

BENJAMIN SUMNER WELLES

Gay U.S. Diplomat, Global Strategist, NATO Co-Founder
(1892-1961)



Following the advice of family friend Franklin D. Roosevelt, Welles took the Foreign Service examination in 1915 and entered the diplomatic corps. Welles used his relatively privileged birth, intelligence and dignified public presence to rise quickly through the ranks. His diplomatic work focused on Latin America and the Caribbean, where he was instrumental in developing Roosevelt's "Good Neighbor" policy. He served briefly as US Ambassador to Cuba in 1933, but his public and controversial attempts to undermine the liberal regime there led to his ouster. In 1937 he was promoted to Undersecretary of State and was one of Roosevelt's most trusted diplomatic advisors, playing a leadership role in the formation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 1941. At the onset of World War II Welles was the natural choice to succeed ailing Secretary of State Cordell Hall, but suspicions that Welles was a homosexual prompted an official investigation by FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover, which confirmed the rumors. As homosexuals were deemed a security risk, Roosevelt had no choice but to accept Sumner Welles resignation. Excluded both formally and informally from the foreign policy establishment for life, Welles resignation robbed the U.S. of its likely Secretary of State in the middle of World War II, underscoring the damage homophobia did to mid-century American foreign policy. Welles continued to write and publish commentary on international affairs, articulating his vision for a multilateral global community. He died in 1961 at the age of 68.



Lesson Plan

Level 1: Contributions Approach

1. Activate prior experience: In what capacity have you heard of Benjamin Sumner Welles?
2. Read the biographical information (above) and explore additional resources here <https://legacyprojectchicago.org/person/benjamin-sumner-welles>
3. Read this link at <http://www.gutenberg-e.org/osc01/frames/fosc08.html>. Group Discussion: Describe his diplomatic skills, achievements, and how suspicions about his gay identity resulted in him being removed from his position.
4. Extend knowledge: How do you think homophobia during this time period impacted the United States?

Level 2: Additive Approach

1. Read <http://www.gutenberg-e.org/osc01/frames/fosc08.html>. What are some factors that led to Welles leaving his position?
2. In what ways did Welles become an advocate for post-war reconstruction under Roosevelt? View <http://documentstalk.com/wp/welles-benjamin-sumner/>
3. Website Investigation: Conduct an Advanced search for "Diplomacy" at <https://legacyprojectchicago.org/explore/advanced>. Review the biography of another diplomat and describe a common element shared with Welles.

Level 3: Transformational Approach

1. Read https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sumner_Welles. Welles was from a well-connected political family. Explain how his upbringing and access to powerful people became a foundation for his personal political beliefs.
2. Although Welles was an accomplished diplomat, his personal life exposed his gay identity. What was the result of this exposure for both his personal life and career? How did he continue to contribute FDR was forced to fire him?

Level 4: Social Action Approach

1. Read <http://www.reformation.org/welles-confidential-magazine.html>. Why do you think this kind of article was written about Welles?
2. Write an essay describing your reaction to Welles's rise as a diplomat while secretly being a gay man. How does one balance their professional and personal lives?
3. Considering the many dimensions of Welles's personal and professional life, what is your understanding of the ethics of being a diplomat for the United States of America? How have they changed since the World War II era?
4. Explore https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_LGBT_ambassadors_of_the_United_States. Compare Welles to "out LGBTQ" diplomats today. Would you advocate for the story of Welles's being part of your history curriculum? Why or why not?