“An International Law with Teeth in It”: The Baruch Plan and American Public Opinion

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Abstract

In 1946, Bernard Baruch, the American representative to the United Nations Atomic Energy Commission, introduced the United States’ proposal for international control of atomic energy, known as the Baruch Plan. It suggested a regime under which the United Nations would enforce an international ban on atomic weapons. The proposal, which stated that the United States would destroy its atomic arsenal only once the plan were fully implemented, was blocked in the United Nations by the Soviet Union. This paper argues that domestic public opinion played a significant role in the development, negotiation, and failure of the plan, but that the sentiments of the public were partly shaped by Baruch at the same time. Public opinion affected the formulation of the proposal, which Baruch based in part on what he believed the American populace favored. By helping discourage negotiations, public opinion also indirectly contributed to the eventual failure of the plan.

On June 14, 1946, Bernard Baruch, the American representative to the United Nations Atomic Energy Commission, presented the United States’ plan for international control of atomic technology at the commission’s inaugural meeting. With World War II having ended less than a year prior, the United States and the Soviet Union were drifting into a period of geopolitical tension that would soon become known as the Cold War. At the time, the United States had a monopoly over atomic weapons; the Soviet Union would not test its first until 1949.

Baruch prefaced his speech with a somber warning of the importance of the moment: “Behind the black portent of the new atomic age lies a hope which, seized upon with faith, can work our salvation. If we fail, then we have damned every man to be the slave of fear. Let us not deceive ourselves; we must elect world peace or world destruction.” Following this dramatic opening, Baruch introduced his proposal, which recommended the creation of an Atomic Development Authority to oversee the use of atomic energy and to inspect atomic facilities to ensure they were used solely for peaceful purposes. He based his plan on the recommendations of the Acheson-Lilienthal Report, issued in March 1946 by a State Department advisory committee headed by Dean Acheson, Under Secretary of State, and David Lilienthal, Chairman of the Tennessee Valley Authority. However, Baruch’s proposal differed from that report in that he charged the United Nations Security Council with enforcing the plan by using sanctions to punish nations that violated it. Controversially, he proposed that in regards to
atomic matters, all members of the Security Council should forfeit their veto power. Additionally, Baruch declared that only once the plan were fully implemented would the United States destroy its atomic arsenal. Because the Soviet Union strongly opposed both of these requirements and the plan’s passage required unanimous approval in the Security Council, disagreement on these two provisions was the proximate cause of the failure of the proposal, which came to be known as the Baruch Plan.\textsuperscript{iv}

Public interest in, and media coverage of, the plan was widespread given the exceptionally high stakes involved. Combined with the importance that Baruch himself placed on the attitudes of the American people, this led public opinion to play a significant part in the rise and fall of the plan. This paper examines the extent of that role. Because Baruch formulated the contents of the plan in part based on his perception of the populace’s beliefs, public opinion helped shape the development of the plan. Public sentiments also reinforced Baruch’s confidence in the proposal and contributed to his intransigent refusal to alter its elements. Consequently, public opinion was partly responsible for the ultimate fate of the plan because it encouraged Baruch to rule out the possibility of negotiations. Public opinion thus played a considerable role in the development of the Baruch Plan, helped engender a dearth of negotiation, and indirectly contributed to the failure of the proposal.

Domestic public sentiments guided the development of the plan. In the immediate aftermath of World War II, it was evident that the American public wished that their government continue to maintain exclusive control over atomic secrets and the bombs they bore. In a September 1945 poll conducted by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC), 85% of respondents stated that they wanted the United States government to keep secret the information that led to the development of atomic weapons.\textsuperscript{v} In the same poll, respondents were asked what country they thought was most likely to attack the United States with an atomic weapon in the future. A plurality, 36%, believed the Soviet Union posed the greatest threat, followed by Japan at 25% and Germany at 16%.\textsuperscript{vi} Despite the war having ended just weeks earlier, Americans were already more suspicious of their erstwhile ally than of their recently-defeated enemies.

