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The Cold War

I. Introduction

Relations between the United States and the Soviet Union—erstwhile allies—soured soon after World War II. On February 22, 1946, less than a year after the end of the war, the chargé d'affaires of the U.S. embassy in Moscow, George Kennan sent a famously lengthy telegram—literally referred to as the Long Telegram—to the State Department denouncing the Soviet Union. “World communism is like a malignant parasite which feeds only on diseased tissue,” he wrote, and “the steady advance of uneasy Russian nationalism . . . in [the] new guise of international Marxism . . . is more dangerous and insidious than ever before.”¹ There could be no cooperation between the United States and the Soviet Union, Kennan wrote. Instead, the Soviets had to be “contained.” Less than two weeks later, on March 5, former British prime minister Winston Churchill visited President Harry Truman in his home state of Missouri and declared

Test of the tactical nuclear weapon Small Boy at the Nevada Test Site, July 14, 1962. National Nuclear Security Administration.

that Europe had been cut in half, divided by an “iron curtain” that had “descended across the Continent.”² Aggressive anti-Soviet sentiment seized the American government and soon the American people.³

The Cold War was a global political and ideological struggle between capitalist and communist countries, particularly between the two surviving superpowers of the postwar world: the United States and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). “Cold” because it was never a “hot,” direct shooting war between the United States and the Soviet Union, the generations-long, multifaceted rivalry nevertheless bent the world to its whims. Tensions ran highest, perhaps, during the first Cold War, which lasted from the mid-1940s through the mid-1960s, after which followed a period of relaxed tensions and increased communication and cooperation, known by the French term *détente*, until the second Cold War interceded from roughly 1979 until the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. The Cold War reshaped the world and the generations of Americans that lived under its shadow.

II. Political, Economic, and Military Dimensions

The Cold War grew out of a failure to achieve a durable settlement among leaders from the Big Three Allies—the United States, Britain, and the Soviet Union—as they met at Yalta in Russian Crimea and at Potsdam in occupied Germany to shape the postwar order. The Germans had pillaged their way across Eastern Europe, and the Soviets had pillaged their way back. Millions of lives were lost. Stalin considered the newly conquered territory part of a Soviet sphere of influence. With Germany’s defeat imminent, the Allies set terms for unconditional surrender. At the same time, deliberation began over reparations, tribunals, and the nature of an occupation regime that would initially be divided into American, British, French, and Soviet zones. Suspicion and mistrust were already mounting. The political landscape was altered drastically by Franklin Roosevelt’s sudden death in April 1945, just days before the inaugural meeting of the UN. Although Roosevelt was skeptical of Stalin, he always held out hope that the Soviets could be brought into the “Free World.” Truman, like Churchill, had no such illusions. He committed the United States to a hard-line, anti-Soviet approach.⁴

At the Potsdam Conference, held on the outskirts of Berlin from mid-July to early August, the Allies debated the fate of Soviet-occupied Poland. Toward the end of the meeting, the American delegation received

word that Manhattan Project scientists had successfully tested an atomic bomb. On July 24, when Truman told Stalin about this “new weapon of unusual destructive force,” the Soviet leader simply nodded his acknowledgment and said that he hoped the Americans would make “good use” of it.⁵

The Cold War had long roots. The World War II alliance of convenience was not enough to erase decades of mutual suspicions. The Bolshevik Revolution had overthrown the Russian tsarists during World War I. Bolshevik leader Vladimir Lenin urged an immediate worldwide peace that would pave the way for world socialism just as Woodrow Wilson brought the United States into the war with promises of global democracy and free trade. The United States had intervened militarily against the Red Army during the Russian Civil War, and when the Soviet Union was founded in 1922 the United States refused to recognize it. The two powers were brought together only by their common enemy, and without that common enemy, there was little hope for cooperation.⁶

On the eve of American involvement in World War II, on August 14, 1941, Roosevelt and Churchill had issued a joint declaration of goals for postwar peace, known as the Atlantic Charter. An adaptation of Wilson’s Fourteen Points, the Atlantic Charter established the creation of the United Nations. The Soviet Union was among the fifty charter UN member-states and was given one of five seats—alongside the United States, Britain, France, and China—on the select Security Council. The Atlantic Charter also set in motion the planning for a reorganized global economy. The July 1944 UN Financial and Monetary Conference, more popularly known as the Bretton Woods Conference, created the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the forerunner of the World Bank, the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD). The Bretton Woods system was bolstered in 1947 with the addition of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), forerunner of the World Trade Organization (WTO). The Soviets rejected it all.

Many officials on both sides knew that the Soviet-American relationship would dissolve into renewed hostility at the end of the war, and events proved them right. In 1946 alone, the Soviet Union refused to cede parts of occupied Iran, a Soviet defector betrayed a Soviet spy who had worked on the Manhattan Project, and the United States refused Soviet calls to dismantle its nuclear arsenal. In a 1947 article for *Foreign Affairs*—written under the pseudonym “Mr. X”—George Kennan warned that Americans should “continue to regard the Soviet Union as a

rival, not a partner,” since Stalin harbored “no real faith in the possibility of a permanent happy coexistence of the Socialist and capitalist worlds.” He urged U.S. leaders to pursue “a policy of firm containment, designed to confront the Russians.”⁷

Truman, on March 12, 1947, announced \$400 million in aid to Greece and Turkey, where “terrorist activities . . . led by Communists” jeopardized “democratic” governance. With Britain “reducing or liquidating its commitments in several parts of the world, including Greece,” it fell on the United States, Truman said, “to support free peoples . . . resisting attempted subjugation by . . . outside pressures.”⁸ The so-called Truman Doctrine became a cornerstone of the American policy of containment.⁹

