issued a positive though less than glowing statement in support of the proposals, declaring that his first impression was ‘one of extreme satisfaction, and even surprise, that so much could have been accomplished on so difficult a subject in so short a time’. However, his concession that he had not yet been able to ‘make a thorough study of these proposals’ meant he was able to speak in generalities about the desire for peace and the need for postwar cooperation without having to go into the details of the proposals
themselves. Concluding that ‘planning the great design of security and peace has been well begun’, the president argued that it remained for nations ‘to complete the structure in a spirit of constructive purpose and mutual confidence’.\(^5\)

Less than two weeks later on 21 October, Roosevelt expressed his support for the Dumbarton Oaks proposals in a major address to the Foreign Policy Association in New York. Yet at no point did he promise too much for the proposed new international organization, highlighting that ‘we are not fighting for, and we shall not attain a Utopia’. He acknowledged there would be no lasting peace without international cooperation and a will to work together. He also expressed concern about those who optimistically hoped to see ‘a structure of peace completely set up immediately, with all the apartments assigned to everybody’s satisfaction, with the telephones in, and the plumbing complete – the heating system, and the electric ice boxes all functioning perfectly, all furnished with linen and silver – and with the rent prepaid’. No such ‘comfortable dwelling place’ existed yet, but the proposals represented ‘a very practical expression of a common purpose’, even if that was hardly the most uplifting phrase.\(^6\)

Statements from the Secretary of State, Cordell Hull, and the chairman of the American delegation, Edward Stettinius, were similarly cautious in their optimism. Hull was particularly restrained and qualified in his response. While ‘immensely gratified’ by the results of the Dumbarton Oaks conversations, he noted that ‘the Proposals in their present form are neither complete nor final. Much work still remains to be done before a completed set of proposals can be placed before the peace-loving nations of the world as a basis of discussion at a formal conference to draft a charter of the projected organization for the submission to the governments’. His conclusion was that the road to an effective international organization ‘will be long. At times it will be difficult’. But the effort had to be made to ensure the war was not in vain. Stettinius was rather more optimistic,
though he acknowledged that differences remained. However, he argued that those issues ‘though important’, were ‘not in any sense insuperable’.7

Beyond the statements of administration leaders, the government made a huge effort to convince the American people of the merits of the Dumbarton Oaks agreements. That effort was spearheaded by the State Department in a job described by one official as ‘one of the most revolutionary and difficult public education tasks ever undertaken by this Department’. The primary mechanism the State Department used to promote the Dumbarton Oaks proposals to the public was the Division of Public Liaison. The Division, set up within the new Office of Public Affairs, was responsible for the ‘Department’s relations with private citizens’ groups and organizations interested in the formulation of foreign policy’. Although it had not been created solely to promote the Dumbarton Oaks proposals, the timing of its creation meant that the opportunity for the Division ‘to build up a public support for the United Nations organization’ was too good to miss.8

The effort was deemed essential in order to avoid a recurrence of 1919-1920. In the eyes of the administration, the rejection of the League of Nations and the retreat into non-interventionism that followed the First World War could not be repeated. Cultivation of public support for the new international organization was therefore necessary. This was in large part a result of the increased importance of public opinion over the previous decades. While this was partly lip service to a democratic ideal, politicians and leaders paid more and more attention to what Americans were thinking as the very concept of public opinion became more sophisticated and measurable during the interwar years. However, by openly engaging with the public and by incorporating public groups into the process, the State Department quickly encountered opposition from those who were unhappy with the imperfect outcome of the Dumbarton Oaks conversations.9
There was always likely to be criticism and debate. But the nature of the debate was less about whether or not there would be an international organization, or even whether the United States should join it, and much more about the nature of the proposed United Nations Organization. The debate had been bubbling under the surface for much of the war in anticipation of concrete proposals. But with firm proposals finally on the table, the debate came out into the open, revealing differing conceptions of internationalism within American popular discourse. Many Americans were willing to accept compromise in the arena of international politics, recognizing that despite the imperfections, the achievements at Dumbarton Oaks were significant. Others were less willing to compromise out of fears that the new international organization placed too much power in the hands of the great powers, or concerns that the new organization either gave away either too much sovereign power or not enough.