But by the beginning of 1946, Americans’ views on international atomic control seemed to have tempered somewhat. Public attitudes softened as the extreme vigilance that accompanied the war receded and post-war demobilization took effect. In a poll conducted by NORC in March 1946, 72% said they would support action by the United Nations prohibiting production of atomic bombs anywhere in the world if the United Nations were given the power to enforce this ban. Of this 72%, 78% were in favor of the ban even if it would require the destruction of all extant atomic bombs.\textsuperscript{vii} Americans seemed not to be bent on ensuring that their nation maintained its atomic weapons, but rather open to a proposal for international control of atomic energy, provided that it would be
enforceable. However, the observation that Americans’ attitudes towards international atomic control had softened must be qualified with the fact that at the same time, an April 1946 poll by the American Institute of Public Opinion (AIPO) demonstrated that a majority, 61%, still wanted the United States to continue manufacturing atomic bombs. This series of polls indicated that most Americans favored strong enforcement mechanisms, were suspicious of the Soviet Union, and wanted the United States to maintain, or even expand, its atomic arsenal in the meantime while an international plan for atomic control was still developing. These views persisted over the course of the year. A November 1946 AIPO poll indicated continued opposition to unilateral cessation of production and destruction of existing atomic weapons. Distrust of the Soviet Union seemed to lie at the heart of these beliefs; 72% of respondents stated that they did not believe that, were the United States to unilaterally disarm, the Soviets would then agree to allow a United Nations committee to verify that they were not producing atomic weapons either. But despite being opposed to unilateral disarmament, Americans still seemed open to the notion of an international ban enforced by the United Nations. When asked in a September 1946 NORC poll whether the United States should “try to keep ahead of other countries by making more and better atomic bombs” or “make the United Nations organization strong enough to prevent all countries, including the United States, from making atomic bombs,” two-thirds of respondents chose the latter option.

Baruch was acutely aware of public opinion and considered winning over the public to be important for securing an enforceable agreement on international atomic control. In a speech he gave to a meeting of the United Jewish Appeal in February 1946, four months before presenting the plan, he stated, “Public opinion cannot be bought, but it can be deserved. A people who are eyed suspiciously must live so as to be the more deserving – not by cringing; not by handwashing; not by appeasement, for these have always failed, but by keeping our heads up and our shoulders back, ready to help and to lead in those causes that build mankind.” He also urged that American military dominance and international leadership were key to maintaining world peace: “Don’t let us be the first to disarm! … Don’t let us dodge the duty which lies upon us of helping to keep the world’s peace. We must be strong!”

Baruch’s speech suggests that he was keenly attuned to public sentiments. Furthermore, his criticism
of unilateral disarmament and appeasement, though not unique in the post-war period, foreshadowed later statements in which he denounced proposed modifications of his plan as appeasement of the Soviets that would be received negatively by the American people. Baruch delivered this address in front of supporters of the United Jewish Appeal, a Jewish philanthropic group that raised funds to support Jews in Europe and Palestine. He shrewdly connected past appeasement of Nazi Germany to possible future appeasement of the Soviet Union, thereby constructing an analogy that he used to paint a negative picture of the Soviet Union in the minds of the American Jews he addressed.

In the months following this speech, Baruch carefully crafted the contents of his proposal, in part based on what he believed the American public would consider conducive to international security. He described his thinking in a memo to President Truman on June 6, 1946, eight days before he presented the plan at the United Nations. Given the intended audience of the document, it serves as an especially revealing source indicating Baruch’s views on the role of public opinion. Unlike in a speech, in this classified communication Baruch did not intend to impress a broader audience; rather, he directly addressed the President (with an expectation of privacy) in hopes of convincing Truman of the need to provide the populace with a practical proposal. Baruch wrote he was “deeply convinced” that “any expression which falls short of bringing a sense of security and a sense of truth to the public would be a gigantic error. … That policy is to set a goal for which we should strive.”

