

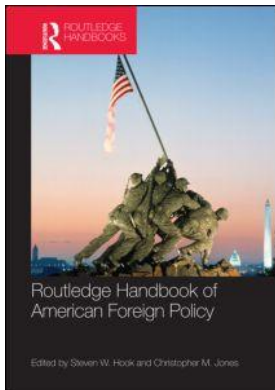
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# America in the Cold War

*Robert D. Schulzinger*

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The Cold War, a global competition between the United States and its allies and the Soviet Union and its supporters, lasted for more than forty years. It began when the World War II alliance against Nazi Germany collapsed after 1945, and it continued until the Soviet Union disbanded in 1991. The Cold War originated from a complex set of interrelated causes. The United States and the Soviet Union were military, economic, political, and ideological rivals. As the historian Odd Arne Westad (2005: 8–72) has written, the United States sought to construct a worldwide “empire of liberty” while the Soviet Union endorsed a global “empire of justice.” In other words, the United States promoted ideas of individual rights and democratic governance while the Soviet Union advocated economic and social equality. Yet each side regularly compromised these ideals by supporting people and movements who rejected their patrons’ stated principles.

The Cold War helped transform American politics and culture. The role of the federal government in the U.S. economy and society expanded significantly, largely although not exclusively because of the Cold War. For most of the era a bipartisan consensus held that the primary aim of U.S. foreign policy was the containment of Soviet power. Anticommunism became a powerful political force. The military gained greater prominence than ever before in U.S. history.

## **The Historical Context**

The United States emerged from World War II as the world’s largest economy and preeminent military power. As detailed in the previous chapter, the rise of the United States as one of the world’s premier powers occurred relatively rapidly in the approximately sixty years from the 1890s through the Second World War. In the twenty-five years before World War I, the United States joined the great powers of Europe in extending the range of its influence far beyond its borders. The United States acquired overseas dependencies, similar to European colonies or protectorates, in the Caribbean and in islands across the Pacific Ocean. The United States also regularly intervened militarily in the internal affairs of nations in the Caribbean and Central America.

Some advocates of the exertion of American power in the early twentieth century believed that the new empire the United States constructed differed from that of the Europeans, because

the United States maintained its founding principles of republican government and opposition to European colonialism. Other contemporary observers of U.S. foreign policy believed that the United States now was one of several imperial powers, committed to advancing its own self-interest often at the expense of poorer, darker-skinned peoples. These differences of opinion over the nature of American power—whether it was more benign than that of the Europeans and Japanese or an ordinary rival competing for power and influence—characterized the early historical study of American foreign relations.

In the middle of the twentieth century, an orthodox school of historical interpretation, led by prominent historians Samuel Flagg Bemis (1942) and Thomas A. Bailey (1958), argued that U.S. foreign policy was different from that of the Europeans. The United States, they maintained, was an exceptional nation that was more often than not opposed to colonialism. When the United States acquired colonies, as it did after the Spanish–American War with the Philippines, this marked, in Bemis’s words, a “great aberration.”

Serious challenges to this orthodox explanation of the rise of American power emerged in the 1960s. William Appleman Williams’ *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* (1962) inspired a generation of revisionist historians who explored the self-interested, often economic, motives behind U.S. expansion. The revisionists argued that the United States’ liberal capitalist economy required new markets and new sources of raw materials, often far beyond the continental boundaries of the United States, in order to flourish. This felt need for economic growth propelled U.S. government officials to become ever more deeply engaged in international affairs in the twentieth century.

Whatever the motives were for Americans to participate deeply in world politics, and they were varied and complex, the United States became a principal actor on the world stage as the twentieth century progressed. U.S. officials and private citizens advocated the expansion of international law and the arbitration of disputes between nations in the decades before World War I began in 1914. Once the United States entered that war in 1917, President Woodrow Wilson presented plans for a complete reorganization of world politics. Wilson’s Fourteen Points formed the basis of a “new diplomacy.” According to Wilson’s vision, states would abandon competing military alliances and embrace collective security. Nations would have the right of self-determination. International disputes would be settled peacefully under the auspices of a general international organization called the League of Nations (Knock 1992: 123–127).

The initial worldwide enthusiasm for Wilson’s plans faded in the reality of the deal-making of the Paris Peace Conference of 1919. The U.S. reforms also faced more radical challenges from the revolutionary communist government which consolidated its power in Russia (named the Soviet Union after 1921). The United States Senate failed to ratify the Treaty of Versailles, and the United States declined to join the League of Nations. Even though the United States was not a member of the League of Nations, it promoted international disarmament agreements and actively encouraged overseas commerce, lending, and investment (see Schulzinger 2008: 89–93).

