

# America's History

James A. Henretta , Rebecca Edwards , Robert O. Self ,

## Cold War America

### Containment in a Divided World

#### The Cold War in Europe, 1945–1946

World War II set the basic conditions for Cold War rivalry. The Cold War would produce an arms race through the **military-industrial complex**, the interconnection of



*Winston Churchill, Harry S. Truman, and Joseph Stalin met in Potsdam, Germany, July–August 1945.*

corporate influence of political policy in the interest of producing armaments for global warfare.

As the Soviet Union had been a victim of German aggression in both world wars, Joseph Stalin was determined to prevent the rebuilding and re-arming of its traditional foe; he insisted on a

security zone of friendly governments in Eastern Europe for protection.

At the Yalta Conference, America and Britain agreed to recognize this Soviet “sphere of influence,” with the proviso that “free and unfettered elections” would be held as

soon as possible. After Yalta, the Soviets made no move to hold the elections and rebuffed Western attempts to reorganize the Soviet-installed governments.

Recalling Britain’s disastrous appeasement of Hitler in 1938, President Harry Truman decided that the United States had to take a hard line against Soviet expansion.



*Cold War Europe, 1955*

At the 1945 Potsdam Conference of the United States, Britain, and the Soviet Union, Truman used what he called “tough methods.” Negotiations on critical postwar issues deadlocked, revealing serious cracks in the Grand Alliance. At Potsdam, the Allies agreed to disarm Germany, dismantle its military

production facilities, and permit the occupying powers to extract reparations. Plans for future reunification of Germany stalled, and the foundation was laid for what would later become the division of Germany into East and West Germany.

### **The Containment Strategy**

As tensions mounted, the United States increasingly perceived Soviet expansionism as a threat to its own interests, and a new policy of **containment** began to take shape, the most influential proponent of whom was **George F. Kennan**. The policy of containment crystallized in 1947 when suspected Soviet-backed Communist guerrillas launched a civil war against the Greek government, causing the West to worry that Soviet influence in Greece threatened its interests in the eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East, especially Turkey.

American reaction resulted in the **Truman Doctrine**, which called for large-scale military and economic assistance in order to prevent communism from taking hold in Greece and Turkey, which in turn lessened the threat to the entire Middle East, making it an early version of the “**domino theory**.” The resulting congressional appropriation reversed the postwar trend toward sharp cuts in foreign spending and marked a new level of commitment to the Cold War.

The **Marshall Plan**, proposed by Secretary of State George C. Marshall, proposed sending relief to devastated European countries and helped to make them less susceptible to communism. The plan required that foreign-aid dollars be spent on U.S. goods and services. The Marshall Plan met with opposition in Congress, until a Communist coup occurred in Czechoslovakia in February 1948, after which Congress voted overwhelmingly to approve funds for the program. Over the next four years, the United States contributed nearly \$13 billion to a highly successful recovery. Western European economies revived, opening new opportunities for international trade, while the Soviet Union decreed that Eastern Europe could not participate.

The United States, France, and Britain initiated a program of economic reform in West Berlin, which alarmed the Soviets, who responded in the summer of 1948 with a blockade of the city. Truman countered the blockade with airlifts of food and fuel; the blockade, lifted in May 1949, made West Berlin a symbol of resistance to communism.

In April 1949, the United States entered into its first peacetime military alliance since the American revolution—the **North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)**—in which twelve nations agreed that an armed attack against one of them would be considered an attack against all of them. In May 1949, NATO also agreed to the creation of the Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany). In response, the Soviets created the German Democratic Republic (East Germany) the following October. To solidify their position in Eastern Europe and to counteract Western moves, the Soviets also organized the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance in 1949 and the military Warsaw Pact in 1955.

In September 1949, American military intelligence had proof that the Soviets had detonated an atomic bomb. This revelation called for a major reassessment of American foreign policy. To devise a new diplomatic and military blueprint, Truman turned to the **National Security Council (NSC)**, an advisory body established by the **National Security Act of 1947** that also created the **Department of Defense** and **Central Intelligence Agency**. The National Security Council gave a report, known as **NSC-68**, recommending the development of a hydrogen bomb, increasing U.S. conventional forces, establishing a strong system of alliances, and increasing taxes in order to finance defense building.

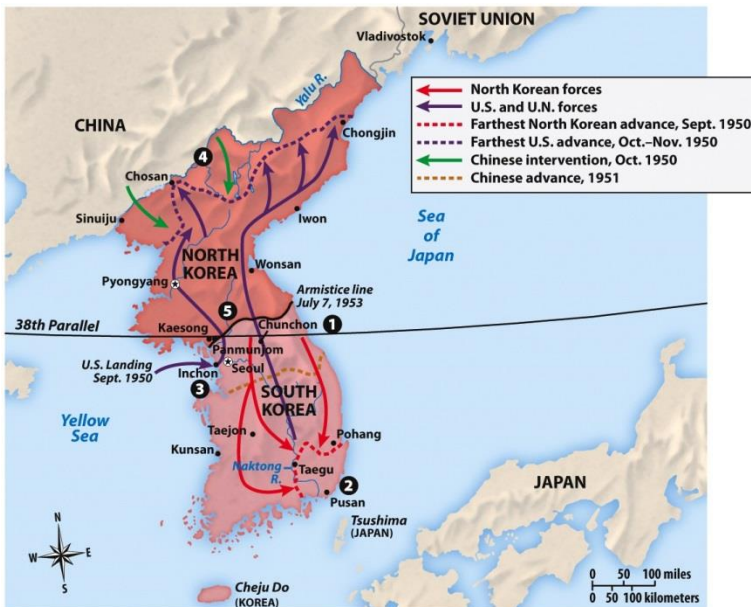
### **Containment in Asia**

American policy in Asia was based as much on Asia's importance to the world economy as on the desire to contain communism. After dismantling Japan's military forces and weaponry, American occupation forces drafted a democratic constitution and oversaw the rebuilding of the economy. In China, a civil war had been raging since the 1930s between Communist forces, led by Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai, and conservative Nationalist forces, under Chiang Kai-shek. For a time, the Truman administration attempted to help the Nationalists by providing more than \$2 billion in aid, but in August 1949 it cut off that aid when reform did not occur. In October 1949, the People's Republic of China was formally established under Mao, and Chiang Kaishek's forces fled to Taiwan.

The "China lobby" in Congress viewed Mao's success as a defeat for the United States; the China lobby's influence blocked U.S. recognition of "Red China," leading instead to U.S. recognition of the exiled Nationalist government in Taiwan. The United States also prevented China's admission to the United Nations. For almost twenty years, U.S. administrations treated mainland China, the world's most populous country, as a diplomatic non-entity.

### **The Korean War**

At the end of World War II, both the Soviet Union and the United States had troops in Korea and divided the country into competing spheres of influence at the thirty-eighth parallel. The Soviets supported a Communist government, led by Kim Il Sung, in North Korea, and the United States backed a Korean nationalist, Syngman Rhee, in South Korea. On June 25, 1950, North Koreans invaded across the thirty-eighth parallel. Truman asked the United Nations Security Council to authorize a "police action" against the invaders. The Security Council voted to send a "peacekeeping" force to Korea. Although fourteen non-Communist nations sent troops, the U.N. army in Korea was overwhelmingly American, and, by request of Truman to the Security Council, headed by General Douglas MacArthur.



