The Cold War

30.1 Introduction

Even before World War II came to an end, the Allies were preparing for peace. In April 1945, delegates from 50 nations met in San Francisco to establish a new organization called the United Nations (UN). The UN was founded to preserve world peace by promoting international cooperation.

A generation earlier, the United States had refused to participate in the League of Nations after World War I. This time, America’s response was quite different. The United States not only joined the UN, but also gave it a home. Since 1952, the UN’s headquarters has been located in New York City.

Hopes for a more peaceful world, however, faded quickly as the United States and the Soviet Union emerged from World War II as bitter rivals. This rivalry led to the Cold War, an intense competition for global power and influence that lasted more than 40 years.

The Cold War began in 1945 as the dictator of the Soviet Union, Josef Stalin, seized control of several eastern European nations. The people in these nations were denied the freedom to choose their own governments, to travel, and even to speak freely.

Stalin’s takeover of these countries alarmed leaders in the United States and Western Europe. Former British prime minister Winston Churchill warned that “an iron curtain has descended across the continent.” In the view of western democracies, that iron curtain divided the free world of the West from the Soviet-dominated world of the East.

In this chapter, you will learn why and how the United States and the Soviet Union waged their cold war without ever fighting each other directly. As you read, think about how the Cold War resembled a game—a deadly game that threatened to destroy the world.
30.2 Choosing Sides: A Bipolar World

After World War II, the once-mighty nations of Japan, Germany, and Great Britain lay in ruins. Only two nations came out of the war strong enough to dominate world affairs. These “superpowers” were the United States and the Soviet Union. The ideals and ambitions of the two superpowers were as opposite as the north and south poles. Their rivalry created a bipolar world—a world deeply divided into two warring camps.

The Soviet Union  The Soviet Union was born out of the Russian Revolution of 1917. That year, revolutionaries known as Bolsheviks overthrew the Russian government and later killed Russia’s royal family.

The Bolsheviks were inspired by the writings of a German philosopher named Karl Marx. In his Communist Manifesto, written in 1848, Marx called on the workers of the world to unite and overthrow the capitalist economic system. Under capitalism, farms and businesses are privately owned by individuals with money, or capital. According to Marx, wealthy capitalists take advantage of the labor of workers to enrich themselves.

Marx claimed that the future belonged to an economic system he called communism. Under communism, workers would own all farms and businesses and run them for the benefit of everyone. The result, Marx predicted, would be a workers’ paradise.

The Bolsheviks called the ruling councils of workers “soviets.” But in the new Soviet Union, power was concentrated in the central government rather than in committees of workers.

When Josef Stalin took over the government in the 1920s, he was determined to transform the Soviet Union from a backward rural nation into a modern industrial giant. Stalin stamped out all individual ownership of farms and businesses. The government took over all economic planning. The Soviet people were forced to work for government-run farms and factories.

To protect his power, Stalin turned the Soviet Union into a vast police state. No one was safe from the prying eyes and ears of Stalin’s spies and secret police. “Enemies of the people”—those suspected of opposing Stalin—were ruthlessly eliminated. During the 1930s, between 3 and 8 million people were executed in the Soviet Union. Millions more were imprisoned in labor camps. Instead of a workers’ paradise, the Soviet Union became a brutal dictatorship.
Containing Communism  Most Americans were appalled by what was happening in the Soviet Union. They saw communism as a cruel system that took away people's property and denied them such basic rights as freedom of speech and religion. Even worse, the Soviet government was doing all it could to spread communism to other countries. Americans saw Stalin's takeover of Eastern Europe as proof that he intended to convert the whole world to communism.

President Truman responded to this threat with a foreign policy known as containment. The goal of this policy was to keep communism from spreading any further by containing, or limiting, it to the countries where it had already taken hold.

Truman first turned his attention to Europe, where World War II had left many people homeless and hungry. George Marshall, Truman's secretary of state, developed a plan to help Europe recover from the war. Under the Marshall Plan, the United States sent vast amounts of money to 16 nations in Europe for rebuilding cities, railroads, factories, and electric systems. As life in these countries improved, the appeal of communism weakened. Both Americans and Europeans hailed the Marshall Plan as a success.