The Great Depression of 1930–1939 curtailed U.S. and Western European involvement in international politics. Americans and their World War I associates in Great Britain concentrated on relieving the suffering caused by persistently high unemployment. Wide majorities opposed forceful military action or economic sanctions to restrain the aggression of Japan, Italy, or Germany. Franklin D. Roosevelt, elected president in 1932, had served in the Wilson administration and supported Wilsonian ideals in the 1920s. But in his first five years as president he reflected the public’s antipathy for deep involvement in conflicts in Europe, Africa, and East Asia (Schulzinger 2008: 111–113).

Once World War II began in Europe in September 1939, Roosevelt first gradually and then with increasing momentum opposed the aggression of the Axis Powers—Nazi Germany,

Fascist Italy, and Japan. U.S. public opinion backed efforts to provide aid to the opponents of the Axis but opposed direct entry into the war. The world war intensified in June 1941 when Germany broke its 1939 Non-Aggression Pact with the Soviet Union and attacked that country in June. The war in Asia also heated up that summer, and Japan secretly prepared to attack U.S. and British positions in the Pacific and South East Asia. The United States responded with military aid to the Soviet Union, China, and the Philippines. In December the United States joined the war after Japan attacked Hawaii and the Philippines and Germany declared war on the United States (Herring 2009: 536–538).

After World War II, U.S. public opinion shifted in favor of postwar participation in the newly created United Nations. Americans believed by wide margins that their country's refusal to participate in the League was one of the causes of the war. They also responded well to Roosevelt's idealistic calls for the expansion of freedom along with his practical application of military power. Roosevelt's successor, vice president Harry Truman, looked forward to the future with confidence after the war ended in August 1945. The U.S. military's power seemed supreme after the detonation of atomic weapons over Hiroshima and Nagasaki forced Japan to surrender. The U.S. economy was the largest and fastest growing in the world. There were many reasons to believe that the succeeding decades would represent, in the words of Henry Luce, the publisher of *Time* magazine, "the American Century."

## The Onset of the Cold War

The wartime alliance against the Axis Powers broke apart in the two years following the defeat of Germany and Japan in 1945. The United States opposed Soviet efforts to establish friendly communist dominated governments in Eastern Europe, and by the end of 1946 it was clear that the two former allies were now bitter adversaries. In March 1947 Truman announced the Truman Doctrine, which promised U.S. support for governments and people around the world threatened by communist revolutions. In June 1947 Secretary of State George C. Marshall proposed a massive economic aid package, called the European Recovery Program, or Marshall Plan, to revive the war-torn economies of Western Europe. The expectation was that a prosperous Europe would become immune to communism. Later that summer diplomat George F. Kennan wrote that American policy should be "the patient, vigilant containment of Soviet power" (Gaddis 2005a: 24–52). The Truman Doctrine, the Marshall Plan, and containment became the foundations of American policy in the Cold War.

The Cold War intensified and spread beyond Europe in the remainder of the Truman administration. The competition between communism and capitalism also affected domestic American politics in those years, as some members of Congress accused federal employees and agencies of being sympathetic with communist groups. The division of Europe into antagonistic Western and Eastern blocs hardened in 1948 and 1949. In March communists seized power in Czechoslovakia, the last remaining country in Soviet-occupied Eastern Europe which had an elected, non-communist government. In June 1948 Soviet armed forces denied land access across their occupied zone of Germany to West Berlin. The United States, Great Britain, and France responded with a thirteen-month-long airlift of food and other vital supplies to keep the non-communist, democratic city alive and out of communist control. The Soviets ended their blockade in September 1949. In 1949 the Western powers ended their occupation of Germany turning over sovereignty to a new Federal Republic of Germany, aligned with the United States and the West. The Soviets in turn ended their occupation and sponsored the creation of the German Democratic Republic (East Germany). Then United States joined with eleven other non-communist states in Europe and North America to create the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the first peace-time military alliance in

U.S. history. The Cold War became even more dangerous when the Soviet Union joined the “nuclear club” by testing an atomic weapon.

The Cold War spread to Asia in the late 1940s. In 1949 the Communist Party of China led by Mao Zedong completed its victory over the nationalist government. The United States declined to extend diplomatic relations to the new People’s Republic of China (PRC) and continued to recognize the Republic of China, now based on the island of Taiwan, as the government of China. In June 1950 the armed forces of the Peoples’ Democratic Republic of (North) Korea, a communist state, invaded the non-communist Republic of (South) Korea. Officials in Washington believed the attack to have been sponsored by Stalin in the Soviet Union and Mao in the PRC, and they ordered U.S. armed forces to Korea to repel the invasion. The United States secured the backing of the United Nations for a multi-national military force to fight against the North Koreans. The Korean War continued until July 1953 when an armistice restored a line partitioning Korea into a communist North and a non-communist South.