In the harsh winter of 1946–1947, famine loomed in much of continental Europe. Blizzards and freezing cold halted coal production. Factories closed. Unemployment spiked. Amid these conditions, the communist parties of France and Italy gained nearly a third of the seats in their respective parliaments. American officials worried that Europe’s impoverished masses were increasingly vulnerable to Soviet propaganda. The situation remained dire through the spring, when secretary of state General George Marshall gave an address at Harvard University on June 5, 1947, suggesting that “the United States should do whatever it is able to do to assist in the return of normal economic health to the world, without which there can be no political stability and no assured peace.”¹⁰ Although Marshall had stipulated to potential critics that his proposal was “not directed against any country, but against hunger, poverty . . . and chaos,” Stalin clearly understood this as an assault against communism in Europe. He saw it as a “Trojan Horse” designed to lure Germany and other countries into the capitalist web.¹¹

The European Recovery Program (ERP), popularly known as the Marshall Plan, pumped enormous sums of capital into Western Europe. From 1948 to 1952 the United States invested \$13 billion toward reconstruction while simultaneously loosening trade barriers. To avoid the postwar chaos of World War I, the Marshall Plan was designed to rebuild Western Europe, open markets, and win European support for capitalist democracies. The Soviets countered with their rival Molotov Plan, a symbolic pledge of aid to Eastern Europe. Polish leader Józef Cyrankiewicz was rewarded with a five-year, \$450 million trade agreement from Russia for boycotting the Marshall Plan. Stalin was jealous of Eastern Europe. When Czechoslovakia received \$200 million in American assistance, Stalin summoned Czech foreign minister Jan Masaryk to Mos-

cow. Masaryk later recounted that he “went to Moscow as the foreign minister of an independent sovereign state” but “returned as a lackey of the Soviet Government.” Stalin exercised ever tighter control over Soviet “satellite” countries in central and Eastern Europe.¹²

The situation in Germany meanwhile deteriorated. Berlin had been divided into communist and capitalist zones. In June 1948, when U.S., British, and French officials introduced a new currency, the Soviet Union initiated a ground blockade, cutting off rail and road access to West Berlin (landlocked within the Soviet occupation zone) to gain control over the entire city. The United States organized and coordinated a massive airlift that flew essential supplies into the beleaguered city for eleven months, until the Soviets lifted the blockade on May 12, 1949. Germany was officially broken in half. On May 23, the western half of the country was formally renamed the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) and the eastern Soviet zone became the German Democratic Republic (GDR) later that fall. Berlin, which lay squarely within the GDR, was

The Berlin Blockade and the Allied airlift that followed represented one of the first major crises of the Cold War. Here, a U.S. Navy Douglas R4D and a U.S. Air Force C-47 aircraft unload at Tempelhof Airport in 1948 or 1949. Wikimedia.



divided into two sections (and, from August 1961 until November 1989, famously separated by physical walls).¹³

In the summer of 1949, American officials launched the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), a mutual defense pact in which the United States and Canada were joined by England, France, Belgium, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Italy, Portugal, Norway, Denmark, and Iceland. The Soviet Union would formalize its own collective defensive agreement in 1955, the Warsaw Pact, which included Albania, Romania, Bulgaria, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Poland, and East Germany.

Liberal journalist Walter Lippmann was largely responsible for popularizing the term *Cold War* in his book *The Cold War: A Study in U.S. Foreign Policy*, published in 1947. Lippmann envisioned a prolonged stalemate between the United States and the USSR, a war of words and ideas in which direct shots would not necessarily be fired between the two. Lippmann agreed that the Soviet Union would only be “prevented from expanding” if it were “confronted with . . . American power,” but he felt “that the strategical conception and plan” recommended by Mr. X (George Kennan) was “fundamentally unsound,” as it would require having “the money and the military power always available in sufficient amounts to apply ‘counter-force’ at constantly shifting points all over the world.” Lippmann cautioned against making far-flung, open-ended commitments, favoring instead a more limited engagement that focused on halting the influence of communism in the “heart” of Europe; he believed that if the Soviet system were successfully restrained on the continent, it could otherwise be left alone to collapse under the weight of its own imperfections.¹⁴

A new chapter in the Cold War began on October 1, 1949, when the CCP, led by Mao Zedong, declared victory against Kuomintang nationalists led by the Western-backed Chiang Kai-shek. The Kuomintang retreated to the island of Taiwan and the CCP took over the mainland under the red flag of the People’s Republic of China (PRC). Coming so soon after the Soviet Union’s successful test of an atomic bomb, on August 29, the “loss of China,” the world’s most populous country, contributed to a sense of panic among American foreign policy makers, whose attention began to shift from Europe to Asia. After Dean Acheson became secretary of state in 1949, Kennan was replaced in the State Department by former investment banker Paul Nitze, whose first task was to help compose, as Acheson later described in his memoir, a document designed to “bludgeon the mass mind of ‘top government’” into approving a “substantial increase” in military expenditures.¹⁵



“National Security Memorandum 68: United States Objectives and Programs for National Security,” a national defense memo known as NSC-68, achieved its goal. Issued in April 1950, the nearly sixty-page classified memo warned of “increasingly terrifying weapons of mass destruction,” which served to remind “every individual” of “the ever-present possibility of annihilation.” It said that leaders of the USSR and its “international communist movement” sought only “to retain and solidify their absolute power.” As the central “bulwark of opposition to Soviet expansion,” America had become “the principal enemy” that “must be subverted or destroyed by one means or another.” NSC-68 urged a “rapid build-up of political, economic, and military strength” in order to “roll back the Kremlin’s drive for world domination.” Such a massive commitment of resources, amounting to more than a threefold increase in the annual defense budget, was necessary because the USSR, “unlike previous aspirants to hegemony,” was “animated by a new fanatic faith,” seeking “to impose its absolute authority over the rest of the world.”¹⁶ Both Kennan and Lippmann were among a minority in the foreign policy establishment who argued to no avail that such a “militarization of containment” was tragically wrongheaded.¹⁷

