

# Teaching by Analogy



## Comparing American and Turkish history

How do you teach the early history of the United States to foreigners? Foreign students—in particular, those I've taught in Ankara, Turkey—know a lot about American pop culture. And they are familiar with American literature, if they have taken any courses in American studies, the main academic discipline for teaching and learning about America from abroad. But foreign students often know little, if anything, about American history. In a course I offered on U.S. foreign relations, I asked one student, a graduate of an American studies program, why American culture and literature seem worth studying but not American history? My query was a leading question: I hoped she would exclaim, "But American history is important!" Unfortunately she calmly replied that studying American literature offered her the chance not only to learn English but also to learn about similarities between American literature and other

kinds of literature. American history offered no such advantage, however, because it was too unique to say anything about other nations' histories. What, for example, could U.S. history possibly have to do with Turkish history?

By way of answering these quaint-sounding but in fact important questions—how to teach U.S. history abroad and why—I explained that U.S. history actually has quite a bit to do with Turkish history and not only since World War II, when America achieved true global influence. I have in mind the era of the early American republic, when American relations with the Ottoman Empire, modern Turkey's ancestor, consisted largely of trade in opium and figs and the evangelical business of a few hearty New England missionaries.

It is clear to me that, despite these seemingly modest connections between the United States and Turkey, the early history of the United States can offer Turkish students lessons about the early history of their own country. And Turkish students' familiarity with Turkish history and society, in particular issues of national identity and citizenship, minority rights, and women's rights, can enable them to better appreciate early U.S. history. Both countries, in other words, struggled with how to form "republican" identities. The challenge of getting foreign students to see the early United States as more than a fuzzy abstraction has prompted me to teach important episodes in U.S. history through cross-national and cross-cultural analogies. I don't incorporate such a comparative strategy wholesale, but even a selective use of the method has paid substantial dividends.

College students in Turkey have mixed feelings about the United States. On one hand they generally dislike U.S. policies in the Middle East, especially concerning Iraq and Israel. The Bush administration's policy of "preemption" has left them fearing American actions against Turkish territorial sovereignty. On the other hand, some students like contemporary American films, pop stars Britney Spears and Justin Timberlake, and NBA basketball, whose stars include not only Americans Allen Iverson and LeBron James but also Turkish players Mehmet Okur and Hedo Türkoğlu. American educational opportunities are also a great draw. Every year a few of the best students in our history department go to top graduate programs in the United States.

Turkish students may have heard anecdotes of pre-World War II presidents George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and Woodrow Wilson. But the first American leader whose policies mean anything to them is Harry Truman. Truman's opposition to global communism influenced Turkey through the Marshall Plan and the dispatch of the USS *Missouri* to Istanbul in 1946. The *Missouri*'s official mission was to return the remains of a deceased Turkish diplomat (Mehmet Ertegün, the father of the founders of the great R&B label Atlantic Records), but in fact the massive ship's presence in the Bosphorus Straits simply reinforced the sense that America saw Turkey as a bulwark against Soviet communism. Today an observer occasionally may find small businesses or memorabilia with the name "Mizuri."

Notwithstanding Turkish students' lack of knowledge about the deep American past, their familiarity with American culture has grown since the end of the cold war and the expansion of cable television and the Internet (through the 1980s Turkey had one television channel). This cultural familiarity, arguably manifesting what Joseph Nye Jr. has called American "soft power," has created the impression among many Turkish students that American influence—not only cultural, but also military and economic—is eternal or at least as old as the United States itself: American power today, that is, has no traceable origins.

I try to disabuse them of this impression because it reads the past through the lens of the present and because it is tautological, saying in effect, "America is powerful because of its historic power." An example of this thinking arose in my U.S. history survey when we studied contemporary debates about Andrew Jackson's Indian removal policy. A student arguing for the removal's justification declared, "We know that the U.S. government is strong, and when it wants to do something, it does it." Might makes right; more pertinent, might has been an American constant.

These sorts of perceptions remind me of the need to communicate contingency in my teaching: that the United States developed one way and not another was not inevitable. It was the result of discrete events, temporary circumstances, the influence or absence of certain key individuals, and the like. And I remind students that contingency is equally important in Turkish history.

With this in mind, the commonalities that emerge in the respective early periods of the United States and Turkey present numerous illuminating subjects for classroom discussion. The national governments of both countries resorted to squashing political opposition in the first decades of their existence: in America the Federalists resorted to the Alien and Sedition Acts; in Turkey, the Republican People's Party remained the only political party with parliamentary representation until 1946. Although both countries are ethnically diverse, both on occasion forced distinct ethnic communities to "relocate." In America, the Sauk, Fox, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Cherokee, Creek, and Seminole Indian tribes were relocated from ancestral lands in the East. In Turkey, Turkish citizens of Greek Orthodox background were sent to Greece in exchange for Muslims of Greek ancestry, and Kurdish people were removed from their historic areas of settlement.

It is possible that without such drastic steps, neither early republic would have avoided dissolution (although African slavery in the United States mitigated whatever unifying effects ethnic cleansing may have had). Classroom dialogue about conservative nation building in the United States by reference to analogous developments in Turkey encourages students to think more analytically and sympathetically about the costs of forming the American state.

Other aspects of republican state formation in the United States and Turkey provide additional points for comparison. Both countries owe their early survival partly to the protection offered by a global power. The United States

was able to expand early in its history partly because Britain, while recognizing American sovereignty, prevented other European powers from encroaching on its former colonies. Likewise Turkey was able to resist encroachment from the Eastern Bloc, as noted above, partly because of the United States. Both of these early episodes of patronage presaged longer-term friendly alliances.