**Korean War, 1950-1953**

Months of fighting resulted in stalemate, which led to a drop in public support. As a result of this unpopularity and the fact that the United States did not want large numbers of troops tied down in Asia, Truman and his advisors decided to work toward a negotiated peace. MacArthur, who believed that the future of the United States lay in Asia and not in Europe, tried to execute his own foreign policy involving Korea and Taiwan and was drawn into a Republican challenge of Truman’s conduct of the war. Truman relieved MacArthur of his command based on insubordination, though the decision to relieve him was highly unpopular.

In July 1953, two years after truce talks began, the parties signed an armistice. Korea was divided near the original border at the thirty-eighth parallel, with a demilitarized zone between the countries. Truman had committed troops to Korea without congressional approval, setting a precedent for other undeclared wars. The war also expanded American involvement in Asia, transforming containment into a truly global policy. During the war, American defense expenditures grew from \$13 billion in 1950 to \$50 billion in 1953, nearly two-thirds of the budget. American foreign policy had become more global, more militarized, and more expensive; even in times of peace, the United States functioned in a state of permanent mobilization.

The Munich analogy—of appeasing Hitler by offering him part of Czechoslovakia in 1938—guided U.S. thinking when it came to anticommunist influence on American foreign policy. This thinking often drove the United States into armed conflicts that supported right-wing repressive regimes.

## Cold War Liberalism

### Truman and the End of Reform

Truman and the Democratic Party after the war forged what historians call “Cold War liberalism.” They preserved the core programs of the New Deal welfare state, developed the containment policy to oppose Soviet influence throughout the world, and fought so-called “subversives” at home. Organized labor was a key force in Cold War liberalism. Union membership increased to over 14 million by 1945 as workers

mounted crippling strikes in the automobile, steel, and coal industries. Trade unions strongly supported the Democratic Party.

In 1946, Republicans gained control of both houses of Congress and set about undoing New Deal social welfare measures, especially targeting labor legislation. In 1947, the Republican-controlled Congress passed the **Taft-Hartley Act**, a rollback of several pro-union provisions of the 1935 National Labor Relations Act. The secondary boycott and the union shop, labor rights that workers had fought hard for, were eventually dismantled by the Republican Party. Truman's attempted veto of the Taft-Hartley Act countered some workers' hostility to his earlier antistrike activity and kept labor in the Democratic fold.

In the election of 1948, the Republicans again nominated Thomas E. Dewey for president. Democratic left and right wings split off: the Progressive Party nominated Henry A. Wallace for president; the States' Rights Party (**Dixiecrats**) nominated Strom Thurmond. To the nation's surprise, Truman won the election handily, and the Democrats regained control of both houses of Congress.



The **Fair Deal** was an extension of the New Deal's liberalism, but it gave attention to civil rights, reflecting the growing importance of African Americans to the Democratic coalition. It also extended the possibilities for a higher standard of living and benefits to a greater number of citizens, reflecting a new liberal vision of the role of the state. Congress adopted only parts of the Fair Deal: a higher minimum wage, an extension of and increase in Social Security, and the National Housing Act of 1949.

### Red Scare: The Hunt for Communists



*Senator Joseph McCarthy*

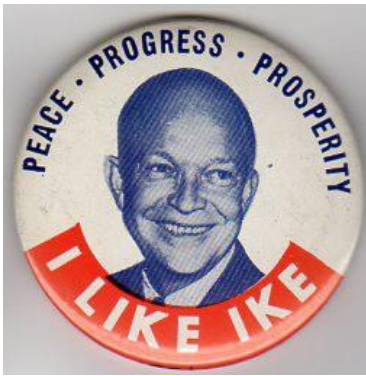
During the administration of FDR, several high-ranking government officials acted as spies for the Soviet Union. After World War II, the spying ceased for the most part. Many Americans at the time, however, felt that Communist influence predominated within the government. In 1947, President Truman created the **Loyalty-Security Program** to permit officials to investigate any employee of the federal government.

In 1938, a group of conservatives had launched the **House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC)** to investigate Communist influence in labor unions and New Deal agencies. In 1947, HUAC held widely publicized hearings on alleged Communist activity in the film industry. Those accused of subversion found themselves on an unofficial **blacklist** that made it impossible to find future work in the industry.

The meteoric rise of **Senator Joseph McCarthy** of Wisconsin marked the finale of the Red Scare. McCarthy dropped a bombshell on the nation in February of 1950: Communist Party members were active in shaping policy in the State Department. In early 1954, McCarthy overreached by launching an investigation into subversive activity in the U.S. Army. In December of 1954, the Senate voted 67 to 22 to censure McCarthy for unbecoming conduct. He died from an alcohol-related illness three years later.

### The Politics of Cold War Liberalism

In 1952, Dwight D. Eisenhower secured the Republican nomination. The Eisenhower administration set the tone for “**modern Republicanism**,” an updated party philosophy that emphasized a slowdown in, rather than a dismantling of, the New Deal state. For eight years, between 1952 and 1960, Eisenhower steered a precarious course from the middle of the party. He signed bills increasing federal outlays for veterans’ benefits, housing, highway construction, and Social Security.



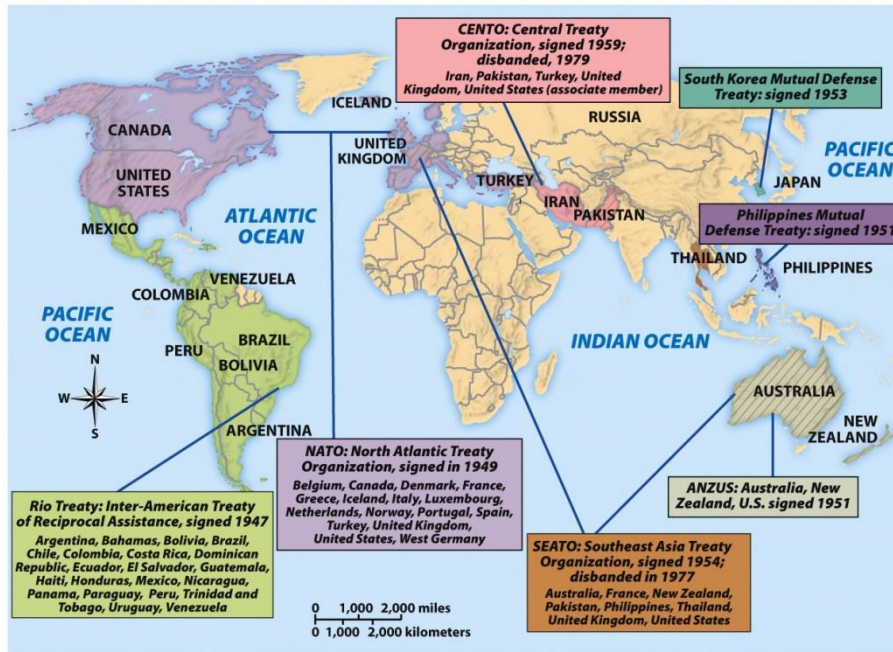
Eisenhower’s “New Look” in foreign policy continued America’s commitment to producing nuclear weapons to project U.S. dominance in the Cold War struggle against international communism. Eisenhower then turned his attention to Europe and the Soviet Union. Stalin died in 1953, and after a power struggle, Nikita S. Khrushchev emerged as his successor in 1956. Soviet repression of the 1956 Hungarian revolt showed that American policymakers had few options for rolling back Soviet power in Europe, short of going to war with the Soviet Union. By 1958, both the United States and the Soviet Union possessed intercontinental ballistic missiles.