The critique from so-called isolationists was no great surprise, but they were in a small minority. One of the most strident came from Senator Gerald P. Nye, who had been at the forefront of non-interventionist efforts to keep the country out of war prior to the attack on Pearl Harbor. In December 1944, Nye argued in his farewell address to the Senate that Dumbarton Oaks represented ‘a military alliance between the great powers to rule the world’. It promised to work only against what Nye called the ‘little fellows’ and not work against any state that ‘might be a real threat to world peace’. Nye foresaw a revived imperialism where the United States would be seen as responsible for having ‘wiped out the one nonwhite empire and having restored all the white, European empires’. For Nye, the only way to stay out of World War III was for America to mind its own business ‘by keeping out of these entangling alliances’. The following month, it was the turn of Nye’s non-interventionist ally, Burton K. Wheeler to speak out against the plans, claiming that ‘Dumbarton Oaks is a grim hoax’.10
The president’s own fears about a resurgence of isolationism were seen in his Foreign Policy Association speech. While conceding that the Democrats had isolationists of their own, Roosevelt noted that they were not in positions of leadership. By contrast, Roosevelt highlighted that ‘inveterate isolationists would occupy positions of commanding influence and power’ if the Republicans gained control of Congress in 1944. These included not only Nye (who was in line to become chairman of the Senate Committee on Appropriations), but Senator Hiram Johnson (in line to become chairman of Senate Foreign Relations Committee), and representatives Joseph Martin (potential Speaker of the House) and Hamilton Fish (potential chairman of the Committee on Rules). ‘Can anyone really suppose that these isolationists have changed their minds about world affairs?’ asked Roosevelt, adding that they were not ‘reliable custodians of the future of America’. 11

Fortunately for the Roosevelt administration, voices such as Nye’s were in the minority with regard to staying out of alliances entirely. A majority of Americans were in support of international engagement. The real question was whether this proposed Dumbarton Oaks framework was in fact the best way to engage. Of course, the administration didn’t really want a significant national debate like that of 1939-41 to threaten support for the proposals. And for all the talk of discussion and debate from the State Department, there was a sense among critics that any real dissent was being stifled. Non-interventionist commentator Oswald Garrison Villard commented upon the new crime of ‘perfectionism’. Noting that perfectionism was usually a good thing, he argued that in the case of the Dumbarton Oaks agreements ‘perfectionism has become a penal transgression second in shame only to what is called “isolationism”. All who refuse to agree that Dumbarton Oaks was a wonderful step forward and the very best that could have been accomplished under the circumstances, are now accused.’12
One arena where debate on the merits of the Dumbarton Oaks proposals was relatively stifled was in the presidential election of 1944. The election appeared to be the ideal place to debate the proposals, but one of the surprises of the final month of the campaign was the limited extent of partisan debate over the proposals. Admittedly, the internationalist/non-interventionist divide had never been strictly along party lines, but the election was still surprisingly light on discussion of the proposals. In part, this was due to the ongoing war effort. While politics rarely stop at the water’s edge, the 1944 election was a time when foreign policy discussions were limited as there was still a war to fight. For that very reason, Roosevelt attempted to keep the issue of the future peace out of the election entirely. However, the proposals still managed to appear as a topic of debate, thanks to partisan Republican perfectionism.13

The most prominent appearance of the proposals in the campaign came before the Dumbarton Oaks meetings even began. Before the great powers met, Republican candidate Thomas Dewey attacked the forthcoming conference in mid-August. Dewey made it clear that the Republican Party and the American people were ‘agreed upon the need for world organization’. In this sense he differed from Nye and Wheeler. But at the same time, he was harshly critical of the plans about to be discussed. He claimed that ‘in some of these proposals there appears to be a cynical intention that the four great Allied Powers shall continue for all time to dominate the world by force and through individual agreements as to spheres of influence’. In a particularly strong turn of phrase, Dewey described this domination as ‘the rankest form of imperialism’. Arguing strongly for the rights of smaller nations and against a permanent military alliance, Dewey urged that ‘we must not sink into the abyss of power politics’.14

