

(Redirected from [Cold war](#))

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*For other uses, please see [Cold War \(disambiguation\)](#).*

The **Cold War** was the period of protracted conflict and competition between the [United States](#) and the [Soviet Union](#) and their allies from the late 1940s until the late 1980s. The main U.S. allies were Western Europe, [Turkey](#), [Japan](#) and [Canada](#). The main Soviet allies were Eastern Europe and (until the [Sino-Soviet Split](#)) [China](#). Throughout the period, the rivalry between the two [superpowers](#) was played out in multiple arenas: military coalitions, ideology, a massive conventional and [nuclear arms race](#), and [proxy wars](#).

In 1947 the term "Cold War" was introduced by Americans [Bernard Baruch](#) and [Walter Lippmann](#) to describe emerging tensions between the two former wartime allies.<sup>[1]</sup> There never was a major battle between the U.S. and the Soviet Union. But there was a half-century of military buildup, and political battles for support around the world, including major proxy wars.

Although the U.S. and the Soviet Union had been wartime allies against [Nazi Germany](#), the two sides differed on how to reconstruct the postwar world even before the end of the Second World War. Over the following decades, the Cold War spread outside Europe to every region of the world, as the U.S. sought the "[containment](#)" of [communism](#) and forged numerous alliances to this end, particularly in Western Europe, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia.

There were repeated crises that threatened to escalate into world wars but never did, notably the [Korean War](#) (1950-1953), the [Cuban Missile Crisis](#) (1962), and the [Vietnam War](#) (1964-1975). There were also periods when tension was reduced as both sides sought [détente](#). The Cold War ended in the late 1980s following the launching of [Mikhail Gorbachev](#)'s reform programs, [perestroika](#) and [glasnost](#). The Soviet Union consequently ceded power over Eastern Europe and dissolved in 1991.

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## [\[edit\]](#) History

## [\[edit\]](#) Origins

*Main article: [Origins of the Cold War](#)*

The challenge of Nazi Germany forced the Western [Allies](#) and the Soviets into wartime cooperation. However, from the start, the alliance between the Soviet Union, the world's first Communist state, the United States, the capitalist world's leading economic power, and the [United Kingdom](#), the world's largest colonial empire, were marked by mutual distrust and ideological tension.

The Wisconsin school of interpretation argues that the U.S. and Russia were economic rivals that made them natural adversaries regardless of ideology.<sup>[2]</sup> [Walter LaFeber](#) argues the U.S. and [Imperial Russia](#) became rivals by 1900 over the development of [Manchuria](#). Russia, unable to compete industrially with the U.S., sought to close off parts of East Asia to trade with other colonial powers. Meanwhile, the U.S demanded open competition for markets.<sup>[3]</sup>

### History of the Cold War

[Origins](#)  
[1947–1953](#)  
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The ideological clash between Communism and capitalism that began in 1917 following the [Russian Revolution](#) was the first event that would make Russian-American relations a matter of major concern to leaders in each country.<sup>[4]</sup> In [World War I](#), the U.S., Britain, and Russia had been allies until the [Bolsheviks](#) seized power in 1917. After winning a civil war (see [Russian Civil War](#)), the Bolsheviks proclaimed a worldwide challenge to [capitalism](#). (Fred Halliday)

The U.S. finally recognized the Soviet Union diplomatically in 1933. But the period of prewar diplomacy also left both sides wary of the other's intentions and motives in World War II. Each feared that the other might pull out of the war effort and make a separate settlement with Germany. Moscow recalled Western appeasement of [Adolf Hitler](#) after the signing of the [Munich Pact](#) in 1936. U.S. President [Franklin D. Roosevelt](#) feared [Joseph Stalin](#) would once more make a settlement with Germany, as he had done in August 1939 with the [German-Soviet Non-aggression Pact](#). (LaFeber 1991) From 1941 to 1945, the alliance was only a temporary aberration in the post-1890s relationship between Russia and America. (LaFeber 1991)

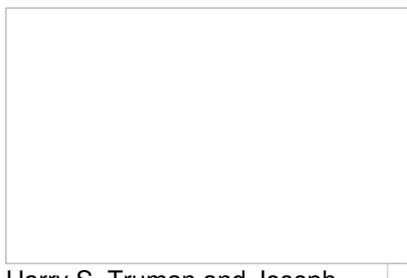
During the war, the Soviets were deeply suspicious of the U.S. military tactics and strategies. The Soviets believed at the time, and charged throughout the Cold War, that the British and Americans intentionally delayed the opening of a second front against Germany. (Gaddis, 151) As early as July 1941, Stalin had asked the UK to invade northern France, but the British were in no position to carry out the request. (Gaddis, 149) The second front was ultimately constituted on June 6, 1944, or [D-Day](#). The Soviets suspected that the Anglo-Americans had decided to allow the Russians to bear the brunt of the war effort, but would intervene at the last minute to influence the peace settlement and dominate Europe. (Gaddis, 151) Historians such as [John Lewis Gaddis](#) dispute this claim, citing other military and strategic calculations for the timing of the Normandy invasion. (Gaddis, 151-153) But Soviet perceptions—or misperceptions—of the West left an undercurrent of tensions and hostility between the Allied powers.

Moreover, both sides held very dissimilar concepts of establishing postwar security. Americans tended to understand security in situational terms, assuming that if U.S.-style governments and markets were established as widely as possible, states could resolve their differences peacefully through [international organizations](#). (Gaddis, 176) The key to the U.S. vision of security was a postwar world shaped according to the principles laid out in the [Atlantic Charter](#) in 1941—a liberal international system based on free trade and open markets. This vision would require a rebuilt capitalist Europe with a healthy Germany at its center that could again serve as a hub in world affairs. (LaFeber 1991) It would also require U.S. economic and political leadership of the postwar world. Europe needed U.S. assistance to rebuild their domestic production and to finance their international trade. The U.S. was the only world power not economically devastated by the fighting. By the end of the war, the U.S. produced around fifty percent of the world's industrial goods. (LaFeber 1991)

Soviet leaders, however, tended to understand security in terms of space. (Gaddis, 176) This reasoning was conditioned by Russia's historical experiences, given the frequency with which their country had been invaded over the previous 150 years. (Gaddis, p. 176) The experiences of the Second World War were particularly dramatic for the Russians. The Soviet Union suffered unprecedented devastation as a result of the Nazi onslaught, and over 20 million Soviet citizens died during the war. Tens of thousands Soviet cities, towns, and villages were leveled; and 30,100 Soviet factories were destroyed. <sup>[5]</sup> In order to prevent a similar assault in the future, Stalin was determined to use the [Red Army](#) to control [Poland](#), dominate the Balkans, and destroy Germany's capacity for another war. However Stalin's strategy risked confrontation with the much more powerful United States.