The Cold War promoted a climate of fear and resentment inside the United States. Anticommunists charged that spies and communist sympathizers in the U.S. government and important public institutions had aided the international communist movement. According to prominent anti-communists, the alleged disloyalty and outright sedition of these domestic communists or communist sympathizers had enabled communists to establish governments in Europe and Asia. American anticommunists claimed that domestic subversives worked to impose communist dictatorship in the United States. Richard Nixon rose to national prominence in 1948 when he accurately accused former State Department official Alger Hiss of having been a spy for the Soviet Union in the 1930s. Nixon’s pugnacious anticommunism helped him become vice president from 1953 to 1961. In 1950 Sen. Joseph McCarthy (R-Wis.) began a four-year campaign of unsubstantiated charges that high-ranking civilian and military officials were communist agents. The term “McCarthyism” came to mean unproven allegations of disloyalty or sedition which regularly led to the ruining of careers or suppression of unpopular points of view. As the historian Robert J. McMahon (2003:118) explained, during the Cold War “‘red baiting’ and guilt by association became common, if deplorable, tactics in local and national elections, trade union politics, and investigations of government employees, teachers, and members of the film industry, among others.”

Dwight D. Eisenhower won the presidential election in 1952 with suggestions that he would be more assertive than Truman had been in “rolling back” communist gains. At the same time, however, he reflected widespread unhappiness with the casualties and cost of the fighting in Korea, and he promised to end the war quickly. Once Eisenhower took office he embraced the broad outlines of Truman’s policy of containment, although he changed tactics to avoid direct ground wars with the Soviets or their allies. Competition between the United States and revolutionaries, inspired to a greater or lesser degree by Marxist ideas, spread to Latin America, the Middle East, and Africa. Eisenhower favored covert operations rather than direct military confrontation with the Soviet Union and its allies. The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) helped organize the overthrow of nationalist-led governments with varying degrees of sympathy to the Soviet Union in Iran in 1953, Guatemala in 1954, and the Congo in 1960.

Joseph Stalin died in March 1953 and Nikita Khrushchev emerged as the leader of the Soviet Union after a two-year power struggle. The Eisenhower administration adjusted to the new leadership in the Soviet Union by attempting to manage relations between the two countries in ways which maintained the Cold War rivalry but diminished the danger of a shooting war between them. In an effort to curb the costs of a large military, the Eisenhower administration shifted resources to the Air Force and announced a policy of “massive retaliation.” This military doctrine asserted that the United States would respond to future communist military

attacks like the one which began the Korean War by launching overwhelming, possibly nuclear, attacks against the Soviet Union. Eisenhower administration officials hoped that fears of massive retaliation would make Soviet leaders restrain their allies. Inside the United States, a growing community of defense intellectuals and nuclear strategists deplored the doctrine for not being a credible deterrent.

Relations between the United States and the Soviet Union underwent ups and downs for the remainder of Eisenhower's presidency. The leaders of the United States, the Soviet Union, and Great Britain had their first summit conference since 1945 in Geneva in July 1955. They discussed arms control, but reached no agreement. The personal atmosphere at the meeting was good, and the "spirit of Geneva" seemed to portend a mutual acknowledgment of the status quo in the Cold War. That status quo was tested in October 1956 when the Soviet Union sent its armed forces into Hungary to crush a rebellion against the pro-Soviet communist government there. The United States responded with radio broadcasts encouraging the Hungarian revolutionaries but refrained from a direct military confrontation with Soviet forces.

American fears of Soviet power grew during Eisenhower's second term. The arms race accelerated after the Soviet Union and the United States deployed nuclear-armed intercontinental ballistic missiles in 1958. Eisenhower himself correctly believed that the U.S. military power far surpassed that of the Soviets, but the public was not calmed by his reassurances. Eisenhower hosted Khrushchev at Camp David in 1959. The two leaders made tentative progress toward resolving strategic differences, but the goodwill did not last long. In May 1960 the Soviet Union shot down a CIA surveillance plane flying over Soviet territory. Khrushchev demanded that Eisenhower apologize for conducting such spy flights, which had gone on for five years. When the U.S. president declined, Khrushchev canceled a great-power summit in Paris.

## Regional Crises and the Vietnam War

The collapse of the Paris summit occurred in the midst of a U.S. presidential election campaign. Massachusetts Senator John F. Kennedy, the Democratic candidate, faced Vice President Richard M. Nixon, the Republican nominee. Both men promised to wage active Cold War against the Soviet Union and its allies. Kennedy was the more assertive of the two. He complained that the recent accession to power in Cuba of Fidel Castro represented a severe setback for the United States in the Cold War. He promised to augment U.S. conventional military forces so they would be better able to fight smaller "brushfire" wars outside of Europe. He advocated a more energetic cultural engagement to convince people in newly independent countries of Asia and Africa of the superiority of American values and institutions over those promoted by the Soviet Union.