Such comments were later echoed by Gerald Nye, but Dewey’s remarks appeared particularly calculated and cynical given both the election calendar and that his general view of international organization was not as critical as Nye’s. Democrats in Washington who had worked
tirelessly to promote international organization spoke out against Dewey’s speech. John Connally of Texas, Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, argued that there was no need for alarm and that the peace planning process needed to remain bipartisan. Instead, Dewey had made a ‘Luftwaffe air attack on the impending Dumbarton Oaks conference before it convenes’. Senator Joseph C. O’Mahoney of Wyoming went for a historical comparison, calling Dewey’s statement a ‘cynical and shocking act of political sabotage’ and claiming it was ‘reminiscent of the statements which were issued by the isolationists of 1920 when they began their attacks upon the League of Nations’.15

Secretary of State Hull used a more measured approach to defuse the situation. His response directly refuted Dewey’s accusations, stating there was no plan for ‘a military alliance of the four major nations permanently to coerce the rest of the world’ and that the purpose of the Dumbarton Oaks conversations was to create the most desirable international organization for all the United Nations and indeed any peaceful nation ‘large and small’. Hull also offered to meet with Dewey in order to clarify any points and to promote a non-partisan approach. Dewey accepted Hull’s offer by arranging for his main foreign policy advisor, John Foster Dulles, to visit with Hull. In some ways Dulles was an unusual choice for Dewey as he had been a strong supporter of international organization through the war years, notably in his role as chairman of the Federal Council of Churches’ Commission to Study a Just and Durable Peace.16

After three days of conversations between Hull and Dulles, an agreement was reached that effectively removed the Dumbarton Oaks proposals as a campaign issue. Their joint statement maintained that the future peace be kept out of domestic politics, yet while Dewey accepted this, the understanding ‘did not preclude full nonpartisan discussion of the means of attaining a lasting peace’. Hull later wrote that this agreement was ultimately successful, as the United Nations ‘did not become a campaign issue in 1944’ and that ‘the nation was not split over this question so vital to its
future, as it had been over the League of Nations in 1919 and 1920’. Dulles clearly agreed with Hull on the importance of the nonpartisan approach. Following the election, Dulles wrote to Roosevelt, stating that ‘throughout the campaign my principal concern was that nothing should occur to jeopardize, through partisan division, the plans for permanent peace which were being evolved at the Dumbarton Oaks Conference’.17

Yet while that was the ideal, the reality was not quite as simple, though when the proposals did reemerge as an election issue it was not the immediate fault of either candidate. Instead, it was Minnesota Republican Senator Joseph Ball who put the issue of international organization back into the campaign. An ardent supporter of international organization, Ball asked both candidates on 12 October if they supported American entry into a new international organization before the war was over, if they opposed Senate reservations to entry, and if they supported the idea that the American representative at the United Nations would have the authority to commit the use of US troops without first asking Congress. On 18 October, Dewey agreed to the first two but not the third, evading the issue of how the United States might engage in any military action. Three days later, Roosevelt broke his campaign silence on the issue, fully agreeing with all three of Ball’s questions, leading the Republican Ball and other internationalists to throw their support behind Roosevelt.18

Roosevelt’s subsequent fourth election victory largely saw an end to the partisan Republican perfectionism of the election campaign. Senator Nye and Congressmen Fish were defeated. The actions of Senator Ball proved that international organization was not an issue that followed party lines, as the criticism from Democrat Burton Wheeler also proved. But the fear of further criticism remained in the Roosevelt administration, and in fact grew larger. This was in part due to the perfectionism of internationalists who wanted more from the proposed international organization. It was also due to international events and the ongoing conduct of the war through the winter of 1944-5, events that suggested the postwar peace was not going to be easy to ensure.
The greatest criticism following the release of the Dumbarton Oaks proposals came from within a broad internationalist camp of opinion. Yet while internationalists disagreed with Gerald Nye that the United States needed to avoid entangling alliances, their criticisms of the Dumbarton Oaks proposals carried some close echoes of Nye. After working for years - if not decades – for the opportunity to bring the United States into an international organization, many internationalists wanted to get it right and to make it perfect. Almost all internationalists agreed on the general principle of an international organization, but they did not all agree on how to create one, or exactly what it should look like. This desire to improve on the Dumbarton Oaks proposals, to create a more perfect international union, can be seen clearly in the press and among newspaper columnists, but also more explicitly in the dialogue between the State Department and the internationalist organizations they hoped would help to promote the proposals.