### Containment in the Postcolonial World

#### The Cold War and Colonial Independence

The American policy of containment soon extended to new nations emerging in the **Third World**. The United States often failed to recognize that indigenous or nationalist movements in emerging nations had their own goals and were not necessarily under the control of Communists. U.S. policymakers tended to support stable governments, as long as they were not Communist; some American allies were governed by dictatorships or repressive right-wing regimes.





The Central Intelligence Agency moved beyond intelligence gathering into active, albeit covert, involvement in the internal affairs of foreign countries. In 1953, the CIA helped to overthrow Iran’s premier after he seized control of British oil properties. In 1954, in

Guatemala, the agency supported a coup against the duly elected government of Jacobo Arbenz Guzman after he expropriated land held by the United Fruit Company and accepted arms from Communist Czechoslovakia.

In Southeast Asia, Truman mismanaged a golden opportunity to bring the Vietnamese nationalist leader Ho Chi Minh into the American camp through domestic and military support against the French attempt after World War II to re-take the colony it had maintained since the mid-1800s. Truman incorrectly viewed Ho Chi Minh as an ardent Communist pledged against American interests. Eisenhower also failed to understand the importance of embracing a united Vietnam. If the French failed to regain control, Eisenhower argued, the **domino theory** would lead to the collapse of all non-Communist governments in the region.

Although the United States eventually provided most of the financing, the French still failed to defeat the tenacious Viet-minh. After a fifty-six-day siege in early 1954, the French went down to stunning defeat at the huge fortress of **Dienbienphu**. The result was the 1954 Geneva Accords, which partitioned Vietnam temporarily at the seventeenth parallel, committed France to withdraw from north of that line, and called for elections within two years that would lead to a unified Vietnam. The United States rejected the Geneva Accords and immediately set about undermining them. With the help of the CIA, a pro-American government took power in South Vietnam in June 1954. As the last French soldiers left in 1956, the United States took over, with South Vietnam now the front line in the American battle to contain communism in Southeast Asia. In 1954, the United States created the **Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO)** to complement the NATO alliance in Europe.

The oil-rich Middle East was playing an increasingly central role in the strategic planning of the United States and the Soviet Union, which presented one of the most complicated foreign policy challenges. On May 14, 1948, **Zionist** leaders proclaimed the state of Israel; Truman quickly recognized the new state, alienating the Arabs but winning crucial support from Jewish voters.

When Gamal Abdel Nasser came to power in Egypt in 1954, he pledged to lead not just his country but the entire Middle East out of its dependent, colonial relationship through a form of pan-Arab socialism. In doing so, he declared Egypt's neutrality in the Cold War. Unwilling to accept this stance of non-alignment, in 1957 Secretary of State **John Foster Dulles** abruptly withdrew his offer of U.S. financial aid to Egypt. In retaliation, Nasser seized and nationalized the Suez Canal, through which three-quarters of Western Europe's oil was transported.

After months of negotiation, Britain and France, in alliance with Israel, attacked Egypt and retook the canal. Eisenhower and the United Nations forced France and Britain to pull back. Egypt retook the Suez Canal and built the Aswan Dam with Soviet support. The Suez crisis increased Soviet influence in the Third World, intensified anti-Western sentiment in Arab countries, and produced dissension among leading members of NATO.

After the Suez Canal crisis, the **Eisenhower Doctrine** stated that American forces would assist any nation in the Middle East requiring aid against communism. Eisenhower invoked the doctrine when he sent troops to aid King Hussein of Jordan against a Nasser-backed revolt and when he sent troops to back a pro-U.S. government in Lebanon. The attention that the Eisenhower administration paid to developments in the Middle East in the 1950s demonstrated how the access to a steady supply of oil increasingly affected foreign policy.

### **John F. Kennedy and the Cold War**

Poised to become the youngest man ever elected to the presidency and the nation's first Catholic chief executive, Kennedy practiced what became known as the "new politics," an approach that emphasized youthful charisma, style, and personality more than issues and platforms. A series of four televised debates between Kennedy and Nixon showed how important television was becoming to political life; voters who listened to the 1960 presidential debates on the radio concluded that Nixon had won, and those who watched it on TV felt that Kennedy had won. Kennedy won only the narrowest of electoral victories, receiving 49.7 percent of the popular vote to Nixon's 49.5 percent; a shift of a few thousand votes in key states would have reversed the outcome.

A resolute cold warrior, Kennedy brought to Washington a cadre of young ambitious newcomers, including **Robert McNamara**, a former head of Ford Motor Company, who would serve as secretary of defense. A host of academics also flocked to



Washington to join the New Frontier, including **Robert Kennedy**, the president's brother, who served as attorney general.

In 1959 **Fidel Castro** overthrew Cuban dictator Fulgencio Batista. Cuban relations with Washington deteriorated after Castro nationalized American-owned banks and industries and the United States declared an embargo on Cuban exports. Isolated by the United States, Cuba turned to the Soviet Union for economic and military support. In early 1961, Kennedy attempted to foment an anti-Castro uprising. On April 17, Castro's troops crushed the CIA-trained invaders who had landed at the **Bay of Pigs**.

U.S.-Soviet relations further deteriorated in June 1961 when the Soviets built the **Berlin Wall** in order to stop the exodus of East Germans. The Berlin Wall remained a symbol of the Cold War until 1989. The most climactic confrontation of the Cold War, the **Cuban missile crisis**, occurred in October 1962, when American reconnaissance



*Berlin Wall with Brandenburg Gate in background*

planes flying over Cuba photographed Soviet-built bases for ICBMs, which could reach U.S. targets as far as 2,200 miles away.

In a televised address, Kennedy confronted the Soviet Union and announced that the United States would impose a “quarantine on all offensive military equipment” intended for Cuba. After a week of tense negotiations, both Kennedy and Khrushchev made concessions: the United States would not invade Cuba, and the Soviets would dismantle the missile bases. Kennedy also secretly ordered U.S. missiles to be removed from Turkey, at the insistence of Khrushchev.

Exhibiting the idealism of the early 1960s, the **Peace Corps** was a low-cost Cold War weapon intended to show the developing world that there was an alternative to communism. Wanting to compete with the Soviet Union and land a man on the moon, Kennedy also increased funding for the **National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA)**. This ambition was later realized when the United States successfully landed a man on the moon in 1969.