At the [Yalta Conference](#) in February 1945, the Allies attempted to define the framework for a postwar settlement in Europe. The Allies could not reach firm agreements on the crucial questions: the occupation of Germany, postwar reparations from Germany, and loans. No final consensus was reached on Germany, other than to agree to a Soviet request for reparations totalling \$10 billion "as a basis for negotiations." (Gaddis, 164) Debates over the composition of Poland's postwar government were also acrimonious. (LaFeber 2002, 15)

Following the Allied victory in May, the Soviets effectively occupied the countries of Eastern Europe; and the U.S. occupied much of Western Europe. In occupied Germany the U.S. and the Soviet Union—the world's two [superpowers](#), along with France and Britain, established zones of occupation and a loose framework for four-power control.



Harry S. Truman and Joseph Stalin meeting at the [Potsdam Conference](#) on July 18, 1945. From left to right, first row: Stalin, Truman, Soviet Ambassador [Andrei Gromyko](#), Secretary of State [James F. Byrnes](#), and Soviet Foreign Minister [Vyacheslav Molotov](#). Second row: Truman confidant [Harry Vaughan \[2\]](#), Russian interpreter [Charles Bohlen](#), Truman naval aide [James K.](#)

[Vardaman, Jr.](#), and [Charles Griffith Ross](#) (partially obscured) [3].

At the [Potsdam Conference](#) starting in late July, serious differences emerged over the future development of Germany and Eastern Europe.<sup>[6]</sup> At Potsdam, the U.S. was represented by a new president, [Harry S. Truman](#), who on April 12 succeeded to the office upon Roosevelt's death. Truman was unaware of Roosevelt's plans for postwar engagement with Soviet Union, and generally uninformed about foreign policy and military matters. (Schmitz) Therefore, the new president was initially reliant upon a set of advisers, including Ambassador to the Soviet Union [Averell Harriman](#), Secretary of War [Henry L. Stimson](#), and his own choice for secretary of state, [James F. Byrnes](#). This group tended to take a harder line toward Moscow than had Roosevelt. (Schmitz) Administration officials favoring cooperation with the Soviet Union and incorporation of socialist economies into a world trade system were marginalized.

One week after the Potsdam Conference ended, the [atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki](#) added to Soviet distrust of the United States. Shortly following the attacks, Stalin protested to U.S. officials when Truman offered the Soviets little real influence in [occupied Japan](#). (LaFeber 2002, p. 28)

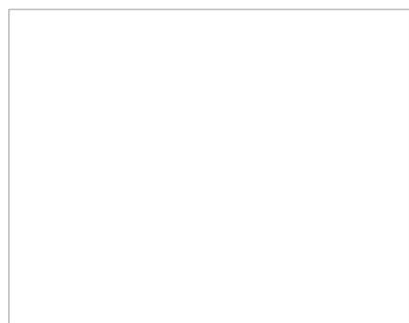
In February 1946, [George F. Kennan](#)'s "Long Telegram" from Moscow helped articulate the growing hard line against the Soviets. (Schmitz) The telegram argued that the Soviet Union was motivated by both traditional Russian imperialism and [Marxist](#) ideology, and that Soviet behavior was inherently expansionist and paranoid, posing a threat to the United States and its allies. Later writing as "Mr. X" in his article "The Sources of Soviet Conduct" in [Foreign Affairs](#) (July 1947), Kennan drafted the classic argument for adopting a policy of "containment" toward the Soviet Union.

A few weeks after the release of the "Long Telegram," former British Prime Minister [Winston Churchill](#) delivered his famous "Iron Curtain" speech in Fulton, Missouri. The speech called for an Anglo-American alliance against the Soviets, whom he accused of establishing an "iron curtain" from "Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic." (Schmitz)

On September 6, 1946 James F. Byrnes made a speech in [Germany](#) repudiating the [Morgenthau Plan](#), as well as warning the Soviets that the U.S. intended to maintain a military presence in Europe indefinitely. (see [Restatement of Policy on Germany](#)) As Byrnes admitted a month later "The nub of our program was to win the German people . . . it was a battle between us and Russia over minds. . . ." [7]

## **[edit]** "Containment" to the Korean War (1947-1953)

*Main article: [Cold War \(1947-1953\)](#)*



Truman delivering the Truman Doctrine on March 12, 1947

By 1947, Truman's advisors worried time was running out to counter the influence of the Soviet Union. (Schmitz) In Europe, postwar economic recovery was faltering; shortages of food and other essential consumer goods were common. Truman's advisors feared the Soviet Union sought to weaken the position of the U.S. in a period of postwar confusion and collapse.

The event that spurred Truman into formally announcing the policy of "[containment](#)" was the British government's announcement in February 1947 that it could no longer afford to finance the Greek monarchical-military regime in its civil war against communist-led insurgents. (see [Greek Civil War](#)) Rather than viewing Britain's pullout from Greece as the related to a civil conflict revolving around domestic issues, U.S. policymakers mistakenly interpreted it as a Soviet effort; the insurgents were helped by [Josip Broz Tito's Yugoslavia](#), not Moscow. (LaFeber 1991) Secretary of State [Dean Acheson](#) accused the Soviet Union of conspiracy against the Greek royalists in an effort to 'expand' into the Middle East, Asia, and Africa; and in March 1947, the administration unveiled the "[Truman Doctrine](#)." It "must be the policy of the United States," Truman declared, "to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or outside pressures."