On June 25, 1950, as U.S. officials were considering the merits of NSC-68’s proposals, including “the intensification of . . . operations by covert means in the fields of economic . . . political and psychological warfare” designed to foment “unrest and revolt in . . . [Soviet] satellite

Global communism was shaped by the relationship between the two largest communist nations—the Soviet Union and the People’s Republic of China. Despite persistent tensions between the two, this 1950 Chinese stamp depicts Joseph Stalin shaking hands with Mao Zedong. Wikimedia.

countries,” fighting erupted in Korea between communists in the north and American-backed anti-communists in the south.¹⁸

After Japan surrendered in September 1945, a U.S.-Soviet joint occupation had paved the way for the division of Korea. In November 1947, the UN passed a resolution that a united government in Korea should be created, but the Soviet Union refused to cooperate. Only the south held elections. The Republic of Korea (ROK), South Korea, was created three months after the election. A month later, communists in the north established the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK). Both claimed to stand for a unified Korean peninsula. The UN recognized the ROK, but incessant armed conflict broke out between North and South.¹⁹

In the spring of 1950, Stalin hesitantly endorsed North Korean leader Kim Il Sung’s plan to liberate the South by force, a plan heavily influenced by Mao’s recent victory in China. While he did not desire a military confrontation with the United States, Stalin thought correctly that he could encourage his Chinese comrades to support North Korea if the war turned against the DPRK. The North Koreans launched a successful surprise attack and Seoul, the capital of South Korea, fell to the communists on June 28. The UN passed resolutions demanding that North Korea cease hostilities and withdraw its armed forces to the thirty-eighth parallel and calling on member states to provide the ROK military assistance to repulse the northern attack.

That July, UN forces mobilized under American general Douglas MacArthur. Troops landed at Inchon, a port city about thirty miles from Seoul, and took the city on September 28. They moved on North Korea. On October 1, ROK/UN forces crossed the thirty-eighth parallel, and on October 26 they reached the Yalu River, the traditional Korea-China border. They were met by three hundred thousand Chinese troops who broke the advance and rolled up the offensive. On November 30, ROK/UN forces began a fevered retreat. They returned across the thirty-eighth parallel and abandoned Seoul on January 4, 1951. The United Nations forces regrouped, but the war entered into a stalemate. General MacArthur, growing impatient and wanting to eliminate the communist threats, requested authorization to use nuclear weapons against North Korea and China. Denied, MacArthur publicly denounced Truman. Truman, unwilling to threaten World War III and refusing to tolerate MacArthur’s public insubordination, dismissed the general in April. On June 23, 1951, the Soviet ambassador to the UN suggested a cease-fire, which the U.S. immediately accepted. Peace talks continued for two years.



With the stated policy of “containing” communism at home and abroad, the United States pressured the United Nations to support the South Koreans and deployed its own troops to the Korean Peninsula. Though overshadowed in the annals of American history, the Korean War witnessed over thirty thousand American combat deaths and left an indelible mark on those who served. Wikimedia.

General Dwight Eisenhower defeated Illinois Governor Adlai Stevenson in the 1952 presidential election, and Stalin died in March 1953. The DPRK warmed to peace, and an armistice agreement was signed on July 27, 1953. More than 1.5 million people had died during the conflict.²⁰

Coming so soon after World War II and ending without clear victory, Korea became for many Americans a “forgotten war.” Decades later, though, the nation’s other major intervention in Asia would be anything but forgotten. The Vietnam War had deep roots in the Cold War world. Vietnam had been colonized by France and seized by Japan during World War II. The nationalist leader Ho Chi Minh had been backed by the United States during his anti-Japanese insurgency and, following Japan’s surrender in 1945, Viet Minh nationalists, quoting the American Declaration of Independence, created the independent Democratic Republic of

Vietnam (DRV). Yet France moved to reassert authority over its former colony in Indochina, and the United States sacrificed Vietnamese self-determination for France's colonial imperatives. Ho Chi Minh turned to the Soviet Union for assistance in waging war against the French colonizers in a protracted war.

After French troops were defeated at the Battle of Dien Bien Phu in May 1954, U.S. officials helped broker a temporary settlement that partitioned Vietnam in two, with a Soviet/Chinese-backed state in the north and an American-backed state in the south. To stifle communist expansion southward, the United States would send arms, offer military advisors, prop up corrupt politicians, stop elections, and, eventually, send over five hundred thousand troops, of whom nearly sixty thousand would be lost before the communists finally reunified the country.

III. The Arms Buildup, the Space Race, and Technological Advancement

The world was never the same after the United States leveled Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945 with atomic bombs. Not only had perhaps 180,000 civilians been killed, the nature of warfare was forever changed. The Soviets accelerated their nuclear research, expedited in no small part by "atom spies" such as Klaus Fuchs, who had stolen nuclear secrets from the Americans' secret Manhattan Project. Soviet scientists successfully tested an atomic bomb on August 29, 1949, years before American officials had estimated they would. This unexpectedly quick Russian success not only caught the United States off guard but alarmed the Western world and propelled a nuclear arms race between the United States and the USSR.