Kennedy's Cold War militancy helped him win a narrow electoral victory. During the first half of his presidency, he embarked on several confrontational initiatives. In the year before his assassination, however, he shifted direction and sought to diminish tensions with the Soviet Union. In April 1961 Kennedy went forward with an invasion of Cuba planned during the Eisenhower administration. Castro's armed forces quickly defeated the assault at the Bay of Pigs by 1,500 CIA-trained Cuban exiles. Relations between the United States and the Soviet Union deteriorated in 1961 and 1962. Khrushchev insisted that the Western powers recognize East Germany's control over access to West Berlin. Kennedy responded with a call-up of military reserves and an expansion of the defense budget. East Germany followed these moves in August 1961 by constructing a wall preventing people from leaving East Berlin for West Berlin. The Berlin Wall remained standing until November 1989, its presence a constant reminder of communist control over Eastern Europe.



In the aftermath of the failure of the Bay of Pigs invasion, Kennedy approved CIA plans to assassinate the Cuban leader. Castro drew ever closer to the Soviet Union, and in 1962 asked Khrushchev to send military forces to Cuba to repel a possible U.S. invasion. The Soviet leader responded by installing intermediate range ballistic missiles capable of hitting the United States with nuclear weapons. During the Cuban missile crisis of October 1962, the Kennedy administration demanded that the Soviet Union stop its shipments of nuclear warheads to Cuba and remove its missiles from the island. After the U.S. Navy surrounded Cuba and stopped Soviet vessels en route, Khrushchev agreed to remove the missiles in return for U.S. promises not to invade Cuba.

The Cuban missile crisis brought the world as close as ever to a full-scale nuclear war. Historian John Lewis Gaddis (2005b: 78) observed that the crisis “persuaded everyone involved in it ... that the weapons each side had developed during the Cold War posed a greater threat to *both* sides than the United States and the Soviet Union did to each other.” The imminence of nuclear disaster encouraged leaders in both countries to try to diminish the danger of all-out war in 1963. They signed a treaty banning the testing of nuclear weapons above ground and in outer space and promised to work for a complete nuclear test ban and reductions in atomic weapons.

In the last year of his life, Kennedy also wrestled with the growing U.S. military commitment to the government of the Republic of (South) Vietnam. Since the late 1940s the United States had assisted first France then South Vietnam to fight against the forces of Ho Chi Minh, a Vietnamese nationalist who led the country’s communist party. By 1963 the United States had 16,000 military personnel stationed in South Vietnam, advising the government in its war against the National Liberation Front, a communist-led coalition aligned with Ho. Kennedy was a strong supporter of an independent, non-communist South Vietnam as a bulwark against Soviet or Chinese communist-inspired insurrections throughout Asia. By the fall of 1963, however, Kennedy had lost confidence in Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem’s ability to prevail in the war with the anti-government forces. Taking their cue from the American president, South Vietnamese military officers overthrew and murdered Diem on November 1, 1963. Kennedy undertook a reevaluation of Vietnam policy in the following three weeks, but he was assassinated on November 22 before he decided on future U.S. foreign policy toward Vietnam.

Lyndon B. Johnson, Kennedy’s successor as president, vowed to continue Kennedy’s policies at home and abroad. In foreign affairs that mission was nearly impossible to fulfill, because Kennedy was in the process of reassessing U.S. foreign policy. Johnson, without significant experience in foreign policy, relied on Kennedy’s principal foreign affairs advisers, and most of them remained committed to confronting the Soviet Union and its allies around the globe. Johnson expanded the buildup of U.S. military forces in Vietnam. In 1965 he decided with considerable misgivings that he needed to make Vietnam an American war. Otherwise, his principal military and foreign affairs advisers predicted, the North Vietnamese would defeat the government of South Vietnam. In 1965 the United States had over 100,000 military personnel fighting in Vietnam, a number that surpassed 500,000 by 1968. American casualties rose to more than 20,000 killed and continued to mount. Opposition to the war grew around the world as the war escalated with no end in sight. By 1967 the domestic Cold War consensus, which held that the United States needed to confront Soviet power, was dissolving.

The war in Vietnam cast a shadow over other aspects of foreign policy. In April 1965 Johnson ordered U.S. marines to the Caribbean nation of the Dominican Republic to prevent the return to power of a democratically elected president with leftist sympathies. The intervention in the political affairs of a Western Hemisphere nation contributed to a sense in many parts of the world that the United States was using fears of communist expansion as an excuse for the arrogant exercise of power. The Johnson administration also cut back on its predecessor’s

efforts to promote economic and social reform in the poorer countries of Latin America and the Caribbean. Johnson administration officials supported conservative governments, often dominated by military officers or members of the traditional land-owning classes, so long as they expressed anticommunist sentiments.

Despite its preoccupation with Vietnam, the Johnson administration hoped to continue progress toward arms control with the Soviet Union. The Soviet Communist Party ousted Khrushchev from power in 1964, partly because rivals believed he had recklessly provoked the United States during the Cuban missile crisis and then retreated in humiliation. His successors, Leonid Brezhnev and Alexei Kosygin, pursued both a more cautious foreign policy and a military buildup. In 1967 Johnson met Kosygin in New Jersey, and the two promised to reach an arms control agreement by the end of 1968. Negotiations went forward, but no treaty emerged, because of upheavals in Soviet-dominated Eastern Europe.