Truman rallied Americas to spend \$400 million to intervene in the civil war in Greece in his famous Truman Doctrine speech. In order to mobilize an unfriendly [Republican](#) Congress, the [Democratic](#) president painted the conflict as a contest between "free" peoples and "totalitarian" regimes, thus dramatically heightening the rhetorical stakes of the conflict. (LaFeber 1991) By aiding Greece, Truman set a precedent for U.S. aid to regimes no matter how repressive and corrupt, that request help to fight communists. (LaFeber 1991)

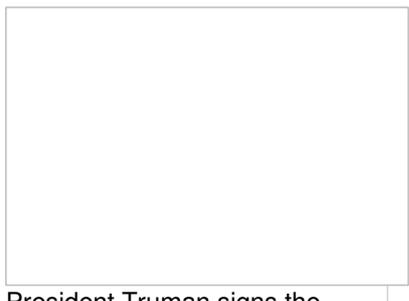
Without the assistance of huge capital resources to rebuild industry transferred from the United States, Western European economies failed to recover from the enormous wartime destruction of the region's infrastructure. Meanwhile, Communist parties were winning large votes in free elections in countries such as France and Italy. American policymakers worried that economic conditions in Western Europe might deteriorate to the point that communist parties could seize power through free elections or coups. (Gaddis 186) Some

U.S. policymakers also feared that their own economy might suffer without restoring effective demand for their exports in Western Europe. (LaFeber 2002, 68)

For U.S. policymakers, threats to Europe's balance of power were not necessarily military ones, but a political and economic challenge. (Schmitz) George Kennan helped summarize the problem at the State Department Planning Staff in May 1947: "Communist activities" were not "the root of the difficulties of Western Europe" but rather "the disruptive effects of the war on the economic, political, and social structure of Europe."<sup>[8]</sup> Rather, the Communists were "exploiting the European crisis" to seize power. (Kennan, 1967)

In June, following the recommendations of the State Department Planning Staff, the Truman Doctrine was complemented by the [Marshall Plan](#), a pledge of economic assistance aimed at rebuilding the Western political-economic system and countering perceived threats to Europe's balance of power, which the U.S. had gone to war to restore, from the radical left. (Gaddis 186)

The Truman administration decided that economic recovery in Europe could not go forward without the reconstruction of the German industrial base on which it had previously had been dependent. In July, Truman thoroughly rejected the punitive Morgenthau plan [JCS 1067](#), which had directed the U.S. forces of occupation in Germany to "take no steps looking toward the economic rehabilitation of Germany." It was replaced by JCS 1779, which instead stressed that "[a]n orderly, prosperous Europe requires the economic contributions of a stable and productive Germany."



President Truman signs the National Security Act Amendment of [1949](#) with guests in the Oval Office.

Also in July, Truman also reorganized the U.S. government to fight the Cold War. The [National Security Act of 1947](#), signed by Truman on July 26, created a unified [Department of Defense](#), the [Central Intelligence Agency](#) (CIA), and the [National Security Council](#). These would become the main bureaucracies for U.S. policy in the Cold War. (Zachary Karabell)

The twin policies of the Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan led to billions in economic and military aid to Western Europe and Greece and Turkey. With U.S. assistance, the Greek military won the civil war, and the [Christian Democrats](#) in Italy defeated the powerful [Communist-Socialist](#) alliance in the [elections of 1948](#). (Zachary Karabell)

The U.S. consolidated its new role as leader of the West. After Stalin retaliated against Western moves to reunite western Germany by blocking western access to [West Berlin](#), Truman maintained supply lines to the enclave by flying supplies over the blockade during 1948-1949. (see [Berlin Blockade](#)) The U.S. formally allied itself to the Western European states in the [North Atlantic Treaty](#) of 1949, creating the [North Atlantic Treaty Organization](#) (NATO). Stalin countered by tying together the economies of the Eastern bloc in a Soviet-led version of the Marshall Plan and exploding the first Soviet atomic device in August 1949. Stalin countered by tying together the economies of the Eastern bloc in a Soviet-led version of the Marshall Plan, the [Council for Mutual Economic Assistance](#) (COMECON), and exploding the first Soviet atomic device in August 1949. (LaFeber 1991)

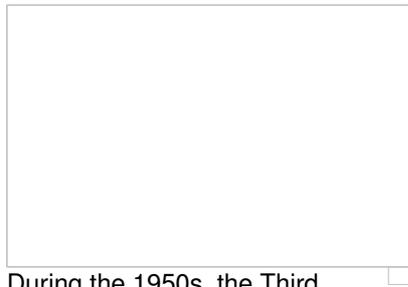
The U.S. took the lead in establishing the West Germany from the three Western zones of occupation in 1949. (Peter Byrd) To counter the Western reorganization of Germany, the Soviet Union proclaimed its zone of occupation in Germany as the [German Democratic Republic](#) in 1949. (Peter Byrd) In the early 1950s, the U.S. worked for the rearmament of West Germany and its full membership of NATO in 1955. (Byrd)

In 1949 Mao's Red Army defeated the U.S.-backed [Kuomintang](#) regime in China. Shortly afterward, the Soviet Union concluded an alliance with the new [People's Republic of China](#). Confronted with the Chinese Revolution and the end of the U.S. atomic monopoly in 1949, the Truman administration quickly moved to escalate and expand the "containment" policy. (LaFeber 1991) In a secret 1950 document, [NSC-68](#), Truman administration officials proposed to reinforce pro-Western alliance systems and quadruple defense spending. (LaFeber 1991)

Afterwards, U.S. officials moved to expand "containment" into Asia, Africa, and Latin America. (Schmitz) At the time, revolutionary nationalist movements, often led by Communist parties, were fighting against the restoration of Europe's colonial empires in Southeast Asia. The U.S. formalized an alliance with Japan in early 1950s, guaranteeing Washington long-term military bases; and brought other states, including Australia, New Zealand, Thailand, and the Philippines, within a series of alliances. (Byrd)

To Stalin's surprise, Truman committed U.S. forces to drive back the North Koreans. (LaFeber 1991) In 1953 the [Korean War](#) ended in stalemate. But the U.S. gradually became entangled in another civil war. In Vietnam, the U.S. supported the [South Vietnamese](#) government against [North Vietnam](#), which was backed by the Soviet Union and China. (Byrd)

**[edit] Crisis and escalation (1953-1962)**



During the 1950s, the Third World emerged as key arena of of Cold War competition. The May 1954 [Battle of Dien Bien Phu](#) was the final battle in the [First Indochina War](#) between France and pro-independence nationalists, but laid the groundwork for U.S. involvement in the region.

