

Panama Canal

Mini-Lesson



Panama Canal

Contacting your Representatives



Background Information

The debate over the Panama Canal treaties in the 1970s centered around two treaties signed on September 7, 1977, between U.S. President Jimmy Carter and Panama's leader, General Omar Torrijos. The treaties stipulated that Panama would gain control of the canal after 1999 and allowed the U.S. the right to defend the canal against any threat to its neutrality. President Carter supported the treaties, arguing that transferring control to Panama would rectify a historical injustice and improve U.S. relations in Latin America. Republican Senator Howard Baker of Tennessee, then-Senate Minority Leader, opposed the treaties but planned to gather as much information about the topic as possible. As Minority Leader, Baker's support would be crucial in gaining the support of other Senate Republicans. Ronald Reagan – a prominent Republican voice and former governor of California – staunchly opposed the treaties and viewed them as an abandonment of strategic U.S. assets and a sign of American weakness. Reagan embarked on a relentless media campaign to encourage opponents of the treaty to make their opinions known. The debate was highly contentious, ultimately ending with the ratification of the treaties by the U.S. Senate in March and April of 1978, passing by a narrow margin that highlighted the deep divisions within American politics over this pivotal issue.

Mini-Lesson Student Materials

Did you know that the Panama Canal is fifty miles long? It connects ports in the Atlantic and Pacific oceans, saving vessels 10-22 days of travel.

Objectives/Learning Outcomes

Students will be able to identify the process by which treaties are signed and ratified.

Students will be able to identify the role of citizens in influencing political decisions.

Students will be able to exercise their right to communicate with their representatives as constituents.

Key Terms and People

Treaty, Constituents, Representative, General Omar Torrijos, President Jimmy Carter, Senator Howard H. Baker, Jr., Ronald Reagan

Handout A | Photos and Maps of the Canal and Key Players



Panama Canal - New *Agua Clara* locks (Atlantic side) in operation



Jimmy Carter
President of the United States
D-Georgia



Howard H. Baker, Jr.
Senate Minority Leader
R-Tennessee



Ronald Reagan
Former Governor
R-California

Handout B | Perspectives on the Canal Treaties

Perspective A - News Article on the Public's Opinion of the Panama Canal Treaty

“President Carter’s decision to go to the American people to win support for the Panama Canal Treaty comes when the public is closely divided on this controversial issue. In the first nationwide survey—in effect, a national referendum—39 percent of those who have heard of the treaty express approval, while 46 percent disapprove of the pact, which calls for the United States to turn over ownership of the canal to Panama by the year 2000 while retaining protective rights and responsibilities. Fifteen percent of the aware group are undecided. Sharp differences are found on the basis of population groups. Persons with a college background, for example, lean 49 to 40 percent in favor of the treaty. Republicans disapprove by 2 to 1, while Democratic voters and independents are about evenly divided”

“The Gallup Poll: Public Closely Divided on Canal Issue” by George Gallup. *The Washington Post*, September 4th, 1977

Public Closely Divided on Canal Issue

By George Gallup

PRINCETON, N.J.—President Carter’s decision to go to the American people to win support for the Panama Canal treaty comes when the public is closely divided on this controversial issue.

In the first nationwide survey—in effect, a national referendum — 39 per cent of those who have heard of the treaty express approval, while 46 per cent disapprove of the pact, which calls for the United States to turn over ownership of the canal to Panama by the year 2000 while retaining protective rights and responsibilities. Fifteen per cent of the aware group are undecided.

Sharp differences are found on the basis of population groups. Persons with a college background, for example, lean 49 to 40 per cent in favor of the treaty. Republicans disapprove by 2 to 1, while Democratic voters and independents are about evenly divided.

This question was asked first in the survey:

Have you heard or read about the

proposed new treaty between the U.S. and the Republic of Panama regarding the Panama Canal?