The United States detonated the first thermonuclear weapon, or hydrogen bomb (using fusion explosives of theoretically limitless power) on November 1, 1952. The blast measured over ten megatons and generated an inferno five miles wide with a mushroom cloud twenty-five miles high and a hundred miles across. The irradiated debris—fallout—from the blast circled the earth, occasioning international alarm about the effects of nuclear testing on human health and the environment. It only hastened the arms race, with each side developing increasingly advanced warheads and delivery systems. The USSR successfully tested a hydrogen bomb in 1953, and soon thereafter Eisenhower announced a policy of "massive retaliation." The United States would henceforth respond to threats or



In response to the Soviet Union's test of a pseudo-hydrogen bomb in 1953, the United States began Castle Bravo—the first U.S. test of a dry-fuel hydrogen bomb. Detonated on March 1, 1954, it was the most powerful nuclear device ever tested. But the effects were more gruesome than expected, causing nuclear fallout and radiation poisoning in nearby Pacific islands. Wikimedia.

acts of aggression with perhaps its entire nuclear might. Both sides, then, would theoretically be deterred from starting a war, through the logic of mutually assured destruction (MAD). J. Robert Oppenheimer, director of Los Alamos nuclear laboratory that developed the first nuclear bomb, likened the state of “nuclear deterrence” between the United States and the USSR to “two scorpions in a bottle, each capable of killing the other,” but only by risking their own lives.²¹

Fears of nuclear war produced a veritable atomic culture. Films such as *Godzilla*, *On the Beach*, *Fail-Safe*, and *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* plumbed the depths of American anxieties with plots featuring radioactive monsters, nuclear accidents, and doomsday scenarios. Antinuclear protests in the United States and abroad warned against the perils of nuclear testing and highlighted the likelihood that a thermonuclear war would unleash a global

environmental catastrophe. Yet at the same time, peaceful nuclear technologies, such as fission- and fusion-based energy, seemed to herald a utopia of power that would be clean, safe, and “too cheap to meter.” In 1953, Eisenhower proclaimed at the UN that the United States would share the knowledge and means for other countries to use atomic power. Henceforth, “the miraculous inventiveness of man shall not be dedicated to his death, but consecrated to his life.” The “Atoms for Peace” speech brought about the establishment of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), along with worldwide investment in this new economic sector.²²

As Germany fell at the close of World War II, the United States and the Soviet Union each sought to acquire elements of the Nazi’s V-2 super-weapon program. A devastating rocket that had terrorized England, the V-2 was capable of delivering its explosive payload up to a distance of nearly six hundred miles, and both nations sought to capture the scientists, designs, and manufacturing equipment to make it work. A former top German rocket scientist, Wernher von Braun, became the leader of the American space program; the Soviet Union’s program was secretly managed by former prisoner Sergei Korolev. After the end of the war, American and Soviet rocket engineering teams worked to adapt German technology in order to create an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM). The Soviets achieved success first. They even used the same launch vehicle on October 4, 1957, to send Sputnik 1, the world’s first human-made satellite, into orbit. It was a decisive Soviet propaganda victory.²³

In response, the U.S. government rushed to perfect its own ICBM technology and launch its own satellites and astronauts into space. In 1958, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) was created as a successor to the National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics (NACA). Initial American attempts to launch a satellite into orbit using the Vanguard rocket suffered spectacular failures, heightening fears of Soviet domination in space. While the American space program floundered, on September 13, 1959, the Soviet Union’s Luna 2 capsule became the first human-made object to touch the moon. The “race for survival,” as it was called by the *New York Times*, reached a new level.²⁴ The Soviet Union successfully launched a pair of dogs (Belka and Strelka) into orbit and returned them to Earth while the American Mercury program languished behind schedule. Despite countless failures and one massive accident that killed nearly one hundred Soviet military and rocket engineers, Russian cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin was launched into orbit on April

12, 1961. American astronaut Alan Shepard accomplished a suborbital flight in the Freedom 7 capsule on May 5. The United States had lagged behind, and John Kennedy would use America's losses in the "space race" to bolster funding for a moon landing.

While outer space captivated the world's imagination, the Cold War still captured its anxieties. The ever-escalating arms race continued to foster panic. In the early 1950s, the Federal Civil Defense Administration (FCDA) began preparing citizens for the worst. Schoolchildren were instructed, via a film featuring Bert the Turtle, to "duck and cover" beneath their desks in the event of a thermonuclear war.²⁵

Although it took a backseat to space travel and nuclear weapons, the advent of modern computing was yet another major Cold War scientific innovation, the effects of which were only just beginning to be understood. In 1958, following the humiliation of the Sputnik launches, Eisenhower authorized the creation of an Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA) housed within the Department of Defense (later changed to DARPA). As a secretive military research and development operation, ARPA was tasked with funding and otherwise overseeing the production of sensitive new technologies. Soon, in cooperation with university-based computer engineers, ARPA would develop the world's first system of "network packing switches," and computer networks would begin connecting to one another.

IV. The Cold War Red Scare, McCarthyism, and Liberal Anticommunism

Joseph McCarthy burst onto the national scene during a speech in Wheeling, West Virginia, on February 9, 1950. Waving a sheet of paper in the air, he proclaimed: "I have here in my hand a list of 205 . . . 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 [U.S.] policy." Since the Wisconsin Republican had no actual list, when pressed, the number changed to fifty-seven, then, later, eighty-one. Finally, he promised to disclose the name of just one communist, the nation's "top Soviet agent." The shifting numbers brought ridicule, but it didn't matter: McCarthy's claims won him fame and fueled the ongoing "red scare."²⁶

McCarthyism was only a symptom of a massive and widespread anticommunist hysteria that engulfed Cold War America. Popular fears,



Joseph McCarthy, a Republican senator from Wisconsin, pictured here in 1950, fueled fears during the early 1950s that communism was rampant and growing. Such fears intensified Cold War tensions at nearly every level of society, from government officials to ordinary American citizens. National Archives and Records Administration.

for instance, had long since shot through the federal government. Only two years after World War II, President Truman, facing growing anti-communist excitement and with a tough election on the horizon, gave in to pressure in March 1947 and issued his “loyalty order,” Executive Order 9835, establishing loyalty reviews for federal employees. The FBI conducted closer examinations of all potential “security risks” among Foreign Service officers. In Congress, the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) and the Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations (SPSI) held hearings on communist influence in American society. Between 1949 and 1954, congressional committees conducted over one hundred investigations into subversive activities. Antisubversion committees emerged in over a dozen state legislatures, and review procedures proliferated in public schools and universities across the country. At the University of California, for example, thirty-one professors were