Hinting at the United States’ impending loss of its atomic monopoly and underscoring the urgency of enacting an effectual plan, Baruch warned that “our secrets are not as secret as we think they are.” He emphasized that above all the proposal must include the possibility of enforcement, ranging from an initial punishment, sanctions, to the ultimate penalty, war: “[Here] lies the essential difference between the Acheson-Lilienthal Report and my own position.” Whereas the former constituted a mere “basis of negotiations,” the latter provided “a formula of a secure peace.”

Baruch’s memo also emphasized the importance of “bringing to the attention of the American people … the necessity of adding enforcement,” suggesting that he favored a two-way relationship between himself and public opinion. He expressed that while the contents of the proposal should fit the wishes of the public, the former should also suggest to the latter what to prioritize.

Furthermore, archival evidence indicates it is possible that Baruch utilized his connections in the news media to obtain favorable coverage. In an October 1948 telegram to Under Secretary of State Robert Lovett, Baruch discussed his secret collaboration with editors. The message concerned the American press’s response to comments that the Soviet permanent representative to the United Nations, Andrei Vishinsky, made during continuing United Nations
debate over international control of atomic energy. Vishinsky pushed for immediate American atomic disarmament and argued that the United States’ refusal to cease production of atomic bombs indicated it was preparing for a war against the Soviet Union. Baruch’s telegram read in part,

As to stimulating sentiment on the soundness of the American position and supporting it in the face of the attacks made by Vishinsky, that is already under way. No sooner had I heard … than I began to work with various elements of the press and radio so that the American position would be strongly supported by American public opinion. That effort is already bearing fruit. Editorials of the type that the *Herald Tribune* printed yesterday, Tuesday, and reprinted in Paris, Wednesday, are being published throughout America. So are supporting commentaries on the air. The counter-propaganda is well under way.xiii

Token discussion of the possibility of international control of atomic energy was ongoing at the time, despite the fact that the Baruch Plan’s failure to pass the Security Council two years prior had made the issue effectively moot. Nonetheless, the telegram informs analysis of the link between public opinion and the Baruch Plan by indicating that Baruch was both able and willing to deploy his connections in the media to produce favorable editorials. While the document concerned counter-propaganda that Baruch disseminated well after his plan had already failed, it also suggests the possibility that he may have done so during the time when it was still a live proposal. Although it was probable that the editors involved truthfully expressed their beliefs, clearly they were not neutral observers; rather, they consciously attempted to shape public opinion, with some of them spurred to do so by Baruch. In this sense, although the attitudes of the public constrained Baruch’s behavior, he also utilized his influence to sway public sentiments.

When he presented his plan at the first meeting of the United Nations Atomic Energy Commission on June 14, 1946, Baruch claimed that global public opinion provided him with a mandate. Before an international audience, he declared, “In this crisis, we represent not only our governments but … the peoples of the world. We must remember that the peoples do not belong to the governments but that the governments belong to the peoples. We must answer their demands; we must answer the world’s longing for peace and security.” He went on: “Public opinion supports a world movement toward security. If I read the signs alright, the peoples want a program not composed merely of pious thoughts but of enforceable sanctions – an international law with teeth in it.”xiv Baruch’s words suggest that public opinion played a major role in the development of the plan, as he specifically cited the opinion of “the peoples” in his justification for the inclusion of enforcement provisions, echoing the message of his June 6 memo to Truman.
American public opinion also played a notable role in the negotiation process, or the lack thereof. Early on, even before presenting his plan, Baruch realized the possible adverse impact that the public’s understanding of official government policy might have on the strength of the United States’ negotiating position. In a March 1946 letter to President Truman, Baruch deplored the public release of the Acheson-Lilienthal Report, as he felt that the close association of the committee with the State Department gave the impression that the report was official government policy. He wrote, “This situation has been brought very forcibly to my attention by the press announcements of the [Acheson-Lilienthal Report]. I do not underestimate the effect of this publication in the United States or in the world at large. … This brings the report pretty close to the category of the United States Government policy.” Baruch’s concerns about this issue were serious enough that he asked Truman to “postpone any action on confirmation of my appointment until I have had a little more time to think things over.”

