

The Perils of the Cold War Americans, like much of the world, lived under the threat of nuclear warfare during the tense years of the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union. This 1951 civil defense poster, with the message “It *can* happen Here,” suggests that Americans should be prepared for such a dire outcome.

Containment in a Divided Global Order

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Cold War Liberalism

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Identify the Big Idea

In the first two decades of the Cold War, how did competition on the international stage and a climate of fear at home affect politics, society, and culture in the United States?

In the autumn of 1950, a little-known California congressman running for the Senate named Richard M. Nixon stood before reporters in Los Angeles. His opponent, Helen Gahagan Douglas, was a Hollywood actress and a New Deal Democrat. Nixon told the gathered reporters that Douglas had cast “Communist-leaning” votes and that she was “pink right down to her underwear.” Gahagan’s voting record was not much different from Nixon’s. But tarring her with communism made her seem un-American, and Nixon defeated the “pink lady” (meaning nearly *red*, or communist) with nearly 60 percent of the vote.

A few months earlier, U.S. tanks and planes had arrived in French Indochina. A French colony since the nineteenth century, Indochina (present-day Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia) was home to an independence movement led by Ho Chi Minh and supported by the Soviet Union and China. In the summer of 1950, President Harry S. Truman authorized \$15 million worth of military supplies to aid France, which was fighting Ho’s army to keep possession of its Indochinese empire. “Neither national independence nor democratic evolution exists in any area dominated by Soviet imperialism,” Secretary of State Dean Acheson warned ominously as he announced U.S. support for French imperialism.

Connecting these coincidental historical moments, one domestic and the other international, was a decades-old force in American life that gained renewed strength after World War II: anticommunism. The events in Los Angeles and Vietnam, however different

on the surface, were part of the Cold War: the global geopolitical struggle between the capitalist, democratic United States and the communist, authoritarian Soviet Union. Beginning in Europe as World War II ended and extending to Asia, Latin America, the Middle East, and Africa by the mid-1950s, the Cold War reshaped international relations and dominated global politics for more than forty years (Interpretations).

In the United States, the Cold War fostered suspicion of “subversives” in government, education, and the media. The arms race that developed between the two superpowers prompted Congress to boost military expenditures. The resulting military-industrial complex enhanced the power of the corporations that built planes, munitions, and electronic devices. In politics, the Cold War stifled liberal initiatives as the New Deal coalition tried to advance its domestic agenda in the shadow of anticommunism. In these ways, the line between the international and the domestic blurred — and that blurred line was another enduring legacy of the Cold War.

Chapter Chronology

As you read, ask yourself why this chapter begins and ends with these dates and identify the links among related events.

1945	▶ End of World War II; Yalta and Potsdam conferences ▶ Senate approves U.S. participation in United Nations
1946	▶ George F. Kennan outlines containment policy ▶ U.S. sides with French in war between French and Vietminh over control of Vietnam
1947	▶ Truman Doctrine ▶ House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) investigates film industry
1948	▶ Communist coup in Czechoslovakia ▶ Marshall Plan aids economic recovery in Europe ▶ State of Israel created ▶ Stalin blockades West Berlin; Berlin Airlift begins
1949	▶ North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) founded ▶ Soviet Union detonates atomic bomb ▶ Mao Zedong establishes People's Republic of China
1950–1953	▶ Korean War
1950	▶ NSC-68 leads to nuclear buildup ▶ Joseph McCarthy announces “list” of Communists in government
1952	▶ Dwight D. Eisenhower elected president
1954	▶ Army-McCarthy hearings on army subversion ▶ Geneva Accords partition Vietnam

1956	▶ Nikita Khrushchev emerges as Stalin's successor ▶ Suez Canal crisis
1960	▶ John F. Kennedy elected president
1961	▶ Kennedy orders the first contingent of Special Forces ("Green Berets") to Vietnam
1963	▶ Ngo Dinh Diem assassinated in South Vietnam

Containment in a Divided Global Order

The Cold War began on the heels of World War II and ended in 1991 with the dissolution of the Soviet Union. While it lasted, this conflict placed two far-reaching questions at the center of global history: Would capitalism or communism shape the nations of Europe and Asia? And how would the European colonies in Asia, the Middle East, and Africa gain their independence and take their places on the world stage? Cold War rivalry framed the possible answers to both questions as it drew the United States into a prolonged engagement with world affairs unprecedented in the nation's history.

Origins of the Cold War

World War II set the basic conditions for the Cold War. With Germany and Japan defeated and Britain and France weakened by years of war, only two geopolitical powers remained standing in 1945. Even had nothing divided them, the United States and the Soviet Union would have jostled each other as they moved to fill the postwar power vacuum. But, of course, the two countries were divided — by geography, history, ideology, and strategic interest. Little united them other than their commitment to defeating the Axis powers. President Franklin Roosevelt understood that maintaining the U.S.-Soviet alliance was essential for postwar global stability. But he also believed that permanent peace and long-term U.S. interests depended on the Wilsonian principles of collective security, self-determination, and free trade ([Chapter 20](#)).

Yalta

At the [Yalta Conference](#) of February 1945, Wilsonian principles yielded to U.S.-Soviet power realities. As Allied forces neared victory in Europe and advanced toward Japan in the Pacific, Roosevelt, Churchill, and Stalin met in Yalta, a resort on the Black Sea in southern Ukraine. Roosevelt focused on maintaining Allied unity and securing Joseph Stalin's commitment to enter the war against Japan. But the fate of Eastern Europe divided the Big Three. Stalin insisted that Russian national security required pro-Soviet governments in Eastern European nations. Roosevelt pressed for an agreement,

the “Declaration on Liberated Europe,” that guaranteed self-determination and democratic elections in Poland and neighboring countries, such as Romania and Hungary. However, given the presence of Soviet troops in those nations, FDR had to accept a lesser pledge from Stalin: to hold “free and unfettered elections” at a future time. The three leaders also formalized their commitment to divide Germany into four zones, each controlled by one of the four Allied powers (including France), and to similarly partition the capital city, Berlin, which was located in the Soviet zone.

At Yalta, the Big Three also agreed to establish an international body to replace the discredited League of Nations. Based on plans drawn up at the 1944 Dumbarton Oaks conference in Washington, D.C., the new organization, to be known as the **United Nations**, would have both a General Assembly, in which all nations would be represented, and a Security Council composed of the five major Allied powers — the United States, Britain, France, China, and the Soviet Union — and seven other nations elected on a rotating basis. The Big Three determined that the five permanent members of the Security Council should have veto power over decisions of the General Assembly. They announced that the United Nations would convene for the first time in San Francisco on April 25, 1945.

East Meets West Soviet soldiers celebrate with U.S. soldiers from the First Army near the Elbe River in Torgau, Germany, on April 25, 1945. Soviet and American forces had converged on Hitler’s Germany from opposite directions, finally meeting in Torgau. The meeting symbolized the Grand Alliance, in which U.S.-Soviet cooperation was essential, that secured victory over the Axis Powers in World War II. However, as these ordinary infantrymen optimistically toast one another and look forward to the end of fighting, Germany was already being divided in two: between a western sector held by the Allies and an eastern sector held by the Soviet Union. Within a few years, the division of Germany between “East” and “West” would stand at the center of a split in the entire European continent at the dawn of the Cold War.

Potsdam

Following the Yalta Conference, developments over the ensuing year further hardened relations between the Soviets on one side and the Americans and British on the other. At the **Potsdam Conference** outside Berlin in July 1945, Harry Truman replaced the deceased Roosevelt. Inexperienced in world affairs and thrown into enormously complicated negotiations, Truman’s instinct was to stand up to Stalin. “Unless Russia is faced with an iron fist and strong language,” he said, “another war is in the making.” But Truman was in no position to shape events in Eastern Europe, where Soviet-imposed governments in Poland, Hungary, and Romania were backed by the Red Army and could not be eliminated by Truman’s bluster. In Poland and Romania, in particular, Stalin was determined to establish communist governments, punish wartime Nazi col-

laborators, and win boundary concessions that augmented Soviet territory.

Yalta and Potsdam thus set the stage for communist rule to descend over Eastern Europe. The elections called for at Yalta eventually took place in Finland, Hungary, Bulgaria, and Czechoslovakia, with varying degrees of democratic openness. Nevertheless, Stalin got the client regimes he desired in those countries and would soon exert near-complete control over their governments. Stalin's unwillingness to honor self-determination for nations in Eastern Europe was, from the American point of view, the precipitating event of the Cold War.