A number of immediate points of contention appeared from this sympathetic but critical perspective. As Robert Divine has pointed out, many liberal publications such as the Nation, PM, and the New Republic acknowledged the criticism in editorials, but warned against the perfectionism that had stopped entry into the League of Nations. Other individual writers were not convinced. E. B. White, a supporter of world government, was dismayed by Roosevelt’s suggestion that there was agreement on ninety percent of the issues. Given that the remaining ten percent included the question of veto power, he wrote ‘that of course, isn’t ten per cent; it is about 99.44 per cent’. This was not the expected response from supporters. The sentiment was echoed by commentator Drew Pearson, who agreed that the remaining ten percent was crucial. ‘Despite all the beautiful words and praises, Dumbarton Oaks agreement [sic] will go down in history as a failure, because even the
British and ourselves were not really willing to sacrifice any part of that high-sounding but selfish principle called “sovereignty.””19

Others were disappointed to find that the Dumbarton Oaks plans did not represent a more substantial step towards world government. Critical commentators who supported the broader idea of international organization included Dorothy Thompson, Grenville Clark, William Agar, and Ely Culbertson. Culbertson, a contract bridge specialist with a strong interest in international affairs, went so far as to write to Roosevelt in March 1945 to express his concerns about the ‘hopelessly weak structure of the Dumbarton Oaks proposals’ and the need to ‘move beyond the first and childishly halting step of Dumbarton Oaks’. Roosevelt, recognizing the need to satisfy not only domestic pressures but also the other great powers, gave a measured reply. Urging greater compromise, his response was that ‘we cannot afford to turn down what can actually be attained, despite the fact that some of our citizens will be disappointed that something less than they had anticipated has been achieved’.20

Other criticisms of the proposals related to more specific themes. African American leaders were understandably disappointed that the Dumbarton Oaks conversations appeared to completely ignore the question of empires. Both the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the Council on African Affairs expressed disappointment that the proposals failed to address colonial peoples and trusteeships. Other groups were concerned about the failure of the proposals to consider human rights. Notably, the most prominent criticism on this issue came from Americans who were otherwise very supportive of the Dumbarton Oaks proposals. League of Nations Association director Clark Eichelberger pushed for more detail on human rights through the Association’s research arm, the Commission to Study the Organization of Peace. At the same time, the Commission on a Just and Durable Peace led by John Foster Dulles pushed for a Commission on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms to be added to the UN Charter.21
Indeed, criticism arose from citizens’ organizations expected to support the proposals, organizations who were clearly disappointed with the limited outcomes of Dumbarton Oaks. Again, criticism related to the attempt in the proposals to incorporate a universal body like the Assembly with a great power body in the form of the Security Council. The Security Council was seen as old fashioned power politics and a potential tool of imperial domination by the great powers. The emphasis on the use of great power force to preserve peace was questioned by religious groups such as the National Catholic Welfare Conference who thought the new organization had the look of a military alliance. Even organizations deliberately set up to promote American entry into an international organization had their doubts. Americans United for World Organization, created in August 1944 to act as an umbrella political action organization for those supporting international organization, argued that there should be no veto power in the Security Council. The Non-Partisan Council to Win the Peace, a different coordinating group for internationalists created back in April 1943, sought more power for the General Assembly. The criticism of the latter two groups, both created during the war specifically to promote American entry into an international organization, was a particularly worrying sign for the administration.22

Anticipating criticism, the government responded. The State Department closely monitored the views of prominent national radio and newspaper commentators, the views of citizens’ organizations, and the results from opinion polls. In the immediate aftermath of the release of the proposals, Undersecretary of State Edward Stettinius prepared a memorandum for the president with the results of a public opinion survey. The news was mostly positive for the administration, but not entirely. Crucially, nine out of ten Americans favored joining an international organization, and eight out of ten accepted that the organization might have to use force to keep the peace. These numbers strongly suggested that there was no resurgence of non-interventionism.23
However, other responses suggested perfectionism remained a threat and that Americans were less willing to join an organization where they did not largely define the terms. More contentiously, opinion was only five to three in favor of joining the organization if the terms of the peace settlement were not wholly satisfactory. Opinion was evenly divided on whether or not Congressional approval was needed before the use of the nation’s armed forces. Finally, opinion was five to two against the idea of allowing a nation veto power when it was responsible for aggression. These polling figures suggested that there was some work to do in promoting the proposals to a public that wanted a more perfect international union. While the general trend was clearly in favor of international organization, the threat of perfectionist critiques conjured up echoes of the end of the previous war.24