Baruch seemed determined to ensure that he, not Acheson, Lilienthal, or another member of their committee, would be the one shaping policy and thus public opinion regarding the government’s position.

Opinion polls conducted shortly after Baruch introduced his proposal reflected broad support among Americans for the elements of the plan. A newspaper article from July 1946 reported the results of a poll about the inspection system proposed by Baruch; the New Journal and Guide cited a NORC poll showing that 75% of respondents favored Baruch’s inspection regime when it was described to them (though they were not asked about the plan by name given that it was not yet widely known). Another NORC poll, conducted in September 1946, showed that 65% of those polled believed the best course of action to preserve peace would be to strengthen the United Nations so it could enforce a ban on atomic bombs.

In a November 1946 poll by AIPO, the majority of respondents opposed unilateral disarmament. Specifically, 65% disagreed with the suggestion that “the United States should stop making atom bombs and destroy those already made to prove our good intentions in asking for international control of atomic bombs.” This finding was affirmed by a Gallup poll published on December 26, 1946, just four days before the Security Council voted down the Baruch Plan. The Atlanta Constitution reported the results of that poll, which found that 72% of Americans surveyed said the United States should not cease production of atomic bombs and destroy its existing arsenal. The article commented, “Public sentiment continues to oppose a Russian suggestion that, to show our good faith in international disarmament, we stop making atom bombs and destroy those already on hand.”

Polls like these indicated that in the weeks and months before the final vote on the Baruch Plan, the American public seemed to support inspections, which were part of the plan, and opposed unilateral disarmament, which was part of the Soviet Union’s...
counter-proposal, the Gromyko Plan. That proposal, named for Soviet Ambassador to the United Nations Andrei Gromyko, was in many ways the antithesis of the Baruch Plan. It called for immediate American atomic disarmament and eventual international atomic control, with no international role in verification, no sanctions or other enforcement, and preservation of Security Council members’ ability to veto resolutions on atomic matters.xx

Although the aforementioned polls may give the impression of widespread American support for the Baruch Plan, they should not necessarily be construed as evidence of such a consensus. In fact, public awareness of the Baruch Plan shortly after it was introduced was quite low. In a June 1946 NORC poll, only 29% said that they had heard or read about it.xxi Awareness of the plan had increased by early 1947, but the majority of the public remained unfamiliar with it; a February 1947 NORC poll found that 45% of respondents had heard or read about the plan.xxii

While the available evidence makes it difficult to definitively determine the influence (relative to other factors) that public opinion had on the breakdown of negotiations or to prove a causal link, evidently the sentiments of the public constituted a significant factor. Baruch’s awareness of polls showing that the American populace favored the elements of his plan over those of the Gromyko Plan likely strengthened his confidence and may have encouraged him to remain obstinate in his rejection of the latter proposal. Baruch’s deputy Frederick Osborn indicated as much in a letter to Lewis Douglas, the American Ambassador to the United Kingdom. Osborn wrote, “Any serious weakening of the proposals would not only be unacceptable to the United States Government, but also to American public opinion. … It seems clear that any attempt to ‘mediate’ between the United States and the Soviet now … would be resented by the American public as an attempt at appeasement.”xxiii

This specific mention of appeasement harkened back to Baruch’s speech to the United Jewish Appeal and revealed a dynamic in which Baruch both attempted to mobilize the public against appeasement at one point, and then later cited this same aversion to appeasement felt by the public to justify his decision not to negotiate with the Soviets. Clearly, Baruch and his team were keenly aware of public opinion and understood that if they weakened inspection and enforcement provisions, or pushed up the United States’ hypothetical atomic disarmament date, they would risk alienating the American people. Like Baruch’s aforementioned memo to Truman, Osborn’s letter was classified, increasing its reliability as a source given the relatively high likelihood that it accurately reflected the thinking of Baruch and his team.
Truman himself stated that Baruch placed much importance on public opinion. In his 1956 memoir *Years of Trial and Hope*, Truman wrote that Baruch “had, of course, full knowledge of the President’s responsibility for national policy. His concern, in my opinion, was really whether he would receive public recognition. He had always seen to it that his suggestions and recommendations, not always requested by the President, would be given publicity.”

