Chapter 26: The Cold War, 1945-1952

Overview
At the conclusion of World War II the United States and the Soviet Union, once allies, were enemies locked in an ideological conflict based in part on their different political economies. As the United States implemented a policy designed to contain communist expansion using a combination of precedent-setting diplomatic, economic, and military initiatives, the conflict between the United States and containment and the Soviet Union and expansion grew in Europe and soon encompassed much of the world. The end of World War II found Americans ready to focus on the reconversion, the restoration of the economy and society to a peacetime footing. The Cold War had a profound effect on American society. And that effect was fear. Fear of nuclear weapons, immigrants, and Communist subversives pervaded all aspects of Americans’ lives.

Key Topics
- The combination of factors that led to the Cold War
- How the return of peace at the end of World War II affected the economy and lives of workers, women, and African Americans
- Why the liberal Democratic agenda had only mixed success during the first years of the Cold War
- Why the Cold War, originally centered in Europe, quickly widened and intensified to become a global confrontation
- The impact of the Cold War on life in the United States

Review Questions
- How did ideological, political, military, and economic factors combine to produce the Cold War confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union? Could the Cold War have been avoided?
- How did the United States fight the Cold War? Was the American strategy effective?
- How did reconversion affect American society? Did the return of peace after World War II help or hurt workers, women, and African Americans?
- Why did the liberal agenda falter after World War II?
- Why did the Red Scare become such a powerful force during the Cold War? How did the search for domestic communism affect American life?

Annotated chapter outline
Esther and Stephen Brunauer: On March 13, 1950, Senator Joseph McCarthy told a Senate subcommittee that Esther and Stephen Brunauer were Communists. His allegations damaged their lives and careers.

The Origins of the Cold War: At the conclusion of World War II the United States and the Soviet Union, once allies, were enemies locked in an ideological conflict based in part on their different political economies. The conflict produced an open antagonism that saw the United States vow to halt, or contain, the spread of Communism. The Cold War grew from seeds planted during the Second World War.
- Before the war the United States tolerated the Soviet Union because it was a relatively weak nation and it posed no real threat to the United States. After the war it was increasingly impossible for capitalism and communism to co-exist.
- At best the two nations were uneasy allies. At war’s end, many Americans concluded that the United States could not tolerate the appearance of fascism anyplace in the world. Soviet communism was another face of fascism and Josef Stalin was another Hitler.
- George Kennan, an American diplomat in Moscow wrote that there could be no peaceful coexistence between capitalism and socialism and that the Soviet Union would try to destabilize
the capitalist nations, especially the United States. Truman’s actions implemented Kennan’s ideas.

**Fighting the Cold War Abroad:** The conflict between the United States and containment and the Soviet Union and expansion and soon encompassed much of the world. Two events in 1949 made the Cold War more dangerous: the Soviets acquired their own atomic weapons and Chinese Communists successfully concluded a civil war in China. In 1950, the Cold War became a fighting war as the North Koreans invaded South Korea.

- For the next forty years containment guided much of American policy toward the Soviets. The United States used foreign aid, overseas alliances, and national defense to halt the spread of communism. The Marshall Plan provided $13 billion dollars to rebuild postwar Europe. Containment also laid the groundwork for the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. The nation’s military was reorganized, the Central Intelligence Agency was created, a new Selective Service Act (1948) was passed, and the National Security Act (1949) created an advisory board of military and cabinet-level individuals to advise the president on military affairs.

- Containment brought its own dangers. The Berlin Blockade, the Soviets acquired the ability to produce and detonate their own atomic weapon, and the revolution in China ended in 1949 in a Communist victory.

- The Cold War turned hot when Soviet communist-backed North Korea forces invaded South Korea in June 1950.

- The Truman administration was willing to go to carry out containment anywhere. By 1950, France needed American help to keep a hold on Vietnam; without it the Communists could expand into southeast Asia. The Cold War required the United States to accept and support things they had long feared: alliances, foreign aid, a massive standing army. Each of these required the growth of the federal government. The president’s power escalated and the military had the power to shape the American economy.

**The Reconversion of American Society:** Americans had waited a decade and a half to enjoy prosperity. But reconversion brought worry, too. What if the depression returned? Labor, women, and African Americans worried they might lose their wartime gains.

- Despite their worries that the depression might return when massive government wartime spending ceased, the economy remained strong. The United States dominated the world economy and that also stimulated reconversion. The world’s demand for American exports helped to provide jobs for returning veterans and to sustain the economy.

- Reconversion posed special problems for workers and the labor movement. It posed special challenges to the status of American women who were reluctant to give up wartime gains.

- African Americans had also made significant social and economic gains during the war and these stimulated their drive for equal rights after the war. A new generation of black activists not only resulted in the increase in the number of blacks registered to vote but also broadened the attack on Jim Crow. Truman helped bring significant changes to the workforce, including the armed forces.

**The Frustrations of Liberalism:** The liberalism of the New Deal reshaped the American political economy. The federal government was intertwined in American’s economic and social lives. But those changes stalled during the war. Following the war, liberalism met with more frustrations.

- Truman’s 1948 re-election victory was short-lived. His program, Fair Deal, was the kind of liberalism voters knew, but Congress was unwilling to go along with any expansion of the New Deal.