Germany represented the biggest challenge of all. American officials at Potsdam believed that a revived German economy was essential to ensuring the prosperity of democratic regimes throughout Western Europe — and to keeping ordinary Germans from turning again to Nazism. In contrast, Stalin hoped merely to extract reparations from Germany in the form of industrial machines and goods. In exchange for American recognition of a new German-Polish border, Truman and Secretary of State James Byrnes convinced the Soviet leader to accept German reparations only from the Soviet zone, which was largely rural and promised little wealth or German industry to plunder. The Yalta and Potsdam agreements paved the way for the division of Germany into East and West ([Map 24.1](#)).



MAP 24.1 Cold War in Europe, 1955

This map vividly shows the Cold War division of Europe. The NATO countries (colored green) are allies of the United States; the Warsaw Pact countries (in purple) are allied to the USSR. In 1955, West Germany had just been admitted to NATO, completing Europe's stabilization into two rival camps. But Berlin remained divided, and one can see from its location deep in East Germany why the former capital was always a flash point in Cold War controversies.

Yalta and Potsdam demonstrated that in private negotiations the United States and the Soviet Union had starkly different objectives. Public utterances only intensified those differences. In February 1946, Stalin delivered a speech in which he insisted that, according to Marxist-Leninist principles, “the unevenness of development of the capitalist countries” was likely to produce “violent disturbance” and even another war. He seemed to blame any future war on the capitalist West. Churchill responded in kind a month later. While visiting Truman in Missouri to be honored for his wartime leadership, Churchill accused Stalin of raising an “iron curtain” around Eastern Europe and allowing “police government” to rule its people. He went further, claiming that “a fraternal association of English-speaking peoples,” and not Russians, ought to set the terms of the postwar world.

The cities and fields of Europe had thus barely ceased to run with the blood of World War II before they were menaced again by the tense standoff between the Soviet Union and the United States. With Stalin intent on establishing client states in Eastern Europe and the United States equally intent on reviving Germany and ensuring collective security throughout Europe, the points of agreement were few and far between. Among the Allies, anxiety about a Nazi victory in World War II had been quickly replaced by fear of a potentially more cataclysmic war with the Soviet Union.

Why Was There a Cold War?

During World War II, the United States and the Soviet Union forged a “Grand Alliance” with Great Britain to defeat Hitler’s Nazi Germany. In the wake of victory, however, this marriage of necessity quickly dissolved, leaving the Americans and Soviets to face each other in a Cold War that lasted until the dissolution of the Soviet Union (USSR) in 1991. For decades, these superpowers viewed each other’s intentions with suspicion and, while avoiding direct and open conflict, waged proxy wars around the globe to advance the security interests they believed the other threatened. But what caused the Cold War, and why was there such hostility between the two nations?

Historians continue to debate these questions. Stephen Ambrose’s account of postwar America’s rise to global dominance offers a traditional explanation of the Cold War. His argument differs from that of Odd Westad, who shifts the geographical focus of the Cold War rivalry from Europe to the Global South.

STEPHEN AMBROSE

SOURCE: Stephen E. Ambrose, *Rise to Globalism: American Foreign Policy Since 1938* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1971), 102–103.

Whatever date is chosen to mark the declaration of [the Cold War], it is certain that the issue that sparked it, gave it life and shaped its early course, was East Europe. For centuries East and West have struggled . . . for control of the huge area running from the Baltic to the Balkans, an area rich in human and industrial resources and one that is strategically vital to both sides. . . . Neither the West nor the East has been willing to allow East Europe to be strong, independent, or neutral. Russia and the West each have wanted the area to be aligned with them and open for their own economic exploitation. . . . [During World War II], the West made no significant contribution to the liberation of East Europe and when the end came the Red Army was in sole possession of the area. . . . This crucial result of World War II destroyed the Grand Alliance and gave birth to the Cold War.

ODD WESTAD

SOURCE: Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 3–5.

[T]he argument that the Cold War conceptually and analytically does not belong in the south [i.e., Africa, South Asia, and Latin America] is wrong. . . . US and Soviet interventionisms . . . shaped both the international and the domestic framework within which political, social, and cultural changes in Third World countries took place. . . . The United States and the Soviet Union were driven to intervene in the Third World by the ideologies inherent in their politics. . . . Washington and Moscow needed to change the world in order to prove the universal applicability of their ideologies, and the elites of the newly independent [Third World] states proved fertile ground for their competition. . . . [B]oth powers saw themselves as assisting natural trends in world history and as defending their own security at the same time. Both saw a specific mission in and for the Third World that only their own state could carry out and which without their involvement would flounder in local hands.

The Containment Strategy

In the late 1940s, American officials developed a clear strategy toward the Soviet Union that would become known as **containment**. Convinced that the USSR was methodically expanding its reach, the United States would counter by limiting Soviet influence to Eastern Europe while reconstituting democratic governments in Western Europe. In 1946–1947, three specific issues worried Truman and his advisors. First, the Soviet Union was pressing Iran for access to oil and Turkey for access to the Mediterranean. Second, a civil war was roiling in Greece, between monarchists backed by England and insurgents supported by the Greek and Yugoslavian Communist parties. Third, as European nations suffered through terrible privation in 1946 and 1947, Communist parties gained strength, particularly in France and Italy. All three developments, as seen from the United States, threatened to expand the influence of the Soviet Union beyond Eastern Europe.

Toward an Uneasy Peace

In this anxious context, the strategy of containment emerged in a series of incremental steps between 1946 and 1949. In February 1946, American diplomat George F. Kennan first proposed the idea in an 8,000-word cable — a confidential message within the U.S. State Department — from his post at the U.S. embassy in Moscow. Kennan argued that the Soviet Union was an “Oriental despotism” and that communism was merely the “fig leaf” justifying Soviet aggression. A year after writing this cable (dubbed the Long Telegram), he published an influential *Foreign Affairs* article, arguing that the West’s only recourse was to meet the Soviets “with unalterable counterforce at every point where they show signs of encroaching upon the interests of a peaceful and stable world.” Kennan called for “long-term, patient but firm and vigilant containment of Russian expansive tendencies.” *Containment*, the key word, came to define America’s evolving strategic stance toward the Soviet Union.



To see an excerpt from the Long Telegram, along with other primary sources from this period, see ***Sources for America’s History***.

Kennan contended that the Soviet system was unstable and would eventually collapse. Containment would work, he reasoned, as long as the United States and its allies opposed Soviet expansion anywhere in the world. Kennan’s attentive readers included Stalin himself, who quickly obtained a copy of the classified Long Telegram. The Soviet leader saw the United States as an imperialist aggressor determined to replace Great Britain as the world’s dominant capitalist power. Just as Kennan thought that the Soviet system was despotic and unsustainable, Stalin believed that the West suffered from its own fatal weaknesses. Neither side completely understood or trusted the other, and each projected its worst fears onto the other.

In fact, Britain’s influence in the world was declining. Exhausted by the war, facing budget deficits and a collapsing economy at home, and confronted with growing independence movements throughout its empire, particularly in India led by Mohandas Gandhi, Britain was waning as a global power. “The reins of world leadership are fast

slipping from Britain's competent but now very weak hands," read a U.S. State Department report. "These reins will be picked up either by the United States or by Russia." The United States was wedded to the notion — dating to the Wilson administration — that communism and capitalism were incompatible on the world stage. With Britain faltering, American officials saw little choice but to fill its shoes.

It did not take long for the reality of Britain's decline to resonate across the Atlantic. In February 1947, London informed Washington that it could no longer afford to support the anticommunists in the Greek civil war. Truman worried that a communist victory in Greece would lead to Soviet domination of the eastern Mediterranean and embolden Communist parties in France and Italy. In response, the president announced what became known as the **Truman Doctrine**. In a speech on March 12, he asserted an American responsibility "to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures." To that end, Truman proposed large-scale assistance for Greece and Turkey (then involved in a dispute with the Soviet Union over the Dardanelles, a strait connecting the Aegean Sea and the Sea of Marmara). "If we falter in our leadership, we may endanger the peace of the world," Truman declared (*Thinking Like a Historian*). Congress quickly approved Truman's request for \$300 million in aid to Greece and \$100 million for Turkey.

Thinking Like a Historian

The Global Cold War

Until 1950, the U.S. policy of containment was confined to economic measures, such as financial assistance to Greece and Turkey and the Marshall Plan, and focused on Europe. That changed between 1950 and 1954. In those years, containment became militarized, and its scope was expanded to include Asia and Latin America. What had begun as a limited policy to contain Soviet influence in war-torn Europe had by the mid-1950s become a global campaign against communism and social revolution.