The environment of anticommunist fear and panic led to the arrest of many innocent people, although some Americans accused of supplying top-secret information to the Soviets were, in fact, spies. Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were convicted of espionage and executed in 1953 for delivering information about the atomic bomb to the Soviets. Library of Congress.

dismissed in 1950 for refusing to sign a loyalty oath. The Internal Security Act, or McCarran Act, passed by Congress in September 1950, mandated all “communist organizations” to register with the government, gave the government greater powers to investigate sedition, and made it possible to prevent suspected individuals from gaining or keeping their citizenship.²⁷

Anticommunist policies reflected national fears of a surging global communism. Within a ten-month span beginning in 1949, for instance, the USSR developed a nuclear bomb, China fell to communism, and over three hundred thousand American soldiers were deployed to fight a land war in Korea. Newspapers, meanwhile, were filled with headlines alleging Soviet espionage.

During the war, Julius Rosenberg worked briefly at the U.S. Army Signal Corps Laboratory in New Jersey, where he had access to classified information. He and his wife, Ethel, who had both been members of the Communist Party of the USA (CPUSA) in the 1930s, were accused of passing secret bomb-related documents to Soviet officials and were indicted in August 1950 on charges of giving nuclear secrets to the Russians. After a trial in March 1951, they were found guilty and executed on June 19, 1953.²⁸

Alger Hiss, the highest-ranking government official linked to Soviet espionage, was another prize for conservatives. Hiss was a prominent official in the U.S. State Department and served as secretary-general of the UN Charter Conference in San Francisco from April to June 1945 before leaving the State Department in 1946. A young congressman and member of HUAC, Richard Nixon, made waves by accusing Hiss of espionage. On August 3, 1948, Whittaker Chambers testified before HUAC that he and Hiss had worked together as part of the secret “communist underground” in Washington, D.C., during the 1930s. Hiss, who always maintained his innocence, stood trial twice. After a hung jury in July 1949, he was convicted on two counts of perjury (the statute of limitations for espionage having expired). Later evidence suggested their guilt. At the time, their convictions fueled an anticommunist frenzy. Some began seeing communists everywhere.²⁹

Alger Hiss and the Rosenbergs offered anticommunists such as Joseph McCarthy the evidence they needed to allege a vast Soviet conspiracy to infiltrate and subvert the U.S. government and justify the smearing of all left-liberals, even those who were resolutely anticommunist. Not long after his February 1950 speech in Wheeling, McCarthy’s sensational charges became a source of growing controversy. Forced to respond, President Truman arranged a partisan congressional investigation designed to discredit McCarthy. The Tydings Committee held hearings from early March through July 1950 and issued a final report admonishing McCarthy for perpetrating a “fraud and a hoax” on the American public. American progressives saw McCarthy’s crusade as nothing less than a political witch hunt. In June 1950, *The Nation* magazine editor Freda Kirchwey characterized “McCarthyism” as “the means by which a handful of men, disguised as hunters of subversion, cynically subvert the instruments of justice . . . in order to help their own political fortunes.”³⁰ Truman’s liberal supporters, and leftists like Kirchwey, hoped in vain that McCarthy and the new “ism” that bore his name would blow over quickly.

There had, of course, been a communist presence in the United States. The CPUSA was formed in the aftermath of the 1917 Russian Revolution when the Bolsheviks created a Communist International (the Comintern) and invited socialists from around the world to join. During its first two years of existence, the CPUSA functioned in secret, hidden from a surge of antiradical and anti-immigrant hysteria, investigations, deportations, and raids at the end of World War I. The CPUSA began its public life in

1921, after the panic subsided, but communism remained on the margins of American life until the 1930s, when leftists and liberals began to see the Soviet Union as a symbol of hope amid the Great Depression. Then many communists joined the Popular Front, an effort to make communism mainstream by adapting it to American history and American culture. During the Popular Front era, communists were integrated into mainstream political institutions through alliances with progressives in the Democratic Party. The CPUSA enjoyed most of its influence and popularity among workers in unions linked to the newly formed CIO. Communists also became strong opponents of Jim Crow segregation and developed a presence in both the NAACP and the ACLU. The CPUSA, moreover, established “front” groups, such as the League of American Writers, in which intellectuals participated without even knowing of its ties to the Comintern. But even at the height of the global economic crisis, communism never attracted many Americans. Even at the peak of its membership, the CPUSA had just eighty thousand national “card-carrying” members. From the mid-1930s through the mid-1940s, the party exercised most of its power indirectly, through coalitions with liberals and reformers. When news broke of Hitler’s and Stalin’s 1939 nonaggression, many fled the party, feeling betrayed. A bloc of left-liberal anticommunists, meanwhile, purged remaining communists in their ranks, and the Popular Front collapsed.³¹

Lacking the legal grounds to abolish the CPUSA, officials instead sought to expose and contain CPUSA influence. Following a series of predecessor committees, HUAC was established in 1938, then reorganized after the war and given the explicit task of investigating communism. By the time the Communist Control Act was passed in August 1954, effectively criminalizing party membership, the CPUSA had long ceased to have meaningful influence. Anticommunists were driven to eliminate remaining CPUSA influence from progressive institutions, including the NAACP and the CIO. The Taft-Hartley Act (1947) gave union officials the initiative to purge communists from the labor movement. A kind of Cold War liberalism took hold. In January 1947, anticommunist liberals formed Americans for Democratic Action (ADA), whose founding members included labor leader Walter Reuther and NAACP chairman Walter White, as well as historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr., theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, and former first lady Eleanor Roosevelt. Working to help Truman defeat former vice president Henry Wallace’s Popular Front-backed campaign in 1948, the ADA combined social and economic reforms with staunch anticommunism.³²