Likewise, Turkey's founder and first president, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, took a revolutionary step towards fostering a new Turkish cultural identity by establishing a new Turkish alphabet and language. The formation of the modern Turkish language, different from its Ottoman, Persian, and Arabic antecedents, helps dramatize the analogous enterprise of the American lexicographer Noah Webster, advocate of an "American tongue," who believed that a distinctive American English would unify American culture and wean Americans from European influence. Turkish students, sensitive to the influence of American and European cultural exports, can readily appreciate Webster's zeal.

Atatürk's leadership and importance as a public symbol amid early instability also help students understand the importance of George Washington to the early American republic. After his military leadership in the American Revolution, Washington retired from public life but returned to serve as the first president, to build grass-roots support for the U.S. Constitution, and generally to impart legitimacy to the new U.S. government. Turkish students' awareness of the absence of democratic institutions under the Ottoman regime, and also Atatürk's celebrity, helps them understand, on the one hand, the early cult of Washington and, on the other, the evolutionary, not constitutional, formations of the first national political parties in American life: Federalists, Democratic-Republicans, Democrats, Whigs, and Republicans. In a class on American political history, a student confessed that he admired America because its politics were more transparent than Turkey's. But then our class discussed such irregular U.S. presidential races as the election of 1800, when Thomas Jefferson, as president of the Senate, had responsibility for counting state ballots for or against his own candidacy; and the so-called corrupt bargains in 1824 and 1876, when respective winners of the popular vote lost the elections. Through such tales, the Turkish student came to feel less embarrassed by the nitty-gritty of his own country's politics.

Another point of instructive analogy concerns the status of women. Both the American and Turkish early republics were paternal, in their assumptions that the principal enactors of civic virtue would be men. In the early United States, this largely meant white men. Turkey, although it legitimized political opposition more slowly than did the United States, was more liberal with its early extension of the franchise, empowering all male citizens to vote in 1924. Thus both early republics envisioned a political role for women, but it was an indirect role, focused on raising sons and disciplining or loving husbands who would become virtuous citizens. Similar to the early American ideology of "republican motherhood," Atatürk proclaimed the emancipation of Turkish women because the republic "needs men who have better minds, more perfect men." "The

mothers of the future," he hoped, "will know how to bring up such men!"

Yet women's suffrage was established more rapidly in Turkey than in the United States: Turkish women gained the national right to vote the same decade American women did. So comparison of women's aspirations and rights in Turkey enhances classroom discussion of the relatively slow process of enfranchising American women. I admit I stumbled on this point when I distributed to my class Abigail Adams's famous letter urging her husband to "remember the ladies." I asked students to tell me about Abigail's tone in the letter. A female student remarked that Abigail was "probably quiet," because if she were too assertive in demanding equality, John might abuse her. Such a response suggests both a traditional expectation that married Turkish women should be submissive and a more modern sense that women had a rightful place in the political nation.

In the last generation some historians of the United States have begun to teach their subject from a comparative or international point of view. Such an approach is designed to reinforce the reality that the American past was never really separate from the world. If my classroom in Turkey is any indication, however, that message has had little resonance outside the United States. But comparison of the early American republic and its Turkish counterpart—one regime with which students have virtually no familiarity, one regime of which they have a civic if not analytical understanding—produces many instructive points of comparison. Both the similarities and the differences can invigorate discussions of how the United States was formed and how that process was just as fraught and historically contingent as the growth of modern Turkey. What hardships, good fortune, civic building blocks, or realpolitik did Americans of the early republic share with later generations in other countries? In an increasingly globalized academic environment, such questions should help both American and foreign students better appreciate the commonalities of their nations' histories.

## Further Reading:

Joseph Nye described "soft power" in *The Paradox of American Power: Why the World's Only Superpower Can't Go It Alone* (Oxford and New York, 2002).

Atatürk's remarks may be found in Lord Kinross, *Ataturk: A Biography of Mustafa Kemal, Father of Modern Turkey [1964]* (New York, 1992). A newer biography is Andrew Mango, *Ataturk* (London, 2004). Mango's *The Turks Today* (Woodstock, N.Y., 2004) interprets modern Turkey. Noah Webster's remark appears in Jack Greene, ed., *The American Revolution: Its Character and Limits* (New York, 1987).

Suggestions for teaching U.S. history comparatively may be found in David Thelen, "Of Audiences, Borderlands, and Comparisons: Toward the Internationalization of American History," *Journal of American History* 79 (1992) and Carl Guarneri, "Internationalizing the United States Survey Course: American History for a Global Age," *The History Teacher* 36 (2002). An earlier essay about teaching U.S. history in Turkey is Russell Johnson, "Stranger in a Not-So-Strange Land: Teaching and Living the Gilded Age and Progressive Era in

Turkey," *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 1 (2002).

This article originally appeared in issue 8.1 (October, 2007).

---

Tim Roberts is assistant professor of history at Bilkent University in Ankara, Turkey. He is the author of *Distant Revolutions: 1848 and the Challenge to American Exceptionalism*, forthcoming from the University of Virginia Press, and is currently researching the interaction of American overseas traders and missionaries during the early American republic. He thanks Bilkent students Ayşegül Avcı, Gülşah Şenkol, and Veysel Şimşek for their insights and corrections to this essay.