1. **President Harry S. Truman, address before joint session of Congress, March 12, 1947.** *Known as the Truman Doctrine, this speech outlined Truman's plan to give large-scale assistance to Greece and Turkey as part of a broader anticommunist policy.*

To ensure the peaceful development of nations, free from coercion, the United States has taken a leading part in establishing the United Nations. The United Nations is designed to make possible lasting freedom and independence for all its members. We shall not realize our objectives, however, unless we are willing to help free peoples to maintain their free institutions and their national integrity against aggressive movements that seek to impose upon them totalitarian regimes. . . .

At the present moment in world history nearly every nation must choose between alternative ways of life. The choice is too often not a free one.

One way of life is based upon the will of the majority, and is distinguished by free

institutions, representative government, free elections, guarantees of individual liberty, freedom of speech and religion, and freedom from political oppression.

The second way of life is based upon the will of a minority forcibly imposed upon the majority. It relies upon terror and oppression, a controlled press and radio; fixed elections, and the suppression of personal freedoms.

I believe that it must be the policy of the United States to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures.

I believe that we must assist free peoples to work out their own destinies in their own way.

I believe that our help should be primarily through economic and financial aid which is essential to economic stability and orderly political processes.

2. Syngman Rhee, president of South Korea, criticizing U.S. policy in 1950.

The Korean War, 1950–1953, represented the militarization of the Truman Doctrine.

A few days ago one American friend said that if the U.S. gave weapons to South Korea, she feared that South Korea would invade North Korea. This is a useless worry of some Americans, who do not know South Korea. Our present war is not a Cold War, but a real shooting war. Our troops will take all possible counter-measures. . . . In South Korea the U.S. has one foot in South Korea and one foot outside so that in case of an unfavorable situation it could pull out of the country. I daresay that if the U.S. wants to aid our country, it should not be only lip-service.

3. Secretary of State Dean Acheson's testimony before the Senate Armed Forces and Foreign Relations Committee, 1951.

The attack on Korea was . . . a challenge to the whole system of collective security, not only in the Far East, but everywhere in the world. It was a threat to all nations newly arrived at independence. . . .

This was a test which would decide whether our collective security system would survive or would crumble. It would determine whether other nations would be intimidated by this show of force. . . .

As a people we condemn aggression of any kind. We reject appeasement of any kind. If we stood with our arms folded while Korea was swallowed up, it would have meant abandoning our principles, and it would have meant the defeat of the collective security system on which our own safety ultimately depends.

4. Shigeru Yoshida, prime minister of Japan, speech before the Japanese Diet (parliament), July 14, 1950.

It is heartening . . . that America and so many members of the United Nations have gone to the rescue of an invaded country regardless of the heavy sacrifices involved. In case a war breaks out on an extensive scale how would Japan's security be preserved [since we are disarmed]? . . . This has been hotly discussed. However, the measures taken by the United Nations have done much to stabilize our people's minds.

5. John Foster Dulles, secretary of state (1953–1959), June 30, 1954, radio and television address to the American people. In 1951, Jacobo Arbenz Guzmán was elected president of Guatemala. Arbenz Guzmán pursued reform policies that threatened large landholders, including the United Fruit Company. In 1954, the United States CIA engineered a coup that overthrew Arbenz Guzmán and replaced him with Carlos Castillo Armas, a colonel in the Guatemalan military .

Tonight I should like to speak with you about Guatemala. It is the scene of dramatic events. They expose the evil purpose of the Kremlin to destroy the inter-American system, and they test the ability of the American States to maintain the peaceful integrity of

the hemisphere.

For several years international communism has been probing here and there for nesting places in the Americas. It finally chose Guatemala as a spot which it could turn into an official base from which to breed subversion which would extend to other American Republics.

This intrusion of Soviet despotism was, of course, a direct challenge to our Monroe Doctrine, the first and most fundamental of our foreign policies.

6. Guillermo Toriello, Guatemalan foreign minister, speech to delegates at the Tenth Inter-American Conference of the Organization of American States in Caracas, Venezuela, March 5, 1954.

What is the real and effective reason for describing our government as communist?

From what sources comes the accusation that we threaten continental solidarity and security? Why do they [United States] wish to intervene in Guatemala?

The answers are simple and evident. The plan of national liberation being carried out with firmness by my government has necessarily affected the privileges of the foreign enterprises that are impeding the progress and the economic development of the country. . . . With construction of publically owned ports and docks, we are putting an end to the monopoly of the United Fruit Company. . . .

They wanted to find a ready expedient to maintain the economic dependence of the American Republics and suppress the legitimate desires of their peoples, cataloguing as "communism" every manifestation of nationalism or economic independence, any desire for social progress, any intellectual curiosity, and any interest in progressive and liberal reforms.

7. Herblock cartoon from the *Washington Post*, February 11, 1962. Many Latin American countries were beset by a wide gap between a small wealthy elite and the mass of ordinary, much poorer citizens. American officials worried that this made social revolution an attractive alternative for those at the bottom.



A 1962 Herblock Cartoon, © The Herb Block Foundation

Soviet expansionism was but one part of a larger story. Europe was sliding into economic chaos. Already devastated by the war, in 1947 the continent suffered the worst winter in memory. People were starving, wages were stagnant, and the consumer market had collapsed. For both humanitarian and practical reasons, Truman's advisors believed something had to be done. A global depression might ensue if the European economy, the largest foreign market for American goods, did not recover. Worse, unemployed and dispirited Western Europeans might fill the ranks of the Communist Party, threatening political stability. Secretary of State George C. Marshall came up with a remarkable proposal: a massive infusion of American capital to rebuild the European economy. In a June 1947 speech, Marshall urged the nations of Europe to work out a comprehensive recovery program based on U.S. aid.

This pledge of financial assistance required approval by Congress, where the plan ran into opposition. Republicans castigated the **Marshall Plan** as a huge "international WPA." But in the midst of the congressional stalemate, on February 25, 1948, Stalin supported a communist-led coup in Czechoslovakia. Congress rallied and voted overwhelmingly to approve the Marshall Plan. Over the next four years, the United States contributed nearly \$13 billion to a highly successful recovery effort that benefitted both Western Europe and the United States. European industrial production increased by 64 percent, and the appeal of Communist parties waned in the West. Markets for American goods grew stronger and fostered economic interdependence between Europe and the United States. Notably, however, the Marshall Plan intensified Cold War tensions. U.S. officials invited the Soviets to participate but insisted on restrictions that virtually guaranteed Stalin's refusal. An embittered Stalin rejected participation and ordered Soviet client states to do so as well.

Place Events in Context

Why did the United States enact the Marshall Plan, and how did the program illustrate America's new role in the world?

East and West in the New Europe

The flash point for a hot war remained Germany, the most important industrial economy and the key strategic nation in Europe. When no agreement could be reached with the Soviet Union to unify the four zones of occupation into a single state, the Western allies consolidated their three zones in 1947. They then prepared to establish an independent federal German republic. Marshall Plan funds would jump-start economic recovery. Some of those funds were slated for West Berlin, in hopes of making the city a capitalist showplace 100 miles inside the Soviet zone.

Stung by the West's intention to create a German republic, in June 1948 Stalin blockaded all traffic to West Berlin. Instead of yielding, as Stalin had expected, Truman and the British were resolute. "We are going to stay, period," Truman said plainly. Over the next year, American and British pilots improvised the Berlin Airlift, which flew 2.5 million tons of food and fuel into the Western zones of the city — nearly a ton for each resident. General Lucius D. Clay, the American commander in Berlin, was nervous and on edge, "drawn as tight as a steel spring," according to U.S. officials. But after a prolonged stalemate, Stalin backed down: on May 12, 1949, he lifted the blockade. Until the Cuban missile crisis in 1962, the Berlin crisis was the closest the two sides came to actual war, and West Berlin became a symbol of resistance to communism.

The Berlin Airlift For 321 days U.S. planes like this one flew missions to bring food and other supplies to Berlin after the Soviet Union had blocked all surface routes into the former German capital. The blockade was finally lifted on May 12, 1949, after the Soviets conceded that it had been a failure.

The crisis in Berlin persuaded Western European nations to forge a collective security pact with the United States. In April 1949, for the first time since the end of the American Revolution, the United States entered into a peacetime military alliance, the **North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)**. Under the NATO pact, twelve nations — Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, Great Britain, Iceland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, and the United States — agreed that “an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all.” In May 1949, those nations also agreed to the creation of the Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany), which eventually joined NATO in 1955. In response, the Soviet Union established the German Democratic Republic (East Germany); the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (COMECON); and, in 1955, the **Warsaw Pact**, a military alliance for Eastern Europe that included Albania, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Hungary, Poland, Romania, and the Soviet Union. In these parallel steps, the two superpowers formalized the Cold War through a massive division of the continent.