The domestic Cold War was bipartisan, fueled by a consensus drawn from a left-liberal and conservative anticommunist alliance that included politicians and policy makers, journalists and scientists, business and civic/religious leaders, and educators and entertainers. Led by its imperious director, J. Edgar Hoover, the FBI took an active role in the domestic battle against communism. Hoover's FBI helped incite panic by assisting the creation of blatantly propagandistic films and television shows, including *The Red Menace* (1949), *My Son John* (1951), and *I Led Three Lives* (1953–1956). Such alarmist depictions of espionage and treason in a “free world” imperiled by communism heightened the 1950s culture of fear. In the fall of 1947, HUAC entered the fray with highly publicized hearings of Hollywood. Film mogul Walt Disney and actor Ronald Reagan, among others, testified to aid investigators' attempts to expose communist influence in the entertainment industry. A group of writers, directors, and producers who refused to answer questions were held in contempt of Congress. This Hollywood Ten created the precedent for a blacklist in which hundreds of film artists were barred from industry work for the next decade.

HUAC made repeated visits to Hollywood during the 1950s, and their interrogation of celebrities often began with the same intimidating refrain: “Are you now, or have you ever been, a member of the Communist Party?” Many witnesses cooperated, and “named names,” naming anyone they knew who had ever been associated with communist-related groups or organizations. In 1956, black entertainer and activist Paul Robeson chided his HUAC inquisitors, claiming that they had put him on trial not for his politics but because he had spent his life “fighting for the rights” of his people. “You are the un-Americans,” he told them, “and you ought to be ashamed of yourselves.”³³ As Robeson and other victims of McCarthyism learned firsthand, this “second red scare,” in the glow of nuclear annihilation and global totalitarianism, fueled an intolerant and skeptical political world, what Cold War liberal Arthur Schlesinger, in his *The Vital Center* (1949), called an “age of anxiety.”³⁴

Anticommunist ideology valorized overt patriotism, religious conviction, and faith in capitalism. Those who shunned such “American values” were open to attack. If communism was a plague spreading across Europe and Asia, anticommunist hyperbole infected cities, towns, and suburbs throughout the country. The playwright Arthur Miller's popular 1953 play *The Crucible* compared the red scare to the Salem Witch Trials. Miller wrote, “In America any man who is not reactionary in his views



Many Americans accused of communist sentiments refused to denounce friends and acquaintances. One of the most well-known Americans of the time, African American actor and singer Paul Robeson, was unwilling to sign an affidavit confirming he was communist and, as a result, his U.S. passport was revoked. During the Cold War, he was condemned by the press and neither his music nor films could be purchased in the United States. Wikimedia.

is open to the charge of alliance with the Red hell. Political opposition, thereby, is given an inhumane overlay which then justifies the abrogation of all normally applied customs of civilized intercourse. A political policy is equated with moral right, and opposition to it with diabolical malevolence. Once such an equation is effectively made, society becomes a congerie of plots and counterplots, and the main role of government changes from that of the arbiter to that of the scourge of God.”³⁵

Rallying against communism, American society urged conformity. “Deviant” behavior became dangerous. Having entered the workforce en masse as part of a collective effort in World War II, middle-class women were told to return to housekeeping responsibilities. Having fought and died abroad for American democracy, black soldiers were told to return home and acquiesce to the American racial order. Homosexuality, already stigmatized, became dangerous. Personal secrets were seen as a liability that exposed one to blackmail. The same paranoid mind-set that fueled the second red scare also ignited the Cold War “lavender scare” against gay Americans.³⁶

American religion, meanwhile, was fixated on what McCarthy, in his 1950 Wheeling speech, called an “all-out battle between communistic

atheism and Christianity.” Cold warriors in the United States routinely referred to a fundamental incompatibility between “godless communism” and God-fearing Americanism. Religious conservatives championed the idea of the traditional nuclear, God-fearing family as a bulwark against the spread of atheistic totalitarianism. As Baptist minister Billy Graham sermonized in 1950, communism aimed to “destroy the American home and cause . . . moral deterioration,” leaving the country exposed to communist infiltration.³⁷

In an atmosphere in which ideas of national belonging and citizenship were so closely linked to religious commitment, Americans during the early Cold War years attended church, professed a belief in a supreme being, and stressed the importance of religion in their lives at higher rates than in any time in American history. Americans sought to differentiate themselves from godless communists through public displays of religiosity. Politicians infused government with religious symbols. The Pledge of Allegiance was altered to include the words *one nation, under God* in 1954. *In God We Trust* was adopted as the official national motto in 1956. In popular culture, one of the most popular films of the decade, *The Ten Commandments* (1956), retold the biblical Exodus story as a Cold War parable, echoing (incidentally) NSC-68’s characterization of the Soviet Union as a “slave state.” Monuments of the Ten Commandments went up at courthouses and city halls across the country.

While the link between American nationalism and religion grew much closer during the Cold War, many Americans began to believe that just believing in almost any religion was better than being an atheist. Gone was the overt anti-Catholic and anti-Semitic language of Protestants in the past. Now, leaders spoke of a common Judeo-Christian heritage. In December 1952, a month before his inauguration, Dwight Eisenhower said that “our form of government makes no sense unless it is founded in a deeply-felt religious faith, and I don’t care what it is.”³⁸

Joseph McCarthy, an Irish Catholic, made common cause with prominent religious anticommunists, including southern evangelist Billy James Hargis of *Christian Crusade*, a popular radio and television ministry that peaked in the 1950s and 1960s. Cold War religion in America also crossed the political divide. During the 1952 campaign, Eisenhower spoke of U.S. foreign policy as “a war of light against darkness, freedom against slavery, Godliness against atheism.”³⁹ His Democratic opponent, former Illinois governor Adlai Stevenson, said that America was engaged in a battle with the “Anti-Christ.” While Billy Graham became a spiri-

tual advisor to Eisenhower as well as other Republican and Democratic presidents, the same was true of the liberal Protestant Reinhold Niebuhr, perhaps the nation's most important theologian when he appeared on the cover of *Life* in March 1948.

