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International Agreements

Governments have an ethical obligation to abide by international agreements and honor their nation's treaty commitments (see Numbers 30:2).

GOALS

1. To illustrate how the observance of international agreements upholds our national integrity.
2. To understand the historical reasons for international commitments and renew our desire to honor such commitments with integrity.

Somewhere right now, a couple declares their wedding vows. Somewhere else, a witness swears an oath to tell the whole truth in court. New military members take an oath to protect the Constitution. Vows and oaths exist everywhere in societies. They signify sacred trust.

Just as a person making an oath expects another person to uphold the terms based on their integrity, nations expect the integrity of other nations when entering into a treaty. The Israelite nation of old understood the importance of integrity. Speaking to the leaders of tribes, Moses conveyed that God commanded the Israelites to keep their vows and be true to their oaths, saying, "If a man vow a vow unto the Lord, or swear an oath to bind his soul with a bond; he shall not break his word, he shall do according to all that proceedeth out of his mouth" (Numbers 30:2).

This scripture is applicable to modern governing leaders. We should expect that the government will honor commitments made by virtue of international agreements and treaties.

SCRIPTURE STUDY

"[T]ill I die, I will not remove mine integrity from me." — Job 27:5

"And I went in unto the king, and he covenanted with me that I might possess the land of Lehi-Nephi, and the land of Shilom." — Mosiah 9:6

"And they did also bury their weapons of war, according as their brethren had, and they began to be a righteous people; and they did walk in the ways of the Lord, and did observe to keep his commandments and his statutes." — Alma 25:14

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INTEGRITY IS A NECESSITY IN TREATY AND AGREEMENT KEEPING

Throughout the Book of Mormon, the peoples made and honored treaty commitments.

King Laman — leader of the majority people, the Lamanites — granted land to Zeniff, the leader of a Nephite offshoot (Mosiah 9:6-9).

Captain Moroni tore his coat to make a banner and wrote on it the words, "In memory of our God, our religion, and freedom, and our peace, our wives, and our children" (Alma 46:12). And he urged his fellow soldiers to do the same. Thereafter, he was known to be a man who "had sworn with an oath to defend his people, his rights, and his country, and his religion, even to the loss of his blood" (Alma 48:13). If all men had the integrity, gratitude, and courage of Moroni, the editor Mormon wrote, “the very powers of hell would have been shaken forever” (Alma 48:17).

The story of the Anti-Nephi-Lehies provides an example of integrity in making and keeping a promise to both God and warring opponents. These converted Lamanites invoked the symbol of the brightness of their swords as their new standard, reflecting their desire to cleanse their souls from the horrific violence they had committed. By burying their once stained and then clean weapons, they covenanted with God and man to never again take up arms against others. When Lamanites then attacked these Anti-Nephi-Lehies, the latter ultimately sealed their promise when they lay on the ground, praising God rather than fight — and 1,005 were killed. Their integrity in keeping their vow to reject violence led to the conversion of “more than the number who had been slain” (Alma 24:26). In response to the persecution the Anti-Nephi-Lehies faced, the Nephites granted the land of Jershon as a safe haven for their former enemies, making and keeping promises to a people in need.

To learn more about the form and function of covenants in Latter-day Saint scripture, read this review.

The level of integrity exhibited in these examples can serve as a model for the nation’s leaders, who are certainly duty-bound to exhibit great care and integrity in making and keeping commitments. International agreements and treaties require the trust and integrity of governments. When nations enter into pacts with other nations, they promise to uphold the terms of the agreement. These promises demand integrity of those who hold offices of power, and the stakes are high. When leaders make and keep fair treaties and agreements with other nations, it is then that a healthy economy, the safety and protection of citizens, the preservation of infrastructure, the environment, and, ultimately, peace can all thrive. But when treaties and agreements are broken, they put all of this at risk.

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As we advocate for our government to keep just treaties with integrity, we promote peace, trust, and stability. The U.S. government has a responsibility to abide by its international commitments — from economic and trade agreements to ceasefires or peace treaties.

What do you think?

- *Why is integrity such a vital component of those who arrange treaties and agreements?*
- *How does honoring treaties empower countries?*
- *How do we influence our nation's willingness to honor its treaties and agreements?*

CONSTITUTIONAL AND HISTORIC BACKGROUND

Some of the reasons the U.S. government has the responsibility to abide by international commitments come from the Constitution itself. When the writers of that document gathered in 1787, it had only been four years since the signing of the international agreement that ended the Revolutionary War — the Treaty of Paris. Many of them had fought in that war and were intimately aware of the importance — and challenges — of treaties. They gave multiple international functions to Congress, but treaty-making power was given to the executive branch, with legislative approval.