By the early 1950s, West and East were the stark markers of the new Europe. As Churchill had observed in 1946, the line dividing the two stretched “from Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic,” cutting off tens of millions of Eastern Europeans from the rest of the continent. Stalin’s tactics had often been ruthless, but they were not without reason. The Soviet Union acted out of the sort of self-interest that had long defined powerful nations — ensuring a defensive perimeter of allies, seeking access to raw materials, and pressing the advantage that victory in war allowed.

NSC-68

Atomic developments, too, played a critical role in the emergence of the Cold War. As the sole nuclear power at the end of World War II, the United States entertained the possibility of international control of nuclear technology but did not wish to lose its advantage over the Soviet Union. When the American Bernard Baruch proposed United Nations oversight of atomic energy in 1946, for instance, the plan assured the United States of near-total control of the technology, which further increased Cold War tensions. America’s brief tenure as sole nuclear power ended in September 1949, however, when the Soviet Union detonated an atomic bomb. Truman then turned to the U.S. National Security Council (NSC), established by the National Security Act of 1947, for a strategic reassessment.

In April 1950, the NSC delivered its report, known as **NSC-68**. Bristling with alarmist rhetoric, the document marked a decisive turning point in the U.S. approach to the Cold War. The report’s authors described the Soviet Union not as a typical great power but as one with a “fanatic faith” that seeks to “impose its absolute authority.” Going beyond even the stern language used by George Kennan, NSC-68 cast Soviet ambitions as nothing short of “the domination of the Eurasian landmass.”

To prevent that outcome, the report proposed “a bold and massive program of rebuilding the West’s defensive potential to surpass that of the Soviet world” (America in Global Context). This included the development of a hydrogen bomb, a thermonuclear device that would be a thousand times more destructive than the atomic bombs dropped on Japan, as well as dramatic increases in conventional military forces. Critically, NSC-68 called for Americans to pay higher taxes to support the new military program and to accept whatever sacrifices were necessary to achieve national unity of purpose against the Soviet enemy. Many historians see the report as having “militarized” the American approach to the Cold War, which had to that point relied largely on economic measures such as aid to Greece and the Marshall Plan. Truman was reluctant to commit to a major defense buildup, fearing that it would overburden the national budget. But shortly after NSC-68 was completed, events in Asia led him to reverse course.

Containment in Asia

As with Germany, American officials believed at the conclusion of World War II that restoring Japan’s economy, while limiting its military influence, would ensure prosperity and contain communism in East Asia. After dismantling Japan’s military, American occupation forces under General Douglas MacArthur drafted a democratic constitution and paved the way for the restoration of Japanese sovereignty in 1951. Considering the scorched-earth war that had just ended, this was a remarkable achievement, thanks partly to the imperious MacArthur but mainly to the Japanese, who embraced peace and accepted U.S. military protection. However, events on the mainland of Asia proved much more difficult for the United States to shape to its advantage.

Civil War in China

A civil war had been raging in China since the 1930s as Communist forces led by Mao Zedong (Mao Tse-tung) fought Nationalist forces under Jiang Jieshi (Chiang Kai-shek). Fearing a Communist victory, between 1945 and 1949 the United States provided \$2 billion to Jiang’s army. Pressing Truman to “save” China, conservative Republican Ohio senator Robert A. Taft predicted that “the Far East is ultimately even more important to our future peace than is Europe.” By 1949, Mao’s forces held the advantage. Truman reasoned that to save Jiang, the United States would have to intervene militarily. Unwilling to do so, he cut off aid and left the Nationalists to their fate. The People’s Republic of China was formally established under Mao on October 1, 1949, and the remnants of Jiang’s forces fled to Taiwan.

Truman expected Mao to take an independent line, as the Communist leader Tito had just done in Yugoslavia. The new Chinese leader, however, aligned himself with the Soviet Union, partly out of fear that the United States would re-arm the Nationalists and invade the mainland. As attitudes hardened, many Americans viewed Mao's success as a defeat for the United States. The pro-Nationalist "China lobby" held Truman's State Department responsible for the "loss" of China. Sensitive to these charges, the Truman administration refused to recognize "Red China" and blocked China's admission to the United Nations. But the United States pointedly declined to guarantee Taiwan's independence, and in fact accepted the outcome on the mainland. (Since 1982, however, the United States has recognized Taiwanese sovereignty.)

Communist China Chinese Communists carry placards with pictures of Joseph Stalin, premier of the Soviet Union and self-proclaimed leader of global communism. Under the leadership of General Mao Zedong, the Communist Party of China defeated its rivals in a civil war and founded the People's Republic of China in 1949. Mao's victory meant that from East Germany to the Pacific Ocean, much of the Eurasian landmass (including Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union, and China) was ruled by Communist governments.

The Korean War

The United States took a stronger stance in Korea. Truman and Stalin had agreed at the close of World War II to occupy the Korean peninsula jointly, temporarily dividing the former Japanese colony at the 38th parallel. As tensions rose in Europe, the 38th parallel hardened into a permanent demarcation line. The Soviets supported a Communist government, led by Kim Il Sung, in North Korea; the United States backed a right-wing Nationalist, Syngman Rhee, in South Korea. The two sides had waged low-level war since 1945, and both leaders were spoiling for a more definitive fight. However, neither Kim nor Rhee could launch an all-out offensive without the backing of his sponsor. Washington repeatedly said no, and so did Moscow. But Kim continued to press Stalin to permit him to reunify the nation. Convinced by the North Koreans that victory would be swift, the Soviet leader finally relented in the late spring of 1950.

On June 25, 1950, the North Koreans launched a surprise attack across the 38th parallel ([Map 24.2](#)). Truman immediately asked the UN Security Council to authorize a "police action" against the invaders. The Soviet Union was boycotting the Security Council to protest China's exclusion from the United Nations and therefore could not veto the request. With the Security Council's approval of a "peacekeeping force," Truman ordered U.S. troops to Korea. The rapidly assembled UN army in Korea was overwhelmingly American, with General Douglas MacArthur in command. At first, the North Koreans held a distinct advantage, but MacArthur's surprise amphibious attack at Inchon gave the UN forces control of Seoul, the South Korean capital, and almost all the territory up to the 38th parallel.

The impetuous MacArthur then ordered his troops across the 38th parallel and led them all the way to the Chinese border at the Yalu River. It was a major blunder, certain to draw China into the war. Sure enough, a massive Chinese counterattack forced UN forces into headlong retreat back down the Korean peninsula. Then stalemate set in. With weak public support for the war in the United States, Truman and his advisors decided to work for a negotiated peace. MacArthur disagreed and denounced the Korean stalemate, declaring, “There is no substitute for victory.” On April 11, 1951, Truman relieved MacArthur of his command. Truman’s decision was highly unpopular, especially among conservative Republicans, but he had likely saved the nation from years of costly warfare with China.

The Korean War As a result of President Truman’s 1948 Executive Order 9981, for the first time in the nation’s history all troops in the Korean War served in racially integrated combat units. This photo taken during the Battle of Ch’ongch’on in 1950 shows a sergeant and his men of the 2nd Infantry Division.

Notwithstanding MacArthur’s dismissal, the war dragged on for more than two years. An armistice in July 1953, pushed by the newly elected president, Dwight D. Eisenhower, left Korea divided at the original demarcation line. North Korea remained firmly allied with the Soviet Union; South Korea signed a mutual defense treaty with the United States. It had been the first major proxy war between the Soviet Union and United States, in which they took sides in a civil conflict without directly confronting one another militarily. It would not be the last.

The Korean War had far-reaching consequences. Truman’s decision to commit troops without congressional approval set a precedent for future undeclared wars. His refusal to unleash atomic bombs, even when American forces were reeling under a massive Chinese attack, set ground rules for Cold War conflict. The war also expanded American involvement in Asia, transforming containment into a truly global policy. Finally, the Korean War ended Truman’s resistance to a major military buildup ([Map 24.3](#)). Defense expenditures grew from \$13 billion in 1950, roughly one-third of the federal budget, to \$50 billion in 1953, nearly two-thirds of the budget ([Figure 24.1](#)). American foreign policy had become more global, more militarized, and more expensive. Even in times of peace, the United States now functioned in a state of permanent military mobilization.