Given that Truman had frequent contact and candid conversations with Baruch, the book provides important insights into Baruch’s purpose and motivations. Baruch’s preoccupation with public opinion thus may have led him to prefer gaining the favor of the populace over seriously negotiating and obtaining an international pact.

Gregg Herken’s research reinforces the notion that public support for Baruch’s proposal bolstered his self-assurance. In *The Winning Weapon*, Herken wrote that Baruch gained a “public vote of confidence” from the reception his plan received. Herken explained that American reaction to the proposal was “overwhelmingly favorable,” citing a *New York Times* article that described it as “‘thoughtful, imaginative, and courageous.’” Herken commented that most newspaper accounts were even more laudatory than this in their praise. He added, “Nor was Baruch unmindful of or indifferent to the paean of enthusiasm with which his plan was greeted. A survey of newspaper editorials by his staff claimed to show that 98.5 percent of press opinion was favorable to the report.”

Baruch’s instruction to his staff to sample media coverage (despite possibly having influenced some of those editorial positions himself) indicates the value he placed on the sentiments of the populace.

Herken’s analysis supports the idea that popular opinion was indirectly influential in the negotiations process, as positive reception of the proposal likely contributed to Baruch’s increasingly headstrong attitude and refusal to compromise on the terms of his plan.

Ultimately, the Soviet Union blocked the proposal in the United Nations Security Council. Two years later, in his book *Uncommon Sense*, Robert Oppenheimer reflected on the failure of the plan. Oppenheimer, who during the war had been director of the Manhattan Project, which produced the atomic bomb, was at this time chairman of the General Advisory Committee of the newly-created United States Atomic Energy Commission. Expressing concern about the catastrophic potential of the weapons he had helped create, Oppenheimer stated

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that it was impossible to know “in what context, and in what manner of the world, we may return again to the great issues touched on by the international control of atomic energy.” Yet he remained hopeful: “Even in the history of recent failure … we may discern the essential harmony, in a world where science has extended and deepened our understanding of the common sources of power for evil and power for good, of restraining the one and of fostering the other. This is seed we take with us, travelling to a land we cannot see, to plant in new soil.”xxvi But despite Oppenheimer’s eloquent optimism, the failure of the Baruch Plan spelled the end of any serious attempts at international control of atomic energy in the post-war period and paved the way for the atomic arms race of the Cold War.

Declassified government documents, paired with contemporary polling data and media publications, demonstrate that public opinion played a significant role in the development, negotiation, and eventual failure of the Baruch Plan. Its author devised its contents in part based on his perception of public opinion. The sentiments of the public also affected negotiations by helping solidify Baruch’s refusal to compromise with the Soviet Union, thereby contributing to the ultimate fate of the plan. This case is noteworthy due to the fact the destructive capability of atomic weapons raised the stakes of the Baruch talks to a level unseen in any prior arms control negotiations in history. Additionally, this case sheds light on the complex relationship between elites and public opinion, in which the former actively shapes the latter, while the latter constrains the behavior of the former. It also serves as an example of the role that domestic affairs play in the two-level game of international arms control; public opinion has the potential to influence arms control proposals, negotiations, and outcomes.
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Endnotes

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2 This paper uses the term atomic as opposed to nuclear for the sake of consistency and also because the former was the term predominately used during the period in question.


vi Ibid., 22.

vii Ibid., 24.

viii Ibid., 25.

ix Ibid.

x Ibid.


xviii Ibid.


xxi Strunk, Public Opinion, 27.


