The Senate Committee on Foreign Relations was established in 1816 as one of the original eleven permanent standing committees of the Senate. Throughout its history, the Foreign Relations Committee has been instrumental in developing
and influencing U.S. foreign policy. The committee considers, debates, and negotiates important treaties and legislation that support the national interest. It also holds jurisdiction over all diplomatic nominations. Through these powers, the committee has helped shape foreign policy of broad significance, in matters of war and peace and international relations.

The committee receives honored guests and conducts official business in its historic, two-room suite, located in the northeast corner of the Senate extension, built between 1851 and 1868.
History

Like many Senate spaces in the Capitol, S-116 and S-117 have served many different committees and offices. The first known use of S-116 was as the Senate folding room. It was here that publications were stored and where clerks prepared documents, bills, and speeches for distribution. Eventually this service was transferred to the Government Printing Office. The Senate Committee on Patents, which held jurisdiction over patents and patent law, moved into S-116 in the 1870s. It was during the Patent Committee’s nearly two-decade occupancy of the room that artist Constantino Brumidi executed the fresco of American innovator Robert Fulton above the entrance to the committee room.

This follows a precedent applied throughout the Capitol’s corridors of relating the figurative murals to the achievements or work of the committee in the nearby room. The fresco above the door to S-116 depicts Fulton with his left hand resting on mechanical diagrams and his right hand gesturing towards a steamboat traveling the Hudson River—references to Fulton’s success at harnessing steam engine technology to create the first viable commercial steamboat service in the early 19th century. Brumidi incorporated emblems representing science, agriculture, navigation, and the arts on the ceiling in the spacious lobby outside S-116, known as the Patent Corridor.
The original occupant of S-117 was the Senate Committee on Post-Offices and Post-Roads. To recognize this committee, Brumidi painted a fresco above the room’s entrance depicting Benjamin Franklin, the first postmaster general, surrounded by his inventions.

The two rooms, S-116 and S-117, continued to serve separate purposes until 1931. Occupants of the rooms reflected the concerns of a growing nation, including the committees on Retrenchment, Patents, Agriculture, Immigration, Territories, Female Suffrage, and Naval Affairs. In 1931, S-116 and S-117 became associated as a suite to accommodate the needs of the Naval Affairs Committee. Shortly after, in 1933, the Committee on Foreign Relations moved into the two-room suite, an assignment it retains to this day. While the Foreign Relations Committee maintains several offices throughout the Capitol complex, the two rooms in the Capitol have become symbolic of the committee and its notable diplomatic work.
Occupancy

The following occupancy lists are compiled from a variety of resources, including architectural plans, guidebooks, contemporary records, and the annual directory of the United States Congress—first published in 1869.

S–116

1869 Senate Folding Room
1870-1871 Committee on Retrenchment
1872-1881 Committee on Patents
1882-1884 Committee on Patents and Committee on Female Suffrage
1885-1895 Committee on Patents
1896-1914 Senate Post-Office
1915 Committee on Agriculture and Forestry
1916 Committee on Contingent Expenses
1917 Committee on Industrial Expositions
1918-1924 Committee on Immigration
1925 Committee on Territories
1926-1928 Committee on Territories and Insular Possessions
1929-1930 Committee on Printing
1931-1932 Committee on Naval Affairs
1933-present Committee on Foreign Relations

S–117

1869-1895 Committee on Post-Offices and Post-Roads
1896-1901 Committee on Foreign Relations
1902-1909 Committee on Printing
1910-1914 Committee on Agriculture and Forestry
1915 Committee on the Library
1915-1917 Committee on Agriculture and Forestry
1918-1920 Committee on Census
1921-1923 Committee on Enrolled Bills
1924-1932 Committee on Naval Affairs
1933-present Committee on Foreign Relations
Decorative Highlights

The Senate extension and its companion House extension, designed by Thomas U. Walter and built by Montgomery C. Meigs, were meant to inspire visitors to reflect upon the Capitol as a symbol of American democracy and to showcase the nation’s accomplishments, resources, and wealth. To this end, the extensions featured elaborate wall and ceiling murals, as well as the finest workmanship, the most exquisite building materials, and the latest technologies. Offices boasted high vaulted ceilings, ornamental cast-iron door and window frames, interior wood shutters, carved marble mantels, and marble baseboards, in addition to unique decorative details. Colorful floor tiles from Minton, Hollins & Company of England were used throughout to enliven spaces and add pattern. Accompanying this architectural grandeur, ventilation, heating, water closets, and gas lighting provided valuable comfort to the occupants.

Natural light floods S-117 through the four generously proportioned windows. Today, the corner room’s windows offer views north to Union Station and east to the Supreme Court building. Ornamental bands of stylized leaves decorate the arched cast-iron window and door frames. The room retains its original marble mantel, crowned by a gilded Neoclassical Revival mirror whose...
The mantel and mirror in S-117

The frame features a prominent cornice with bead-and-reel and egg-and-dart ornaments, fluted pilasters, and acanthus leaves that delicately wrap around the corners of the frame.

Aside from the windows, the room is lit by a central crystal chandelier, four inverted crystal cone pendant lights, and eight sconces installed on the window frames. The pendant lights were added in the 1960s and were designed to integrate with the committee room’s existing 19th-century chandelier and sconces. While not the original light fixtures, the chandelier and sconces are early 20th-century pieces reminiscent of new, vibrant chandeliers that were appearing in Senate spaces at the time. The newly constructed 1909 Senate Russell Office Building’s committee rooms sparkled with silver and crystal fixtures, and in 1910 seven striking crystal chandeliers acquired from the White House were installed in the Capitol. These bright, vivid lights offered a welcome contrast to the darker, dull metal ones that hung in most extension spaces, so silver and crystal chandeliers were purchased for many Capitol offices.

The painted decoration on the ceiling in S-117 emphasizes the architectural vault lines and dates from the turn of the 20th century, when a comprehensive decorative campaign for the Capitol was implemented. While some of the colors have
changed with repainting over the years, the style of ornamentation holds true to the original design.

Room S-116, which was first used as the folding room, was probably very plainly decorated. Initially there were not even fireplaces. The two existing marble mantels were presumably installed in 1872 when the prominent Committee on Patents was assigned the room. The Rococo Revival mirrors that rest on the mantels feature a central cartouche, scrolls, stylized leaves, and flowers. The decorative painted banding on the ceiling in S-116 probably dates to sometime after 1900 and is documented in images as early as 1946. The impressive, obround-shaped committee table fills the room and accommodates every current member of the committee. Each senator has an assigned seat, marked by an engraved brass nameplate. A bronze bust of Cordell Hull by George Conlon oversees the activities of the Foreign Relations Committee from the central window well. Hull’s commemoration in the Foreign Relations Committee Room is fitting given his work as secretary of state, promoting peace and international alliances and establishing the United Nations.