The Munich Analogy

Behind much of U.S. foreign policy in the first two decades of the Cold War lay the memory of appeasement ([Chapter 23](#)). The generation of politicians and officials who designed the containment strategy had come of age in the era of Munich, the conference in 1938 at which the Western democracies had appeased Hitler by offering him part of Czechoslovakia, paving the road to World War II. Applying the lessons of Munich, American presidents believed that “appeasing” Stalin (and subsequent Soviet rulers Nikita Khrushchev and Leonid Brezhnev) would have the same result: wider war. Thus in Germany, Greece, and Korea, and later in Iran, Guatemala, and Vietnam, the United States staunchly resisted the Soviets — or what it perceived as Soviet influence. The Munich analogy strengthened the U.S. position in a number of strategic conflicts, particularly over the fate of Germany. But it also drew Americans into armed conflicts — and convinced them to support repressive, right-wing regimes — that compromised, as much as supported, stated American principles.

Cold War Liberalism in Cold War Liberalism

Cold war Liberalism

As president, Harry Truman cast himself in the mold of his predecessor, Franklin Roosevelt, and hoped to seize the possibilities afforded by victory in World War II to expand the New Deal at home. But the crises in postwar Europe and Asia, combined with the swift rise of anticommunism in the United States, forced him to take a different path. In the end, Truman went down in history as a Cold Warrior rather than a New Dealer. The Cold War consensus that he ultimately embraced — the notion that resisting communism at home and abroad represented America’s most important postwar objective — shaped the nation’s life and politics for decades to come.

Truman and the End of Reform

Truman and the Democratic Party of the late 1940s and early 1950s forged what historians call **Cold War liberalism**. They preserved the core programs of the New Deal welfare state, developed the containment policy to oppose Soviet influence throughout the world, and fought so-called subversives at home. But there would be no second act for the New Deal. The Democrats adopted this combination of moderate liberal policies and anticommunism — Cold War liberalism — partly by choice and partly out of necessity. A few high-level espionage scandals and the Communist victories in Eastern Europe and China reenergized the Republican Party, which forced Truman and the Democrats to retreat to what historian Arthur Schlesinger called the “vital center” of American politics. However, Americans on both the progressive left and the conservative right accepted this development only reluctantly. Cold War liberalism was a practical centrist program for a turbulent era. But it would not last.

Organized labor remained a key force in the Democratic Party and played a central role in championing Cold War liberalism. Stronger than ever, union membership swelled to more than 14 million by 1945. Determined to make up for their wartime sacrifices, unionized workers made aggressive demands and mounted major strikes in the automobile, steel, and coal industries after the war, as they had after World War I. Republicans responded. They gained control of the House in a sweeping repudiation of Democrats in 1946 and promptly passed — over Truman’s veto — the **Taft-Hartley Act** (1947), an overhaul of the 1935 National Labor Relations Act.

Taft-Hartley brought changes in procedures and language that, over time, weakened the right of workers to organize and engage in collective bargaining. Unions especially disliked Section 14b, which allowed states to pass “right-to-work” laws prohibiting the union shop. Additionally, the law forced unions to purge communists, who had been among the most successful labor organizers in the 1930s, from their ranks. Trade unions would continue to support the Democratic Party, but the labor movement would not crack the largely non-union South and would not penetrate the many American industries that remained unorganized. In that sense, Taft-Hartley effectively “contained” the labor movement.

Compare and Contrast

Compare the years immediately following World War I ([Chapter 21](#)) and World War II. In what ways were they similar, especially with respect to politics, reform, radicalism, and organized labor?

The 1948 Election

Democrats would have dumped Truman in 1948 had they found a better candidate. But the party fell into disarray. The left wing split off and formed the Progressive Party, nominating Henry A. Wallace, an avid New Dealer whom Truman had fired as secretary of commerce in 1946 because Wallace opposed America’s actions in the Cold War.

A right-wing challenge came from the South. When northern liberals such as Mayor Hubert H. Humphrey of Minneapolis pushed through a strong civil rights platform at the Democratic convention, the southern delegations bolted and, calling themselves Dixiecrats, nominated for president South Carolina governor Strom Thurmond, an ardent supporter of racial segregation. The Republicans meanwhile renominated Thomas E. Dewey, the politically moderate governor of New York who had run a strong campaign against FDR in 1944.

Truman surprised everyone. He launched a strenuous cross-country speaking tour and hammered away at the Republicans for opposing progressive legislation and, in general, for running a “do-nothing” Congress. By combining these issues with attacks on the Soviet menace abroad, Truman began to salvage his troubled campaign. At his rallies, enthusiastic listeners shouted, “Give ’em hell, Harry!” Truman won, receiving 49.6 percent of the vote to Dewey’s 45.1 percent ([Map 24.4](#)).

This remarkable election foreshadowed coming political turmoil. Truman occupied the center of FDR’s sprawling New Deal coalition. On his left were progressives, civil rights advocates, and peace activists critical of the Cold War. On his right were segregationist southerners, who opposed civil rights and were allied with Republicans on many economic and foreign policy issues. In 1948, Truman performed a delicate balancing act, largely retaining the support of Jewish and Catholic voters in the big cities, black voters in the North, and union voters across the country. But Thurmond’s strong showing — he carried four states in the Deep South — demonstrated the fragility of the Democratic coalition and prefigured the revolt of the party’s southern wing in the 1960s. As he tried to manage contending forces in his own party, Truman faced mounting pressure from Republicans to denounce radicals at home and to take a tough stand against the Soviet Union.

The Fair Deal

Despite having to perform a balancing act, Truman and progressive Democrats forged ahead. In 1949, reaching ambitiously to extend the New Deal, Truman proposed the **Fair Deal**: national health insurance, civil rights legislation, aid to education, a housing program, expansion of Social Security, a higher minimum wage, and a new agricultural program. In its attention to civil rights, the Fair Deal reflected the growing influence of African Americans in the Democratic Party. Congress, however, remained a huge stumbling block, and the Fair Deal fared poorly. The same conservative coalition that had blocked Roosevelt’s initiatives in his second term stymied Truman’s as well. Cold War pressure shaped political arguments about domestic social programs, while the nation’s growing paranoia over internal subversion weakened support for bold extensions of the welfare state. Truman’s proposal for national health insurance, for instance, was a popular idea, with strong backing from organized labor. But it was denounced as “socialized medicine” by the American Medical Association and the insurance industry. In the end, the Fair Deal’s only significant breakthrough, other than improvements to the minimum wage and Social Security, was the National Housing Act of 1949, which authorized the construction of 810,000 low-income units.

Red Scare: The Hunt for Communists

Cold War liberalism was premised on the grave domestic threat posed, many believed, by **Red Scare: The Hunt for Communists in Cold War Liberalism** here significant Soviet penetration of the American government? Records opened after the 1991 disintegration of the Soviet Union, including the Venona Papers made available in 1995 by the National Security Agency, indicate that there was. Among American suppliers of information to Moscow were FDR's assistant secretary of the treasury, Harry Dexter White; FDR's administrative aide Laughlin Currie; a strategically placed midlevel group in the State Department; key scientists and technicians working on the Manhattan Project; and several hundred more, some identified only by code name, working in a range of government departments and agencies.

How are we to explain this? Many of these enlistees in the Soviet cause had been bright young New Dealers in the mid-1930s, when the Soviet-backed Popular Front suggested that the lines separating liberalism, progressivism, and communism were permeable ([Chapter 23](#)). At that time, the United States was not at war and never expected to be. And when war did come, the Soviet Union was an American ally. For critics of the informants, however, there remained the time between the Nazi-Soviet Pact and the German invasion of the Soviet Union, a nearly two-year period during which cooperation with the Soviet Union could be seen in a less positive light. More-

over, passing secrets to another country, even a wartime ally, was simply indefensible to many Americans — particularly when it came to atomic secrets. The lines between U.S. and Soviet interests blurred for some; for others, they remained clear and definite.

After World War II, however, most suppliers of information to the Soviets apparently ceased spying. For one thing, the professional apparatus of Soviet spying in the United States was disrupted by American counterintelligence work. For another, most of the well-connected amateur spies moved on to other careers. Historians have thus developed a healthy skepticism that there was much Soviet espionage in the United States after 1947, but this was not how many Americans saw it at the time. Legitimate suspicions and real fears, along with political opportunism, combined to fuel the national Red Scare, which was longer and more far-reaching than the one that followed World War I ([Chapter 21](#)).

Loyalty-Security Program

To insulate his administration against charges of Communist infiltration, Truman issued Executive Order 9835 on March 21, 1947, which created the **Loyalty-Security Program**. The order permitted officials to investigate any employee of the federal government (some 2.5 million people) for “subversive” activities. Representing a profound centralization of power, the order sent shock waves through every federal agency. Truman intended the order to apply principally to actions designed to harm the United States (sabotage, treason, etc.), but it was broad enough to allow anyone to be accused

of subversion for the slightest reason — for marching in a Communist-led demonstration in the 1930s, for instance, or signing a petition endorsing public housing. Along with suspected political subversives, more than a thousand gay men and lesbians were dismissed from federal employment in the 1950s, victims of an obsessive search for anyone deemed “unfit” for government work.