The effort to contain communism suffered a major setback in 1949, when Mao Zedong's communist revolutionaries seized control of China, the world's most populous nation. With the success of this revolution, nearly a billion people came under communist rule.

The Third World  The Cold War created a new set of divisions in the world. The United States and its democratic, industrialized allies came to be known as "First World" nations. The Soviet Union and its communist allies were seen as a "Second World."

There was also a "Third World" of poorer, less-developed nations in Latin America, Africa, and Asia. Many of these countries had only recently gained their independence from colonial rulers.

Both the United States and the Soviet Union tried to convince these nations to join their "team" in the Cold War. But many Third World countries, such as India, remained non-aligned nations—countries that refused to line up with either side.
30.3 Forming Teams: Cold War Alliances

The Cold War saw powerful new alliances led by the United States and the Soviet Union. These alliances came about as a result of the first great confrontation of the Cold War—the Berlin blockade.

A Divided City When Germany surrendered in 1945, it was divided into two. Soviet troops occupied East Germany, while American, British, and French forces controlled West Germany. The capital city of Berlin, located in East Germany, was also split into western and eastern parts.

The Soviets set up a communist government in East Germany and demanded that the Allies leave West Berlin. When the Allies refused to budge, Stalin ordered a blockade of Berlin in 1948. Hoping to starve the Allies out of the city, Stalin closed all roads and railroads leading to West Berlin. He also cut electrical power to West Berlin.

The Allies faced a tough choice. They did not want to give in to Stalin and abandon West Berlin. But they feared that efforts to break through the blockade on land might lead to war. Instead, American and British planes began to airlift food, clothing, medicine, and fuel into West Berlin.

At first people worried that the Soviets would try to end the airlift by shooting down the Allies’ planes. But the Soviets also wanted to avoid war. Stalin bid his time, hoping that the Allies could not afford to continue flying in supplies for 2 million people.

For ten long months, the airlift continued. Finally, the Soviets gave up and removed the blockade. The lights went back on in Berlin.

Berlin continued to be a potential flashpoint throughout much of the Cold War. In 1961, East Germany and the Soviet Union tried to stem the tide of East Germans fleeing to West Berlin by putting up a wall between
the two parts of the city. On the eastern side of the Berlin Wall, armed guards stood ready to shoot anyone trying to escape to freedom in West Berlin. For the next 30 years, the Berlin Wall served as a grim symbol of a divided Europe.

**NATO: The Western Alliance** The Berlin blockade convinced the United States and its allies to form a more permanent alliance for their mutual protection. In April 1949, ten Western European countries, the United States, and Canada formed the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). An attack upon any NATO country, they agreed, would be treated as an attack against them all.

Ratification of the NATO treaty was a big step for the United States. For the first time in its history, the United States had gone against George Washington’s warning to “steer clear of permanent alliances with any portion of the foreign world.” With the creation of NATO, American aid to Europe began to shift from economic assistance to military assistance.

**The Warsaw Pact: The Eastern Alliance** Despite the failure of the Berlin blockade, the Soviets still hoped to unite Berlin—and Germany—under a communist government. Twice in the twentieth century, German armies had invaded Russia. Soviet leaders believed that the best way to prevent future invasions was to gain firm control over all of Germany.

The Soviets’ hopes for a united, communist Germany soon began to fade. In 1949, West Germany became an independent nation with a democratic government. Six years later, West Germany was allowed to join NATO and rebuild its military.

The prospect of West Germany building a new army pushed the Soviets to create their own military alliance in 1955. The Warsaw Pact (named after the capital of Poland) called for military cooperation among the Soviet Union, Albania, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland, Rumania, and East Germany. If any one of these nations was attacked, the others promised to come to its defense. As part of this agreement, Soviet troops were stationed throughout Eastern Europe.

With the establishment of NATO and the Warsaw Pact, Europe had been divided into two opposing teams. The alliances made members of each team feel more secure. At the same time, the alliance system increased the risk that a dispute between two small nations could trigger a third world war—a war fought with terrifying new weapons.
30.4 The Nuclear Arms Race

When the United States dropped atomic bombs on Japan in 1945, a frightening new age began—the Atomic Age. Four years later—aided by spies who had worked on America’s secret atomic bomb project—the Soviet Union successfully tested its own bomb.

