The Fulbright Program is celebrating its 70th anniversary today, so this is a good occasion to look back on the ingenuity that accompanied the birth of what was to become the flagship academic exchange program of the United States. There are no indications that anybody at the time anticipated that the Fulbright Program would become an epochal success.

On August 1, 1946, U.S. President Harry Truman signed a relatively inconspicuous amendment to the Surplus Property Act of 1944 into law. It had been authored by J. William Fulbright, a junior Senator from Arkansas, who had shepherded it through Congress without attracting much too much attention or debate. This piece of legislation, better known as the Fulbright Act, was not even two pages long, complicated in its technicalities, and full of legislative jargon. However, in all brevity it laid the foundations for an academic exchange program that would come to bear the Senator’s name.

At first glance, the Fulbright Act seemed to have almost nothing to do with academics or exchanges because it addressed the modalities of handling windfall revenue the U.S. government was accruing in foreign currencies overseas from the disposal of “surplus property”: the sale of wartime surpluses in the form of foodstuffs, vehicles, building materials, etc. – or “war junk” as the historian Sam Lebovic recently has observed – arbitrarily scattered in over two dozen countries in Europe, Africa, the Pacific, and Asia. The Fulbright Act did five important things.

First, it earmarked the disposal of foreign currencies for purposes “in accordance with the objectives of this Act” before it actually stated what the objectives of the Act were.

Second, it authorized the Secretary of State to enter into “executive agreement or agreements with any foreign government for the use of such currencies, . . .” These “executive agreements” between the United States and those countries where revenues from the sale of wartime surpluses were available implicitly provided the Fulbright Program with a philosophical and organizational agenda: the establishment of special binational organizations (or “foundations”) with binational boards that came to be known as Fulbright commissions.

The legislation made these commissions responsible for the “use of currencies . . . acquired as a result of such surplus property disposals, . . .” Most importantly, these agreements made shared responsibility and joint decision-making as well as partnership and reciprocity trademarks of the Fulbright Program from the very start. The first binational exchange agreement concluded by the United States was with China on November 10, 1947, and the 27 other agreements that followed in the next five years established the “first generation” of Fulbright Programs. (The Fulbright Program has 49 binational commissions today, which are responsible for 80% of the Fulbright Program’s 360,000 U.S. and international alumni. In over 100 other countries without Fulbright commissions, the program is managed by the staff of U.S. embassies.)
Third, the Act then stated the dedicated purpose of funding accrued from the sale of wartime surpluses. It was earmarked for the “transportation, tuition, maintenance, and other expenses incident to scholastic activities” for “American citizens in schools and institutions of higher learning” located in those countries where revenues from the sale of wartime surpluses overseas were available and that were to conclude Fulbright agreements with the United States. The original Fulbright grants for U.S. grantees were comprehensively covered by the foreign currencies that were available to commissions on site (for example, Austrian schillings in Austria).

Fourth, these foreign currencies also could be used to cover the costs of travel grants: transportation to and from the United States for the Fulbright grantees from participating countries. However, the initial absence of funding in U.S. dollars to cover the stateside costs of incoming grantees was a substantial challenge. The Fulbright Program never would have gotten off the ground without the support of U.S. institutions of higher education that waived tuition and fees for incoming Fulbrighters and provided additional valuable support in the form of scholarships, grants, or stipends. American civil society also was instrumental in providing hospitality and stepped up to cover their on-site living costs.

Fifth, the Fulbright Act authorized the President of the United States to appoint a ten-person Board of Foreign Scholarships consisting of non-partisan, expert representatives of “cultural, educational, student, and war veterans groups, . . . for the purpose of selecting students and educational institutions qualified to participate in this program and to supervise the exchange program, . . .” Between the signature of the Fulbright Act on August 1, 1946 and the conclusion of the first binational exchange agreements starting in November 1947, the Board of Foreign Scholarships – in collaboration with a handful of committed cultural exchange specialists from the Department of State – put the policies and the procedures together that were necessary to recruit U.S. Fulbrighters to go abroad and to host incoming Fulbrighters in the States. In 1948, 84 grantees participated in the Fulbright Program; by 1951, there were over 3,400; and today there are around 7,000.

The Board of Foreign Scholarships – rechristened the Fulbright Foreign Scholarship Board by Congress in 1990 – private NGOs and professional organizations entrusted with the stateside management of the program, such as the Institute of International Education in New York City, foundations, universities and colleges, and binational Fulbright commissions all have contributed to making the Fulbright Program what perhaps could best be called the most non-governmental program of the U.S. government.

Finally, the idea of using windfall funding from the sale of U.S. government surpluses overseas to fund exchanges subsequently was extended to the sale of agricultural surpluses in the mid-1950s and fueled the establishment of over a dozen new Fulbright commissions, predominantly in Latin America. These revenues were substantial enough to keep the program running for its first 15 years. When they ran out, the Fulbright-Hays Mutual Educational Exchange Act of 1961 provided funding for the program as a line item in the federal budget and ingeniously proposed the idea of having the partner governments co-fund the program, too.

So, if you look back at the text of the Fulbright Act today and see how things originally fell into place for the Fulbright Program in its first five years, the ingenuity of the program can be recapitulated in five
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brief points: It (1) earmarked revenues from the sale of U.S. wartime surpluses overseas (2) to finance bilateral academic exchange programs. The management of these exchanges was (3) based on the conclusion of executive agreements between the United States and participating partner countries that (4) established special binational commissions responsible for collaborative planning and decision-making. (5) The Fulbright Scholarship Board, an autonomous body of nongovernmental experts appointed with by the President of the United States, was entrusted with responsibility of establishing policies and procedures to insure the program’s academic integrity and reinforce its non-partisan character.

What a great idea!

Background Reading and Sources:

