

## Cold War Overview

Rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union for control over the postwar world emerged before World War II had even ended. U.S. presidents Franklin D. Roosevelt and Harry S. Truman and Soviet premier Joseph Stalin never really trusted one another, even while working together to defeat the Nazis. This mutual mistrust actually began as far back as 1917, when the United States refused to recognize the new Bolshevik government after the Russian Revolution. Stalin also resented the fact that the United States and Great Britain had not shared nuclear weapons research with the Soviet Union during the war and was unhappy with the countries' initial unwillingness to engage the Germans on a second front in order to take pressure off of the Soviets. Additionally, Stalin was irked by the fact that Truman had offered postwar relief loans to Great Britain but not to the USSR.

Important ideological differences separated the two countries as well, especially during the postwar years, when American foreign policy officials took it upon themselves to spread democracy across the globe. This goal conflicted drastically with the Russian revolutionaries' original desire to overthrow capitalism. Having been invaded by Germany twice in the last fifty years, Soviet leaders also wanted to restructure Europe so that a buffer existed between the Germans and the Soviet border. Both the United States and the USSR believed that their respective survival was at stake, and each was therefore prepared to take any steps to win. As a result, both countries found themselves succumbing to the classic prisoners' dilemma: working together would produce the best result, but with everything to lose, neither side could risk trusting the other.

At the same time, however, both the United States and the USSR did much to prevent the Cold War from escalating, as both countries knew how devastating a nuclear war would be. Truman, for example, kept the Korean War limited by refusing to use nuclear weapons against North Korea and China, aware that doing so would force the USSR to retaliate. President Dwight D. Eisenhower kept his distance from the Hungarian Revolution in 1956, knowing full well that the USSR would not tolerate interference in Eastern Europe. Likewise, the Soviet Union made sacrifices to keep the war "cold" by backing down from the Cuban missile crisis. Many Cold War historians believe that both countries worked hard to keep conflicts limited and used tacit signaling techniques to communicate goals, fears, concerns, intentions, and counteractions.

The Cold War had an enormous impact on the United States politically, socially, and economically. In addition to spawning fear-induced Red hunts and McCarthyism in the late 1940s and early 1950s, the Cold War also shaped U.S. presidents' political agendas. Eisenhower, for example, sought to reduce government spending at home in order to halt what he called "creeping socialism" and to save money for more urgent needs such as defense. Kennedy's New Frontier inspired patriotic fervor and visions of new hope in American youth. Even Eisenhower's farewell warning of a growing military-industrial complex within the United States, which would come to dominate American political thinking, proved to be eerily accurate during the Vietnam War era the following decade. At the same time, federal dollars feeding this complex helped produce one of the greatest economic booms in world history.

The question as to whether the United States or the USSR was more to blame for starting the Cold War has produced heated debate among twentieth-century historians. For years, most historians placed blame squarely on Soviet shoulders and helped perpetuate the notion that Americans wanted merely to expand freedom and democracy. More recent historians, however, have accused President Truman of inciting the Cold War with his acerbic language and public characterization of the Soviet Union as the greatest threat to the free world. Although conflict between the two powers was arguably inevitable, the escalation into a full "hot" war and the attendant threat of nuclear annihilation might have been avoidable.

## Summary of Events

**Postwar Tension** - In many ways, the Cold War began even before the guns fell silent in Germany and in the Pacific in 1945. Suspicion and mistrust had defined U.S.-Soviet relations for decades and resurfaced as soon as the alliance against Adolf Hitler was no longer necessary. Competing ideologies and visions of the postwar world prevented U.S. president **Harry S. Truman** and Soviet premier **Joseph Stalin** from working together.

Stalin intended to destroy Germany's industrial capabilities in order to prevent the country from remilitarizing and wanted Germany to pay outrageous sums in war reparations. Moreover, he wanted to erect pro-Soviet governments throughout Eastern Europe to protect the USSR from any future invasions. Truman, however, wanted exactly the opposite. He believed that only industrialization and democracy in Germany and throughout the continent would ensure postwar stability. Unable to compromise or find common ground, the world's two remaining superpowers inevitably clashed.

**Truman's Postwar Vision** - Truman worked tirelessly to clean up the postwar mess and establish a new international order. He helped create the **World Bank** and the **International Monetary Fund (IMF)** and funded the rebuilding of Japan under General **Douglas MacArthur**. After prosecuting Nazi war criminals at the **Nuremberg trials**, Truman in 1947 also outlined the **Marshall Plan**, which set aside more than \$10 billion for the rebuilding and reindustrialization of Germany. The Marshall Plan was so successful that factories in Western Europe were exceeding their prewar production levels within just a few years.

