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. The adversarial post-war conflict was exacerbated by war-time decisions. 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. 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. 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. Truman authorized research on hydrogen bombs. 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. It had been a long haul for Americans. First they suffered the Great Depression then the war. They 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 war-time gains. 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 also tried to prove that he was a worthy successor to Franklin Roosevelt. The Democrats lost control of Congress in 1946 but Truman was elected to his own term as president in 1948. He ran on a liberal platform but his legislative agenda made little headway. 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.

Key Topics
The information in chapter 26 introduces you to the following 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

Chapter Outline
Esther and Stephen Brunauer
The Origins of the Cold War
Ideological Adversaries
Uneasy Allies
From Allies to Antagonists
Fighting the Cold War Abroad
The Strategy of Containment
The Dangers of Containment
The Globalization of the Cold War
The Cold War Turns hot in Korea
Escalating the U. S. Effort
The Reconversion of American Society
The Postwar Economy
The Challenge of Organized Labor
Opportunities for Women
Civil Rights for African Americans
The Frustrations of Liberalism
The Democrats’ Troubles
Truman’s Comeback
The Fair Deal Falters
Fighting the Cold War at Home
Doubts and Fears in the Atomic Age
The Anticommunist Crusade Begins

Feature: America on Trial: The Hollywood Ten
The Hunt for Soviet Spies
The Rise of McCarthyism

Conclusion

Annotated chapter outline with review questions

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 adversarial post-war conflict was exacerbated by war-time decisions. 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.

- When the United States entered World War II the United States and the U.S.S.R. were allied against a common enemy, Germany and Japan. 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. The enmity between the United States and the Soviet Union was enhanced by war time decisions at Yalta. When Harry Truman became president in April 1945, he inherited Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s decisions but not always his long-term thinking about issues so Harry Truman had to follow his own instincts. He and Stalin did not like each other.

- At the end of the war the United States and the Soviet Union rivaled one another as world powers and in 1945 the United States possessed atomic weapons, the Soviets did not. As each prepared for peace their definitions of national security conflicted with each other. George Kennan, an American diplomat in Moscow, articulated what became the foundation of American policy toward the Soviets. Kennan wrote that there could be no peaceful co-existence between capitalism and socialism. He argued that the Soviet Union would try to destabilize the capitalist nations, especially the United States. Truman’s actions implemented Kennan’s ideas. In Iran, Turkey, and Greece the Soviets tried to gain influence and power. Truman was in a difficult position. Congress was not in favor of such massive peace time aid. Truman went to the American public. On March 12, 1947, Truman defined what is now called the Truman Doctrine. He said that it was the “policy of the United States” to support people fighting to protect their freedom.

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?

Fighting the Cold War Abroad: 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. 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. Truman authorized research on hydrogen bombs.
Containment was the term given to the policy articulated by Kennan that acted to prevent the “Russian expansive tendencies: through the use of “counter-force” where ever and whenever it threatened to spread beyond its borders. For the next forty years containment guided much of American policy toward the Soviets. Even though the United Nations existed and functioned, the United States did not depend on United Nations’ implementation. Instead the United States used foreign aid, overseas alliances, and national defense to halt the spread of communism. War-torn Europe could become a breeding ground for communism if the United States did not do something. The Marshall Plan provided $13 billion dollars to rebuild postwar Europe. The money rebuilt and reindustrialized Europe and helped war torn nations become economically and politically stable. In the process the nations were tied to the United States. Containment also laid the groundwork for the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. In the United States, containment also required a large, strong military. The nation’s military was reorganized, the Central Intelligence Agency was created to gather information and carry out covert operations, and a new Selective Service Act (1948) was passed. 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. One of those dangers came in 1948 when the Americans, British, and French unified their zones. In response the Soviets blockaded all of Berlin -- the Soviets did not allow American aid to get into the city. Instead of giving up or resorting to armed conflict, American B-29 bombers carried in 2,500 tons of food and fuel every day. The Soviets withdrew the blockade in May 1949. Containment succeeded. But when it became clear that the Soviets had acquired the ability to produce and detonate their own atomic weapon the world changed. Suddenly the dangers of containment were very real.

Events in Europe escalated to Asia. A revolution in China between the nationalists led by Jiang Jieshi, America’s ally, and the Communist Party leader Mao Zedong ended in 1949 in a Communist victory. The defeated nationalists fled China for the island called Formosa (known as Taiwan). Even Africa and other less industrialized regions became important to the Americans. Technical assistance to “underdeveloped areas” where “economic life is primitive and stagnant” became known as Truman’s “Fourth Point”. Cold War calculations and humanitarian goals were married. Although never fully funded it became a model for administration that followed Truman’s.