### **Making a Commitment in Vietnam**

When Kennedy became president, he inherited Eisenhower's involvement in Vietnam. Kennedy saw Vietnam in very much the same Cold War terms. The Army was training U.S. Special Forces, called **Green Berets** for their distinctive headgear, to engage in unconventional, small-group warfare. Kennedy and his advisors wanted to try out the Green Berets in the Vietnamese jungles.

Despite American aid, the corrupt and repressive Diem regime installed by Eisenhower in 1954 in South Vietnam was losing ground to domestic critics and North Vietnamese

insurgents. Losing patience with Diem, Kennedy let it be known in Saigon that the United States would support a military coup. On November 1, 1963, Diem was overthrown and assassinated—a result evidently not anticipated by Kennedy. At that point, there were about 16,000 American “advisors” in Vietnam. Kennedy himself was assassinated in late November of 1963.

## KEY TERMS

**military-industrial complex** First used by President Eisenhower in his farewell address in 1961, this term refers to the interlinkage of the military and the defense industry that emerged with the arms buildup of the Cold War. Eisenhower particularly warned against the “unwarranted influence” that the military-industrial complex might exert on public policy.

**containment** The U.S. policy of the late 1940s that sought to contain communism within its existing geographic boundaries, namely the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, and North Korea (and after 1949, China). Rather than seek to defeat communist governments through military confrontation, the United States would instead “contain” the influence of the communist powers.

**Third World** This term came into use in the post-World War II era to describe developing or ex-colonial nations that were not aligned with either the Western capitalist countries led by the United States or the socialist states of Eastern Europe led by the Soviet Union. It referred to developing countries in Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East.

## The War in Vietnam, 1963–1968

### Escalation under Johnson



*The Vietnam War in 1968*

When Johnson became president, he continued and accelerated U.S. involvement in Vietnam based on the policy of containing communism. In the summer of 1964, Johnson heard reports that North Vietnamese torpedo boats had fired on American destroyers in international waters. On August 7, 1964, Congress authorized the **Gulf of Tonkin Resolution**, which allowed Johnson to “take all necessary measures to repel any armed attack against the forces of the United States and to prevent further aggression.”

The Johnson administration moved toward the Americanization of the war with Operation Rolling Thunder, a protracted bombing campaign that by 1968 had dropped a million tons of bombs on North Vietnam. **Operation Rolling Thunder** intensified the North Vietnamese’s will to fight; the flow of their troops and supplies continued to the south unabated as the Communists rebuilt roads and bridges, moved munitions underground, and built networks of tunnels and shelters.

Simultaneously with the launch of Operation Rolling Thunder, the United States sent its first ground troops into combat in 1965; by

1966, more than 380,000 American soldiers were present in Vietnam; by 1968, more than 536,000 American soldiers were stationed in Vietnam. Hoping to win a war of attrition, the Johnson administration assumed that American superiority in personnel and weaponry would ultimately triumph.

### **Public Opinion and the War**

By the late 1960s, public opinion began to turn against the war in Vietnam; television had much to do with these attitudes as Vietnam was the first televised war. Despite glowing statements made on television, by 1967, many administration officials privately reached a more pessimistic conclusion regarding the war. The administration was accused of suffering from a “**credibility gap**.” In 1966 televised hearings by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee raised further questions about U.S. policy. Economic developments put Johnson and his advisors even more on the defensive as the costs of the war became evident as the growing federal deficit nudged the inflation rate upward, beginning the inflationary spiral that plagued the U.S. economy throughout the 1970s.

After the escalation in the spring of 1965, various antiwar coalitions organized several mass demonstrations in Washington. Participants shared a common skepticism about the means and aims of U.S. policy and argued that the war was antithetical to American ideals.

### **Rise of the Student Movement**



*1967 - Summer of Love*

The youth were among the key protestors of the era. In their manifesto, the **Port Huron Statement**, the **Students for a Democratic Society (SDS)** expressed their disillusionment with the consumer culture and the gulf between the prosperous and the poor and rejected Cold War ideology and foreign policy. The founders of SDS referred to themselves as the “**New Left**” to distinguish themselves from the “**Old Left**” of Communists and socialists of the 1930s and 1940s. At the University of California at Berkeley, the **Free Speech Movement** organized a sit-in in response to administrators’ attempts to ban political activity on campus.

Many protests centered on the draft, especially after the Selective Service system abolished automatic student deferments in January 1966. In public demonstrations of civil disobedience, opponents of the war burned their draft cards, closed down induction centers, and broke into Selective Service offices and destroyed records. As many universities’ research budgets came from Defense Department contracts student protestors demanded that the Reserve Officer Training Corps be removed from college campuses. The Johnson administration had to face the reality of large-scale opposition to the war. The 1967 Mobilization to End the War brought 100,000 protestors into the streets of San Francisco and over 250,000 in New York.

The “**hippie**” symbolized the new **counterculture**, a youthful movement that glorified liberation from traditional social strictures. Popular music by Pete Seeger, Joan Baez, and Bob Dylan expressed political idealism, protest, and loss of patience with the war and was an important part of the counterculture. Beatlemania helped to deepen the generational divide and paved the way for the more rebellious, angrier music of other British groups, notably the Rolling Stones. Drugs and sex intertwined with music as a crucial element of the youth culture as celebrated at rock concerts attended by hundreds of thousands of people. In 1967, at the “world’s first Human Be-In” at San Francisco’s Golden Gate Park, Timothy Leary urged gatherers to “turn on, tune in, and drop out.” 1967 was also the “Summer of Love,” in which city neighborhoods swelled with young dropouts, drifters, and teenage runaways dubbed “flower children.”

Many young people stayed out of the counterculture and the antiwar movement, yet media coverage made it seem that all of America’s youth were rejecting political, social, and cultural norms.

## **Days of Rage, 1968–1972**

### **Blood in the Streets**

The Johnson administration’s hopes for Vietnam evaporated when the Viet Cong unleashed a massive assault, known as the **Tet offensive**, on major urban areas in South Vietnam. The attack made a mockery of official pronouncements that the United States was winning the war and swung public opinion more strongly against the



*US Marines fight outside the US Embassy in Saigon during the Tet Offensive, 1968*

conflict. Antiwar **Senator Eugene J. McCarthy**’s strong showing in the presidential primaries reflected profound public dissatisfaction with the course of the war and propelled **Senator Robert F. Kennedy** into the race on an antiwar platform.

On March 31, 1968, Johnson stunned the nation by announcing that he would not seek reelection; he vowed to devote his remaining months in office to the search for peace, and peace talks began in May 1968.

1968 also witnessed the assassination of Martin Luther King and its ensuing riots; student occupation of several buildings at Columbia University; a strike by students and labor that toppled the French government; and the assassination of Robert Kennedy, which shattered the dreams of those hoping for social change through political action. The Democratic Party never fully recovered from Johnson’s withdrawal and Robert Kennedy’s assassination.