In 1953 changes in political leadership on both sides shifted the dynamic of the Cold War. (Zachary Karabell)[Dwight D. Eisenhower](#) was inaugurated president in January 1953. During the last 18 months of the Truman administration, the U.S. defense budget had quadrupled; and Eisenhower resolved to reduce military spending by brandishing the United States' nuclear superiority while contining to fight the Cold War effectively. (LaFeber 1991) In March Joseph Stalin died, and the Soviets, now led by [Nikita Khrushchev](#), moved away from Stalinist terror. (Zachary Karabell)

Eisenhower's secretary of state, [John Foster Dulles](#) initiated a "New Look" for the "containment" strategy, calling for a greater reliance on nuclear weapons to U.S. enemies. (Zachary Karabell) Dulles also enunciated the doctrine of "massive retaliation," threatening a severe U.S response to any Soviet aggression. Possessing nuclear superiority, for example, Eisenhower curtailed Soviet threats to intervene in the Middle East during the 1956 [Suez Crisis](#). (LaFeber 1991)

There was a slight relaxation of tensions after Stalin's death in 1953, but the Cold War in Europe remained an uneasy armed truce.<sup>[9]</sup> U.S. troops seemed stationed indefinitely in West Germany and Soviet forces seemed indefinitely stationed throughout Eastern Europe. To counter West German rearmament, the Soviets established a formal alliance with the Eastern European Communist states termed the Warsaw Pact Treaty Organization or [Warsaw Pact](#) in 1955. (Peter Byrd) In 1956, the status quo was briefly threatened in Hungary, when the Soviets invaded rather than allow the Hungarians to move out of their orbit. (see [Hungarian Revolution of 1956](#)) Berlin remained divided and contested. In 1961, the East Germans erected the "[Berlin Wall](#)" to prevent the movement of East Berliners into West Berlin.

In the U.S., Wisconsin senator [Joseph McCarthy](#) emerged as an influential proponent of a hard-line stance on the Cold War. Although the president quietly deplored his demagoguery, the senator exploited anti-Soviet sentiment when alleging a communist conspiracy to take over the U.S. government, leading to a massive political witch-hunt.

During the 1950s, the Third World was an increasingly important arena of Cold War competition. After the Second World War, the U.S. emerged as the predominant power in the Third World, filling the vacuum of the old imperial hegemony of its principal Cold War allies—the traditional Western European colonial powers (particularly the UK, France, and the Netherlands).<sup>[10]</sup> However, nationalists in many [postcolonial](#) states were often unsympathetic to the Western bloc. (Hobsbawm, 227) Adjusting to decolonization, meanwhile, was a difficult process economically and psychologically for European powers; and NATO suffered, as it included all the world's major colonial empires.<sup>[11]</sup>

Nationalist movements in some countries and regions, notably [Guatemala](#), [Iran](#), the [Philippines](#), and [Indochina](#) were often allied with communist groups—or at least were perceived in the West to be allied with communists.<sup>[12]</sup> In this context, the U.S. and the Soviet Union increasingly competed for influence by proxy in the Third World as [decolonization](#) gained momentum in the 1950s and early 1960s. The U.S. government utilized the CIA in order to a remove string of unfriendly Third World governments and to support others. (Karabell) The U.S. used the CIA to overthrow governments suspected by Washington of turning pro-Soviet, including Iran's first democratically elected government under Prime Minister [Mohammed Mossadegh](#) in 1953 (see [Operation Ajax](#)) and Guatemala's democratically-elected president [Jacobo Arbenz Guzmán](#) in 1954 (see [Operation PBSUCCESS](#)) Between 1954 and 1961, the U.S. sent economic aid and military advisors to stem the collapse of South Vietnam's pro-Western regime. (LaFeber 1991)



The Brioni Declaration, [July 19, 1956](#). From left to right: [Gamal Abdel Nasser](#), [Josip Broz Tito](#), and [Jawaharlal Nehru](#).

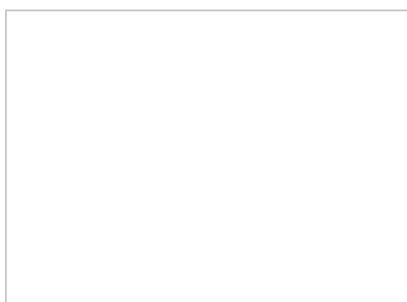
Many emerging nations of Asia, Africa, and Latin America rejected the pressure to choose sides in the East-West competition. In 1955, at the [Bandung Conference](#) in Indonesia dozens of Third World governments resolved to stay out of the Cold War. The consensus reached at Bandung culminated with the creation of the [Non-Aligned Movement](#) in 1961. (Karabell) Meanwhile, Khrushchev broadened Moscow's policy to establish ties with [India](#) and other key neutral states. Independence movements in the Third World transformed the postwar order into a more pluralistic world of decolonized African and Middle Eastern nations and of rising nationalism in Asia and Latin America. (LaFeber 1991)

During the 1950s, the U.S. and the USSR pursued nuclear rearmament and developed long-range weapons with which they could strike the territory of the other. (Peter Byrd) The Soviets developed their own [hydrogen bomb](#) and, in 1957, launched the first earth satellite. However, the period after 1956 marked by serious setbacks for the Soviet Union, most notably the breakdown of the Sino-Soviet alliance. (see [Sino-Soviet Split](#)) Before Khrushchev's ouster in 1964, the Soviets focused on a bitter rivalry with Mao's China for leadership of the global communist movement.