**Fighting the Cold War:** The Cold War had a profound affect on American society. And that affect was fear. Fear of nuclear weapons, immigrants, and Communist subversives pervaded all aspects of Americans’ lives. Anti-Communist crusaders destroyed the lives of many Americans.
The irony of the American victory in World War II and the strength of America’s postwar economy is that these successes bred more fear and pessimism than in the 1930s. The Cold War did nothing to calm their fears.

Of all their fears, disloyalty was the most powerful. America’s second Red Scare was made more popular and more dangerous by American politicians of both parties who played on American’s pre-existing fears. Americans searched for secret Communists and the hunt was led by the House Committee on Un-American Activities.

The anti-Communist crusade was led by Senator Joseph McCarthy claimed to have the names of 205 Communists employed in the state department. Frightened Americans believed his allegations. The Congress passed the Internal Security Act of 1950 giving the federal government sweeping powers over suspicious persons or groups.

**Conclusion:** The Cold War affected most aspects of Americans’ lives and it influenced every foreign policy decision made by the United States. As Americans adjusted to life after the war, they adjusted to a very uncertain future.

**Analytical reading** These questions refer to the passage “The Globalization of the Cold War” on page 623.

1. In the Chinese Revolution, who led the nationalists? the Communists? Who did the United States back? How? Who won the revolution? What happened to the losers?
2. What did the expansion of communism into China tell President Truman about the “truth” of Kennan’s containment policy?

**Lecture Strategies**

The seeds of the Cold War were planted during World War II and if your students are going to understand the Cold War, they need to remember the WWII issues, especially the Yalta Conference, Potsdam Conference, etc. Some of your students may need a gentle review on the incompatibilities of capitalism and communism so that they can understand just what the Americans and Soviets saw at stake. In this post-Cold War world, some aspects of the Cold War will seem very foreign to those whose lives were not touched by the conflict.

Containment. George Kennan’s long telegram to President Truman is very readable, and he places the conflict in historical and cultural perspective. This might be an effective backdrop for discussing plans, programs, and policies designed to halt the spread of communism.

Containment becomes even more important after the fall of China and the Soviets acquisition of nuclear weapons.

NSC-68, once top secret and now commonly read, presents an interesting contrast to the Containment policy. Although a bit less readable than Kennan’s policy, NSC-68 offers a different view of the relationship between the U.S. and the Soviet Union. With subsequent events, such as the invasion of Korea, NSC-68 becomes even more influential in the development and application of foreign policy.

Globalization of the Cold War begins in earnest with Korea. Help your students see that Korea (and all of the other hot spots during the Cold War) was a proxy war fought by the Americans and Soviets and Communist Chinese. If you have introduced NSC-68, your students will readily see that Truman was trying to keep the war from becoming global and nuclear and that containing the spread of communism, by keeping South Korea free, may have been the best of all options.

The Cold War at home may also be a bit challenging for your students. If they understand just how afraid and perhaps paranoid the United States was at the time, then the anti-Communist preoccupation and subsequent witch hunts become more understandable. Help them see how American fear was manifested in American society by using examples from social and political events at the time.

The Cold War helped the nation adjust to a postwar economy and one of the things your students should see is the parallel fear that a second “great depression” could pave the way for the Communist
takeover of the United States. Have them remember the pre-WWII events in Germany and the rest of Europe as despair and depression allowed for the totalitarian dictatorships to take hold. Those events are not too far back in Americans’ memory. The post-Cold War economic conversion brought a number of positive changes to American society: the GI Bill, the “baby boom,” the expansion of the petroleum business, resettlement of the southern and western states, a strong export economy. The Cold War era was also a time of positive gains for women and blacks. Presentism is a strong force in teaching American history and this period seems particularly susceptible to it. If your students try to understand Jackie Robinson’s breaking the color barrier in major league baseball from their understanding of the present, his and the Dodgers’s remarkable move will not seem very remarkable.

President Harry Truman is also an interesting study in leadership. Have your students study and evaluate his actions. Did he exacerbate an already bad situation with Josef Stalin, or was he the perfect counter for Stalin’s personality?

**Supplements:** Prentice Hall has developed a number of supplements that can enhance your lectures as well as your students’ comprehension and performance.

**American Stories: Biographies in United States History** by Katheryn A. Abbott and Patricia Hagler Minter. See Chapter 24, The Cold War, 1945-1952, for biographical sketches of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg and John Foster Dulles.

**Documents Collection** see Part Twenty-Six: Cold War

- *George F. Kennan, “Long Telegram” 1946*
- *Kenneth MacFarland, “The Unfinished Work” 1946*
- *Containment 1947*
- *Harry S Truman, The Truman Doctrine 1947*
- *Ronald Reagan, Testimony Before the House Un-American Activities Committee 1947*
- *Joseph R. McCarthy, from Speech Delivered to the Women’s Club of Wheeling, West Virginia 1950*
- *National Security Council Memorandum Number 68 1950*
- *Senator Joseph McCarthy’s telegram to President Truman following the ‘Wheeling [W. Va.] Speech,’ February 11, 1950*

The documents of particular relevance to this chapter are identified with an asterisk, although previous and subsequent parts have relevant documents.