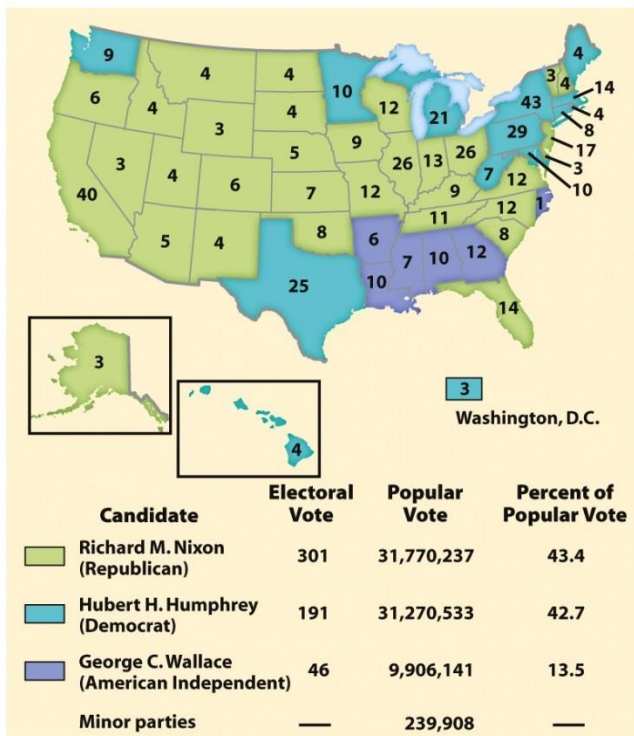
### The Antiwar Movement and the 1968 Election

At the Democratic Convention, the political divisions generated by the war consumed the party; outside the convention “yippies” demonstrated, diverting attention from the more serious and numerous activists who came to Chicago as delegates or volunteers. The Democratic mayor of Chicago, **Richard J. Daley**, called out the police to break up the demonstrations. In what was later described as a “police riot,” patrolmen attacked protestors at the convention with mace, tear gas, and clubs as TV viewers watched, which only cemented a popular impression of the Democrats as the party of disorder.



**Violence at the Democratic Convention, 1968**

Democrats dispiritedly nominated **Hubert H. Humphrey** and approved a platform that endorsed continued fighting in Vietnam while diplomatic means to an end were explored.



*The Presidential Election of 1968*

**Richard Nixon**, after losing the presidential campaign in 1960 and the California gubernatorial race in 1962, tapped the increasingly conservative mood of the electorate in an amazing political comeback, winning the 1968 Republican presidential nomination and courting the “**silent majority**” of law-abiding Americans. **George Wallace**, a third-party candidate, skillfully combined attacks on liberal intellectuals and government elites with denunciations of school segregation and forced busing. Nixon offered a subtler version of Wallace’s populism, adopting what his advisers called the “**southern strategy**” of courting disaffected southern white voters tired of the civil rights agenda of the Democratic Party.

Nixon received 43.4 percent of the vote to Humphrey’s 42.7 percent, defeating him by only 510,000 votes out of the 73 million that were cast. The New Deal coalition of the past thirty years was now broken for the Democratic Party.

### The Nationalist Turn

Vietnam and the increasingly radical youth rebellion intersected with the turn toward nationalism by young African American and Chicano activists. Mexican Americans including Cesar Chavez marched in Los Angeles in 1970 against the war. The Black Panther Party and the National Black Antiwar Antidraft League



spoke out against the war as well. Muhammad Ali, the most famous boxer in the world, refused to be inducted in the army.

### Nixon’s War in Vietnam

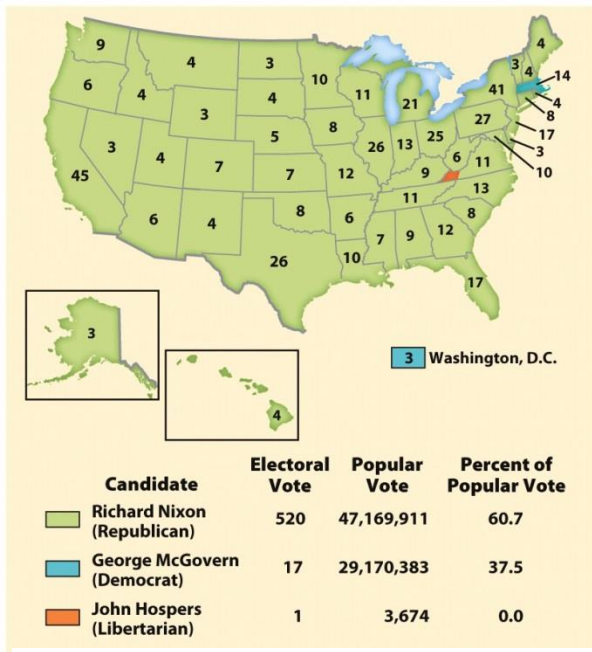


National Guard troops at Kent State University, 1970

When it came to Vietnam, Nixon picked up where Johnson had left off. Abandoning Vietnam, Nixon insisted, would damage America’s “credibility” and make the country seem “a pitiful, helpless giant.” Nixon wanted peace, but only “peace with honor.”

To neutralize criticism at home, Nixon began delegating the ground fighting to the South Vietnamese. Under this new policy of “**Vietnamization,**” American troop levels dropped from 543,000 in 1968 to 334,000 in 1971 to barely 24,000 by early 1973.

Far from abating, however, the antiwar movement intensified. In November 1969, half a million demonstrators staged a huge protest in Washington. On April 30, 1970, as part of a secret bombing campaign against Vietminh (Vietnamese liberation army) supply lines operating in neutral Cambodia, American troops destroyed enemy bases there. When news of the invasion of Cambodia came out, American campuses exploded in outrage. On May 4, 1970, at Kent State University in Ohio, panicky National Guardsmen fired into an antiwar rally, killing four students and wounding eleven. At Jackson State College in Mississippi, Guardsmen stormed a dormitory, killing two black students.



Presidential Election of 1972

Nixon’s policy of **détente** was to seek peaceful coexistence with the Soviet Union and Communist China and to link these overtures of friendship with a plan to end the Vietnam War, a war fought ostensibly to halt the spread of communism. He traveled to Moscow to sign the first **Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (SALT)** between the United States and the Soviet Union. The treaty limited the production and deployment of ICBMs and ABMs and signified that the United States could no longer afford massive military spending to regain the nuclear and military superiority it had enjoyed after World War II. Nixon traveled to China in 1972, the first sitting U.S. president to do so, in a symbolic visit that set the stage for the establishment of formal diplomatic relations.

To strengthen his negotiating position at the Paris Peace Talks with North Vietnam, Nixon stepped up military action with a series of B-52 bombings; the Paris Peace Accords were signed on January 27, 1973. The South Vietnamese government soon fell to Communist forces; horrified Americans watched as American embassy personnel and Vietnamese citizens struggled to board helicopters leaving Saigon before North Vietnamese troops entered the city. On April 29, 1975, Vietnam was reunited, and Saigon was renamed Ho Chi Minh City in honor of the Communist leader who had died in 1969. More than 58,000 Americans died and over 300,000 were wounded



during a war that cost over \$150 billion and decreased Americans' confidence in their government system.