The efforts made to convince the public of the merits of the Dumbarton Oaks proposals reveal the scale of the Roosevelt administration’s concerns regarding perfectionism in late 1944 and early 1945. To address perfectionism, the State Department’s Division of Public Liaison held a number of meetings with representatives of private organizations. The largest was held on 16 October at the State Department, when over one hundred different national citizens’ organizations were represented. Stettinius opened the meeting with a strong statement in support of the proposals, adding that throughout the coming ratification process there needed to be ‘wide, intelligent, and maturing consideration of the proposals on the part of the American people and of all other peace-loving peoples’. However, in emphasizing that the proposals were ‘tentative, and as yet incomplete,’ he opened the door for further criticism of the proposals from those who felt they were insufficient to secure world peace.25
This became clear at a subsequent and more intimate meeting held with members of Americans United for World Organization at Blair House on 14 November. A number of internationalist leaders including Clark Eichelberger, Ulric Bell, James Warburg and Ernest M. Hopkins met with State Department representatives including Stettinius, those directly involved in the postwar planning process such as Leo Pasvolsky, Harley Notter, and Benjamin Gerig, as well as those involved with public liaison including John Sloan Dickey and Richard Morin. This private meeting was revealing as while the government at no point asked for a limit to public discussion of the proposals, it was clear that they preferred endorsement over further detailed exposition.26

The dilemma was stated most clearly by Leo Pasvolsky, a man who had arguably done more than anyone else in writing the Dumbarton Oaks proposals. While he agreed that the American public should not be discouraged from wanting more than had been secured at Dumbarton Oaks, there was risk in belittling what had already been achieved by asking for more. Pasvolsky argued that suggestions could be put forward by the public, but only if they would not come to be seen as essential to the final agreements. Otherwise, there was the risk of disillusionment if an issue that was strongly argued for, such as the removal of veto power, was ultimately rejected. There was a real concern with perfectionists taking the ‘position that the whole effort was worthless if one certain problem was not solved in one certain way’, as ‘the whole program might be destroyed’.27

This was a delicate issue for the State Department, who wanted the public consideration of the proposals to be as open and democratic as possible, while at the same time doing their best to ensure the public agreed with the government. Once again, a historical analogy was made with the rejection of the League of Nations. Pasvolsky recalled Woodrow Wilson’s concerns in 1919 that too many individuals were obsessed with getting one particular issue into the Covenant, and that there was a risk of a ‘boomerang of disappointment’. If the American people were convinced that international organization could only be made in one form, and that particular form did not
materialize, then there would be a sense of failure, even if 99 percent of the goal had been achieved. While Pasvolsky was talking about those with particular plans and reservations, Wilson himself had ultimately fallen into that category as well. Either way, a repeat of the failure of 1919-20 was clearly an undesirable outcome.28

Some supporters of the existing proposals felt the government needed to more actively and positively promote the results of Dumbarton Oaks. Clark Eichelberger wrote to Stettinius on 1 November urging an enthusiastic public statement in support of the proposals. Eichelberger’s concern was that commentators and organizational leaders had misinterpreted the call for public discussion to the extent that there was a growing view that the proposals were only tentative. The risk was that public attitudes might start to call for change to the proposals rather than simply support them. ‘If this impression grows, you may find yourself entering the United Nations conference with a highly critical public opinion in which the isolationists would naturally oppose and the perfectionists demand changes’. The internal response was that the concern raised by Eichelberger was one that was shared by many in the State Department.29