Soon, both sides were developing nuclear weapons—even more powerful versions of the atomic bomb. Suddenly, the world was faced with the threat of unthinkable destruction if a war broke out between the superpowers. It was this threat that made the Cold War so terrifying. What if the war turned hot?

**McCarthyism** The Soviet Union’s successful atomic bomb test fueled fears that communist spies were everywhere in the United States. Senator Joseph McCarthy took advantage of those fears to launch a well-publicized campaign to uncover suspected communists. Without any real evidence, McCarthy accused many people of being communists and working for the Soviet Union. Those who questioned McCarthy or his charges were branded “communist sympathizers.” The senator’s practice of publicly accusing people of being disloyal with little or no evidence became known as “McCarthyism.”

During McCarthy’s spy hunt, many Americans lost their jobs and reputations after being accused of being communists. McCarthy finally lost public support for his crusade in 1954, when he made false charges against the U.S. Army on television. But those who had been hurt by McCarthyism were among the casualties of the Cold War.

**The Arms Race Begins** While McCarthy was busy hunting for communists, President Truman announced plans to develop a hydrogen bomb. This was a nuclear weapon that would be hundreds of times more powerful than the bomb that had destroyed Hiroshima in 1945.
The Soviets set to work to match this goal. The result was a nuclear arms race, a competition to develop and manufacture ever more powerful and destructive weapons.

By 1953, both superpowers had tested their first hydrogen bombs. Both nations also began work on long-range missiles that could carry nuclear weapons to any point on Earth. By 1960, both superpowers could launch nuclear missiles at each other from the land, air, and sea.

**Mutual Assured Destruction** When John F. Kennedy became president in 1961, it was clear that neither side could win the arms race. By then, each superpower had enough nuclear weapons to destroy the other many times over. In the face of this overwhelming threat, the United States adopted a military policy known as Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD).

MAD was based on the belief that Soviet leaders would not order a nuclear attack on the United States if doing so meant the certain destruction of their own country. The way to ensure such destruction was to build so many missiles that they could not all be wiped out by a surprise Soviet attack. The surviving missiles would then destroy the Soviet Union. As one writer summed up MAD, “Whoever shoots first, dies second.”

**Anti-nuclear Protests** The nuclear arms race inspired “ban the bomb” protests in both the United States and Europe. Most protesters were deeply concerned that the effects of a nuclear war could destroy all life on Earth. Many were also upset by the huge amounts of money being spent on the arms race. As President Eisenhower once noted, “Every gun that is made, every warship launched is a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, from those who are cold and are not clothed.”

Early in the arms race, protesters also focused on the problem of fallout—radioactive dust from the explosion of nuclear weapons that is potentially harmful to living things. As testing increased, scientists began to detect radioactive material in drinking water, in crops, and in the bones of children. Demands that the superpowers stop testing weapons grew louder year by year.

**Towards Arms Control** In 1963, the superpowers took their first step toward controlling the arms race when they signed the Limited Test Ban Treaty. This agreement banned nuclear testing in the air, the ocean, and outer space. Underground tests were still permitted. Kennedy called the treaty “an important first step—a step toward reason—a step away from war.” But despite this step, both sides continued to spend vast sums of money developing new weapons.

During the Cold War, the United States and the Soviet Union rushed to build nuclear weapons. Even though the Cold War ended, it was estimated that there were 35,000 nuclear warheads still in existence in 2000. A single megaton warhead can kill 220,000 people and injure 420,000.
30.5 The Cold War Heats Up

As the superpowers armed themselves with nuclear weapons, war between them became something neither side could hope to win. Instead of confronting each other directly, they competed in proxy wars. A proxy war was a conflict between nations, or within a single country, in which the superpowers backed opposite sides without fighting each other directly. The superpowers supplied advisors, weapons, and sometimes troops to their "proxies," or substitutes. Most of these proxy wars took place in small nations in Asia, Africa, and Latin America.