In the spring and summer of 1968, the communist government of Czechoslovakia embarked on an ambitious program of reforms which they called Socialism with a Human Face. By the summer of 1968, Czech leader Alexander Dubcek called for an end of one-party communist rule in his country. Brezhnev, now the undisputed leader of the Soviet Union, considered this to be an unacceptable challenge to Soviet control over Eastern Europe. As a result, he ordered the Red Army into Czechoslovakia to arrest Dubcek and to restore the authority of pro-Soviet Communists. The Soviets justified their intervention with the "Brezhnev Doctrine," which held that once a state had adopted a communist form of government it was the duty of the Soviet Union to make sure that it never abandoned it. Johnson reacted to the Soviet suppression of Czechoslovakia's attempt to move toward multiparty democracy by canceling a scheduled visit to the Soviet Union which was supposed to yield an arms control treaty.

Fighting and casualties in Vietnam reached their peak in 1968. Student protests erupted around the globe. The United States was rocked by the assassinations of civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr. and Senator Robert F. Kennedy, who sought the Democratic nomination for president. Nixon won the U.S. presidential election with promises to end the divisions which had wracked the country during the Johnson years. His foreign policy prescriptions were vague, but most people expected that he would continue his ardent anti-communism and support for the Vietnam War. To the surprise of nearly everyone, Nixon undertook major reversals in U.S. foreign policy designed to dampen tension with the communist world. Together with Henry Kissinger, his national security adviser and later secretary of state, Nixon embarked on a policy of détente, or relaxation of tensions, with the Soviet Union and China. Nixon and Brezhnev met three times at summits where they signed a series of arms control agreements and treaties. They agreed that their countries bore special responsibility to coordinate their international actions so to lessen the dangers of nuclear war.

Even more dramatic were Nixon's and Kissinger's efforts to end the twenty-year long estrangement between the United States and the PRC. Nixon believed that China was likely to become an ever-more important player on the international stage in the late twentieth century. The United States needed to deal with this new power rather than continue an increasingly ineffectual policy of isolation. Nixon visited China in 1972 for talks with Mao and Premier Zhou Enlai. They agreed that they would begin a process of mutual diplomatic recognition. They stated that Chinese on both sides of the Taiwan Straits affirmed that there was a single China. In 1979, during the administration of U.S. President Jimmy Carter and Chinese Communist Chairman Deng Xiaoping, the United States replaced its diplomatic ties with the Republic of China on Taiwan with an official ambassador to the PRC in Beijing.

Nixon and Kissinger also ended U.S. participation in the Vietnam War. Improvement in relations between the United States and the Soviet Union and the PRC diminished the importance of a non-communist Vietnam as a bulwark against communism. The United States left Vietnam slowly, however, because Nixon and Kissinger wanted to avoid the appearance



around the world that the North Vietnamese had defeated the U.S. militarily. In 1973, the United States and North Vietnam signed several agreements under which a ceasefire would occur in the fighting, prisoners of war would return to their home countries, U.S. forces would leave Vietnam, and North Vietnamese forces would remain in the South.

## Efforts to Defuse Superpower Tensions

Nixon's and Kissinger's dramatic changes in foreign policy captured public attention at home and around the world. They disrupted long-standing political alignments. American liberals who distrusted or even reviled Nixon for his rough anticommunist tactics supported détente and the opening to China. They opposed the often brutal way he conducted the war in Vietnam, but they were pleased when the war finally ended. Conservatives had opposite reactions, distrusting détente as acknowledgment of Soviet military superiority, the opening to China as a betrayal of Taiwan, and the end of the Vietnam War as an abandonment of allies in South Vietnam.

By 1974 some of the initial public enthusiasm for détente had diminished. Nixon and Kissinger made it clear to Soviet and Chinese leaders and the public that they had little interest in what happened inside the Soviet Union. Their apparent indifference to human rights helped forge a coalition against their policies. In 1974 Americans who still endorsed détente and better relations with China believed, largely incorrectly, that Kissinger, not Nixon, had been responsible for the less hostile stance toward communist governments. Nixon resigned in August as a result of the Watergate scandal. During the brief presidency of former Vice President Gerald R. Ford (1974–1977), détente unraveled more and the communists gained complete control of Vietnam.

Domestic opponents of better relations with the communist world pointed to the end of the Vietnam War as proof that revolutionaries would be emboldened around the world. Candidates who sought both the Democratic and Republican nominations for president in 1976 criticized Nixon's and Kissinger's foreign policies for different reasons. Jimmy Carter, the former governor of Georgia and the eventual Democratic nominee, assailed Nixon, Kissinger, and now Ford for turning a blind eye to human rights abuses in the Soviet Union and China. Former California Governor Ronald Reagan challenged Ford for the Republican presidential nomination. He criticized the arms control agreements Nixon had signed as "a one way street" which had led to the "loss of U.S. military supremacy" (Schulzinger 2010: 391).