Notably, just days after Eichelberger’s letter, an address from the State Department’s Ben Gerig to a meeting of peace organization representatives took a far more promotional tone. Gerig began by highlighting the ‘essentially democratic character of the proposed international organization’, which was clearly a response to criticisms of the domination of the Security Council by the great powers. Noting that the proposed methods of maintaining peace and security appeared to deviate from that democratic character, he defended the proposals at length, arguing that ‘the maintenance of security must inevitably be a special responsibility of those states which have the capacity and the will to contribute effectively to it’. More strident speeches followed as the need for promotion in the face of perfectionism was acknowledged by the State Department, though they remained reluctant to ‘sell’ the Dumbarton Oaks proposals.30
The general support for a new international organization was still strong, which gave the administration a certain amount of confidence. As of December, the State Department’s Francis Russell believed that it was ‘probable’ that the Dumbarton Oaks proposals had enough public support to be accepted by Congress. However, he also argued that more was to be done and that the Office of Public Affairs needed ‘to drive home the idea that Dumbarton Oaks is but the first of many steps, that it enables us to take the others, but that, alone, it will not accomplish our objectives’. The prospect of a perfect international organization was still countered strongly, as it was increasingly apparent that such an organization was not going to appear.31

The ongoing conduct of the war was not helping. Through December, a major issue for the Roosevelt administration was a growing sense of public disillusionment with international affairs. A memorandum for the president on 30 December highlighted three main areas of concern. The first was in Europe, where events in Greece, Italy and Poland left Americans frustrated with the prospect of British and Soviet spheres of influence, which in turn represented a rejection of the Atlantic Charter peace aims. British fighting in Greece and the looming Soviet domination of Poland were particularly disturbing. Second, this all contributed to a sense of disunity among the allied powers, who appeared to be working towards different objectives with different methods. Finally, given this frustration, there was a sense that American diplomacy was failing, despite all of the effort put into funding and fighting the war. This growing disillusionment, and especially the suspicion of the nation’s closest allies, had the potential to threaten public support for the nascent international organization.32
Given the growing climate of international suspicion, even Roosevelt recognized that perfectionism threatened the peace process and needed to be addressed. Having remained relatively quiet on the issue during the election campaign, it was now time for the president to speak up. In his State of the Union address, Roosevelt directly confronted the issue. He argued that ‘perfectionism, no less than isolationism or imperialism or power politics, may obstruct the paths to international peace’. Reminding Americans of the events of 1919-20, he noted that ‘the retreat to isolationism a quarter of a century ago was started not by direct attack against international cooperation, but against the alleged imperfections of the peace…. We gave up the hope of gradually achieving a better peace because we had not the courage to fulfill our responsibilities in an admittedly imperfect world. We must not let that happen again, or we shall follow the same tragic road again – the road to a third world war’. The reaction to the speech was generally positive, and helped to steady public concerns about international cooperation.

The president’s address was reinforced by other similar messages over the following months. One of the most encouraging came just days later when former ‘isolationist’ Senator Arthur Vandenberg announced his support for international cooperation and urged continued unity between the great powers, despite their different aims in places such as Greece and Poland. The following week, a New York Times article from Joseph Ball argued that ‘we never achieve political objectives at one bound and there isn’t a chance of achieving a world Utopia in that fashion’. Attempting to counter the perfectionists and inject a dose of realism into the debate, Ball maintained that the Dumbarton Oaks proposals offered ‘greater hope than anything else likely to be agreed upon by the nations involved of preventing future great wars’. The only alternative to Dumbarton Oaks was ‘to retire to our ivory tower of isolation that V-1 and V-2 have turned into rubble. It just isn’t there any more’. The message was now an urgent one given that the United Nations Conference on International Organization was scheduled to meet in San Francisco in late
April 1945 to build on the Dumbarton Oaks agreements and create the new United Nations
Organization.34

The president returned to the issue himself when he addressed Congress at the beginning of
March on his return from the Yalta conference. Noting that the peace must be cooperative, and
could not simply be an American peace, Roosevelt conceded ‘it cannot be a structure of complete
perfection at first. But it can be a peace – and it will be a peace – based on the sound and just
principles of the Atlantic Charter’. A similar message came from new Undersecretary of State Joseph
C. Grew. In his St. Patrick’s Day message, he stated ‘we realize that the Proposals are neither
complete nor perfect – that they can and will be developed and improved – but we are backing
these Proposals with enthusiasm and conviction, because we know that they represent the greatest
measure of agreement possible among ourselves and our great Allies’.35

A slightly different approach and a new historical analogy came from Edward Stettinius, who
chose to appeal to Americans by comparing the origins of the United Nations with the origins of the
United States. Comparing the creation of the Charter with that of the US Constitution, the Secretary
of State urged Americans to prepare for a process of adjustments and compromises, much as had
been seen in 1787. Not only that, but further ‘adjustments and amendments’ would likely be
necessary in the future, just as with the Constitution. To fend off remaining perfectionists, he also
warned that no charter ‘will completely meet the wishes of any one of the United Nations’.36