The Korean War The first major proxy war erupted in Korea in 1950. At the end of World War II, the Korean Peninsula was occupied by both American and Soviet troops. Unable to agree on what kind of government the Korean people should have, the superpowers divided the country. The Soviets installed a communist government in North Korea, while in South Korea the Americans encouraged a government that favored capitalism.

In 1950, North Korean troops armed with Soviet tanks and weapons overran most of South Korea. Their goal was to unite the country under a communist government. President Truman ordered the U.S. military to support South Korea. The United Nations also took action by calling on member nations to assist South Korea. In all, 15 nations sent more than half a million troops to Korea. More than 90 percent of the UN forces were American.

The UN forces pushed the communist invaders back into North Korea almost as far as its border with China. At that point, 300,000 Chinese soldiers poured into North Korea and drove the UN troops back into South Korea. Fearing that the struggle in Korea could widen into a world war, Truman pushed for a peace settlement.

The agreement ending the Korean War left Korea divided as it had been before the war. Americans were pleased that communism had been contained in North Korea without starting a third world war. But the costs of containment were high. About 54,000 Americans died in a war that cost the nation over $20 billion. More than a million Koreans also lost their lives.

proxy wars: wars in which the superpowers backed different sides that acted as substitutes (proxies) for the superpowers themselves

When the North Korean communists, aided by the Soviet Union, invaded South Korea, the United States sent troops to aid the South Koreans. After more than three years of fighting, a truce ended the war with the Korean Peninsula still divided. The war cost over 54,000 American lives.
Communism Comes to Cuba  The United States and the Soviet Union nearly came into direct conflict over Cuba. As you read in Chapter 27, the United States first became involved in Cuban affairs during the Spanish-American War of 1898. Even after Cuba gained its independence, the United States maintained a naval base on the island. Americans also invested heavily in Cuba. By 1956, Americans owned 90 percent of Cuba’s mining wealth and 40 percent of its sugar crop. U.S. influence was so great that the American ambassador was reported to be “the second most important man in Cuba, sometimes more important than the [Cuban] president.”

In 1959, rebels led by Fidel Castro took control of the island and promised “to revolutionize Cuba from the ground up.” President Eisenhower tried to maintain friendly relations with the new Cuban government. But when Castro declared himself a communist and seized control of American-owned farms and businesses, Eisenhower broke off relations with Cuba.

The president also allowed the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to begin training Cuban exiles living in the United States for an invasion of Cuba. The CIA hoped that the invasion would trigger a massive revolt against Castro.

Soon after taking office in 1961, President John F. Kennedy approved the CIA’s invasion plan. On April 17, about 1,400 Cuban exiles landed on a Cuban beach in the Bay of Pigs. Nothing went as planned. The Cuban people did not rise up in revolt, and the invaders were quickly killed or captured.

One observer commented that the bungled invasion made Americans “look like fools to our friends, rascals to our enemies, and incompetents to the rest.” An embarrassed President Kennedy promised that one day the invaders’ flag would fly over a “free Cuba.”

The Cuban Missile Crisis  Cuban president Fidel Castro had a powerful ally in Nikita Khrushchev, the leader of the Soviet Union. Khrushchev sent Soviet advisors and weapons to Cuba, including nuclear missiles.

In October 1962, U.S. spy planes photographed secret missile bases built by the Soviets in Cuba. Missiles launched from these bases could reach U.S. cities in a matter of minutes.

President Kennedy met this challenge head-on. He demanded that the Soviets remove their missile bases in Cuba. He also declared that the United States would consider any missile attack from Cuba as an attack by the Soviet Union.
Next, Kennedy ordered a naval blockade of Cuba to prevent Soviet ships from delivering any more missiles to the island. Finally, he ordered the U.S. military to prepare for an invasion of Cuba to remove the missile bases by force if necessary.

For the next six days, tensions mounted unbearably as Soviet ships, which were thought to be carrying more missiles, steamed toward Cuba. “We were on the edge of the precipice [cliff] of nuclear war,” Khrushchev later said of that terrifying week. “Both sides were ready to go.”