	Have Heard Or Read About
National	76%
Men	83
Women	69
18-29 years	65
30-49 years	76
50 and older	82
College	89
High school	71
Grade school	56
Republicans	84
Democrats	73
Independents	74

All people in the survey were then asked:

The proposed new treaty between the U.S. and Panama calls for the U.S. to turn over ownership of the canal to Panama at the end of this century. However, the U.S. will maintain control over the land and installations necessary to operate and defend the canal. Do you approve or disapprove of this proposed new treaty?

	Approve	Disapprove	No Opinion
Nationwide	39%	46%	15%
College	49	40	11
High school	32	52	16
Grade school	28	46	26

18-29 years	44	44	12
30-49 years	45	43	12
50 and older	30	51	19
East	43	42	15
Midwest	37	50	13
South	35	47	18
West	38	49	13
Republicans	31	58	11
Democrats	43	41	16
Independents	41	43	16


The results are based on interviews with 1,025 adults out of a total sample of 1,356 adults 18 and older, conducted in person in more than 300 scientifically selected localities across the nation Aug. 18-22.

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The Washington Post

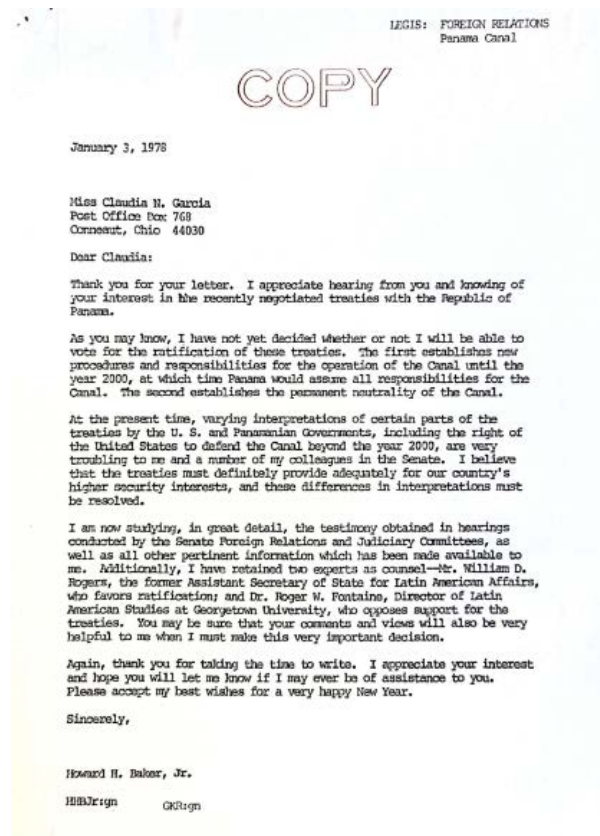
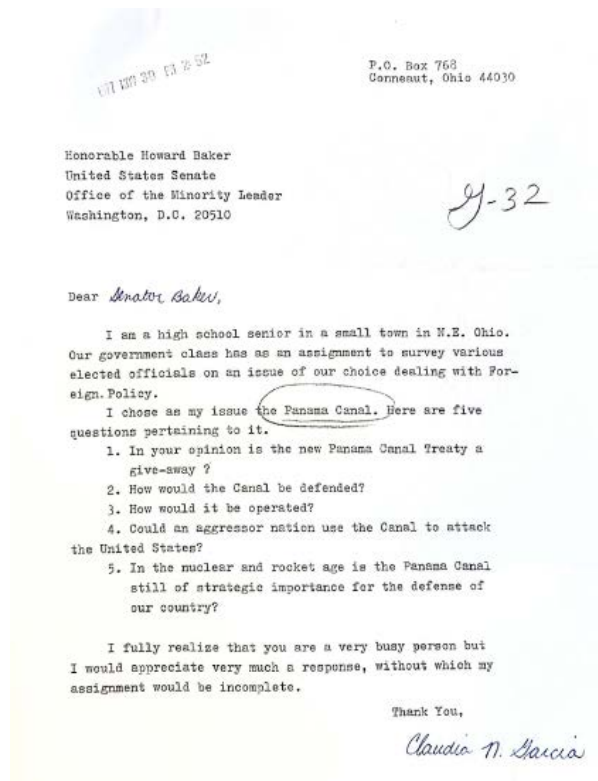
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Perspective B - Letter from Claudia Garcia to Senate Minority Leader, Howard Baker and His Response



Dear Senator Baker,

I am a high school senior in a small town in N.E. Ohio. Our government class has as an assignment to survey various officials on an issue of our choice dealing with [foreign policy].

