



AVOIDING ARMAGEDDON

The Cold War – 1945 > 1989

Introduction

Explaining a hot war isn't too tough. One side wants something from another side. The other side would prefer to keep it. Tensions mount. Both sides prepare for conflict. Whether intentional or accidental, a catalyst erupts. One side attacks the other. The other defends itself. Civilians help out. Civilians are killed. One side conquers the other, or one side just gets tired of fighting and gives up. The war ends. A peace deal is set. Life goes on.

That's how a hot war works.

But what about a cold war? How does one of those things start?

Within weeks of Germany's surrender, the highest military brass warned that World War III was just around the corner.

Within months, the Soviet Union secured its borders and prepared for yet another invasion from the West. The Americans and Brits tried to slow the Soviets down, pushing their own forces as far east as peace would allow.

Within years, the world was again at war, but this time it wouldn't be a conventional war. It would be something totally different. It would be the Cold War, a near five-decade struggle between the Soviet Union and the United States of America for mastery of the universe.

Their fight was as much for ideological supremacy as it was for geographic influence and self-preservation. From 1946 to 1989, the Soviets and Americans spied, schemed, built up armies, built up weapons, created

Key Questions

- To what extent was the Cold War caused by choices made during WWII?
- What events brought the world close to WWII?
- How did the Cold War advance human civilization?
- What factors led to the end of the Cold War?
- How did the Cold War impact daily lives of civilians?

alliances, prevented alliances, expanded their science, economies and spheres of influence, all with the hopes that when the great civilization day of judgment arrived, their nation would stand alone as the preeminent superpower on the planet (while hopefully preventing a nuclear holocaust that just might vaporize all living creatures).

But the roots of the war didn't actually start in the weeks after Germany's surrender. Like all conflicts, the roots oftentimes find themselves buried deep within a previous conflict. The way one war ends determines when and how the next war will be fought.

Creating the Cold War

In the final stages of war, when victorious powers fail to prepare for the peace, they might as well prepare for another war. The failures at Versailles fueled the tension and rage that spawned World War II. And likewise, the missteps by the Allied powers in the final months of World War II started the world down an even more treacherous path where total annihilation would loom only moments away.

So yes, World War II created the Cold War.

The fragile alliance between America, Britain and the Soviet Union was never meant to last. It was formed to take out Hitler - nothing more, nothing less.

Churchill and Roosevelt never really trusted Stalin. Why would they? His domestic policies killed millions, his secret police and show trials persecuted, prosecuted and then discarded even his closest advisors (fourteen of the original fifteen leaders of the Bolshevik party were murdered or "died" under convenient circumstances) and even Stalin admitted, "I trust no one, not even myself." It didn't help the Allied circle of trust that just a few years earlier, Stalin had actually partnered with Hitler to carve up neutral Poland, before invading Finland, Lithuania, Estonia and Latvia.

So as World War II progressed and the Big Three came together to meet at first Tehran, then Yalta and finally at Potsdam (with Truman replacing the recently deceased Franklin D. Roosevelt), it became more than apparent that America and Britain were two peas from the same idealistic pod, whereas Russia was the obvious odd man out, appeased more out of necessity than out of a shared vision for the future. Tensions arose almost immediately when Britain and America delayed launching a Western offensive, choosing to instead approach Europe from the African front, leaving Russia alone to bear the brunt of the German blitzkrieg.

But dissension over military tactics was the least of their worries; of bigger concern was what to do with Germany, and the world, once the war was over. America and Britain wanted a world where all nations embraced free trade, free markets, free elections, free speech and free choice. Russia wanted to be safe. Sure, Stalin wouldn't be upset if the rest of the world adopted his version of communism, but his number one priority was security. Russia lost a quarter of a million countrymen when Napoleon invaded in 1812, over three million in World War I and over 23 million in World War II. Their nation's borders were seemingly limitless, and the West had frequently shown the propensity for invasion whenever someone got the idea to expand their empire.