**Stalin's Postwar Vision** - Although Stalin joined with the United States in founding the **United Nations**, he fought Truman on nearly every other issue. He protested the Marshall Plan as well as the formation of the World Bank and IMF. In defiance, he followed through on his plan to create a buffer between the Soviet Union and Germany by setting up pro-Communist governments in Poland and other Eastern European countries. As a result, the so-called **iron curtain** soon divided East from West in Europe. Stalin also tried unsuccessfully to drive French, British, and American occupation forces from the German city of Berlin by blocking highway and railway access. Determined not to let the city fall, Truman ordered the **Berlin airlift** to drop food and medical supplies for starving Berliners.

**Containment** - The Berlin crisis, as well as the formation of the **Eastern bloc** of Soviet-dominated countries in Eastern Europe, caused foreign policy officials in Washington to believe that the United States needed to check Soviet influence abroad in order to prevent the further spread of Communism. In 1947, Truman incorporated this desire for **containment** into his **Truman Doctrine**, which vowed to support free nations fighting Communism. He and Congress then pledged \$400 million to fighting Communist revolutionaries in Greece and Turkey. In 1949, Truman also convinced the Western European powers to join the **North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)**, so that they might mutually defend themselves against the danger of Soviet invasion. Threatened, the USSR sponsored a similar treaty of its own in Eastern Europe, called the **Warsaw Pact**, in 1955.

**Truman at Home** - In the domestic policy arena, Truman signed the **National Security Act** in 1947 to restructure America's defenses for the new Communist threat. The act reorganized the military under the new office of the **secretary of defense** and the new **Joint Chiefs of Staff**. It also created the **National Security Council** to advise the president on global affairs and the **Central Intelligence Agency** to conduct espionage. Truman's leadership in confronting the Soviet Union and rebuilding Europe convinced Democrats to nominate him again for the 1948 election. His **Fair Deal** domestic policies and support for civil rights, however, divided the Republican Party and nearly cost Truman the election.

**Red Hunts** - Developments in Eastern Europe, the fall of **China** to Communist revolutionaries in 1949, and the Soviet Union's development of nuclear weapons terrified Americans, who feared that Communists would try to infiltrate or attack the United States from within. Congressman **Richard M. Nixon**

and the **House Un-American Activities Committee** led the earliest **Red hunts** for Communists in the government, which culminated with the prosecution of federal employee **Alger Hiss** and the executions of suspected spies **Julius and Ethel Rosenberg**. Truman initially supported these inquiries and even established a **Loyalty Review Board** to assist in the search. He eventually began to express concern, however, that the Red hunts were quickly devolving into witch hunts.

**The Korean War** - Cold War tensions between the United States and the USSR eventually exploded in **Korea** when Soviet-backed North Korea invaded South Korea in 1950. Determined not to let Communism spread in East Asia, Truman quadrupled military spending and ordered General MacArthur to retake the southern half of the peninsula. MacArthur succeeded and then pushed the North Koreans almost up to the Chinese border. Threatened, over a million soldiers from Communist China poured into Korea, forcing MacArthur to retreat back to the **38th parallel**, which had originally divided North Korea from South Korea.

When MacArthur began to criticize Truman publicly for his unwillingness to use nuclear weapons in Korea, Truman was forced to fire his top general for insubordination. United States forces remained entrenched at the 38th parallel for two more years, at the cost of more than 50,000 American lives. Both sides declared a cease-fire only after the new U.S. president, **Dwight D. Eisenhower**, threatened to use nuclear weapons in 1953.

**Postwar Prosperity** - Eisenhower's election in 1952 ushered in an unprecedented era of economic growth and prosperity in the United States. The average national income doubled during the 1950s and then doubled again the following decade, primarily due to continued defense spending and to the 1944 **Montgomery G.I. Bill**, which helped returning veterans buy homes and go back to school. The postwar "**baby boom**" contributed to population growth, while the **Great Migration** of African-Americans to northern cities, "**white flight**" from the cities to the suburbs, and the rush to the **Sun Belt** altered population demographics. By 1960, most American families had a car, a television, and a refrigerator and owned their own home. Popular television **sitcoms** like *Leave It to Beaver* and *Ozzie and Harriet* glamorized suburbia and consumerism.

