

## Pop-Up Case: Influenza and War in 1918

*In the early fall of 1918, a second wave of influenza is spreading, and World War I is waning but not yet over. As the pandemic grows deadlier, how can the United States bring the war to an end while responding effectively to a pandemic outbreak?*

Use the following historical case to spark discussion and help students to think through what they would do if they were decision makers. See the back of the page for some inspiration for how to structure your conversation.

### The Situation:

By the summer of 1918, World War I was waning but not yet over. Just a year after entering the war, the United States had mobilized its entire society and economy to fight. That summer, ten thousand U.S. troops were arriving in France every day, and nearly the entire labor force at home—forty million strong—was working to fuel the war effort. Against this backdrop, influenza began to spread. It first appeared in the spring of 1918, but in August a second, deadlier wave emerged in cities across the United States, Europe, and Africa. Within one month of the first cases arriving at Camp Devens, a military training base near Boston, the influenza sickened one-third of the camp's forty thousand soldiers and killed nearly one thousand. As mass mobilization for the war effort continued, the virus tore through camps, ships, and trenches as it devastated crowded cities and factories at home. With no test or vaccine and treatments only available for a handful of symptoms, the 1918 influenza was on track to become a pandemic that would kill millions.

The war not only facilitated the influenza's spread but also simultaneously hampered governments' responses. For policymakers on both sides of the war, the measures required to fight the pandemic were at odds with those required to fight the war. Keeping medical resources and personnel at home rather than sending them to the front could boost domestic health-care capacity but deprive the war effort of vital resources. Quarantining troops or reducing their movement could slow the disease's international spread but would risk sapping military strength and demonstrating weakness to the enemy. Clear, centralized communication of data and guidelines could slow the disease at home but jeopardize morale. Maintaining the total mobilization of society for the war required sustaining belief in the importance of the war effort. News of a seemingly greater threat—the influenza—could lead people to worry more about the health of their families than the success of U.S. troops.

After a string of defeats, Germany was rumored to be considering peace negotiations. The United States and its allies were therefore reluctant to let up pressure. Thus, despite warnings of the pandemic's intensity, many countries continued to prioritize their war efforts. This included censoring media about the disease to downplay its severity and avoid showing weakness. The Woodrow Wilson administration remained largely silent about the pandemic, leaving a response in the hands of under-equipped and uncoordinated state and local governments. In the fall of 1918, however, as the pandemic grew increasingly severe, the United States faced the risk of the influenza becoming more deadly than the war itself unless the Wilson administration took a more active role.

### Additional Resources:

1. [Letter from a doctor describing conditions at Camp Devens \(September 29, 1918\)](#)
2. [Navy Bureau of Sanitation Influenza Guidelines \(September 26, 1918\)](#)
3. ["Spanish Influenza Here," New York Times article revealing attitudes toward the epidemic \(August 14, 1918\)](#)



### Decision Point: Set in Late September 1918

The American Meuse-Argonne offensive, just begun, is mired in sickness. Field hospitals and medical transports along the Western Front are filling, and thousands of troops are stricken with influenza each day. The influenza is ravaging cities across the United States too. With limited medical and research capacity and little to no guidance from the president or the press, local governments are unable to effectively combat the pandemic. President Wilson has yet to make a public announcement concerning the influenza. Yet with the war's end seemingly drawing near, Wilson has called a meeting of his cabinet to discuss whether and how to turn attention to the pandemic. Advisors will need to consider what measures are appropriate to contain or manage the disease and what trade-offs those measures could incur on the war effort.

#### Cabinet members should consider any combination of the following policy options:

- *Domestic measures*, including public statements on the extent of the pandemic and federal guidelines for U.S. states to follow on social distancing practices, public event cancellation, quarantine procedures, and civilian travel restrictions. This option could slow the spread of influenza within the United States while largely maintaining the war effort abroad. However, this option risks damaging morale and disrupting production for the war effort.
- *Military measures*, including halting or reducing the transport of new troops to France, implementing strict quarantine measures for troops, recalling some medical personnel, and diverting military resources and funding to domestic health responses. This option could bolster states' and cities' capacity to care for patients, but a weakening of U.S. forces could reinvigorate the enemy and prolong the war.
- *Prioritize the war effort*, including by upholding wartime censorship and maintaining current troop movements. This option would leave management of the pandemic up to state and local governments, doing little to slow the disease and lessen its death toll, but it has the best chance of ensuring swift victory in the war.

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## Pop-Up Case Guidelines

U.S. history pop-up cases from Model Diplomacy are short case studies examining foreign policy decision-making in U.S. history. Designed with a U.S. history survey course in mind, the cases do assume some pre-existing knowledge for context, but there is sufficient detail in the case to fuel a lively discussion.

For historical cases, a post-discussion debrief is crucial. After a simulation, it is important to give students a chance to step out of character and reflect on the conversation: what was difficult about the decision, what was troubling about its implications. It is also important to discuss what decision was actually made.

There are lots of ways to organize a discussion using a pop-up case. It is always helpful to think about your goals for the discussion and then to consider any time or participation constraints you could have. If you are teaching online and are looking for some tips, the introduction to [this page](#) from Model Diplomacy has some great links. If you cannot discuss synchronously, consider a short writing assignment or using an online discussion board (see some excellent tips [here](#) and [here](#)). If you are teaching face-to-face or over videoconference and are looking for some inspiration, here are a few ideas:

### Gauge reaction:

If you want to show what students are thinking before diving into the discussion, here are two easy ways to do it. In one, often called “four corners,” assign each policy option to a corner of the room, and then ask students to stand in the corner associated with the policy option they support. In the other, if you want your students to think along a spectrum instead (e.g., interventionist-isolationist, unilateral-multilateral, more urgent–less urgent), put the ends of your spectrum at either end of your blackboard and have students stand along the board to indicate where along the spectrum they fall. With both approaches, everyone will sit down again with a sense of where they stand regarding the case. Use this knowledge to shape discussion—eliciting less popular opinions, challenging more popular ones, encouraging like-minded students to further develop their ideas, or having students who disagree discuss in small groups.

### Think-Pair-Share:

This exercise is particularly useful for groups where some students are hesitant. Ask everyone to spend a few minutes quietly gathering their thoughts and articulating them in a notebook (“think”), then have them turn to the person sitting next to them to compare notes (“pair”), and then have students report out to the whole group (“share”), knowing that everyone will have had time to think through something to say.



Don Pollard

### Whiparound:

Ask students to briefly share their position one after the other without responding to each other. Typically, everyone speaks in the order they are sitting. This can be a way to see where everyone stands before launching into a discussion. If you expect a topic to be particularly contentious, you could have students listen to each other and then reflect in writing.

### Simple simulation:

If you would like to simulate a simplified version of a more realistic policy debate, you can appoint yourself (or a randomly chosen student) president. Ask students to debate the policy options (or come up with new ones) and try to reach consensus on a recommendation to the president. You could consider assigning students certain perspectives or opinions to encourage debate. For example, different students or groups could prioritize the military, economic, and diplomatic considerations of the case respectively, and use their assigned perspectives to inform their arguments.

*Note: In our experience, simulations are often most productive if students focus on the policy issues and do not try to simulate the personality of particular historical figures.*

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