

## Historical Perspectives on Sanctions

February 6, 2024, at 9:00 a.m. ET  
Rayburn House Office Building Room 2044

### *A Historical Overview of US Economic Sanctions*

What are economic sanctions?

- Sanctions can be defined as the use of economic coercion by governments during peacetime. Drawing on the precedents of boycott and blockade, they can include import and export embargoes, asset freezes and other financial measures, and export controls, among other policies.
- They can be unilateral or multilateral, invoked in defense of international law and norms and/or for national interests.
- Concern with whether sanctions “work” reflects the hopes projected onto sanctions to provide a nonmilitary means of solving global problems.

How and why has the practice of US sanctions changed over time?

- The uses of sanctions reflect the expansion of US global power and the development of transnational economic and social networks.
- From enforcing peace after World War I to waging the Cold War to promoting human rights in the late 20th century, government and nongovernmental groups have advocated for sanctions for a wide variety of reasons.
- Overall, sanctions have become increasingly common, especially since the rise of financial sanctions after 9/11.

What role has Congress played in US sanctions?

- The legislature has delegated extensive sanctioning powers to the executive branch, as wartime exceptions have become normal peacetime practices.
- Congress has also directed the president to impose sanctions on particular countries and actors. In short, Congress has made it easy for presidents to impose sanctions but difficult to remove them.

### *“A Swiss Army Knife”*

- While many countries use economic sanctions, the United States uses them so frequently that they’ve been referred to as “a Swiss army knife with a ready attachment just right for any foreign policy challenge.”
- Yet one study found only a 33.5% American success rate, which drops to 28.2% when sanctioning unilaterally.
- Why are sanctions used so frequently?
- What are the main criteria for success?
- What key factors affect success?
- Why are there so many cases in which sanctions have had major economic impact but have not achieved their core policy objectives?
- What lessons can policymakers learn about why, how, and when to wield sanctions?
- Most recently, sanctions have been placed on Iran by the Obama and Trump administrations and on Russia over its invasion of Ukraine.

### *Sanctions on Rhodesia: Jimmy Carter versus Congress—A Case Study*

- President Jimmy Carter said, “I spent more time on Rhodesia than I did on the Middle East.” Why did Carter spend so much time on Rhodesia?
- The answer is sanctions, as Carter engaged in a heated and time-consuming battle with Congress over sanctions on Rhodesia.
- The Carter administration wanted to retain the United Nations–mandated sanctions on the illegal, white-dominated regime in Rhodesia, while a bipartisan group of conservative members of Congress wanted to lift them.
- This case study shows how the debates about sanctions sometimes have very little to do with their effectiveness or morality. Instead, sanctions can become political footballs.
- The Rhodesian sanctions debates provided the terrain for:
  - A classic post-Watergate Congressional struggle to wrest foreign-policy power from the presidency
  - Discussions about racial politics that avoided the fraught domestic issues of busing, voting rights, and affirmative action
  - Arguments about the authority of the United Nations over US policy
- The Carter administration won the battle: sanctions were not lifted until Rhodesia achieved independence. However, it lost the war: the opponents of Rhodesian sanctions coalesced into the bipartisan “neoconservatives,” who helped propel Ronald Reagan to victory in the 1980 presidential election.

### Participant Biographies

**Benjamin Coates** is an associate professor of history at Wake Forest University. His research interests include the history of US foreign relations, empire, and law. He is the author of *Legalist Empire: International Law and American Foreign Relations in the Early Twentieth Century*, as well as numerous articles and book chapters on topics including US foreign relations, the development of international law, the history of Pan-Americanism, and the ideology of civilization. He is currently writing a history of economic sanctions that traces their intellectual, legal, and political trajectories in the 20th-century United States.

**Bruce W. Jentleson** is William Preston Few Professor of Public Policy and professor of political science at Duke University. He also is a Global Fellow of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars and Non-Resident Senior Fellow at the Chicago Council on Global Affairs. He has served in a number of US foreign policy positions, including senior advisor to the State Department Policy Planning Director (2009-11) and foreign policy aide for two US Senators (Al Gore, 1987-88; Dave Durenberger, 1978-79). In 2015-16, he was the Henry A. Kissinger Chair in Foreign Policy and International Relations at the John W. Kluge Center, Library of Congress. He is senior advisor to the Bridging the Gap project promoting greater policy relevance among academics. His most recent book is *Economic Sanctions: What Everyone Needs to Know*.

**Nancy Mitchell** is a professor of history at North Carolina State University. She is the author of *Jimmy Carter in Africa: Race and the Cold War*, which won the American Academy of Diplomacy's Douglas Dillon Award and the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations' Robert Ferrell Prize. Mitchell's first book was *The Danger of Dreams: German and American Imperialism in Latin America, 1895-1914*. She contributed the chapter on "The Cold War and Jimmy Carter" in *The Cambridge History of the Cold War* and her articles have appeared in *Cold War History*, *International History Review*, *Diplomatic History*, *American Historical Review*, *Journal of American History*, *Prologue*, *H-Diplo*, and *H-Pol*.

**Dane Kennedy** is professor emeritus at George Washington University. He is the author of eight books, including *The Imperial History Wars: Debating the British Empire* and *Decolonization: A Very Short Introduction*. He served as director of the National History Center from 2014 to 2020 and president of the North American Conference of British Studies from 2011 to 2013.

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