To the relief of the entire world, the Soviet ships stopped when they reached the U.S. blockade. “We’re eyeball to eyeball,” observed Dean Rusk, Kennedy’s secretary of state, “and I think the other fellow just blinked.” The Cuban missile crisis ended when Khrushchev agreed to remove the missile bases in exchange for Kennedy’s promise not to invade Cuba.

**Containment in Southeast Asia**  
Half a world away from Cuba, a new communist threat appeared in the southeast Asian country of Vietnam. Once a French colony, Vietnam won its independence from France in 1954.

As part of Vietnam’s independence agreement, elections were to be held in 1956 to determine who would rule the new country. The most likely winner of the elections would have been Ho Chi Minh, the leader of Vietnam’s independence movement and a supporter of communism. The elections, however, were never held.

Backed by a few hundred military advisors from the United States, anti-communist leaders took control of the southern half of Vietnam. By the time Kennedy took office, communist rebels backed by North Vietnam were waging a guerilla war against the South Vietnamese government. The rebels, known as the Viet Cong, attacked suddenly and then faded away.

“The Free World,” President Kennedy declared, “must increasingly protect against and oppose communist subversive [rebellious] activity . . . in Southeast Asia.” To back up his words, Kennedy increased the number of U.S. military advisors in South Vietnam to more than 16,000.

**Johnson Sends More Troops**  
Lyndon Johnson, who became president after Kennedy was assassinated in 1963, was faced with the problem of how far to go in supporting the government of South Vietnam. Many argued that, in the end, South Vietnam would have to win its own fight. But Johnson decided that the United States could not afford a communist overthrow of the South Vietnamese government.
Johnson used reports of a North Vietnamese attack on an American destroyer to win approval of a Congressional resolution that, he argued, authorized him to increase the American military presence in Vietnam. By the end of 1965, there were 180,000 U.S. troops in Vietnam. Two years later, the number had increased to 500,000. The United States was involved in a full-scale war.

Despite this massive buildup of troops, the war did not go well for South Vietnam and its American ally. U.S. soldiers were often unable to tell friends from enemies. Sometimes they burned entire villages in their search for Viet Cong rebels. After shelling one village, an officer explained, “It became necessary to destroy the town in order to save it.” Many Americans protested the Vietnam War, calling it unfair, destructive, and unwinnable.

**Nixon Ends the War**  Johnson’s successor, President Richard Nixon, promised to get the United States out of Vietnam. He carried out part of this promise by bringing all but 150,000 troops home by 1972.

At the same time, Nixon secretly expanded the war into the neighboring countries of Laos and Cambodia. In 1971 alone, the U.S. dropped 800,000 tons of bombs on Vietnam and the other southeast Asian countries. When the air raids became public, massive protests erupted throughout the United States.

A peace agreement was finally worked out in January 1973. In April, the final American troops withdrew. In 1975, North Vietnamese troops reunified Vietnam under a communist government.

For both the United States and Vietnam, the human costs of this long war were huge. More than 58,000 Americans died in the conflict. Hundreds of thousands more came home wounded, disabled, or suffering from emotional and mental problems. In Vietnam, up to 2 million people died, while millions more were wounded and left homeless.

For the United States, perhaps the greatest cost was a loss of faith in the nation’s leaders. For the first time in its history, the United States had lost a war. While people argued over the cause of this defeat, the Vietnam War left many wondering if containment was worth so many lives and a deeply divided nation.

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial, designed by Maya Yang Lin, honors the more than 58,000 Americans who died in the Vietnam War. Their names, inscribed in black granite, serve as a reminder of the terrible cost of trying to contain communism.
1. Identify four details about this map.