The Cold War turned hot when Soviet communist-backed North Korea forces invaded South Korea in June 1950. The Korean peninsula was divided at the 38th parallel at the end of World War II and although it did not like it, the United States recognized this political division. The Soviets backed Kim Il Sung in the North while the United States backed Syngman Rhee in the South. South Korea was not strategically important to the United States but in light of the Containment Policy, and the loss of China to communism, Korea was very important.

The policy of containment did not change even though China was communist, the Soviets had atomic weapons, and the Korean war took American lives. What changed were the limits to which the Truman administration was willing to go to carry out containment. Anti-communist forces were now supported by the United States and soon the United States was supporting the anti-communist forces in Vietnam. By 1950, France needed American help to keep a hold on Vietnam; without it the communists could expand into south east Asia. American military equipment and financial aid went to the French in Indo China. By this time, the United States was actively caught up in an arms race. The National Security Council modified the containment policy by declaring that the United States needed to match the aggressive Soviets with a massive military build-up. This included research and development on a thermo-nuclear hydrogen bomb. Defense spending in the United States escalated as did the number of military personnel. 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.

How did the United States fight the Cold War? Was the American strategy effective?

The Reconversion of American Society: 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. It had been a long haul for Americans. First they suffered the Great Depression then the war. They 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 war-time gains.

- Despite their worries that the depression might return when massive government war-time spending ceased, the economy remained strong. By 1950 an economic boom began. One of the areas of phenomenal growth was college and university attendance. Industrial growth continued to expand in the South and West. Oil and natural gas provided more than half of the nation’s energy. 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. Organized labor came out of the war powerful and politically influential. The Congress of Industrial Organizations played a significant role in the Democratic Party. Trying to increase their war-time gains, a huge wave of labor strikes began in August 1945. The Taft-Hartley Act modified federal labor law, making it easier for employers to hire non-union workers and to oppose the formation of unions. Unions still prospered.

- Reconversion posed special challenges to the status of American women. Having acquired jobs during the war because of an absence of men, American women were reluctant to give up their jobs in peacetime. They had acquired income and self-satisfaction but society believed they should turnover their jobs to returning veterans. About three quarters of those women employed during the war kept their jobs. By 1953 as many women were employed as in 1945 and many women worked in non-traditional jobs. Economic realities overcame social and cultural prejudices.

- Like women, African-Americans made significant social and economic gains during the war and these stimulated their drive for equal rights after the war. Blacks continued to abandon cotton fields and systematic racism of the South for higher paying jobs and some opportunity in the northern and western cities. The NAACP, the nation’s oldest civil rights association, used earlier Supreme Court decisions to set up challenges to the South’s disfranchisement of African-Americans. 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. The CORE attacked public discrimination. Activists pressured President Truman who found himself representing freedom and democracy around the world while suppressing the same freedoms at home. Truman helped bring significant changes to the workforce, including the armed forces. But the striking blow against segregation came on the baseball field when the Brooklyn Dodgers called up Jackie Robinson in 1947. He became the first black major league baseball player in decades.

How did reconversion affect American society? Did the return of peace after World War II help or hurt workers, women, and African Americans?

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 also tried to prove that he was a worthy successor to Franklin Roosevelt. The Democrats lost control of Congress in 1946 but Truman was elected to his own term as president in 1948. He ran on a liberal platform but his legislative agenda made little headway. Harry Truman’s presidency was marked by the president trying to prove to the American public that he could carry the nation after Roosevelt’s death and prove to the Democratic Party that he, too, was a true believer. Shortly after taking office in 1945, Truman’s legislative agenda included education, employment, insurance, social security, and civil rights. The president could not persuade Congress to see his view to the future. In 1946 the voters returned the Congress to the Republicans after a sixteen year absence.

- It looked like President Truman was on his way out of the White House. But the Republican Congress helped Truman’s 1948 victory. The Republican Congress took victory in 1946 as a mandate to turn back the advances of the New Deal, the American voter was not so certain. Americans did not want to give back their advances. However, a split Democratic Party seemed to guarantee Truman’s defeat and the Republican Thomas E. Dewey’s election. Truman campaigned to the American voter, those who favored the New Deal, African-American civil rights advocates, to laborers, farmers, and senior citizens. He energized voters with his vision of the political economy. Truman won with 49.5 percent of the vote. The Democrats recaptured the Congress.

- Truman’s 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. The Fair Deal, with its national
health care program, new civil rights act, and the repeal of Taft-Hartley, faltered. The liberalism so influential two decades earlier could not command the politics of the Cold War. Truman announced he would not seek reelection and served out his term as a lame duck. The Democratic Party and the liberal Fair Deal had an uncertain future.

Why did the liberal agenda falter after World War II?