I chose as my issue the Panama Canal. Here are five questions pertaining to it.

1. In your opinion is the new Panama Canal Treaty a give-away?
2. How would the Canal be defended?
3. How would it be operated?
4. Could an aggressor nation use the Canal to attack the United States?
5. In the nuclear and rocket age is the Panama Canal still of strategic importance for the defense of our country?

I fully realize that you are a very busy person but I would appreciate very much a response, without which my assignment would be incomplete.

Thank You,

Claudia N. Garcia
(Received November 1977)

Dear Claudia:

Thank you for your letter. I appreciate hearing from you and knowing of your interest in [the] recently negotiated treaties with the Republic of Panama.

As you may know, I have not yet decided whether or not I will be able to vote for the ratification of these treaties. . . .

I am now studying, in great detail, the testimony obtained in hearings conducted by the Senate Foreign Relations and Judiciary Committees, as well as all other pertinent information which has been made available to me. Additionally, I have retained two experts as counsel Mr. William D. Rogers, the former Assistant Secretary of State for Latin American Affairs, who favors ratification; and Dr. Roger W. Fontaine, Director of Latin American Studies at Georgetown University, who opposes support for the treaties. You may be sure that your comments and views will also be very helpful to me when I must make this very important decision.

Again, thank you for taking the time to write. I appreciate your interest and hope you will let me know if I may ever be of assistance to you. Please accept my best wishes for a very happy New Year.

Sincerely,
Howard H. Baker, Jr.
January 3, 1978

Perspective C - Newspaper Editorial from Former Governor Ronald Reagan

IN THE NEWS REPORTS summarizing the probable terms of a new Panama Canal treaty, I have found nothing that would lead me to alter my belief that we should maintain control of the canal. . . . there is no assurance that once we give up our right of sovereignty a Panamanian government might not nationalize the canal and abrogate the treaty. This could lead either to confrontation or to meek American acceptance of an accomplished fact. Neither prospect is a happy one . . . The friendship between the people of the United States and the people of Panama has been long and durable. The United States helped Panama achieve its independence as a nation. We can and should continue to be a good friend and neighbor to Panama by helping to assure it of economic stability and growth but not at the price of U.S. security.

Ronald Reagan, former Governor of California. "The Opposing Force: Price of Helping Panama Must Not Be U.S. Security," *The Atlanta Constitution*, August 20th, 1977

The Opposing Force: Price of Helping Panama Must Not Be U. S. Security

Reagan, Ronald

The Atlanta Constitution (1946-1984); Aug 20, 1977;

ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Atlanta Constitution

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The Opposing Force

Price of Helping Panama Must Not Be U. S. Security

By RONALD REAGAN

Reagan is a former governor of California whose campaign for the presidency ended when he failed to get the nomination of the Republican Party last summer. He has long opposed giving up control over the Panama Canal.

IN THE NEWS REPORTS summarizing the probable terms of a new Panama Canal treaty, I have found nothing that would lead me to alter my belief that we should maintain control of the canal.

The existing treaty provides for the United States to exercise rights of sovereignty in the Canal Zone, to the exclusion of the Republic of Panama. This is the foundation on which our presence there rests. Even though the new proposals call for a special treaty to guarantee the canal's neutrality and joint defense by the United States

and Panama, there is no assurance that once we give up our right of sovereignty a Panamanian government might not nationalize the canal and abrogate the treaty.

This could lead either to confrontation or to meek American acceptance of an accomplished fact. Neither prospect is a happy one.

There are other reasons to be concerned about the proposal to give up the canal. Fidel Castro has made a show of his friendship for the present dictator of Panama. He also makes no secret of his interest in exporting Marxism throughout the hemisphere.