Ford withstood Reagan's challenge for the nomination but lost the presidential election to Carter. One reason for Carter's victory was that Ford blundered in one of their televised debates by stating "there is no Soviet domination of Eastern Europe" (Schulzinger 2008: 276). Carter pounced on the remark by replying that the Poles or Czechs certainly felt that they were under communist domination. As president Carter initially pursued both a more accommodating and a more confrontational policy toward the Soviet Union. Early in his presidency he signaled a shift in U.S. foreign policy away from the Cold War because, he said, the United States had displayed an "inordinate fear of communism" since the end of the World War II (Schulzinger 2008: 278). Carter sought to expand the arms limitation treaties proposed by Nixon and Ford to reduce rather than simply maintain the numbers of missiles and warheads possessed by the Soviets and the United States. While Carter sought arms control with the Soviets, he also raised the prominence of human rights as a focus of U.S. foreign policy. He criticized the Soviet Union and the states of Eastern Europe as well as many traditional U.S. allies in the developing world, for suppressing the rights of their own people.

Carter's efforts to redirect the focus away from the Cold War toward great dialogue between the richer nations of the Northern Hemisphere and the poorer countries of the South

lost momentum in 1979. In February Islamic militants ousted the Shah of Iran from power and replaced him with an Islamic republic under the leadership of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. The new government of Iran was fiercely critical of the American role in the overthrow of the nationalist government in 1953. Khomeini characterized the United States the “Great Satan.” Oil prices soared in the aftermath of the Iranian revolution, which contributed to mounting inflation in the United States. These economic troubles, in turn, heightened the public sense that the Carter administration was ineffectual at home and abroad.

Among those most critical of the Carter administration’s foreign policy was a group of “neoconservatives,” many of whom were former liberals who had supported the Johnson administration’s escalation of the war in Vietnam and were distressed when most Democrats turned against the war. Some neoconservatives remained within the Democratic Party; more joined the Republicans. Whatever their partisan affiliation, neoconservatives were united in their disdain for Carter’s foreign policy by 1979. They joined with traditional conservatives in the Republican Party to oppose the arms control treaty Carter and Brezhnev signed in June 1979.

By the time the two leaders concluded that treaty, relations between the United States and the Soviet Union had badly deteriorated in some of the world’s poorest regions. The communist victory in the Vietnam War in 1975 did not, as some American supporters of the war effort predicted, lead to communist successes elsewhere in Southeast Asia. But the end of the Vietnam War did encourage Soviet leaders to give greater support to revolutionaries in the Horn of Africa, Southern Africa and Central America. The United States and the Soviet Union supported governments or movements in each of these areas for the next ten years.

The most dramatic events which ratcheted up Cold War tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union occurred in Iran and Afghanistan in late 1979. In the former, the Islamic revolution took a more radically anti-American tone, culminating in the seizure of the U.S. embassy and the holding of fifty-three Americans as hostages. The Carter administration froze Iranian assets and declared a trade embargo as it sought the safe return of the hostages. Meanwhile, in neighboring Afghanistan, a pro-Soviet government feared that the Islamic revolution might cross the border and threaten its hold on power. The Soviet Union also feared the power of radical Islam, so in December 1979 it sent its army into Afghanistan to prop up its weakening ally.

The Carter administration characterized the Soviet action as naked aggression, with some officials in Washington believing that it portended a Soviet effort to send its forces further west and south to control the oil of the Persian Gulf. Carter proclaimed the Soviet move into Afghanistan as “the gravest threat to peace since the Second World War” (Schulzinger 2008: 293). He initiated a number of measures—including withdrawal of the arms control treaty, a boycott of the summer 1980 Olympics in Moscow, an embargo of grain sales to the Soviet Union, draft registration for young men, a large increase in the defense budget, and military aid to Muslim insurgents fighting the Soviets. All of these measures were designed to force the Soviets out of Afghanistan, but none achieved their desired results.

Americans were in a sour mood as the 1980 presidential election approached. Hostages remained captive in Iran and the inflation of 1979 was accompanied by an economic recession and mounting unemployment. Reagan gained the Republican Party’s presidential nomination, and he criticized Carter across a broad front of domestic and international issues. Reagan was even more scathing in his denunciations of Carter’s foreign policies than he had been of Nixon’s and Kissinger’s in 1976. He gave Carter no credit for having denounced the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, because he said that Carter’s unwillingness to consider the use of military force in his first two years in office had led the Soviets to believe they faced no consequences for military adventures outside their homeland. Reagan also said that the success of a leftist revolution in Nicaragua and the Islamic revolution in Iran were proof that Carter

had let Moscow gain advantage in the Cold War. Reagan promised that he would attain “peace through strength;” the United States would force the Soviets to accept American terms in the conflict.