Following Truman’s lead, many state and local governments, universities, political organizations, churches, and businesses undertook their own antsubversion campaigns, which often included loyalty oaths. In the labor movement, charges of Communist domination led to the expulsion of a number of unions by the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) in 1949. Civil rights organizations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the National Urban League also expelled Communists and “fellow travelers,” or Communist sympathizers. Thus the Red Scare spread from the federal government to the farthest reaches of American organizational, economic, and cultural life.

HUAC

The Truman administration had legitimized the vague and malleable concept of “disloyalty.” Others proved willing to stretch the concept even further, beginning with the **House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC)**, which Congressman Martin spark the Red Scare by holding widely publicized hearings on alleged Communist infiltration in the movie industry. A group of writers and directors dubbed the Hollywood Ten went to jail for contempt of Congress after they refused to testify about their past associations. Hundreds of other actors, directors, and writers whose names had been mentioned in the HUAC investigation were unable to get work, victims of an unacknowledged but very real blacklist honored by industry executives.

Other HUAC investigations had greater legitimacy. One that intensified the anti-communist crusade in 1948 involved Alger Hiss, a former New Dealer and State Department official who had accompanied Franklin Roosevelt to Yalta. A former Communist, Whitaker Chambers, claimed that Hiss was a member of a secret Communist cell operating in the government and had passed him classified documents in the 1930s. Hiss denied the allegations, but California Republican congressman Richard Nixon doggedly pursued the case against him. In early 1950, Hiss was found guilty not of spying but of lying to Congress about his Communist affiliations and was sentenced to five years in federal prison. Many Americans doubted at the time that Hiss was a spy. But the Venona transcripts in the 1990s corroborated a great deal of Chambers’s testimony, and though no definitive proof has emerged, many historians now recognize the strong circumstantial evidence against Hiss.

McCarthyism

The meteoric career of Senator Joseph McCarthy of Wisconsin marked first the apex and then the finale of the Red Scare. In February 1950, McCarthy delivered a bomb-

shell during a speech in Wheeling, West Virginia: “I have here in my hand a list of 205 . . . a list of names that were made known to the Secretary of State as being members of the Communist Party and who nevertheless are still working and shaping policy in the State Department.” McCarthy later reduced his numbers, gave different figures in different speeches, and never released any names or proof. But he had gained the attention he sought (Analyzing Voices).

For the next four years, from his position as chair of the Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, McCarthy waged a virulent smear campaign. Critics who disagreed with him exposed themselves to charges of being “soft” on communism. Truman called McCarthy’s charges “slander, lies, [and] character assassination” but could do nothing to curb him. Republicans, for their part, refrained from publicly challenging their most outspoken senator and, on the whole, were content to reap the political benefits. McCarthy’s charges almost always targeted Democrats.

Despite McCarthy’s failure to identify a single Communist in government, several national developments gave his charges credibility with the public. The dramatic 1951 espionage trial of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, followed around the world, fueled McCarthy’s allegations. Convicted of passing atomic secrets to the Soviet Union, the Rosenbergs were executed in 1953. As in the Hiss case, documents released decades later provided some evidence of Julius Rosenberg’s guilt, though not Ethel’s. Their execution nevertheless remains controversial — in part because some felt that anti-Semitism played a role in their sentencing. Also fueling McCarthy’s charges were a series of trials of American Communists between 1949 and 1955 for violation of the 1940 Smith Act, which prohibited Americans from advocating the violent overthrow of the government. Though civil libertarians and two Supreme Court justices vigorously objected, dozens of Communist Party members were convicted. McCarthy was not involved in either the Rosenberg trial or the Smith Act convictions, but these sensational events gave his wild charges some credence.

The Army-McCarthy Hearings These 1954 hearings contributed to the downfall of Senator Joseph McCarthy by exposing his reckless accusations and bullying tactics to the huge television audience that tuned in each day. Some of the most heated exchanges took place between McCarthy (center) and Joseph Welch (seated, left), the lawyer representing the army. When the gentlemanly Welch finally asked, “Have you no sense of decency sir, at long last? Have you left no sense of decency?” he fatally punctured McCarthy’s armor. The audience broke into applause because someone had finally had the courage to stand up to the senator from Wisconsin.

In early 1954, McCarthy overreached by launching an investigation into subversive activities in the U.S. Army. When lengthy hearings — the first of their kind broadcast on the new medium of television — brought McCarthy’s tactics into the nation’s living rooms, support for him plummeted. In December 1954, the Senate voted 67 to 22 to censure McCarthy for unbecoming conduct. He died from an alcohol-related illness three years later at the age of forty-eight, his name forever attached to a period of political repression of which he was only the most flagrant manifestation.

The Politics of Cold War Liberalism

As election day 1952 approached, the nation was embroiled in the tense Cold War with the Soviet Union and fighting a “hot” war in Korea. Though Americans gave the Republicans victory, radical change was not in the offing. The new president, Dwight D. Eisenhower, embraced what his supporters called modern Republicanism, an updated GOP approach that aimed at moderating, not dismantling, the New Deal. Eisenhower Republicans were as much successors of FDR as of Herbert Hoover. Foreign policy revealed a similar continuity. Like their predecessors, Republicans saw the world in Cold War polarities.

Despite Eisenhower’s popularity as the former commander of Allied forces in Europe, divisions in the party persisted. Conservative party activists preferred Robert A. Taft of Ohio, the Republican leader in the Senate who was an outspoken opponent of the New Deal. As a close friend of business, he opposed labor unions. Though an ardent anticommunist, the isolationist-minded Taft criticized Truman’s aggressive containment policy and opposed U.S. participation in NATO. Taft ran for president three times, and though he was never the Republican nominee, he won the loyalty of conservative Americans who saw the welfare state as wasteful spending and international affairs as dangerous foreign entanglements.

In contrast, moderate Republicans looked to Eisenhower and even to more liberal-minded party leaders like Nelson Rockefeller, who supported international initiatives

such as the Marshall Plan and NATO and were willing to tolerate labor unions and the welfare state. Eisenhower was a man without a political past. Believing that democracy required the military to stand aside, he had never voted. Rockefeller, the scion of one of the richest families in America, was a Cold War internationalist. He served in a variety of capacities under Eisenhower, including as an advisor on foreign affairs. Having made his political name, Rockefeller was elected the governor of New York in 1959 and became the de facto leader of the liberal wing of the Republican Party.

For eight years, between 1952 and 1960, Eisenhower steered a precarious course from the middle of the party, with conservative Taft Republicans on one side and liberal Rockefeller Republicans on the other. His popularity temporarily kept the two sides at bay, though more ardent conservatives considered him a closet New Dealer. “Ike,” as he was widely known, proved willing to work with the mostly Democratic-controlled Congresses of those years. Eisenhower signed bills increasing federal outlays for veterans’ benefits, housing, highway construction ([Chapter 25](#)), and Social Security, and he increased the minimum wage from 75 cents an hour to \$1. Like Truman, Eisenhower accepted some government responsibility for the economic security of individuals, part of a broad consensus in American politics in these years.

America Under Eisenhower

The global power realities that had called forth containment guided Eisenhower’s foreign policy. New developments, however, altered the tone of the Cold War. Stalin’s death in March 1953 precipitated an intraparty struggle in the Soviet Union that lasted until 1956, when Nikita Khrushchev emerged as Stalin’s successor. Khrushchev soon startled communists around the world by denouncing Stalin and detailing his crimes and blunders. He also surprised many Americans by calling for “peaceful coexistence” with the West. But the new Soviet leader had his limits, and when Hungarians rose up in 1956 to demand independence from Moscow, Khrushchev crushed the incipient revolution.

With no end to the Cold War in sight, Eisenhower focused on limiting the cost of containment. The president hoped to economize by relying on a nuclear arsenal and deemphasizing expensive conventional forces. Under this **“New Look”** defense policy, the Eisenhower administration stepped up production of the hydrogen bomb and developed long-range bombing capabilities. The Soviets, however, matched the United States weapon for weapon. By 1958, both nations had intercontinental ballistic missiles. When an American nuclear submarine launched an atomic-tipped Polaris missile in 1960, Soviet engineers raced to produce an equivalent weapon. This arms race was another critical feature of the Cold War. American officials believed the best deterrent to Soviet aggression was the threat of an all-out nuclear response by the United States, which was dubbed “massive retaliation” by Secretary of State Dulles.