Panama has been plagued by political instability before. Castro and his patron, the Soviet Union, can be counted on to take advantage of any future instability, as well as the vacuum which might be created by the systematic withdrawal of American forces from the Canal Zone.

The negotiators on both sides are taking bows

right now, but they may have raised Panamanian expectations too high.

After all, the President cannot approve a treaty. The Senate must do that. And since United States property is involved, the House must pass enabling legislation as well.

It is by no means certain that Congress will approve this proposed treaty. If it does not, Panamanian disappointment may lead to trouble. What kind of stand is President Carter prepared to take it does?

The friendship between the people of the United States and the people of Panama has been long and durable. The United States helped Panama achieve its independence as a nation.

We can and should continue to be a good friend and neighbor to Panama by helping to assure it of economic stability and growth, but not at the price of U.S. security.

Perspective D - Excerpt from Howard Baker's Response to a Constituent Explaining his Final Decision

As you know, after a long period of deliberation and consultation with knowledgeable experts on both sides of the issue, I have decided that as submitted to the Senate the treaties could not and should not receive the consent of the Senate to ratification. I became gradually convinced, however, that if the treaties could be modified to provide to the United States additional and essential guarantees . . . it is then in the interest of the United States to ratify the treaties and eventually, following the year 2000, to allow Panama to assume the responsibility for operating the Canal. I am aware, of course, that strong arguments could be made on both sides of this issue; and I deeply respect the sincerity of those whose stand on this issue is not in accord with my own.

Senator Howard H. Baker, Jr. "Response to Mr. Raoul Bugg of California."
February 2, 1978

LEGIS: FOREIGN RELATIONS
Panama Canal
Response to request for
campaign contributions

COPY

February 2, 1978

Mr. Raoul Bugg
24262 Virginia Lane
Sunnymead, California 92388

Dear Mr. Bugg:

I appreciate your thoughtful response to my request for contributions for my 1978 campaign for reelection; and, naturally, I regret that you so strongly disagree with my position on the proposed Panama Canal Treaties.

As you know, after a long period of deliberation and consultation with knowledgeable experts on both sides of the issue, I have decided that as submitted to the Senate the treaties could not and should not receive the consent of the Senate to ratification. I became gradually convinced, however, that if the treaties could be modified to provide to the United States additional and essential guarantees -- particularly with regard to the right to defend, the right to privileged passage by warships of the United States Navy and possibly the right to build a sea-level canal should that prove desirable -- it is then in the interest of the United States to ratify the treaties and eventually, following the year 2000, to allow Panama to assume the responsibility for operating the Canal. I am aware, of course, that strong arguments could be made on both sides of this issue; and I deeply respect the sincerity of those whose stand on this issue is not in accord with my own.

Again, I am grateful that you took the time to respond to my solicitation for contributions; and I remain hopeful that on the many other important issues confronting the country, we remain in substantial agreement.

Sincerely,

Howard H. Baker, Jr.

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Student Skill Sheet | Letter Writing Assignment

After researching your chosen/assigned topic, write a three-paragraph letter to the federal or state senator or representative of your choice. Your letter should follow the following format:

1. Paragraph 1 – Introduction with a thesis explaining your understanding of the topic.
2. Paragraph 2 – An explanation of your questions about the topic. While you are not interrogating the representative or arguing with their position, you can ask for clarification or state your position and ask for theirs.
3. Paragraph 3 – Conclude by restating your position and explain briefly why the topic matters to you. Ask politely for a response and sign your name.

When you have completed your letter, you will work with a partner to edit and revise your letter before you submit.

KEY TERMS & PEOPLE*

Treaty- An agreement between two or more nations containing promises to behave in specified ways; U.S. treaties require ratification by a two-thirds vote of the Senate.

Constituents - Members of a particular area or community that elected officials represent.

Representative - A member of Congress elected by local citizens to act on behalf of their community.

General Omar Torrijos - Military leader of Panama, 1968-1981.

President Jimmy Carter - 39th President of the United States, 1977-1981.

Senator Howard H. Baker, Jr. - U.S. Senator (R - Tennessee) 1959-1980.

Ronald Reagan – Former governor of California, 1967-1975.

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