**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 post war economy is that these successes bred more fear and pessimism than in the 1930s. The Cold War did nothing to calm their fears. Americans saw “UFOs” in North American skies and some came to believe the federal government was “covering up” the truth about them. Hollywood explored popular fears about capitalism, corporate control, and life in an immoral, confusing world. Asian immigration was highly restricted. Communists and homosexuals were refused immigration and any foreigners presumed to be disloyal were reported.

- Of all their fears, disloyalty was the most powerful. The success of the Soviet Union could only happen because communists in the United States had betrayed America, or so many Americans believed. This was America’s second Red Scare. It 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. Their investigations took them to New Deal era bureaucrats, Hollywood screen writers, producers, directors, and actors, and current government employees. President Truman joined the search and established a permanent Federal Employee Loyalty Program. Those presumed guilty could not confront their accusers, and had to prove their innocence rather than the prosecutor proving their guilt. The impression that Americans had was that there must have been a serious problem in Washington.

- Spies were found along with the evidence that American atomic secrets had been passed to the Soviets during World War II. The suspect was Alger Hiss, an aid to the secretary of state. The case was well-publicized and after two trials Hiss was found guilty of lying to Congress in January 1950. The episode was a triumph for Republicans and conservatives, a blow to Democrats and liberalism, and a young Congressman from California, Richard Nixon, became a Senator. Another spy scandal shook Americans - - this one had more dire consequences for the accused. Klaus Fuchs, a physicist and his brother-in-law and sister, Julius and Ethel Rosenberg. They were sentenced to death and executed in April 1953 despite millions of appeals for clemency.

- Within the excitement over Hiss’s conviction, Truman’s decision to build a hydrogen bomb, and days following the arrest of Klaus Fuchs, an unremarkable Republican senator from Wisconsin took control of the anticommunist crusade. Joseph McCarthy claimed to have the names of 205 communists employed in the state department. He expanded the list of names and won instant fame. The more President Truman and the Democrats dismissed the charges, the more expansive McCarthy’s claims grew -- along with his popularity. Frightened Americans believed his allegations. With his popularity, McCarthy’s power grew. Democrats hated what he represented but they feared him, too. The Congress passed the Internal Security Act of 1950 giving the federal government sweeping powers over suspicious persons or groups. McCarthyism finally went too far as Senator McCarthy’s charges became unbelievable and baseless. Twenty-million Americans watched as the televised hearings exposed McCarthy’s lack of credibility and his popularity ratings dropped sharply. However, Americans searched for communists. Loyalty oaths were required for many jobs. Americans experienced the containment of communists at home and consciously sought ways to prove their own loyalty.

Why did the Red Scare become such a powerful force during the Cold War? How did the search for domestic communism affect American life?

**Feature: America on Trial: The Hollywood Ten:** Americans’ fears about communist infiltrators and spies caused them to act in very dangerous ways. The Hollywood Ten is an example of that. Called before the
House of Representatives committee on Un-American activities, Hollywood writers, directors, producers, and actors faced unsubstantiated charges and were intimidated into testifying against others in an attempt to clear themselves. **Conclusion:** The Cold War effected 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.

**Making links to other ideas** Using the maps and websites, in addition to your prepared lectures and other assignments, can give you more resources to enable your students to see that history is much more than memorizing names and dates. You will find that the websites are even more comprehensive and adaptable than described and because they have been collected here in one volume you have a world of information no further away than the click of your mouse. If you are new to the web’s opportunities, you will be pleasantly surprised at the breadth and depth of the information available in these sites.

Map 01. List the member nations of NATO; of the Warsaw Pact. Where is the metaphorical “Iron Curtain” located?
Map 02. When the U.N. forces landed to reclaim South Korea, they could have landed at Pusan. Locate Pusan and explain why that landing site was determined to be a bad idea. Why, then, did they choose Inchon? Identify the location of the 38th parallel.
Map 03. Compare the states that Dewey won with those of Harry Truman. Which state(s) did Strom Thurmond win?
Place the following world events in chronological order: Truman Doctrine articulated in a speech to the American people, the Soviets detonate a nuclear warhead, Containment Policy is written, Communist Chinese forces win the Chinese Revolution, North Korean forces invade South Korea in Soviet-made tanks, NSC-68 is delivered to the president.

**Web connections and resources** Consider using these websites to supplement your students’ reading and analytical skills. The sites were chosen because of their relevance to the material in the chapter -- not just to mirror it but to provide additional materials and perspectives. Questions from the student study guide have been included so that you can use or amend them to your own needs. Your students may find it insightful for you to guide them through the site as you help them develop research strategies.