Reagan’s two terms as president included some of the harshest conflicts during the Cold War, but they also encompassed a warm friendship between the president of the United States and the leader of the Soviet Union and the approaching end of the conflict. The first three years of the Reagan administration (1981–1983) were years of Cold War confrontation and tension, just as one might have expected from Reagan’s anti-Soviet rhetoric of the 1970s and the 1980 presidential campaign. Reagan increased the U.S. defense budget from approximately \$270 billion per year to \$400 billion. He also reversed earlier presidents’ avoidance of harsh condemnations of the Soviet Union or communism and declared that the Soviet Union was an “evil empire” which would soon land in “the ash heap of history” (Schulzinger 2008: 295). Reagan ordered the installation of nuclear armed intermediate-range missiles in Western Europe. The hostile rhetoric and the military buildup generated international alarm that a nuclear war between the United States and the Soviet Union might occur. Huge public demonstrations demanding a freeze on the deployment of new nuclear weapons took place in Europe and the United States. Soviet–American relations hit their lowest point in decades in September 1983, when Soviet war planes shot down a Korean Airlines jet which had inadvertently strayed over Soviet territory. Reagan denounced the attack on the civilian airliner, which resulted in 269 casualties, as “an act of barbarism.” For their part, Soviet leaders speculated that the South Korean plane had deliberately entered Soviet territory in order to provoke them into a war.

Reagan also confronted governments and movements it believed aligned with the Soviet Union around the world. In Central America, the United States provided military aid to anti-communist counter revolutionaries, or “contras,” fighting against the Marxist Sandinista government that had come to power in Nicaragua in 1979. The United States also provided hundreds of millions of dollars of military aid to the conservative government of El Salvador fighting against leftist revolutionaries. Reagan administration officials believed that defeating revolutionaries in Central America would help erase the “Vietnam syndrome,” a fear of U.S. interventions in the developing world which they believed had paralyzed the Carter administration.

Domestic opponents of an increased American military presence in Central America also saw comparisons with Vietnam, and they did not like them. A bumper sticker popular with opponents of the Reagan administration’s policies in Central America read “El Salvador is Spanish for Vietnam” (Schulzinger 2008: 302). Eventually ceasefires ended conflicts in both countries. The Sandinistas remained in power in Nicaragua, but lost power in democratic elections in 1990. The anticommunist government remained in power in El Salvador. The Reagan administration also funneled millions of dollars in military equipment to Muslim fighters (the *mujahideen*) who were resisting the Soviet forces in Afghanistan. The mujahideen made life very difficult for the Soviets, downing their helicopters and killing more than 14,000 soldiers in the country’s harsh terrain. The Soviets, whose military power was exhausted by the decade-long conflict, eventually agreed to a ceasefire and withdrew its forces from the country in 1989.

## The Cold War’s Peaceful Demise

Reagan adopted a softer tone against the Soviets as he sought reelection in 1984. He spoke of his abhorrence of nuclear war and expressed an interest in eliminating all nuclear weapons throughout the world. He proposed the development of a nuclear missile defense system (the

Strategic Defense Initiative) which he offered to share with the Soviets. He directly told the Soviet public that American and Soviet citizens shared a common interest in avoiding war. The government of Soviet leader Yuri Andropov remained skeptical of Reagan's motives, and it thought any kind of missile defense would increase rather than diminish the danger of nuclear war. But by showing that he understood public anxieties over the danger of nuclear war, Reagan persuaded many American voters that he was not looking for a showdown with Moscow. He won an overwhelming reelection victory in 1984.

The second Reagan administration (1985–1989) witnessed a dramatic and completely unexpected turn as the United States and the Soviet Union ended the Cold War without resorting to direct military conflict. Mikhail Gorbachev, the new leader of the Soviet Union who took office in March 1985, bore much of the responsibility for the turn toward friendship and the thawing of the Cold War. At the relatively young age of fifty-four, Gorbachev represented a new generation of Soviet leadership. His contemporaries were university educated and had greater knowledge of political, economic, and social developments outside the Soviet Union country than their predecessors. Most importantly, the new generation of Soviet leaders had grown increasingly disappointed at their own country's stagnation and underdevelopment when compared with Western Europe, the United States, and the booming economies of East Asia. Gorbachev embarked on an ambitious program of *glasnost* and *perestroika* (openness and restructuring, respectively) to breathe new life into Soviet society and help its economy grow. Gorbachev believed that his ambitious reforms would work only if he could lift the crushing burden of military expenditures. To do that, he sought to reduce tensions with the United States and, possibly, end the Cold War.