2. Where did Cold War conflicts occur?

3. What areas were free of Cold War conflicts?

4. In what part of the world did the United States have the most influence?

5. In what part of the world did the Soviet Union have the most influence?

A. The Korean War 1950–1953
B. Communist revolution in China 1949
C. The Vietnam War 1964–1975
D. Communist revolution in Cambodia 1975
E. Soviet invasion of Afghanistan 1979
F. U.S.-supported coup in Iran 1953
G. French and British attack
   Suez Canal in Egypt 1956
I. Angola turns communist 1975
J. Communist coup in Zaire (Congo) 1963
L. Communist coup in Ethiopia 1974
M. U.S.-supported coup in Chile 1973
N. U.S. invasion of Grenada 1983
   Communist revolution in Cuba 1959
   U.S.-supported invasion fails 1961
   Cuban missile crisis 1962
P. U.S.-supported coup in Guatemala 1954
Q. Communist revolution in Nicaragua 1979
S. Large U.S. military aid to Honduras 1981–
T. Large U.S. military aid to El Salvador 1981–
U. Soviets stop uprising in Hungary 1956
V. Soviets stop uprising in Czechoslovakia 1968
W. Berlin blockade and airlift 1948–49, Berlin Wall 1961

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30.6 The End of the Cold War

President Ronald Reagan, who took office in 1981, had no doubts about fighting communism. Reagan publicly denounced the Soviet Union as an “evil empire” and greatly increased military spending. In his second term, however, Reagan’s attitude toward the Soviet Union softened. The reason was a new leader in the Soviet Union named Mikhail Gorbachev.

A New Soviet Leader

When Gorbachev took office in 1985, the Soviet economy was not working well. Heavy military spending had kept the nation from meeting the human needs of the Soviet people. Farms and factories owned by the government were inefficient and unproductive.

Gorbachev came into power hoping to reform the communist system and make it work better. He began a policy of glasnost (openness), which led to increased freedom of the press, speech, and religion. He started an economic program called perestroika (restructuring) that was supposed to improve the economy. And he reduced the size and power of the Soviet military.

Reagan and Gorbachev met twice to discuss ways to end the arms race. For the first time ever, both sides agreed to reduce the number of their nuclear weapons.

Communism Collapses  Gorbachev’s policies gave hope to reformers throughout Eastern Europe. In August 1989, Poland freely elected a non-communist government. In November, bulldozers tore down the Berlin Wall. As one country after another overthrew its communist government, Gorbachev told his people, “We have no right...to interfere.”

Then the uprisings against communism spread to the Soviet Union itself. In August 1991, a second Russian Revolution took place as supporters of democracy, led by Boris Yeltsin, seized power. One of Yeltsin’s first official acts was to ban communists from power.

With the end of communist rule, 9 of the 15 republics that had made up the Soviet Union declared their independence. The remaining republics formed a new nation called the Russian Federation. In December, a Russian official announced that “the Soviet Union has ceased to exist.”

After more than 40 years, the Cold War was over. Americans rejoiced that the free world had won. Still, communism survives in such countries as China, Vietnam, North Korea, and Cuba.

Armed with chisels and sledgehammers, Germans destroyed the Berlin wall, a powerful reminder of the communist dictatorship in East Germany. Soon after, other countries overthrew their communist governments, and the Soviet Union did not interfere.
30.7 Chapter Summary

In this chapter, you read about the conflict known as the Cold War. You used the metaphor of a game of tag to understand the power struggle between the United States and the Soviet Union as each tried to dominate global politics.

The Cold War was a struggle between two superpowers and two very different ways of life, communism and capitalism. Under President Truman, the United States adopted a policy of trying to contain communism.

The rivalry between the superpowers created a bipolar world in which many nations took the side of either the United States or the Soviet Union. Many Third World countries, however, remained non-aligned nations.

The first confrontation of the Cold War took place in Berlin. As a result of the Berlin blockade, the United States joined with western democracies to form a new alliance, NATO. The Soviet Union responded by joining with eastern European countries in the Warsaw Pact.

Both the United States and the Soviet Union engaged in a costly and frightening arms race. The United States hoped to prevent a nuclear war through the strategy of Mutual Assured Destruction.

With neither side wanting a nuclear war, the superpowers struggled for influence through proxy wars. In Korea and Vietnam, tens of thousands of Americans died in efforts to contain the spread of communism. In Cuba, the Soviet Union supported Fidel Castro and installed nuclear missile bases. The resulting crisis brought the superpowers to the brink of war.

The Cold War ended with the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and in the Soviet Union. The United States and the free world had won the struggle, but only at great cost.
Why are these people carrying an American flag? What might these people be protesting?