### **The 1972 Election**

The disarray within the Democratic Party over Vietnam and civil rights gave Nixon's campaign a decisive edge. Nixon's advantages against his weak opponent, Senator George McGovern, and a short-term upturn in the economy favored the Republicans. Nixon appealed to the "silent majority" of non-protesters and easily won reelection with 61 percent of the popular vote, carrying every state except Massachusetts and the District of Columbia, although Democrats maintained control of both houses of Congress.

### **Watergate and the Fall of a President**

In June 1972, five men with connections to the Nixon administration were arrested for breaking into the headquarters of the Democratic National Committee at the Watergate apartment complex in Washington. In an abuse of presidential power, the White House had established a clandestine intelligence group known as the "**plumbers**" to plug government information leaks and implement tactics to harass the administration's opponents. The activities of the "plumbers" were financed by massive illegal fundraising efforts by Nixon's Committee to Re-Elect the President (known as CREEP).

The White House denied any involvement in the break-in, but investigations revealed that Nixon ordered his chief of staff to instruct the CIA to tell the FBI not to probe too deeply into connections between the White House and the burglars. In February 1973,



the Senate established an investigative committee that began holding nationally televised hearings in May, during which Jeb Magruder confessed his guilt and implicated former Attorney General John Mitchell, White House counsel John Dean, and others. Dean, in turn, implicated Nixon in the plot, and another Nixon aide revealed that Nixon had installed a secret taping system in the Oval Office. Nixon stonewalled the committee's demand that he surrender the tapes, citing executive privilege and national security. He finally released them, but a suspicious eighteen-minute gap remained.

On June 30, 1974, the House of Representatives voted on three articles of impeachment against Nixon: obstruction of justice, abuse of power, and subverting the Constitution.

Facing certain conviction if impeached, on August 9, 1974, Nixon became the first U.S. president to resign. Vice President Gerald Ford was sworn in as president. A month later, he granted Nixon a “full, free, and absolute” pardon.

Congress adopted several reforms in response to the abuses of the Nixon administration, such as the **War Powers Act**, which reined in the president’s ability to deploy U.S. forces without congressional approval. In 1974, a strengthened **Freedom of Information Act** gave citizens greater access to files that federal government agencies had amassed on them. The **Fair Campaign Practices Act** of 1974 limited campaign contributions and provided for stricter accountability and public financing of presidential campaigns, but it contained a loophole for contributions from political action committees (PACs).

### The Carter Presidential Interregnum



*US Embassy staff taken hostage by Iranian students*

Carter had an idealistic vision of American leadership in world affairs. He presented himself as the anti-Nixon, a world leader who rejected Henry Kissinger’s “realism” in favor of human rights and peacemaking. He withdrew economic and military aid from some repressive regimes, signed a treaty turning control of the Panama Canal over to Panama, and crafted a “framework for peace,” between Egypt and Israel. While Carter deplored what he called the “inordinate fear of Communism,” his efforts at improving relations with the Soviet Union foundered.

After ordering an embargo on wheat shipments to the Soviet Union and withdrawing SALT II from Senate consideration, Carter called for increased defense spending and declared an American boycott of the 1980 summer Olympics in Moscow. With the support of Congress, he began providing covert assistance to anti-Soviet fighters in Afghanistan, some of whom, including Osama bin Laden, would metamorphose into anti-American Islamic radicals decades later.

Carter’s ultimate undoing came in Iran, however. Since the 1940s, Iran had been ruled by the Shah (“King”), Muhammad Reza Pahlavi. Ousted by a democratically elected parliament in the early 1950s, Pahlavi sought and received the assistance of the CIA, which helped him reclaim power in 1953. Early in 1979, the Shah was driven into exile by a revolution that brought the fundamentalist Shiite cleric Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini to power. When the United States admitted the deposed Shah into the country for cancer treatment, Iranian students seized the U.S. embassy in Tehran, taking sixty-six Americans hostages. The captors demanded that the Shah be returned to Iran for trial. Carter refused and instead suspended arms sales to Iran and froze Iranian assets.

For the next fourteen months, the hostage crisis paralyzed Carter’s presidency. Several months later, however, a stunning development changed the calculus on both sides:

Iraq, led by Saddam Hussein, invaded Iran. Desperate to focus his nation’s attention on Iraq’s invasion, Khomeini began to talk with the United States about releasing the hostages. The hostages were finally released the day after Carter left office—a final indignity endured by a well-intentioned but ineffectual president.



President Carter’s sinking popularity hurt his bid for reelection. When he was barely re-nominated for the presidency, Carter’s approval rating was historically low: a mere 21 percent of Americans believed that he was an effective president. Economically, millions of citizens were suffering from stagnant wages, high inflation, crippling mortgage rates, and an unemployment rate of nearly 8 percent. With Carter on the defensive, Reagan remained upbeat and decisive. To emphasize his intention to be a formidable international leader, Reagan hinted that he would take strong action to win the hostages’ return. To signal his rejection of liberal

policies, he declared his opposition to affirmative action and forced busing and promised to get “the government off our backs.” Reagan effectively appealed to the many Americans who felt financially insecure. He emphasized the hardships facing working- and middle-class Americans in an era of “stagflation” and asked them: “Are you better off today than you were four years ago?”

Carter received only 41 percent of the vote. Independent candidate John Anderson garnered 8 percent, and Reagan won with 51 percent of the popular vote. The Republicans elected thirty-three new members of the House of Representatives and twelve new senators, which gave them control of the U.S. Senate for the first time since 1954.

## The End of the Cold War

### **U.S.-Soviet Relations in a New Era**

When Reagan assumed the presidency in 1981, he broke with his immediate predecessors in Cold War strategy. Nixon regarded himself as a “realist” in foreign affairs, which meant advancing the national interest without regard to ideology. His policy of **détente** with the Soviet Union and China embodied this realist view. Carter endorsed détente and continued to push for relaxing Cold War tensions. This worked for a time, but the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan empowered hard-liners in the U.S. Congress and forced Carter to take a tougher line—which he did with the Olympic boycott and grain embargo.

Conservatives did not believe in détente. Neither did they believe in the containment policy that had guided U.S. Cold War strategy since 1947. Reagan and his advisors

wanted to *defeat* the Soviet Union. His administration pursued a two-pronged strategy toward that end. First, it abandoned détente and set about rearming America. This buildup in American military strength, reasoned **Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger**, would force the Soviets into an arms race that would strain their economy and cause domestic unrest. Second, the president supported CIA initiatives to roll back Soviet influence in the developing world by funding anticommunist movements in Angola, Mozambique, Afghanistan, and Central America. As a result, Reagan supported repressive, right-wing regimes, particularly in Guatemala, Nicaragua, and El Salvador.

In Guatemala, this approach produced a brutal military rule—thousands of opponents of the government were executed or kidnapped. In Nicaragua, Reagan actively encouraged a coup against the left-wing Sandinista government, which had overthrown the U.S.-backed strongman, Anastasio Somoza. And in El Salvador, the U.S.-backed government maintained secret “death-squads,” which murdered members of the opposition. In each case, Reagan blocked Soviet influence, but the damage done to local communities and to the international reputation of the United States, as in Vietnam, was great.