But no more. Stalin was done with being vulnerable. He wanted to create a protected ring of satellite nations around Mother Russia, a buffer zone that would if not prevent, at least slow down any attempt to invade Soviet soil.

So in every discussion between the Big Three, it became quite apparent that Stalin had no intention of merely defeating Germany and withdrawing his forces to focus on domestic tranquility. At the Yalta Conference, Stalin was unwavering. He wanted a divided Germany. He wanted Berlin. And he also wanted control of Eastern Europe.

And Churchill and Roosevelt let him have it. They wanted Stalin's consent to a United Nations and his promise to enter the war in the Pacific 90 days after Germany was defeated. The Yalta deal was made, and the fate of the world for the rest of the 20th century had been sealed. In the spring of 1945, General Eisenhower ordered the American troops entering Germany and Eastern Europe to slow down, leaving the Red Army free to occupy Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Austria and Romania. The Red Army then marched into Berlin, "liberating" the German people from Nazi rule, all the while sanctioning the murder and rape of millions of innocent civilians. Stalin even sanctioned this behavior, believing that people should "understand it if a soldier who has crossed thousands of kilometers through blood and fire and death has fun with a woman or takes some trifle."

As word of Soviet atrocities spread through the Allied High Command and it became glaringly obvious that Stalin would never adhere to his agreement to let all occupied territories hold free elections, Churchill even considered enlisting captured German soldiers and invading Russia once the Nazis had surrendered.

When the Big Three sat down at their final meeting at Potsdam, the groundwork for World War III was being sewn. Power was up for grabs and both the US and the USSR wanted each other to know who would be filling the vacuum. Germany was defeated. Japan was on its final legs. Roosevelt, the calming presence that mediated the tension between Stalin and Churchill, had died. Russia occupied the whole of Eastern Europe, with no intention of leaving. US president Truman knew he had a super- weapon, even subtly letting its existence slip during the talks. The eventual agreements of the Potsdam Conference offered glimpses into a bipolar world, where geopolitical relationships would be divided simplistically using "us against them" terminology.

At Potsdam, the four-way division of Germany and Austria was finalized. Next, the German industrial machines were to be disassembled and sent back to the Soviet Union as restitution. Stalin wanted his "war booty." And finally, all the eastern European countries were to be liberated by the Soviet Union, occupied by the Red Army until they were stable and ready to rule themselves again independently. The Soviets agreed that they would allow Liberated Eastern Europe to have free elections (of course they wouldn't be disappointed if these nations happened to choose communism).

In fact, they wouldn't be disappointed if all recovering nations chose to align themselves with Soviet communism. And in the post-WWII landscape, communism actually looked like a viable option.

Temptation of Communism

When life is going well, communism isn't attractive. People don't just voluntarily exchange a life of prosperity for a life where everyone is equal. Communist equality takes the wealthy down a couple notches to bring up those at the bottom. If there are a ton of people who are prospering (or at least naively believe they have a shot at the good life), they aren't too excited about giving up this promise by sharing their cash with those down below. Humans can be nice, but they're not stupid. Think of it in the terms of academic grading. Who wants to trade in their A- life for a D- existence?

But when life sucks, when your nation is destroyed, when a generation of your young men lie dead or wounded, when your factories have been turned to rubble, when your roads, railroads and ports can't move goods, when your economy is in utter ruin and your people don't know from where the next meal will come, when your life is in misery and your nation is teetering on anarchy, this is when communism is attractive. When your life is an F, a D- doesn't look too bad.

And in 1946, Europe and East Asia were failing. The tyrants of the 1920s and 1930s had taken the world to war. The people wanted power restored to the masses. This was when Marxism had a chance. If ever the workers of the world were going to unite to overthrow the power elite, this was the moment.