Though publicly rebuked by the Tydings Committee, McCarthy soldiered on. In June 1951, on the floor of Congress, McCarthy charged that then secretary of defense (and former secretary of state) General George Marshall had fallen prey to "a conspiracy on a scale so immense as to dwarf any previous such venture in the history of man." He claimed that Marshall, a war hero, had helped to "diminish the United States in world affairs," enabling the United States to "finally fall victim to Soviet intrigue . . . and Russian military might." The speech caused an uproar. During the 1952 campaign, Eisenhower, who was in all things moderate and politically cautious, refused to publicly denounce McCarthy. "I will not . . . get into the gutter with that guy," he wrote privately. McCarthy campaigned for Eisenhower, who won a stunning victory.⁴⁰

So did the Republicans, who regained Congress. McCarthy became chairman of the Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations (SPSI). He turned his newfound power against the government's overseas broadcast division, the Voice of America (VOA). McCarthy's investigation in February–March 1953 resulted in several resignations or transfers. McCarthy's mudslinging had become increasingly unrestrained. Soon he went after the U.S. Army. After forcing the army to again disprove theories of a Soviet spy ring at Fort Monmouth in New Jersey, McCarthy publicly berated officers suspected of promoting leftists. McCarthy's badgering of witnesses created cover for critics to publicly denounce his abrasive fearmongering.

On March 9, CBS anchor Edward R. Murrow, a respected journalist, told his television audience that McCarthy's actions had "caused alarm and dismay amongst . . . allies abroad, and given considerable comfort to our enemies." Yet, Murrow explained, "he didn't create this situation of fear; he merely exploited it—and rather successfully. Cassius was right. 'The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, but in ourselves.'"⁴¹

Twenty million people saw the Army-McCarthy hearings unfold over thirty-six days in 1954. The army's head counsel, Joseph Welch, captured much of the mood of the country when he defended a fellow lawyer from McCarthy's public smears, saying, "Let us not assassinate this lad further, Senator. You've done enough. Have you no sense of decency, sir? At long last, have you left no sense of decency?" In September, a senate

subcommittee recommended that McCarthy be censured. On December 2, 1954, his colleagues voted 67–22 to “condemn” his actions. Humiliated, McCarthy faded into irrelevance and alcoholism and died in May 1957 at age 48.⁴²

By the late 1950s, the worst of the second red scare was over. Stalin’s death, followed by the Korean War armistice, opened new space—and hope—for the easing of Cold War tensions. Détente and the upheavals of the late 1960s were on the horizon. But McCarthyism outlasted McCarthy and the 1950s. The tactics he perfected continued to be practiced long after his death. “Red-baiting,” the act of smearing a political opponent by linking them to communism or some other demonized ideology, persevered. But McCarthy had hardly been alone.

Congressman Richard Nixon, for instance, used his place on HUAC and his public role in the campaign against Alger Hiss to catapult himself into the White House alongside Eisenhower and later into the presidency. Ronald Reagan bolstered the fame he had won in Hollywood with his testimony before Congress and his anticommunist work for major American corporations such as General Electric. He too would use anti-communism to enter public life and chart a course to the presidency. In 1958, radical anticommunists founded the John Birch Society, attacking liberals and civil rights activists such as Martin Luther King Jr. as communists. Although joined by Cold War liberals, the weight of anti-communism was used as part of an assault against the New Deal and its defenders. Even those liberals, such as historian Arthur Schlesinger, who had fought against communism found themselves smeared by the red scare. The leftist American tradition was in tatters, destroyed by anti-communist hysteria. Movements for social justice, from civil rights to gay rights to feminism, were all suppressed under Cold War conformity.

V. Decolonization and the Global Reach of the American Century

In an influential 1941 *Life* magazine editorial titled “The American Century,” publishing magnate Henry Luce outlined his “vision of America as the principal guarantor of freedom of the seas” and “the dynamic leader of world trade.” In his embrace of an American-led international system, the conservative Luce was joined by liberals including historian Arthur Schlesinger, who in his 1949 Cold War tome *The Vital Center* proclaimed that a “world destiny” had been “thrust” upon the United

States, with perhaps no other nation becoming “a more reluctant great power.” Emerging from the war as the world’s preeminent military and economic force, the United States was perhaps destined to compete with the Soviet Union for influence in the Third World, where a power vacuum had been created by the demise of European imperialism. As France and Britain in particular struggled in vain to control colonies in Asia, the Middle East, and North Africa, the United States assumed responsibility for maintaining order and producing a kind of “pax-Americana.” Little of the postwar world, however, would be so peaceful.⁴³

Based on the logic of militarized containment established by NSC-68 and American Cold War strategy, interventions in Korea and Vietnam were seen as appropriate American responses to the ascent of communism in China. Unless Soviet power in Asia was halted, Chinese influence would ripple across the continent, and one country after another would fall to communism. Easily transposed onto any region of the world, the



The Cuban revolution seemed to confirm the fears of many Americans that the spread of communism could not be stopped. In this photograph, Castro and fellow revolutionary Che Guevara march in a memorial for those killed in the explosion of a ship unloading munitions in Havana in March 1960. The U.S. government had been active in undermining Castro’s regime, and although there was no evidence in this instance, Castro publicly blamed the United States for the explosion. Wikimedia.

Domino Theory became a standard basis for the justification of U.S. interventions abroad. Cuba was seen as a communist beachhead that imperiled Latin America, the Caribbean, and perhaps eventually the United States. Like Ho Chi Minh, Cuban leader Fidel Castro was a revolutionary nationalist whose career as a communist began in earnest after he was rebuffed by the United States, and American interventions targeted nations that never espoused official communist positions. Many interventions in Asia, Latin America, and elsewhere were driven by factors that were shaped by but also transcended anticommunist ideology.