Reagan played his part by responding positively to Gorbachev's offers to reduce tensions. The two men met five times—the most between any American president and Soviet leader—in Reagan's second term. Their most concrete achievement was the signing of an Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty in December 1987 which led to the removal of intermediate-range ballistic missiles from Europe and the western parts of the Soviet Union. The two men also formed a personal friendship, eventually agreeing to address each other as Ron and Mikhail. Enthusiastic crowds cheered Gorbachev as a man who was ending the Cold War when he visited Washington in 1987. Russian students lauded Reagan too when he visited Moscow State University in 1988 and extolled the virtues of free-market capitalism.

The Cold War was not yet officially over when George H.W. Bush succeeded Reagan as president in 1989. Indeed, Bush initially feared that Reagan may have been so charmed by Gorbachev that he had been too accommodating to Soviet interests. But by the fall of 1989, Bush and Secretary of State James A. Baker III understood that Gorbachev had set in motion far-reaching changes both inside the Soviet Union and in the Communist-led states of Eastern Europe.

Most notably, Gorbachev reversed the “Brezhnev Doctrine” of 1968 under which the Soviet Union had asserted its unilateral right to intervene militarily in countries that comprised the Soviet bloc in order to prevent them from abandoning communism. This change coincided with popular demands for free institutions and the end to one-party rule throughout Eastern Europe. Anti-communist protest marches took place in East Germany in the fall of 1989. This surge in popular activism culminated in East Germany's decision to allow its citizens to cross into West Berlin for the first time since the construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961. Thousands of jubilant Germans and people of other nations climbed atop the wall on the night of November 9, 1989, and began chipping away at the ugly concrete. The fall of the Berlin Wall marked the symbolic end of the Cold War.

Bush helped the transition from communism to democracy in Eastern Europe go smoothly by working calmly with Gorbachev. He assured the Soviet leader that the United States did not want to take advantage of the Eastern European revolutions by undermining the Soviet

Union. In fact, the Soviet Union was well on its way to self-destruction after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Demands rose for an end to one-party rule in the Soviet Union. Nations which had been forcibly included in the Soviet Union since its establishment in 1921 insisted upon independence. Gorbachev proved unable to resist these movements, and on December 25, 1991, he announced the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The Cold War had officially ended.

## Conclusion

The Cold War ended much more suddenly than nearly anyone expected. In its aftermath historians have asked why it persisted as long as it did and why it ended so abruptly. The answer to the first is that both the United States and the Soviet Union promoted their conflicting visions of world order from the 1940s through the 1980s. They persisted in efforts to consolidate the American “empire of liberty” and the Soviet “empire of justice” during long periods of intense competition and briefer ones of détente or relation of tension.

The historian Melvyn P. Leffler (2007: 452–453) has written that “U.S. and Soviet leaders thought they represented superior ways of organizing human existence. The men in the Kremlin sincerely believed they were reconfiguring human society and eradicating human exploitation.... The men in the White House had a different vision of how history should unfold. Their aim was to fashion a world along the lines of democratic capitalism.... Individual rights and private property were the keys to human advancement.” Only when Gorbachev took power and recognized that his country’s command economy could not compete with the West did opportunities open to end the conflict. Presidents Reagan and Bush played a crucial role in this outcome by joining with Gorbachev, despite his continued embrace of communism as an instrument of equality and justice. Nonetheless, as Fischer (2010: 88) noted, the role of the two presidents was “clearly secondary. Reagan became more conciliatory, but Gorbachev revolutionized his country’s foreign policy. Bush supported Gorbachev, but his propensity for prudence paled in comparison to Gorbachev’s bold initiatives.”

Taken as a whole, the Cold War profoundly altered the course of U.S. foreign relations and America’s perceptions of its role in the world. The conflict solidified a process, begun more than fifty years before, of continuing and deep involvement in international affairs. In short, American foreign policy went global with the Cold War. Throughout the period U.S. policy makers believed it was necessary for the United States to exert its influence in most regions of the world. A broad consensus on the need to confront the Soviet Union persisted in American politics during a large part of the era. That consensus was mostly voluntary, but occasionally it was enforced in ways which limited the scope of political debate, as in the case of angry disagreements over the Vietnam War. The attitudes of policy makers and the general public fluctuated from profound anxiety that the Soviet Union was gaining an edge in the global balance of power to soaring triumphalism based upon the superiority of American values. The conflict also elevated the role and influence of the U.S. military in American politics, the economy, and civil society.

In the twenty years since the end of the Cold War, Americans have debated its meaning and its legacy. There is general agreement that contemporary American life was shaped by the Cold War—whether that was for better or worse is a matter of dispute. Similarly, while it is obvious that the United States emerged the victor in the struggle, observers disagree over whether victory was worth the physical and monetary costs. Some believe the U.S. victory validated Western values of individual freedom, representative government, and the rule of law—a perspective that leads them to conclude that the United States is obliged in the post-Cold War era to promote democracy and freedom in the contemporary world. For still others, this sense of triumphalism is dangerous because it has led the United States into prolonged,

expensive, and unpopular international interventions in the 1990s and into the twenty-first century.

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