For years, Reagan had denounced Iran as an “outlaw state” and a supporter of terrorism. But in 1985, he wanted its help. To win Iran’s assistance in freeing two dozen American hostages, the administration sold arms to the Iran without public or congressional knowledge. While this secret arms deal was diplomatically and politically controversial, the use of resulting profits in Nicaragua was explicitly illegal. To overthrow the democratically elected Sandinistas, which the president accused of threatening U.S. business interests, Reagan ordered the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to assist an armed opposition group called the **Contras**. Although Reagan praised the Contras as “freedom fighters,” Congress worried that the president and other executive branch agencies were assuming war-making powers that the Constitution reserved to the legislature. In 1984, Congress banned the CIA and any other government agency from providing any military support to the Contras. **Oliver North**, a lieutenant colonel in the U.S. Marines and an aide to the National Security Council, defied that ban. With the tacit or explicit consent of high-ranking administration officials, including the president, North used the profits from the Iranian arms deal to assist the Contras. Still swayed by Reagan’s charm, the public accepted his convenient loss of memory. Nonetheless, the **Iran-Contra affair** resulted in the prosecution of Colonel North and several other officials and jeopardized the president’s reputation.

The Soviet system of state socialism and central economic planning had transformed Russia from an agricultural to an industrial society between 1917 and the 1950s. But it had done so inefficiently. Most enterprises hoarded raw materials, employed too many workers, and did not develop new products. The Russian economy fell farther and farther behind those of capitalist societies, and most people in the Soviet bloc endured a low standard of living.



*Time Magazine cover, March 1985, featuring Mikhail Gorbachev*

Mikhail Gorbachev, a younger Russian leader, recognized the need for internal economic reform and an end to the war in Afghanistan. He introduced policies of *glasnost* (openness) and *perestroika* (economic restructuring), which encouraged widespread criticism of the rigid institutions and authoritarian controls of the Communist regime. To lessen tensions with the United States, Gorbachev met with Reagan and by 1987, they had agreed to eliminate all intermediate-range nuclear missiles based in Europe. A year later, Gorbachev ordered Soviet troops out of Afghanistan, and Reagan replaced many of his hard-line advisors with policymakers who favored a renewal of *détente*.

As Gorbachev's efforts revealed the flaws of the Soviet system, the peoples of Eastern and Central Europe demanded the ouster of their Communist governments. In Poland, the Roman Catholic Church and its pope—Polish-born John Paul II—joined with **Solidarity**, the trade union movement, to overthrow the pro-Soviet regime. Soviet troops did not intervene, and a series of peaceful uprisings created a new political order throughout the region. The destruction of the Berlin Wall in 1989 symbolized the end of Communist rule in Central Europe.

Soviet military leaders seized power in August 1991 and arrested Gorbachev. But widespread popular opposition led by Boris Yeltsin, the president of the Russian Republic, thwarted their efforts to oust Gorbachev from office. This failure broke the dominance of the Communist Party. On December 25, 1991, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics formally dissolved to make way for an eleven-member Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). The Russian Republic assumed leadership of the CIS, but the Soviet Union was no more. The collapse of the Soviet Union was the result of internal weaknesses of the Communist economy. External pressure from the United States played an important, though secondary, role.

# Ronald Reagan and the End of the Cold War: The Debate Continues

by Michael Cox



Ronald Reagan at the Berlin Wall, 1987. (Ronald Reagan Library)

For a British professor with more than a passing interest in US foreign policy and the role of the United States in ending the Cold War, it is indeed fascinating to observe how deeply divided opinion still remains over the part played in the making of 1989 by one very special American: President Ronald Reagan. Indeed, in a recent class I taught at my home institution—the London School of Economics—I asked a simple question about which policy-maker at the time was most instrumental in ending Soviet control in Eastern and Central Europe. Reagan was of course high on my list of possible candidates; and you might say that for a European I made a fairly strong case for him—but to no avail. Amongst a group of 500 very bright first-year students, there seemed to be only one correct answer, and that was not Ronald Reagan but, rather, Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev. By a considerable margin it was the Russian rather than the American who won the overwhelming majority of votes (over 70 percent of the total).

Yet amongst other students, and no doubt amongst political leaders in other countries, Reagan continues to exercise an enormous fascination—as political leader of the free world at a critical moment in time; as a transformational president; and of course, as the man whose policies, it has been argued, contributed more than anything else to bringing about the demise of Communism. Few American presidents have complete special issues of *USA Today* devoted to their life and times. But in early 2011 Reagan did: forty-eight pages of it from the cover title—“Reagan: An American Icon”—through the back page where we find out that it was no less a corporation than General Electric (a company for which Reagan worked as spokesman between 1954 and 1962) that had in fact sponsored that very important “Ronald Reagan Centennial Celebration.” Reagan, I suspect, would not have been dismayed. Indeed, according to one account, he later admitted that working for GE was “the second most important eight-year job” he ever had!

Still, for students and teachers of international affairs, the most interesting and difficult question to answer concerns his role in changing the world only a few years after he had assumed the office of president in 1980. Three questions in particular deserve our attention. First, what are the main points in favor of the thesis that Reagan, or at least Reagan’s policies, “won” the Cold War? Second, why has there been so much resistance to this thesis—and not only amongst LSE students? And finally, is it possible to arrive (twenty years after the end of the Cold War in 1989 and a century after the birth of Ronald Reagan) at a balanced view of the part he played in undermining the Soviet system?

When Ronald Reagan took over the White House, the end of the Cold War not only seemed a very long way off—nobody in fact thought in such terms at the time—but in many respects it actually looked as if the USSR (and not the West) was winning. The Soviet Union had just invaded Afghanistan. Its supporters in the Third World from Central America to southern Africa seemed to be sweeping all opposition before them. America’s



European allies were mired down in a politically bruising effort to deploy a new class of missiles at home. And, as many felt at the time, the United States stood on the cusp between one highly debilitating decade (Reagan later called the 1970s a “decade of neglect”) and another whose prospects looked anything but bright.

Into this situation strode the ever-optimistic Reagan. The time had come, he announced, to reverse the tide of history. Indeed, instead of retreating (some even believed declining), the United States should challenge its enemies, including the USSR, to a serious contest with nothing less than the world as the prize. Reagan was always certain that in the end the West would win. He was so certain, in fact, that he even abandoned the niceties of nearly forty years of diplomatic convention that took it for granted that “containment” was America’s preferred strategy toward the Soviet Union and replaced it with an altogether more aggressive policy that did not merely contest the Communist system more forcefully, but called its legitimacy (indeed its very survivability) into question.

Reagan was clear. The USSR, he opined in 1982 before the British Parliament, did not represent the wave of the future. On the contrary, it was, he insisted, condemned like all totalitarian systems to that proverbial “ash can” of history. Reagan even cited Karl Marx in his favor. Marx was right—there was a crisis unfolding—except it was not happening in the capitalist West, according to Reagan, but rather in the communist East. Nor was Reagan content just to point out what was wrong with planning—though he did so in some detail. A few months later he spoke of the USSR in almost religious terms. Its government was not just another system with which the United States was engaged in a competition. It was nothing less (he noted in March 1983) than an “evil empire,” one that the United States not only had a foreign-policy duty to oppose but a moral duty to compete with as well.