Harry S. Truman's decision to support the anti-communist side in the Greek Civil War did much to shape overall U.S. policy vis a vis the Soviet Union for the next four decades. Equally influential perhaps is the way Truman sought to gain public and Congressional support for his decision. How did Truman justify the “Doctrine” that came to bear his name?

“Readings in the 1950s” [http://www.english.upenn.edu/~afilreis/50s/home.html](http://www.english.upenn.edu/~afilreis/50s/home.html)

This site contains primary sources that reflect the anti-Communist ideology that permeated the Cold War era. Sources on the site include transcripts from testimony from anti-Communist hearings, magazine articles that address the cultural anxiety of nuclear threat, and numerous links to other sites.

1. Phillip Morrison reviewed a book written by P. M. S. Blackett entitled *One World or None*. Morrison’s review was published in the *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists* in February 1949. In September 1952 Morrison was called before a Senate subcommittee to Investigate the Administration of the Internal Security. Read the Senate transcript and Morrison’s book review. What is it that the Senate was so concerned about Morrison’s article?

“The Truman Doctrine” [http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/trudoc.htm](http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/trudoc.htm)

Read President Harry Truman’s address before a joint session of Congress in which the “Truman Doctrine,” or using U.S. economic power to ensure the freedom of all nations, was born.
1. Based on President Truman’s speech to the Congress, what is the new policy of the United States? What will be the consequences for the world and for the U.S. if the United States does not follow through on this new commitment?

“Korean War” http://www.nps.gov/kwvm/war/korea.htm

On this site sponsored by the National Park Service, read about the origins of the Korean War, the conflict year by year, and the context of the home-front. It also features information on the war veteran’s memorial.

1. Summarize the long-term issues and events that led to the Korean War.
2. Summarize the short-term issues and events that led to the Korean War.

Analytical reading  Your students may need more experience analyzing a short reading passage so that he or she can determine its component parts. They may need help identifying primary and supporting information as well as the author’s analysis. The analytical reading passages and the questions from the student study guide have been duplicated in the instructor’s manual for your use. Your students may need direction and encouragement in using them.

At the end of World War II, the Chinese Nationalist government of Jiang Jieshi, America’s ally, faced a revolution led by the Communist Party of Mao Zedong. Hoping to save Jiang, Truman sent George Marshall on a mission in 1945 to promote a settlement between the Nationalists and the Communists. The effort failed. Although Republicans strongly supported Jiang, the Truman administration concluded that the Nationalist regime could not be saved. The president agreed to $2 billion in aid for the Nationalists from 1945 to 1949, but he refused to send American troops to China. In December 1949 the defeated Nationalists fled the Chinese mainland for the island of Formosa, also known as Taiwan. “We . . . bet on a bad horse . . .” Truman admitted. His conservative opponents were not as philosophical. They angrily blamed the administration for the “loss” of China.

The Chinese Revolution widened the Cold War. Although Stalin did not direct the Chinese Communists, Americans readily saw Jiang’s defeat as a victory for the Soviet Union. The Truman administration refused to recognize the new mainland Chinese regime, the People’s Republic of China. Now communism was not just a problem in Europe; it was apparently a threat in Asia, too.

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?

Writing  The questions or writing prompts from the student study guide have been duplicated here for your use. These writing topics make good lecture topics especially if you help your students see the development of the idea in lecture format before they refine the idea in their writing assignments.

1. Discuss the origins and issues of the Cold War. What was at stake?
2. Why could communism and capitalism not coexist as Stalin claimed in February 1946?
3. In what ways is the Containment Policy an American attempt to prevent making the same mistakes that led to World War II?
4. In what ways is the Marshall Plan an American attempt to prevent making the same mistakes that led to World War II?
5. Explain this statement: The Cold War contributed to an arms race between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R.
6. In what ways did the Cold War contribute to the expansion of the president’s powers?
7. How did African Americans use their wartime experiences and post-war situations to push for civil rights reform? How did the NAACP and the Supreme Court contribute to these reforms?
8. What evidence supports the author’s statement that the main domestic by-product of the Cold War was fear? What were Americans afraid of? Were their fears justified?
9. How did fear and the belief in communist spies in the government contribute to Senator McCarthy’s investigations? What finally brought an end to the nation’s collective paranoia?

**Lecture Strategies** Ultimately the lecture is where you impart, or profess, your knowledge for the benefit of your students. These strategies were designed around the textbook and if your classroom strategy is to use the organization of the text to organize your course content, these lecture ideas may prove helpful. However, if you lecture around themes please see the section entitled “Thematic Lecture Topics.” You may find that you are more comfortable with and your students are more responsive to a combination of the two.

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 resident 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 anticommunist 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 post-war 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 take over 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 G I 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 Dodger’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?