The [nuclear arms race](#) brought the two superpowers to the brink of nuclear war. Khrushchev formed an alliance with [Fidel Castro](#) after the Cuban Revolution in 1959. In 1962, President [John F. Kennedy](#) responded to the installation of nuclear missiles in Cuba with a naval blockade—a show of force that brought the world close to nuclear war. <sup>[13]</sup> The [Cuban Missile Crisis](#) showed that neither superpower was ready to use nuclear weapons for fear of the other's retaliation, and thus of [mutually assured destruction](#). The aftermath of the crisis led to the first efforts at nuclear disarmament and improving relations. (Palmowski)

## **[edit] From confrontation to détente (1962-1979)**

*Main article: [Cold War \(1962-1979\)](#)*



On April 29, 1975, the last U.S. helicopters leave Saigon (now [Ho Chi Minh city](#)) as Vietnam is reunited, marking the final defeat of U.S. forces in the [Vietnam War](#).

In the course of the 1960s and 1970s, both the U.S. and the Soviet Union struggled to adjust to a new, more complicated pattern of international relations in which the world was no longer by the two superpowers and divided into into two clearly opposed blocs. <sup>[14]</sup> Since the beginning of the postwar period, Western Europe and Japan rapidly recovered from the destruction of World War II and sustained strong economic growth through the 1950s and 1960s, increasing their strength compared to the United States. As a result of the [1973 oil crisis](#), combined with the growing influence of Third World alignments such as the [Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries](#) (OPEC) and the Non-Aligned Movement, less-powerful countries had more room to assert their independence and often showed themselves resistant to pressure from either superpower. (EB) Moscow, meanwhile, was forced to turn its attention inward to deal with the Soviet Union's deep-seated domestic economic problems. During this period, Soviet leaders such as [Alexei Kosygin](#) and [Leonid Brezhnev](#) embraced the notion of détente. (Karabell)

Nevertheless, but both superpowers resolved to reinforce their global leadership. Both the Soviet Union and the United States struggled to stave off challenges to their leadership in their own regions. President [Lyndon B. Johnson](#) landed 22,000 troops in the [Dominican Republic](#), citing the threat of the emergence of a Cuban-style revolution in Latin America. (see [Operation Power Pack](#)) (LaFeber 1991) In Eastern Europe, the Soviets in 1968 crushed the [Prague Spring](#) reform movement in [Czechoslovakia](#) that might have threatened to take

the country out of the Warsaw Pact.

The U.S. continued to spend heavily on supporting friendly Third World regimes in Asia. Conflicts in peripheral regions and client states—most prominently in Vietnam—continued. (Calhoun) Johnson stationed 575,000 troops in Southeast Asia to defeat the [National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam](#) (NLF) and their North Vietnamese allies, but his costly policy weakened the U.S. economy and, by 1975, ultimately culminated in a humiliating defeat of the world's most powerful superpower at the hands of one of the world's poorest nations. Brezhnev, meanwhile, faced far more daunting challenges in reviving the Soviet economy, which was declining in part because of heavy military expenditures. (LaFeber 1991)

Although indirect conflict between Cold War powers continued through the late 1960s and early 1970s, tensions began to ease, as the period of [détente](#) began. (Palmowski) The Chinese had sought improved relations with the U.S. in order to gain advantage over the Soviets. In February 1972, [Richard Nixon](#) traveled Beijing and met with [Mao Zedong](#) and [Chou En-Lai](#). Nixon and [Henry Kissinger](#) then announced a stunning rapprochement with Mao's China.



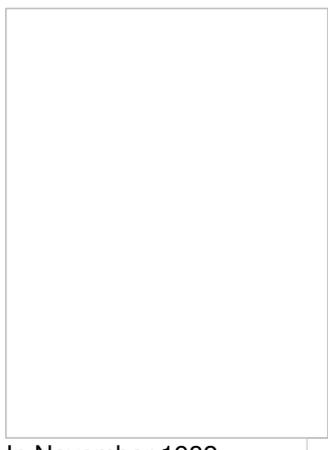
Brezhnev and Nixon talk during Brezhnev's June 1973 visit to Washington—a high-water mark in détente between the United States and the Soviet Union.

Later, in June, Nixon and Kissinger met with Soviet leaders in Moscow, and announced the first of the [Strategic Arms Limitation Talks](#), aimed at limiting the development of costly antiballistic missiles and offensive nuclear missiles. (Karabell) Between 1972 and 1974, the two sides also agreed to strengthen their economic ties. (LaFeber 1991) Meanwhile, these developments coincided with the "[Ostpolitik](#)" of West German Chancellor [Willy Brandt](#). Other agreements were concluded to stabilize the situation in Europe, culminating in the [Helsinki Accords](#) signed by the [Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe](#) in 1975.

However, the détente of the 1970s was short-lived. The economic pact between Nixon and Brezhnev was limited so much by the U.S. Congress that the Soviets repudiated it in 1975. (LaFeber 1991) Indirect conflict between the superpowers continued through this period of détente in the Third World, particularly during political crises in the Middle East (see [Yom Kippur War](#)), Chile (see [Chilean coup of 1973](#)), and Angola (see [Angolan Civil War](#)). While President Jimmy Carter tried to place another limit on the arms race with a [SALT II](#) agreement in 1979, his efforts were undercut other events that year, including the [Iranian Revolution](#) and the [Nicaraguan Revolution](#), which both ousted pro-U.S. regimes, and his retaliation against Soviet intervention in Afghanistan in December. (LaFeber 1991)

## [\[edit\]](#) The "Second Cold War" (1980-1985)

*Main article: [Cold War \(1979-1985\)](#)*



In November 1982 American ten-year-old [Samantha Smith](#) wrote a letter to the Soviet leader [Yuri Andropov](#) expressing her fear of nuclear war, and pleading with him to work toward peace. Surprisingly, Andropov himself replied,

and gave her a personal invitation to visit the country, which she accepted. Samantha Smith's visit was one of few prominent attempts to improve relations between the superpowers during Andropov's brief rule from 1982-1984 at a dangerously low point in U.S.-Soviet relations. Above appears a cover of her book about the experience.

The term "second Cold War" has been used by historians to refer to the period of intensive reawakening of Cold War tensions in the early 1980s. (Halliday) In 1980 [Ronald Reagan](#) defeated [Jimmy Carter](#), vowing to increase military spending and confront the Soviets everywhere. (LaFeber 1991) Both Reagan and Britain's new prime minister, [Margaret Thatcher](#), denounced the Soviet Union in ideological terms that rivaled that of the worst days of the Cold War in the late 1940s. (Byrd)

Reagan spent \$2.2 trillion for the military over eight years. Military spending, combined with the legacy of the economic structural problems of the 1970s, transformed the U.S. from the world's leading creditor in 1981 to the world's leading debtor. (LaFeber 1991) Tensions intensified in the early 1980s when Reagan installed U.S. cruise missiles in Europe and announced his experimental "[Strategic Defense Initiative](#)" to shoot down missiles in mid-flight. Reagan also imposed economic sanctions to protest the suppression of the opposition [Solidarity](#) movement in Poland.