At the same time as addresses for broad public consumption were countering the forces of
perfectionism, the State Department continued to urge caution in the promotion of the Dumbarton
Oaks proposals. A confidential memorandum on presenting the proposals to the public claimed that
the department had ‘no inclination to “sell” the Dumbarton Oaks proposals to the country’. The
Department had to be clear that the new international organization was not a guarantee against all
future wars, and it had to accept comment and criticism on the proposals. However, the department also wanted the public to know that the Dumbarton Oaks proposals had been developed over ‘careful and extended conversations’ between representatives of different governments ‘on the basis of studies undertaken over a long period of time by qualified experts’. The final proposals needed to be acceptable to all countries involved, and it was hoped that any criticisms would be ‘made with these considerations in mind’.

Fortunately for the government, as the San Francisco conference approached in April 1945, it became clear that fears about perfectionism had not come true and public support was strongly behind the proposed United Nations. As one State Department assessment concluded on the eve of the conference, despite all the criticism, one central theme had emerged: ‘the success of the San Francisco Conference was more important than any single issue’. Indeed, the United Nations Charter that emerged at after two months in San Francisco was not dramatically different from the proposals drawn up at Dumbarton Oaks. The great powers dominated the Security Council and retained veto power. Changes were made to the proposals, but not at the highest levels of power. Concerns about international power politics and the dominance of the victorious Allied powers remained. Many liberals were restrained in their celebrations, and supporters of world government were disappointed, but those who had worked hard to see the organization created applauded the tremendous achievement. The death of Franklin Roosevelt in early April was a great loss for internationalists, but new president Harry Truman made it clear the conference would go ahead as planned and that Roosevelt’s legacy would be fulfilled.

At the closing session of the conference in San Francisco on 26 June, Truman echoed the argument of his Secretary of State. With regard to the Charter, he conceded that ‘no one claims that it is now a final or perfect instrument’. But like the US Constitution, a document also formed out of conflicting ideas and interests, it could expand and grow to create ‘a bigger, a better, a more perfect
union’. Truman made a similar argument on 28 June in Kansas City. Once again he highlighted that the founding fathers had considered the Constitution ‘imperfect’, and that they needed to ‘go out on a selling program to get enough states to ratify that Constitution’. On 2 July, less than a week after the close of the conference, Truman went before the Senate to urge ratification. ‘The choice is not between this Charter and something else’, Truman argued. ‘It is between this Charter and no Charter at all. Improvements will come in the future as the United Nations gain experience with the machinery and methods which they have set up. For this is not a static treaty. It can be improved – and, as the years go by, it will be – just as our own Constitution has been improved. This Charter points down the only road to enduring peace’. 39

The Senate agreed. In the most obvious way, the effort to sell the Dumbarton Oaks proposals to the American public was a great success. There was no repeat of 1919-20, despite concerns of an isolationist backlash that lasted well into 1945. The American people accepted the new international organization and the United Nations Charter was easily ratified in the Senate by a near-unanimous vote of 89-2 on 28 July 1945. However, the campaign behind the Dumbarton Oaks revealed that uncertainties about American opinion were as much about the threat of internationalist perfectionism as from a more conventional non-interventionism or isolationism. Dissatisfaction over particular aspects of Dumbarton Oaks, such as the veto, followed by growing concerns about Allied behavior in Europe left many internationalists suspicious of the proposals and wanting a stronger organization more likely to secure the peace.

Criticism of the Dumbarton Oaks proposals from those who were expected to be sympathetic conjured up a very particular historical lesson. The concern was not that Americans might reject the United Nations as a result of pure isolationism. Instead, the possibility was raised
that an unlikely coalition of isolationists and perfectionists might lead to a repeat of the rejection of
the League of Nations. Echoes of the coalition between irreconcilables and reservationists at the end
of the First World War were hard to avoid. The Roosevelt administration quickly mobilized to meet
this possibility, urging realism while highlighting that the Dumbarton Oaks proposals were a merely a
first step to peace. While trying not to openly ‘sell’ the proposals without appearing open to
dialogue, the administration did all it could to convince the public of the need to accept the
international organization as planned.