Although confident in the international arena, Eisenhower started out as a novice in domestic affairs. Doing his best to set a less confrontational tone after the rancorous Truman years, he was reluctant to speak out against Joe McCarthy, and he was not a leader on civil rights. Democrats meanwhile maintained a strong presence in Congress but proved weak in presidential elections in the 1950s. In the two presidential contests of the decade, 1952 and 1956, Eisenhower defeated the admired but politically ineffectual liberal Adlai Stevenson. In the 1952 election, Stevenson was hampered by the unpopularity of the Truman administration. The deadlocked Korean War and a series of scandals that Republicans dubbed “the mess in Washington” combined to give the war-hero general an easy victory. In 1956, Ike won an even more impressive victory over Stevenson, an eloquent and sophisticated spokesman for liberalism but no match for Eisenhower’s popularity with the public.

During Eisenhower’s presidency, new political forces on both the right and the left had begun to stir. But they had not yet fully transformed the party system itself. Particularly at the national level, Democrats and Republicans seemed in broad agreement about the realities of the Cold War and the demands of a modern, industrial economy and welfare state. Indeed, respected commentators in the 1950s declared “the end of ideology” and wondered if the great political clashes that had wracked the 1930s were gone forever. Below the apparent calm of national party politics, however, lay profound differences among Americans over the direction of the nation. Those differences would starkly divide the country in the 1960s and bring an end to the brief and fragile

Cold War consensus ([Chapters 26](#) and [27](#)).

Containment in the Postcolonial World

As the Cold War took shape, the world scene was changing at a furious pace. New nations were emerging across Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, created in the wake of successful anticolonial movements whose origins dated to before World War II. Between 1947 and 1962, the British, French, Dutch, and Belgian empires all but disintegrated in a momentous collapse of European global power. FDR had favored the idea of national self-determination, often to the fury of his British and French allies. He expected emerging democracies to be new partners in an American-led, free-market world system. But colonial revolts produced many independent- or socialist-minded regimes in the so-called Third World, as well. *Third World* was a term that came into usage after World War II to describe developing or ex-colonial nations in Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East that were not aligned with the Western capitalist countries led by the United States or the socialist states of Eastern Europe led by the Soviet Union.

The Cold War and Colonial Independence

Insisting that all nations had to choose sides in the Cold War, the United States drew as many countries as possible into collective security agreements, with the NATO alliance in Europe as a model. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles orchestrated the creation of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), which in 1954 linked the United States and its major European allies with Australia, New Zealand, Pakistan, the Philippines, and Thailand. An extensive system of defense alliances eventually tied the United States to more than forty other countries ([Map 24.5](#)). The United States also sponsored a strategically instrumental alliance between Iraq and Iran, on the southern flank of the Soviet Union.

Despite American rhetoric, the United States was often concerned less with democracy than with stability. The Truman and Eisenhower administrations tended to support governments, no matter how repressive, that were overtly anticommunist. Some of America's staunchest allies — the Philippines, South Korea, Iran, Cuba, South Vietnam, and Nicaragua — were governed by dictatorships or right-wing regimes that lacked broad-based support. Moreover, Eisenhower's secretary of state Dulles often resorted to covert operations against governments that, in his opinion, were too closely aligned with the Soviets.

For these covert tasks, Dulles turned to the newly created (1947) Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), run by his brother, Allen Dulles. When Iran's democratically elected nationalist premier, Mohammad Mossadegh, seized British oil properties in 1953, CIA agents helped depose him and installed the young Mohammad Reza Pahlavi as shah of Iran. Iranian resentment of the coup, followed by twenty-five years of U.S. support for the shah, provided fuel for the 1979 Iranian Revolution ([Chapter 29](#)). In 1954, the CIA also engineered a coup in Guatemala against the democratically elected president, Jacobo Arbenz Guzmán, who had seized land owned by the American-owned United Fruit Company. Arbenz Guzmán offered to pay United Fruit the declared value of the land, but the company rejected the offer and sought help from the U.S. government. Eisenhower specifically approved those CIA efforts and expanded the agency's mandate from gathering intelligence to intervening in the affairs of sovereign states.

Vietnam

But when covert operations failed or proved impractical, the American approach to emerging nations could entangle the United States in deeper, more intractable conflicts. One example was already unfolding on a distant stage, in a small country unknown to most Americans: Vietnam. In August 1945, at the close of World War II, the Japanese occupiers of Vietnam surrendered to China in the north of the country and to Britain in the south. The Vietminh, the nationalist movement that had led the resistance against the Japanese (and the French, prior to 1940), seized control in the north. But their leader, Ho Chi Minh, was a Communist, and this single fact outweighed American and British commitment to self-determination. When France moved to restore its control over the country, the United States and Britain sided with their European ally. President Truman rejected Ho's plea to support the Vietnamese struggle for nationhood, and France rejected Ho's offer of a negotiated independence. Shortly after France returned, in late 1946, the Vietminh resumed their war of national liberation.

Eisenhower picked up where Truman left off. If the French failed, Eisenhower argued, all non-Communist governments in the region would fall like dominoes. This so-called **domino theory** — which represented an extension of the containment doctrine — guided U.S. policy in Southeast Asia for the next twenty years. The United States eventually provided most of the financing for the French war, but money was not enough to defeat the determined Vietminh, who were fighting for the liberation of their country. After a fifty-six-day siege in early 1954, the French were defeated at the huge

fortress of Dien Bien Phu. The result was the 1954 Geneva Accords, which partitioned Vietnam temporarily at the 17th parallel and called for elections within two years to unify the strife-torn nation.

The United States rejected the Geneva Accords and set about undermining them. With the help of the CIA, a pro-American government took power in South Vietnam in June 1954. Ngo Dinh Diem, an anticommunist Catholic living in exile in the United States, returned to Vietnam as premier. The next year, in a rigged election, Diem became president of an independent South Vietnam. Facing certain defeat by the popular Ho Chi Minh, Diem called off the scheduled reunification elections. The Eisenhower administration propped up Diem with an average of \$200 million a year in aid and a contingent of 675 American military advisors. This support was just the beginning.

The Middle East

If Vietnam was still of minor concern, the same could not be said of the Middle East, an area rich in oil and political complexity. The most volatile area was Palestine, populated by Arabs but also historically the ancient land of Israel and coveted by the Zionist movement as a Jewish national homeland. After World War II, many survivors of the Nazi extermination camps resettled in Palestine, which was still controlled by Britain under a World War I mandate. On November 29, 1947, the UN General Assembly voted to partition Palestine between Jewish and Arab sectors. When the British mandate ended in 1948, Palestinian leaders rejected the partition as a violation of their right to self-determination. When Zionist leaders proclaimed the state of Israel, a coalition of

Arab nations known as the Arab League invaded, but Israel survived. Many Palestinians fled or were driven from their homes during the fighting. The Arab defeat left these people permanently stranded in refugee camps. President Truman recognized the new state immediately, which won him crucial support from Jewish voters in the 1948 election but alienated the Arab world.

Southeast of Palestine, Egypt began to assert its presence in the region. Having gained independence from Britain several decades earlier, Egypt remained a monarchy until 1952, when Gamal Abdel Nasser led a military coup that established a constitutional republic. Caught between the Soviet Union and the United States, Nasser sought an independent route: a pan-Arab socialism designed to end the Middle East's colonial relationship with the West. When negotiations with the United States over Nasser's plan to build a massive hydroelectric dam on the Nile broke down in 1956, he nationalized the Suez Canal, which was the lifeline for Western Europe's oil. Britain and France, in alliance with Israel, attacked Egypt and seized the canal. Concerned that the invasion would encourage Egypt to turn to the Soviets for help, Eisenhower urged France and Britain to pull back and applied additional pressure through the UN General Assembly. When the Western nations backed down, however, Egypt reclaimed the Suez Canal and built the Aswan Dam on the Nile with Soviet support. Eisenhower had likely avoided a larger war, but the West lost a potential ally in Nasser.

In early 1957, concerned about Soviet influence in the Middle East, the president announced the **Eisenhower Doctrine**, which stated that American forces would assist any nation in the region that required aid "against overt armed aggression from any nation controlled by International Communism." Invoking the doctrine later that year, Eisenhower helped King Hussein of Jordan put down a Nasser-backed revolt and propped up a pro-American government in Lebanon. The Eisenhower Doctrine was further evidence that the United States had extended the global reach of containment, in this instance accentuated by the strategic objective of protecting the West's access to steady supplies of oil.