U.S. domestic public concerns about intervening in foreign conflicts persisted from the end of the Vietnam War. (LaFeber, 323) But Reagan did not encounter major public opposition to his foreign policies. The Reagan administration emphasized the use of quick, low cost [counterinsurgency](#) tactics to intervene in foreign conflicts. (LaFeber, 323) In 1983, the Reagan administration intervened in the multisided [Lebanese Civil War](#) (see [1983 Beirut barracks bombing](#)), invaded Grenada (see [Invasion of Grenada](#)), bombed Libya (see [United States bombing of Libya](#)), and backed the Central American [Contras](#)—right-wing paramilitaries seeking overthrow the Soviet-aligned [Sandinista](#) government in Nicaragua.<sup>[15]</sup> While Reagan's interventions against Grenada and Libya were popular in the U.S., his backing of the Contra rebels was mired in controversy. In 1985, the president authorized the sale of arms to Iran; later, administration subordinates illegally diverted the proceeds to the Contras. (see [Iran-Contra](#))

Meanwhile, the Soviets incurred high costs for their own foreign interventions. Although Brezhnev was convinced in 1979 that the [Soviet war in Afghanistan](#) would be brief, Muslim guerrillas waged a surprisingly fierce resistance against the invasion. (LaFeber, 314) The Kremlin sent nearly 100,000 troops to support its puppet regime in Afghanistan, leading many outside observers to call the war the Soviets' Vietnam. (LaFeber, 314) However, Moscow's quagmire in Afghanistan was far more disastrous for the Soviets than Vietnam had been for the Americans because the conflict coincided with a period of internal decay and domestic crisis in the Soviet system. A high [U.S. State Department](#) official outcome was predicted such an outcome as early as 1980, posting that the invasion resulted in part from a "domestic crisis within the Soviet system.... It may be that the thermodynamic law of entropy has... caught up with the Soviet system, which now seems to expend more energy on simply maintaining its equilibrium than on improving itself. We could," he construed, "be seeing a period of foreign movement at a time of internal decay."<sup>[16]</sup>

## **[edit]** End of the Cold War

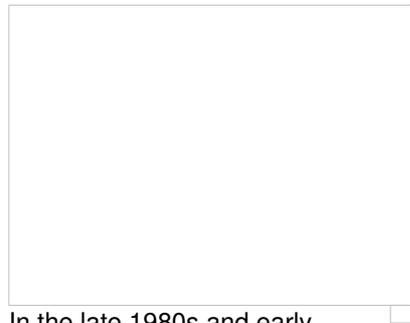
*Main article: [Cold War \(1985-1991\)](#)*

By the early 1980s, the [Soviet armed forces](#) were the largest in the world by many measures—in terms of the numbers and types of weapons they possessed, in the number of troops in their ranks, and in the sheer size of their military-industrial base.<sup>[17]</sup> However, the quantitative advantages held by the Soviet military often concealed areas where the Eastern bloc dramatically lagged behind the West. This led many U.S. observers to vastly overestimate Soviet power. (LaFeber 2002, 340)

By the late years of the Cold War, Moscow had built up a military that consumed as much as twenty-five percent of the Soviet Union's gross national product at the expense of [consumer goods](#) and investment in civilian sectors. (LaFeber 2002, 332) But the size of the Soviet armed forces was not necessarily the result of a simple action-reaction arms race with the United States. (Odom) Instead, Soviet spending on the [arms race](#) and other Cold War commitments can be understood as both a cause and effect of the deep-seated structural problems in the Soviet system, which accumulated at least a decade of economic stagnation during the Brezhnev years. (see [Economy of the Soviet Union](#)) Soviet investment in the defense sector was not necessarily driven by military necessity, but in large part by the interests of massive party and state bureaucracies dependent on the sector for their own power and privileges. (LaFeber 2002, 335)

By the time [Mikhail Gorbachev](#) had ascended to power in 1985, the Soviets suffered from an economic growth rate close to zero percent, combined with a sharp fall in hard currency earnings as a result of the downward slide in world oil prices in the 1980s. (LaFeber 2002, 331-333) (Petroleum exports made up around 60 percent of the Soviet Union's total export earnings.) (LaFeber 2002, 332) To restructure the Soviet economy before it collapsed, Gorbachev announced an agenda of rapid reform. (see [perestroika](#) and [glasnost](#))

Reform required Gorbachev to redirect the country's resources from costly Cold War military commitments to more profitable areas in the civilian sector. As a result, Gorbachev offered major concessions to the United States on the levels of conventional forces, nuclear weapons, and policy in Eastern Europe.



In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the Soviet Union quickly abandoned its Cold War commitments as the state and [Communist Party](#) rule unraveled. By late 1991, opposition to Gorbachev's radical reforms had triggered the [Soviet coup attempt of 1991](#), but the failure of the coup wound up accelerating the [dissolution of the USSR](#). Above, immediately following the failure of the coup attempt, Gorbachev and [Boris Yeltsin](#) spar over the events of the coup, with Yeltsin accusing Gorbachev of failing to prevent the crisis. Later, Gorbachev would accuse Yeltsin of tearing the Soviet Union apart out of a desire to advance his own personal interests.

However, many U.S. Soviet experts and administration officials doubted that Gorbachev was serious about winding down the arms race. (LaFeber, 2002) But the new Soviet leader eventually proved more concerned about reversing the Soviet Union's deteriorating economic condition than fighting the arms race with the West. (Palmowski) The Kremlin made major military and political concessions; in response Reagan agreed to renew talks on economic issues and the scaling-back of the arms race. The East-West tensions that had reached intense new heights earlier in the decade rapidly subsided through the mid-to-late 1980s. In 1988, the Soviets officially declared that they would no longer intervene in the affairs of allied states in Eastern Europe. In 1989, Soviet forces withdrew from Afghanistan.