More broadly, the campaign revealed the complex nature of American thought with regard
to international affairs at the end of the Second World War. Binary categories such as
‘internationalism’ and ‘isolationism’ (or even ‘non-interventionism’) have limited utility in helping to
understand the way Americans responded to the Dumbarton Oaks proposals and the creation of the
United Nations. This was because the debate was not about whether the United States would
engage with world affairs or not, but it was about how the nation would engage with the world.
True, there was a risk that the debate might lead to non-involvement, but the national conversation
was much more about the extent to which the United States could impose its will and ideals on the
United Nations, and how far it was willing to compromise those ideals.

Even as the United States finally agreed to enter the United Nations, new areas of
disagreement opened up. For those inclined towards world government, the United Nations was –
as the Roosevelt administration had stated – merely the first step to a more perfect and ideal world
organization. This was a realization many internationalists reached in their initial criticisms of the
Dumbarton Oaks proposals. For less perfectionist internationalists, disillusionment came not from
the new world body itself, but from the US government’s lack of willingness to engage with and
improve the new organization. Tension in Washington between internationalism and nationalism
(rather than isolationism), when combined with the onset of the Cold War, led many Americans to
become quickly disillusioned with the United Nations. This ignored the unfortunate fact that as it was no more than the sum of its parts, the United Nations was never likely to be perfect. As Edward Stettinius said in April, just weeks before the San Francisco conference, ‘an international organization can be no more successful than the nations which belong to it desire it to be’.  

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2 Brucken, A Most Uncertain Crusade, 69.

3 F.D. Roosevelt, The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt: 1944-45 (New York, NY 1950), 498. On the idea that the UN had been oversold, see R. Riggs, ‘Overselling the UN Charter-Fact and Myth’, International Organization, 14, 2, (March 1960), 277-90. For a more recent argument that the United Nations


8 J.S. Dickey to E. Stettinius, 20 December 1944, Folder: International Organization—Public Explanations and Opinions, Records Relating to the Dumbarton Oaks Conversations, 1944, RG59 Records of Harley Notter, National Archives, College Park, Maryland (hereafter cited as NARA); *Department of State Bulletin*, X, 244, 210; Memorandum from F. Russell to R. Morin and J. Dickey, 8 December 1944, Folder: PA/PL Aims Philosophy 1944-65 (P/OPS), Records Relating to Public Affairs Activities, RG59, NARA. The Division of Public Liaison was part of the Office of Public Information (OPI), which was set up in January 1944, and which was renamed the Office of Public Affairs in December 1944.


14 *New York Times*, 17 August 1944, 1, 11.


24 *Ibid*.

25 *Department of State Bulletin*, XI, 278, 452.

26 Minutes of Meeting with Representatives of Americans United, 14 November 1944, Folder: Interest of Private Groups in the Dumbarton Oaks Proposals, Box 173, Papers of Harley Notter, RG 59, NARA.

27 *Ibid*.

28 *Ibid*.

29 Eichelberger to Stettinius, 1 November 1944, and H. Raynor to Notter, November 7, 1944, 500.CC/11-144, Decimal File, RG 59, NARA.

30 *Department of State Bulletin*, XI, 281, 566.

31 Russell to Morin and Dickey, 8 December 1944, Folder: PA/PL Aims Philosophy 1944-65, Records Relating to Public Affairs Activities, Papers of Harley Notter, RG59, NARA.

32 Memorandum for the President re: American Public Opinion on Recent European Developments, 30 December 1944, Folder: Annual Message to Congress Jan 6 1945, Box 27, Samuel Rosenman Papers, FDRL. Similar sentiments can be found in Memorandum for the President re: Observations from the Middle West, 21 December 1944, Folder: Dumbarton Oaks Conference Oct 1944-45, Box 131, President’s Secretary’s File, FDRL.


37 Memorandum on the Policy of the Department of State on the Department’s presentation to the Country of the Dumbarton Oaks proposals, 13 February 1945, Folder: Dumbarton Oaks Proposals, Box 7, Records of the Assistant Secretary of State for Public Affairs 1945-1950, RG59, NARA.


40 Edward Stettinius, Speech before the Council on Foreign Relations, 4 April 1945, OF 20, FDRL.