John F. Kennedy and the Cold War

Charisma, style, and personality — these, more than platforms and issues, defined a new brand of politics in the early 1960s. This was John F. Kennedy's natural environment. Kennedy, a Harvard alumnus, World War II hero, and senator from Massachusetts, had inherited his love of politics from his grandfathers — colorful, and often ruthless, Irish Catholic politicians in Boston. Ambitious and deeply aware of style, the forty-three-year-old Kennedy made use of his many advantages to become, as novelist Norman Mailer put it, “our leading man.” His one disadvantage — that he was Catholic in a country that had never elected a Catholic president — he masterfully neutralized. And thanks to both media advisors and his youthful attractiveness, Kennedy projected a superb television image.

At heart, Kennedy was a Cold Warrior who had come of age politically in the era of Munich, Yalta, and McCarthyism. He projected an air of idealism, but his years in the Senate (1953–1960) had proved him to be a conventional Cold War politician. Once elected president, Kennedy would shape the nation's foreign policy by drawing both on his ingenuity and on old-style Cold War power politics.

The Election of 1960 and the New Frontier

Kennedy's Republican opponent in the 1960 presidential election, Eisenhower's vice president, Richard Nixon, was a seasoned politician and Cold Warrior himself. The great innovation of the 1960 campaign was a series of four nationally televised debates. Nixon, less photogenic than Kennedy, looked sallow and unshaven under the intense studio lights. Voters who heard the first debate on the radio concluded that Nixon had won, but those who viewed it on television favored Kennedy. Despite the edge Kennedy enjoyed in the debates, he won only the narrowest of electoral victories, receiving 49.7 percent of the popular vote to Nixon's 49.5 percent. Kennedy attracted Catholics, African Americans, and the labor vote; his vice-presidential running mate, Texas senator Lyndon Baines Johnson, helped bring in southern Democrats. Yet only 120,000 votes separated the two candidates, and a shift of a few thousand votes in key states would have reversed the outcome.

Kennedy brought to Washington a cadre of young, ambitious newcomers, including Robert McNamara, a renowned systems analyst and former head of Ford Motor Company, as secretary of defense. A host of trusted advisors and academics flocked to Washington to join the New Frontier — Kennedy's term for the challenges the country faced. Included on the team as attorney general was Kennedy's younger brother Robert, who had made a name as a hard-hitting investigator of organized crime. Relying on an old American trope, Kennedy's New Frontier suggested masculine toughness and adventurism and encouraged Americans to again think of themselves as exploring

uncharted terrain. That terrain proved treacherous, however, as the new administration immediately faced a crisis.

Crises in Cuba and Berlin

In January 1961, the Soviet Union announced that it intended to support “wars of national liberation” wherever in the world they occurred. Kennedy took Soviet premier Khrushchev at his word, especially regarding Cuba, where in 1959 Fidel Castro had overthrown the right-wing dictator Fulgencio Batista and declared a revolution. Determined to keep Cuba out of the Soviet orbit, Kennedy followed through on Eisenhower administration plans to dispatch Cuban exiles to launch an anti-Castro uprising. The invaders, trained by the CIA, were ill-prepared for their task. On landing at Cuba’s **Bay of Pigs** on April 17, 1961, the force of 1,400 was crushed by Castro’s troops. Kennedy prudently rejected CIA pleas for a U.S. air strike. Accepting defeat, Kennedy went before the American people and took full responsibility for the fiasco ([Map 24.6](#)).

Already strained by the Bay of Pigs incident, U.S.-Soviet relations deteriorated further in June 1961 when Khrushchev stopped movement between Communist-controlled East Berlin and the city’s Western sector. Kennedy responded by dispatching 40,000 more troops to Europe. In mid-August, to stop the exodus of East Germans fleeing to the West, the Communist regime began constructing the Berlin Wall, policed by border guards under shoot-to-kill orders. Kennedy again responded, though this time rhetorically, by delivering a speech in Berlin criticizing the wall in June 1963. Until the 12-foot-high concrete barrier came down in 1989, it served as the supreme symbol of the Cold War.

Perhaps the most perilous Cold War confrontation came in October 1962. In a somber televised address on October 22, Kennedy revealed that U.S. reconnaissance planes had spotted Soviet-built bases for intermediate-range ballistic missiles in Cuba. Some of those weapons had already been installed, and more were on the way. Kennedy announced that the United States would impose a “quarantine on all offensive military equipment” bound for Cuba. As the world held its breath waiting to see if the conflict would escalate into war, on October 25 ships carrying Soviet missiles turned back. After a week of tense negotiations, both sides made concessions: Kennedy pledged not to invade Cuba, and Khrushchev promised to dismantle the missile bases. Kennedy also secretly ordered U.S. missiles to be removed from Turkey, at Khrushchev’s insistence. The risk of nuclear war, greater during the **Cuban missile crisis** than at any other time in the Cold War, prompted a slight thaw in U.S.-Soviet relations. As National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy put it, both sides were chastened by “having come so close to the edge.”

Kennedy and the World

Kennedy also launched a series of bold nonmilitary initiatives. One was the **Peace Corps**, which embodied a call to public service put forth in his inaugural address (“Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country”). Thousands of men and women agreed to devote two or more years as volunteers for projects such as teaching English to Filipino schoolchildren or helping African villagers obtain clean water. Exhibiting the idealism of the early 1960s, the Peace Corps was also a low-cost Cold War weapon — and an extension of American “soft power” ([Chapter 21](#)) — intended to show the developing world that there was an alternative to communism. Kennedy championed space exploration, as well. In a 1962 speech, he proposed that the nation commit itself to landing a man on the moon within the decade. The Soviets had already beaten the United States into space with the 1957 *Sputnik* satellite and the 1961 flight of cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin. Capitalizing on America’s fascination with space, Kennedy persuaded Congress to increase funding for the government’s space agency, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), enabling the United States to pull ahead of the Soviet Union. Kennedy’s ambition was realized when U.S. astronauts arrived on the moon in 1969.

Making a Commitment in Vietnam

When Kennedy became president, he inherited Eisenhower’s commitment in Vietnam, which he saw in Cold War terms. But rather than practicing brinksmanship — threatening nuclear war to stop communism — Kennedy sought what at the time seemed a more intelligent and realistic, if nevertheless interventionist, approach. In 1961, he increased military aid to the South Vietnamese and expanded the role of U.S. Special Forces (“Green Berets”), who would train the South Vietnamese army in unconventional, small-group warfare tactics.

South Vietnam’s corrupt and repressive Diem regime, propped up by Eisenhower since 1954, was losing ground in spite of American aid. By 1961, Diem’s opponents, with backing from North Vietnam, had formed a revolutionary movement known as the National Liberation Front (NLF). NLF guerrilla forces — the Vietcong — found allies among peasants alienated by Diem’s “strategic hamlet” program, which had uprooted entire villages and moved villagers into barbed-wire compounds. Furthermore, Buddhists charged Diem, a Catholic, with religious persecution. Starting in May 1963, militant Buddhists staged dramatic demonstrations, including self-immolations (burning to death) recorded by reporters covering the activities of the 16,000 U.S. military personnel then in Vietnam.

The self-immolations, broadcast on television to a shocked global audience, powerfully illustrated the dilemmas of American policy in Vietnam. To ensure a stable southern government and prevent victory for Ho Chi Minh and the North, the United States

had to support Diem's authoritarian regime. But the regime's repression of its political opponents made Diem more unpopular. He was assassinated on November 3, 1963. Whether one supported U.S. involvement in Vietnam or not, the elemental paradox remained unchanged: in its efforts to achieve victory over the North, the United States brought defeat ever closer.

Summary

The Cold War began as a conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union over Eastern Europe and the fate of post-World War II Germany. Early in the conflict, the United States adopted a strategy of containment, which quickly expanded to Asia after China became a communist state under Mao Zedong. The first effect of that expansion was the Korean War, after which, under Dwight D. Eisenhower, containment of communism became America's guiding principle across the developing world — often called the Third World. Cold War tensions relaxed in the late 1950s but erupted again under John F. Kennedy with the Cuban missile crisis, the building of the Berlin Wall, and major increases in American military assistance to South Vietnam. Cold War imperatives between 1945 and the early 1960s meant a major military buildup, a massive nuclear arms race, and unprecedented entanglements across the globe.

On the domestic front, Harry S. Truman started out with high hopes for an expanded New Deal, only to be confounded by resistance from Congress and the competing demands of the Cold War. The greatest Cold War-inspired development was a climate of fear over internal subversion by Communists that gave rise to McCarthyism. Truman's successor, Eisenhower, brought the Republicans back into power. Although personally conservative, Eisenhower actually proved a New Dealer in disguise. When Eisenhower left office and Kennedy became president, it seemed that a "liberal consensus" prevailed, with old-fashioned, *laissez faire* conservatism mostly marginalized in American political life.