International agreements, including but not limited to peace treaties, are written agreements among countries. "Bilateral" agreements exist between two countries, while "multilateral" agreements are among several countries.

The degree of cooperation and coordination between the executive and legislative branches varies depending on the type of international agreement.

Here are the categories of treaties and agreements made in the U.S.:

Article 2 Treaties *(the "Gold Standard")*
The only place the Constitution mentions "treaties" is in Article 2, Section 2, Clause 2, also called the treaty clause of the Constitution. The president has the power to make such treaties, as long as **two-thirds of the Senate** agrees.

Key features:

1. Because they require a two-thirds supermajority in the Senate, Article 2 treaties are the hardest to pass, making up only about 5% of U.S. treaties.
2. They are slow to achieve but especially durable.

Examples:

1. Under President Thomas Jefferson, James Monroe and Robert Livingston negotiated the Louisiana Purchase treaty (1803). The Senate ratified the treaty 24-7. It doubled the size of the U.S. and is a prime example of an Article 2 treaty being used for territorial expansion.
2. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization, or NATO, (1949) was created in the wake of World War II. It established the principle of "collective defense" — an attack on one member is an attack on all. The Senate ratified it with an overwhelming 82-13 vote; this treaty remains the cornerstone of U.S. security policy in Europe and is a classic example of a "mutual defense" Article 2 treaty.

Congressional-Executive Agreements

While not mentioned in the Constitution, congressional-executive agreements have become the most common way the U.S. enters international deals. These agreements require a **simple majority in both the House and the Senate**, plus the president's signature.

Key features:

1. They have the same legal status as a formal treaty, becoming part of international and domestic law.
2. They take a moderate amount of time to achieve and have high durability.

Examples:

1. The **North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA)** is a congressional-executive agreement that was passed by simple majorities in both the House and Senate.
2. The U.S. entered the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 1995. Learn more about trade agreements here.

Sole Executive Agreements

Solo executive agreements are made by the president alone, based on their inherent powers as commander in chief and authority to manage foreign relationships. These require absolutely no input, votes, pre-authorization, or subsequent funding approvals from Congress.

Key features:

1. These agreements are usually for less "weighty" concerns, such as settling minor claims, temporary military stays, and administrative arrangements.
2. While quicker to implement, these can be controversial and are easily undone by the next president.

Example:

The Algiers Accords (1981) was signed by President Jimmy Carter, ending the Iran

hostage crisis. He agreed to free frozen Iranian assets in exchange for the release of American hostages. An international tribunal was formed to settle legal claims and was upheld in Dames and Moore v. Regan (1981).

RESPECTING AGREEMENTS CONTRIBUTED TO WORLD PEACE AFTER WORLD WAR II

After World War II, inhabitants and leaders of the world hoped never to experience such a catastrophe again. They established new agreements and institutions to promote diplomacy over war:

United Nations (UN): While World War II was still underway, the Allies began working to create the UN, a postwar international organization based on the principles of collective security, human rights, and a rule-based international order. The charter of the UN was signed in June 1945 and passed in the U.S. Senate the following month, with 89-2 bipartisan approval. The charter's preamble opens by recognizing the need "to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small."

The original members of the UN created another landmark international document, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The UDHR set forth, for the first time ever, "the fundamental human rights to be universally protected." The UDHR recognizes that "the inherent dignity and . . . the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice, and peace in the world." In the words of one historian, the UDHR "remains aspirational" but "is a vital part of the rules-based order" in which leaders may be checked for their abuses.

North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO): While the Marshall Plan bolstered European economic integration and the idea of shared cooperation between Europe and the U.S., the USSR refused to participate or to allow its satellite states in Eastern Europe to do so. In 1948, the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, covertly backed by the Soviet Union, overturned the democratically elected government in that country. The growing division between east and west in Europe led U.S. officials to decide that "only a truly transatlantic security agreement could deter Soviet aggression while simultaneously preventing the revival of European militarism and laying the groundwork for political integration." NATO, an Article 2 treaty, became the first peacetime military alliance the U.S. entered into outside of the Western Hemisphere.

In addition to these agreements made in the immediate aftermath of World War II, two other significant agreements are worth discussing.

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First, the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons has been in force since 1970 and received the advice and consent of the Senate. Its purpose is contained in three main pillars: non-proliferation (to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons), disarmament (to bolster the goal of eventual complete nuclear disarmament), and the peaceful use of nuclear energy (to advance cooperation in the peaceful uses of nuclear energy). Five nuclear-weapon states (NWS) — the U.S., Russia, China, France, and the U.K. — pledge not to transfer nuclear weapons or technologies to the 186 non-nuclear-weapon states (NNWS), who vow not to procure or produce nuclear weapons. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) is a safeguard that monitors nuclear programs to ensure compliance. In 1995, the treaty was extended indefinitely.