And compete the United States did with increasing determination, most immediately with a decisive military build up in what became known as SDI (the Strategic Defence Initiative). The United States, some of Reagan’s supporters loudly proclaimed, would, quite simply, spend the Soviet Union into bankruptcy. It would also make the USSR pay for its aggressive actions undertaken in the 1970s. Hence was born the “Reagan doctrine,” a form of proxy war fought by the United States from Afghanistan to Nicaragua using local forces to increase Soviet problems globally. Finally, the US would seek to squeeze the USSR economically through trade embargoes and investment freezes. And even if this proved problematic (largely because the Soviet economy was not that dependent on the West), there was at least one other metaphorical weapon in the American arsenal: Saudi Arabia, which controlled over 25 percent of the world’s oil supplies, and which was well placed to force down the price of the black stuff upon which the USSR did depend for most of its hard currency.

That Reagan had combined a serious analysis of Soviet systemic weaknesses with a fairly coherent strategy of squeeze and pressure is not, I think, in doubt. Where I think there is some doubt is in making a connection between what he talked about and practiced in his first term in office regarding the superpower relationship and what later unfolded in his second term when one of these two players finally decided to fly the white flag of surrender in Europe. Here we have to exercise some intellectual caution and academic balance.

On one hand, there is very clearly a relationship between US policies under Reagan before late 1988 and what subsequently happened on the Soviet side. It would be most odd if there was not. On the other hand, it is not at all obvious what that relationship is.

First, we have to determine which Ronald Reagan we are actually talking about: the tough, uncompromising American leader who seemingly denied the very legitimacy of the Soviet Union and opposed it by calling for Mr. Gorbachev to tear down the Berlin Wall. Or Reagan the serious negotiator, who met new Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev on no less than four occasions after 1984. The issue is a critical one in terms of explaining the end of the Cold War. For if, as some believe, it was a policy of strength and contestation that ended the Cold War, then obviously one must conclude that it is the Reagan of the first term who needs to be celebrated. However, if one concludes—as does Reagan’s secretary of state, George Schultz, in his memoirs—that it was only the presence of a Soviet leader with whom one could engage after 1985 that made the end of the Cold War possible, then a very different story is bound to be told; not about a Soviet surrender to the imminent

might of American power, but about constructive diplomacy, trust, and something that the early Reagan had been deeply suspicious of: namely détente.

This in turn raises the issue of the USSR and the role played by Gorbachev himself. Here most historians would concede that without a reformer taking over in the Kremlin, not only would there have been nobody with whom Reagan could engage, but there would have been no end to the Cold War either. The United States could raise its own military expenditures as high as it liked; it could have lent even more support to so-called “freedom fighters” in Afghanistan, but without a very different kind of Soviet leader responding to some very real Soviet problems it is impossible to envisage 1989 ever happening. The United States might have played its part in weakening the legitimacy of communism and exposing its weaknesses (of which Reagan was more aware than many American experts at the time). However, at the end of the day the corrosive work was not being done from outside the USSR but from within by an economy that could not innovate and an ideology in which fewer and fewer believed.

There is, in addition, another problem with the argument that an assertive Reagan fought the Soviets to a standstill and then wrestled them to the floor until they cried “Uncle,” and it is a problem that all teachers of history and world affairs confront on a daily basis in the classroom: complexity. What happens in history—as we all know—can never be explained in single-factor terms; and the end of the Cold War is no exception to this important rule. Indeed, this is why scholars from both sides of the Atlantic are still arguing about it. While some give Reagan his due (though it is never entirely clear which Reagan), they often go on to point out that one also has to take into account several other factors when thinking about 1989, including the central part performed by the ordinary people of Central and Eastern Europe in their own liberation; the important role played by some European leaders—among whom the West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl was key when it came to pressing for German unification in October 1989; and finally, the quiet but critical role performed by misperception and misunderstanding. Here, the evidence is now clear. Was Gorbachev prepared to loosen Soviet control over Eastern Europe and let the states there choose their own way (the “Sinatra Doctrine”)? Obviously so. Did he, however, think that this would lead to the rapid and complete collapse of socialism in all its forms? Apparently not. It was one thing seeking a looser, and hopefully less costly, relationship with countries like Poland and Hungary. This did not necessarily mean that Gorbachev actually intended to lose control of the USSR’s “cordon sanitaire” completely. In reality, Gorbachev miscalculated and it was this miscalculation that brought the Cold War to an end.

Finally, how did Reagan himself—and indeed how do most Americans—view the historical figure of Ronald Reagan and what he did in bringing about the end of the Cold War. The simple answer to this is that it all depends on which American you talk to and when! This has certainly been my experience as a teacher. In fact, Americans seem to be even more divided about Reagan than nearly anybody else. There is not very much positive that the broad American left has to say about Reagan, and little indication either that they are prepared to give him any credit for anything. The view on this side of the ideological aisle seems to be that Reagan did more to keep the Cold War going than bringing it to an end. Conservatives and Republicans, you will not be surprised to hear, take a rather different view. Reagan—and here they mean the Reagan of the first term—was absolutely vital in destroying the USSR as result of his policies. George W. Bush even drew significant lessons from what Ronald Reagan had achieved, and sold many of his own policies in the so-called war on terror almost as if they were a re-run of the past. Admittedly in his time, the new enemy was very different from the old one, but the cause was equally just and victory would be achieved by pursuing the same set of uncompromising, morally superior policies against the new totalitarians.

What Reagan himself did say on the end of the Cold War after he left office is revealing. Here, significantly, one finds no sense of the triumphalism that later characterized some more conservative accounts of 1989. Nor, in fact, can we detect much effort on his part to overplay his own role. He accepted that his own policies contributed to the erosion of Soviet power; and that the ideological offensive he unleashed against the USSR in particular (and socialism in general) contributed to changing the terms of the debate about the East-West relationship. But others played their part, too, he insisted: one being Mrs. Thatcher with whom he was so

politically close; and the other of course being Mikhail Gorbachev, whose reformist policies he recognized as being genuine when others in his administration were far more sceptical.

Indeed, Reagan even carried on a debate with the skeptics immediately after he left office. He was certainly very critical of his immediate successor. Bush senior may have been the best and only man for the top job. However, he was quite wrong (at first) to treat the Gorbachev reforms with deep suspicion. This not only displayed a distinct lack of vision (unsurprisingly for a president famed for never being possessed of that rather important political commodity), but according to Reagan, it also meant that the West and the United States might lose a golden opportunity. It was time in his view for the United States to be bold and work with the USSR to make the world a safer place; not to hold back for fear of what might lay beyond the Cold War. In this very important sense, Ronald Reagan ultimately demonstrated something that many of his erstwhile critics, and most of his admiring apologists, have never fully comprehended: that whatever role he may or may not have played in bringing about the end of the Cold War—and historians will continue to debate that for many decades to come I suspect—he had what few leaders have ever displayed since: a sense of a different global future in which all might play a constructive role.

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*Michael Cox is a professor of history at the London School of Economics.*