**Creeping Socialism** - "Ike" Eisenhower had entered the White House determined to block the creation of new social welfare programs, which he called "**creeping socialism**." He did not, however, cut federal funding from existing New Deal programs. In fact, he expanded **Social Security** and the **Federal Housing Administration** and even set aside tens of millions of dollars for the creation of the first **interstates** under the **Federal Highway Act**. Still a conservative, though, Eisenhower refused to endorse the blossoming **civil rights movement** and signed the **Landrum-Griffin Act**, also known as the Labor-Management Reporting and Disclosure Act, in the wake of numerous **AFL-CIO** labor union scandals in the mid-1950s.

**McCarthyism** - First-term Wisconsin Republican senator **Joseph McCarthy**, meanwhile, exploded onto the national political scene in 1950, when he accused more than 200 federal employees of being Communists. Even though McCarthy had no proof to support these claims, Americans supported his endeavors to find more "Soviet agents" hiding in Washington. Thousands of former New Dealers and Red-hunt critics from all walks of life were wrongfully persecuted. McCarthy's influence eventually waned after he humiliated himself during the nationally televised **Amy-McCarthy hearings** in 1954.

**Ike's New Look** - In addition to halting "creeping socialism" at home, Eisenhower also wanted to "**roll back**" Communist advances abroad. Along with Vice President **Richard M. Nixon** and Secretary of State **John Foster Dulles**, Eisenhower devised a **New Look** at foreign policy that emphasized the use of nuclear weapons, rather than conventional weapons and troops, to contain Communism. Eisenhower threatened the USSR with "**massive retaliation**," or nuclear war, against Soviet aggression or the spread of Communism.

Eisenhower also made full use of the newly created **CIA** to help overthrow unfriendly governments in developing countries. He resolved the **Suez crisis** peacefully before it led to war and committed American funds to fighting **Ho Chi Minh's** pro-Communist forces in **Vietnam** after the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu in 1954. The Soviet launch of the Sputnik satellites in 1957 started the **space race**, prompting Eisenhower to create the **National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA)**, and sign the **National Defense Education Act**. In his farewell address in 1961, he warned Americans of the growing **military-industrial complex** that threatened to restrict civil liberties and dominate American foreign policy making.

**Kennedy and the New Frontier** - Facing term limits, Eisenhower endorsed Vice President **Richard Nixon** for the Republican presidential nomination in 1960. Democrats countered with World War II hero and Massachusetts senator **John F. Kennedy**. After a close race, Kennedy defeated Nixon, thanks in large part to the African-American vote and Kennedy's polished performance in the first-ever **televised presidential debates**.

As president, Kennedy pushed for a package of new social welfare spending programs that he called the **New Frontier**. Hoping to inspire a new generation of young Americans, he told them to "ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country." Republicans and conservative southern Democrats, however, blocked most New Frontier legislation in Congress.

**Flexible Response** - Because Eisenhower's threat of "massive retaliation" had proved too stringent and binding, Kennedy and his foreign policy team devised a new doctrine of "**flexible response**" designed to give the president more options to fight Communism.

In addition, Kennedy committed thousands of American troops to South Vietnam to support **Ngo Dinh Diem's** corrupt regime but claimed the troops were merely "military advisors." In Latin America, Kennedy took a different approach, funneling millions of dollars into the **Alliance for Progress** to thwart Communists by ending poverty. Despite the new doctrine, Kennedy was unable to prevent Soviet premier **Nikita Khrushchev** from constructing the **Berlin Wall** in 1961.

**The Cuban Crises** - Kennedy's greatest Cold War challenge came in **Cuba**. Hoping to topple Cuba's new pro-Communist revolutionary leader, **Fidel Castro**, Kennedy authorized the CIA to train and arm a force of more than 1,000 Cuban exiles and sent them to invade Cuba in the spring of 1961. When this **Bay of Pigs invasion** failed embarrassingly, Kennedy authorized several unsuccessful assassination attempts against Castro. Outraged, Castro turned to the USSR for economic aid and protection.

Khrushchev capitalized on the opportunity and placed several nuclear missiles in Cuba. Kennedy consequently blockaded the island nation, pushing the United States and the USSR to the brink of nuclear war. Khrushchev ended the terrifying

**Cuban missile crisis** when he agreed to remove the missiles in exchange for an end to the blockade. Kennedy also removed American missiles from Turkey and agreed to work on reducing Cold War tensions. Tragically, Kennedy was assassinated in late 1963, just as tensions were rising in Vietnam—which would prove to be the next, and most costly, theater of the Cold War.