Instead of the United States dismantling its military after World War II, as it had after every major conflict, the Cold War facilitated a new permanent defense establishment. Federal investments in national defense affected the entire country. Different regions housed various sectors of what sociologist C. Wright Mills, in 1956, called the “permanent war economy.” The aerospace industry was concentrated in areas like Southern California and Long Island, New York; Massachusetts was home to several universities that received major defense contracts; the Midwest became home base for intercontinental ballistic missiles pointed at the Soviet Union; many of the largest defense companies and military installations were concentrated in the South, so much so that in 1956 author William Faulkner, who was born in Mississippi, remarked, “Our economy is the Federal Government.”⁴⁴

A radical critic of U.S. policy, Mills was one of the first thinkers to question the effects of massive defense spending, which, he said, corrupted the ruling class, or “power elite,” who now had the potential to take the country into war for the sake of corporate profits. Yet perhaps the most famous critique of the entrenched war economy came from an unlikely source. During his farewell address to the nation in January 1961, President Eisenhower cautioned Americans against the “unwarranted influence” of a “permanent armaments industry of vast proportions” that could threaten “liberties” and “democratic processes.” While the “conjunction of an immense military establishment and a large arms industry” was a fairly recent development, this “military-industrial complex” had cultivated a “total influence,” which was “economic, political, even spiritual . . . felt in every city . . . Statehouse . . . [and] office of the Federal government.” There was, he said, great danger in failing to “comprehend its grave implications.”⁴⁵

In Eisenhower’s formulation, the “military-industrial complex” referred specifically to domestic connections between arms manufacturers,

members of Congress, and the Department of Defense. Yet the new alliance between corporations, politicians, and the military was dependent on having an actual conflict to wage, without which there could be no ultimate financial gain. To critics, military-industrial partnerships at home were now linked to U.S. interests abroad. Suddenly American foreign policy had to secure foreign markets and protect favorable terms for American trade all across the globe. Seen in such a way, the Cold War was just a by-product of America's new role as the remaining Western superpower. Regardless, the postwar rise of U.S. power correlated with what many historians describe as a "national security consensus" that has dominated American policy since World War II. And so the United States was now more intimately involved in world affairs than ever before.

Ideological conflicts and independence movements erupted across the postwar world. More than eighty countries achieved independence, primarily from European control. As it took center stage in the realm of global affairs, the United States played a complicated and often contradictory role in this process of "decolonization." The sweeping scope of post-1945 U.S. military expansion was unique in the country's history. Critics believed that the advent of a "standing army," so feared by many of the founding fathers, set a disturbing precedent. But in the postwar world, American leaders eagerly set about maintaining a new permanent military juggernaut and creating viable international institutions.

But what of independence movements around the world? Roosevelt had spoken for many in his remark to British prime minister Winston Churchill, in 1941, that it was hard to imagine "fight[ing] a war against fascist slavery, and at the same time not work to free people all over the world from a backward colonial policy."⁴⁶ American postwar foreign policy leaders therefore struggled to balance support for decolonization against the reality that national independence movements often posed a threat to America's global interests.

American strategy became consumed with thwarting Russian power and the concomitant global spread of communism. Foreign policy officials increasingly opposed all insurgencies or independence movements that could in any way be linked to international communism. The Soviet Union, too, was attempting to sway the world. Stalin and his successors pushed an agenda that included not only the creation of Soviet client states in Eastern and Central Europe, but also a tendency to support leftwing liberation movements everywhere, particularly when they espoused anti-American sentiment. As a result, the United States and the

did the same, through what they called an international peace offensive, which by most accounts was more successful than the American campaign. Although U.S. officials made strides through the initiation of various overt and covert programs, they still perceived that they were lagging behind the Soviet Union in the “war for hearts and minds.” But as unrest festered in much of the Third World, American officials faced difficult choices.⁴⁷

As black Americans fought for justice at home, prominent American black radicals, including Malcolm X, Paul Robeson, and the aging W. E. B. Du Bois, joined in solidarity with the global anticolonial movement, arguing that the United States had inherited the racist European imperial tradition. Supporters of the Soviet Union made their own effort to win over countries, claiming that Marxist-Leninist doctrine offered a road map for their liberation from colonial bondage. Moreover, Kremlin propaganda pointed to injustices of the American South as an example of American hypocrisy: how could the United States claim to fight for global freedom when it refused to guarantee freedoms for its own citizenry? In such ways the Cold War connected the black freedom struggle, the Third World, and the global Cold War.

VI. Conclusion

In June 1987, American president Ronald Reagan stood at the Berlin Wall and demanded that Soviet premier Mikhail Gorbachev “Tear down this wall!” Less than three years later, amid civil unrest in November 1989, East German authorities announced that their citizens were free to travel to and from West Berlin. The concrete curtain would be lifted and East Berlin would be opened to the world. Within months, the Berlin Wall was reduced to rubble by jubilant crowds anticipating the reunification of their city and their nation, which took place on October 3, 1990. By July 1991 the Warsaw Pact had crumbled, and on December 25 of that year, the Soviet Union was officially dissolved. Hungary, Poland, Czechoslovakia, and the Baltic States (Latvia, Estonia, and Lithuania) were freed from Russian domination.

Partisans fought to claim responsibility for the breakup of the Soviet Union and the ending of the Cold War. Whether it was the triumphalist rhetoric and militaristic pressure of conservatives or the internal fracturing of ossified bureaucracies and work of Russian reformers that shaped the ending of the Cold War is a question of later decades. Questions about the Cold War’s end must pause before appreciations of the Cold

War's impact at home and abroad. Whether measured by the tens of millions killed in Cold War–related conflicts, in the reshaping of American politics and culture, or in the transformation of America's role in the world, the Cold War pushed American history upon a new path, one that it has yet to yield.

VII. Reference Material

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