In December 1989, Gorbachev and [George H.W. Bush](#) declared the Cold War officially over at a summit meeting in Malta.<sup>[18]</sup> But by then, the Soviet alliance system was on the brink of collapse, and the Communist regimes of the Warsaw Pact were losing power. In the USSR itself, Gorbachev tried to reform the party to destroy resistance to his reforms, but, in doing so, ultimately weakened the bonds that held the state and union together. By February 1990, the [Communist Party](#) was forced to surrender its 73-year old monopoly on state power. By December of the next year, the union-state also dissolved, breaking the USSR up into fifteen separate independent states. (see [Dissolution of the USSR](#))

## [\[edit\]](#) Legacy

Despite its rapid and relatively bloodless end, the Cold War was fought at a tremendous cost globally over the course of more than four decades. It cost the U.S. up to \$8 trillion in military expenditures, and the lives of nearly 100,000 Americans in Korea and Vietnam. (LaFeber 2002, 1). It cost the Soviets an even higher share of their gross national product. In Southeast Asia, local civil wars were intensified by superpower rivalry, leaving millions dead.

The end of the Cold War gave Russia the chance to cut military spending dramatically, but the adjustment was wrenching. The military-industrial sector employed at least one of every five Soviet adults.<sup>[19]</sup> Its dismantling left millions throughout the former Soviet Union unemployed. Russian living standards have worsened overall in the post-Cold War years, although the economy has resumed growth in recent years. In the 1990s, Russia suffered an economic downturn more severe than the U.S. or Germany had undergone six decades earlier in the [Great Depression](#) as it embarked on capitalist economic reforms.<sup>[20]</sup>

The legacy of the Cold War continues to structure world affairs. (Halliday) The Cold War institutionalized the role of the United States in the postwar global economic and political system. By 1989, the U.S. was responsible for military alliances with 50 countries and 1.5 million U.S. troops were posted in 117 countries. (Calhoun) The Cold War also institutionalized the commitment to a huge, permanent wartime military-industrial complex. (Calhoun)

Some of the economic and social tensions that underpinned Cold War competition in parts of the Third World remain acute. The breakdown of state control in a number of areas formerly ruled by Communist governments has produced new civil and ethnic conflicts, particularly in the former [Yugoslavia](#). (Halliday) In some countries, the breakdown of state control was accompanied by [state failure](#), such as in [Afghanistan](#). But in other areas, particularly much of Eastern Europe, the end of the Cold War was accompanied by a large growth in the number of [liberal democracies](#). In areas where the two superpowers had been waging proxy wars, and subsidizing local conflicts, many conflicts ended with the Cold War; and the occurrence of interstate wars, ethnic wars, revolutionary wars, or refugee and displaced persons crises declined sharply.<sup>[21]</sup>

## [\[edit\]](#) Historiography

As soon as the term "Cold War" was popularized to refer to postwar tensions between the U.S. and the Soviet Union, interpreting the course and origins of the conflict has been a source of heated controversy among historians, political scientists, and journalists.<sup>[22]</sup> In particular, historians have sharply disagreed as to who was responsible for the breakdown of Soviet-U.S. relations after the Second World War; and whether the conflict between the two superpowers was inevitable, or could have been avoided.<sup>[23]</sup> Historians have also disagreed on what exactly the Cold War was, what the sources of the conflict were, and how to disentangle patterns of action and reaction between the two sides. (Halliday)

While the explanations of the origins of the conflict in academic discussions are complex and diverse, several general schools of thought on the subject can be identified. Historians commonly speak of three differing approaches to the study of the Cold War: "orthodox" accounts, "revisionism," and "post-revisionism." Nevertheless, much of the historiography on the Cold War weaves together two or even all three of these broad categories. (Byrd)

### [\[edit\]](#) "Orthodox accounts"

The first school of interpretation to emerge in the U.S. was the "orthodox" one. For more than a decade after the end of the Second World War, few U.S. historians challenged the official U.S. interpretation of the beginnings of the Cold War. (Brinkley, 798-799) This "orthodox" school places the responsibility for the Cold War on the Soviet Union and its expansion into Eastern Europe. (Calhoun) [Thomas A. Bailey](#), for example, argued in his 1950 *America Faces Russia* that the breakdown of postwar peace was the result of Soviet expansionism in the immediate postwar years. Bailey argued Stalin violated promises he had made at Yalta, imposed Soviet-dominated regimes on unwilling Eastern European populations, and conspired to spread communism throughout the world. (Brinkley, 798-799) From this view, U.S. officials were forced to respond to Soviet aggression with the Truman Doctrine, plans to contain communist subversion around the world, and the Marshall Plan.

This interpretation has been described as the "official" U.S. version of Cold War history. (Craig Calhoun) Although it lost its dominance as a dominant mode of historical thought in academic discussions in 1960s, it continues to be influential. (Nashel) Writers such as [Jean Kirkpatrick](#) and, more recently, [Stephen Ambrose](#) have attempted to reintroduce this perspective in various forms. (Craig Calhoun)

### [\[edit\]](#) "Revisionism"

U.S. involvement in Vietnam in the 1960s disillusioned many historians with the premises of "containment" and thus with assumptions of the "orthodox" approach to understanding the Cold War. (Brinkley, 798-799) "Revisionist" accounts emerged in the wake of the Vietnam War, in the context of a larger rethinking of the U.S. role in international affairs. (Calhoun)

While the new school of thought contained many differences between individual scholars, the works comprising it were generally responses in one way or another to [William Appleman Williams'](#) landmark 1959 *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy*. Williams challenged the long-held assumptions of "orthodox" accounts, arguing that Americans had always been an empire-building people, even as U.S. officials denied it. (Nashel)

Following Williams, "revisionist" writers saw more responsibility for the breakdown of postwar peace resulting from the U.S. and cited a range of U.S. efforts to isolate and confront the Soviet Union well before the end of World War II. (Calhoun) According to Williams and later "revisionist" writers, U.S. policymakers shared an overarching concern with maintaining capitalism domestically; in order to ensure this goal, they understood an "open door" policy abroad, increasing access to foreign markets for U.S. business and agriculture would be required. (Nashel) From this perspective, a growing economy domestically went hand-in-hand with the consolidation of U.S. power internationally.