Another agreement — this one carried out through executive order — shows how easily that type of agreement can be done and undone. In December 2015, the United Nations Climate Change Conference adopted a landmark agreement to combat global climate change, often referred to as the Paris Agreement. Under the accord, member countries voluntarily pledge to limit global climate change to 2 degrees Celsius by reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

As of January 2026, 194 countries have signed the Paris Agreement. A small number of countries have yet to formally join, including Iran, Libya, and Yemen. The U.S. wasn't an active participant in negotiating this agreement, but President Trump withdrew from the agreement during his first presidential term and (after President Biden rejoined during his) again in his second. President Trump officially completed the withdrawal for a second time on January 27, 2026.

What do you think?

- *Read the particulars of the discussed treaties and agreements. What do you feel prompted to do to encourage lawmakers in efforts to maintain the agreements?*
- *Circumstances change, and treaty agreements may need to change too. In these instances, does the process matter? How can the process uphold or undermine a nation's integrity when negotiating changes to treaties and agreements?*
- *Despite the benefits of many agreements, not all treaties have been righteous or just. Some treaties, notably those with Indigenous communities or nations, were not always inherently fair or may have been extracted by coercion. What must be considered to avoid unfairness or coercion in treaty-making and upholding?*

WOMEN'S INVOLVEMENT IN TREATIES AND INTERNATIONAL AGREEMENTS

Throughout history, women have been essential to treaty making and keeping. Research indicates that "women's participation in peace negotiations increases the durability and the quality of peace." To this point, a report issued by the U.N. in 2015 cited a seminal study

by The Geneva Graduate Institute, where they analyzed 40 international agreements. The analysis indicated that when women are involved in peace agreements, they not only improve the chances of coming to an agreement, but they persist in continuing negotiations when stalled, increase implementation, and influence more lasting agreements.

Here are some examples of individual women who played crucial roles in making and keeping treaties:

Alice Paul, Doris Stevens, and the Equal Nationality Treaty, 1933
Between World Wars I and II, Alice Paul and Doris Stevens of the National Women's Party advocated for women's equal rights, laying the groundwork for women worldwide. With multiple law degrees between them, the two would blend efforts with international law scholar James Brown Scott, ultimately leading to the U.S. and 18 other countries signing the Equal Nationality Treaty, advancing women's rights across the globe.

"I have never doubted that equal rights was the right direction. Most reforms, most problems are complicated. But to me there is nothing complicated about ordinary equality." — Alice Paul

Eleanor Roosevelt and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948
Known for her advocacy on behalf of women, Black Americans, and human rights in general, Eleanor Roosevelt used her position both as First Lady and later as an influential world leader on her own terms to open doors for those without a seat in the room. After her husband's death in 1945, Roosevelt accepted the U.S. delegate position at the United Nations. She led the effort to develop the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, an international agreement adopted by more than 50 nations and still in effect today. Many other women contributed as well.

"I hope the women of the United States will awaken to the full sense of the influence which they can wield if they accept the responsibility which all power implies."
— Eleanor Roosevelt, "My Day," December 10, 1942

Ada Deer and the restoration of the Menominee Nation, 1973
Ada Deer, a member of the Menominee Tribe, became the first university graduate in her nation and the first Native American to graduate in social work from Columbia University. In 1972, she went on to restore Menominee Nation rights terminated by the U.S. in 1954. Deer served as assistant secretary of Indian Affairs under President Clinton — the first woman in this role — and proved integral in setting policy for 555 American Indian tribes.

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"I speak up. I speak out. It's not like I plotted and planned. I just had this general goal. I want to do and I want to be and I want to help. And I've been able to do it." — Ada Deer

What do you think?

- *Study more about women's contributions to treaties and agreements. How do their peacemaking efforts inspire you? Are you aware of how international agreements impact your daily life? How can you use your talents to advocate for upholding international agreements?*

In addition to the impact of women as seen above, do American citizens play a role in honoring and abiding by treaties and agreements?

U.S. citizens can advocate for upholding agreements and treaties that protect and serve our nation and its people. We can urge U.S. presidents and Congress to follow through with Constitutional procedures and promises they make regarding treaties, engendering the continued trust of other nations. As we advocate for our government to make just treaties and agreements that ensure human rights and keep them with integrity, we promote peace, trust, and stability.