"Revisionist" writers also complicated the assumption that Soviet leaders were committed to postwar 'expansionism.' They cited evidence that Soviet Union's occupation of Eastern Europe had a defensive rationale, and Soviet leaders saw themselves as attempting to avoid encirclement by the United States and its allies. (Calhoun) From this view, the Soviet Union was so weak and devastated after the end of the Second World War as to be unable to pose any serious threat to the United States; in addition, the U.S. even had a nuclear monopoly until 1949. (Brinkley, 798-799)

Revisionist writers have also challenged the assumption that the origins of the Cold War began only as recently as the immediate postwar period. (Nashel) Notably, [Walter LaFeber](#), in his landmark *America, Russia, and the Cold War*, first published in 1972, argued that the Cold War had its origins in 19th century conflicts between Russia and America over the opening of East Asia to U.S. trade, markets, and influence. (Nashel) LaFeber argues that the U.S. commitment at the close of the war to ensure a world in which every state was open to U.S. influence and trade underpinned many of the conflicts that triggered the beginning of the Cold War. (Brinkley, 798-799)

Starting with [Gar Alperovitz](#), in his influential *Atomic Diplomacy: Hiroshima and Potsdam* (1965), "revisionist" scholars have focused on the U.S. decision to use atomic weapons against Hiroshima and Nagasaki during the last days of World War II. (Brinkley, 798-799) According to Alperovitz, the bombs were not used on an already defeated Japan to win the war, but to intimidate the Soviets, signaling that the U.S. would use nuclear weapons to structure a postwar world around U.S. interests as U.S. policymakers saw fit. (Nashel)

Joyce and [Gabriel Kolko's](#) *The Limits of Power: The World and U.S. Foreign Policy, 1945–1954* (1972) has also received considerable attention in the historiography on the Cold War. The Kolkos argued U.S. policy was both reflexively [anticommunist](#) and counterrevolutionary. The U.S. was not necessarily fighting Soviet influence, but any form of challenge to the U.S. economic and political prerogatives through either covert or military means. (Nashel) In this sense, the Cold War is less a story of rivalry between two blocs, and more a story of the ways by which the dominant states within each bloc controlled and disciplined their own populations and clients, and about who supported and stood to benefit from increased arms production and political anxiety over a perceived external enemy. (Halliday)

## [\[edit\]](#) "Post-revisionism"

The "revisionist" interpretation produced a critical reaction of its own. In a variety of ways, "post-revisionist" scholarship has challenged earlier works on the origins and course of the Cold War.

One current of "post-revisionism" challenges the "revisionists" by accepting some of their findings but rejecting most of their key claims. (Brinkley, 798-799) Another current has attempted to strike a balance between the "orthodox" and "revisionist" camps, identifying areas of responsibility for the origins of the conflict on both sides. (Brinkley, 798-799) [Thomas G. Paterson](#), in *Soviet-American Confrontation* (1973), for example, viewed Soviet hostility and U.S. efforts to dominate the postwar world as equally responsible for the Cold War. (Brinkley, 798-799)

The seminal work of the new approach was [John Lewis Gaddis's](#) *The United States and the Origins of the Cold War, 1941–1947* (1972). The account was immediately hailed as the beginning of a new school of thought on the Cold War claiming to synthesize a variety of interpretations. (Nashel) Gaddis's maintained that "neither side can bear sole responsibility for the onset of the Cold War." (Brinkley, 798-799) Gaddis emphasized the limitations of U.S. policymakers because of domestic politics, and the complications these constraints imposed on U.S. policymakers. (Brinkley) Gaddis, however, has criticized some "revisionist" scholars, particularly Williams, for failing to understand the role of Soviet policy in the origins of the Cold War. (Nashel) While Gaddis does not hold either side as entirely responsible for the onset of the conflict, he has argued that the Soviets must be held at least slightly more accountable for the problems. According to Gaddis, Stalin was in a much better position to compromise than his Western counterparts, given his much broader power within his own regime than Truman, who was often undermined by vociferous political opposition at home. (Brinkley, 798-799)

Out of the "post-revisionist" literature has emerged a new and more sensitive to nuance area of inquiry interested less in the question of who started the conflict than in offering insight into U.S. and Soviet actions and perspectives. (Calhoun) From this perspective, the Cold War was not so much the responsibility of either side as the result of predictable tensions between two world powers that had been suspicious of one another for nearly a century. For example, Ernest May wrote in a 1984 essay:

After the Second World War, the United States and the Soviet Union were doomed to be antagonists.... There probably was never any real possibility that the post-1945 relationship could be anything but hostility verging on conflict... Traditions, belief systems, propinquity, and convenience ... all combined to stimulate antagonism, and almost no factor operated in either country to hold it back. (Brinkley, 799)

From this current of post-revisionism emerged an area of inquiry interested in how Cold War actors perceived various events, and the degree of misperception involved in the failure of the two sides to reach common understandings of their wartime alliance and disputes. (Halliday)

## [\[edit\]](#) References

- <sup>↑</sup> Fred Halliday, "Cold War" *The Oxford Companion to the Politics of the World*, 2e. Joel Krieger, ed. Oxford University Press Inc. 2001.
- <sup>↑</sup> The term "Wisconsin school" refers to interpretations of the Cold War influenced by William Appleman Williams, a historian at the University of Wisconsin. The term is used because his research interests were continued by some of his students, particularly [Walter La Feber](#).
- <sup>↑</sup> LeFaber 2002, pp. 1-2
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- <sup>↑</sup> Jan Palmowski, "Cold War" *A Dictionary of Contemporary World History*. Oxford University Press, 2003.
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The Worldwide Cold War. In Europe, the dividing line between East and West remained essentially frozen during the next decades. But conflict spread to Asia, Africa, and Latin America. The struggle to overthrow colonial regimes frequently became entangled in Cold War tensions, and the superpowers competed to influence anti-colonial movements. In 1949, the communists triumphed in the Chinese civil war, and the world's most populous nation joined the Soviet Union as a Cold War adversary.