It didn't hurt the communist cause that Soviet tanks and soldiers remained stationed all across Eastern Europe. If the allure of communism in times of strife wasn't enough to influence the ballot box, the hundreds of thousands of occupying Soviet troops definitely tipped the scales in the Soviets favor. Stalin had hoped each occupied nation would naturally choose communism, but he quickly learned that even though the conditions were ripe for a series of communist victories, the initial post-war ballot boxes chosen non-communist leaders. Stalin couldn't tolerate this outcome, so he made sure "free elections" would be just a little bit less free. One by one, the nations of Eastern Europe (Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Romania, Albania and Yugoslavia) started to "choose" communist governments. But with the Soviet Red Army involved in all facets of the election process, Eastern Europe never really had a choice.

England and the United States were less than pleased. In 1946, on a trip to President Harry Truman's hometown in Missouri, Winston Churchill delivered his famous "iron curtain" speech where he warned, "From Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic an iron curtain has descended across the Continent" and that the Communist parties "are seeking everywhere to obtain totalitarian control." To the east of the curtain stood the Soviet Bloc, the network of nations all answering to the mandates of Moscow. To the west was a weakened, vulnerable Europe. Communism had already taken hold of Eastern Europe, and it appeared only a matter of time before the suffering masses to the west likewise followed suit.

America couldn't allow that to happen.

Early Cold War Events

Marshall Plan & Containment

Europe needed money, and a lot of it. The only way America could ensure Soviet influence would never gain a foothold in Western Europe was if prosperity could be quickly restored, making the communist system look like a laughable alternative.

Enter US Secretary of State George Marshall. He proposed to just give Europe money. Not a loan, just a gift. And they would give Europe a lot of it – \$12.5 billion from 1948 to 1952. This money was used to: rebuild roads, power plants and factories; to pay for millions of tons of food and clothing; to help restore Europe's ability to rejoin the world as equal players. In one fell swoop, this European Recovery Program (known as the Marshall Plan) not only put Western Europe back on its feet, but more importantly "strengthen[ed] the area still outside Stalin's grasp," firmly locking Western Europe into America's capitalist corner for the remainder of the Cold War.

But economic aid was only part of America's plan to contain the communist menace. In Turkey and Greece, the communist parties grew more powerful, and because of their terrorist campaigns and socialist promises, it appeared only a matter of time before two more puppet nations fell under Stalin's umbrella. Britain tried to fight the movement with covert aid, but the forces of democracy and capitalism needed help on a much grander scale, and on March 12, 1947, President Truman promised to Congress that America would not sit by passively as the Soviet Union supported communist takeovers. He recognized:

At the present moment in world history nearly every nation must choose between alternative ways of life. The choice is too often not a free one. One way of life is based upon the will of the majority, and is distinguished by free institutions, representative government, free elections, guarantees of individual liberty, freedom of speech and religion, and freedom from political oppression. The second way of life is based upon the will of a minority forcibly imposed upon the majority. It relies upon terror and oppression, a controlled press and radio, fixed elections, and the suppression of personal freedoms. I believe that it must be the policy of the United States to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures.

Truman was “fully aware of the broad implications involved if the United States extended[ed] assistance to Greece” and eventually Turkey. America would essentially become the policemen of the world. Any façade of isolationism would never again be an option. Anytime a nation needed help, America would have to be there. Anytime a leader, whether the head of state or the leader of a revolutionary force, professed the desire to fend off communism, America would have to be there.

The Truman Doctrine ushered in the era of Pax Americana, a world where 500,000 US troops were deployed to keep peace on every corner of the planet. Although by 1950, hundreds of thousands of US troops could be found everywhere from Okinawa to South Korea to the Indian Ocean to the depths of the Arctic Ocean, the bulk of all troops were stationed in West Germany, for it was in Germany where everyone believed World War III was going to start.

Berlin Blockade

By 1948, Germany was still rebuilding from the rubble, and all signs pointed to a standoff between the Soviets and the rest of the allies. Split into four sections by the decrees made at Potsdam, Germany was theoretically to be ruled independently by the French, British, Americans and Soviets. But there was nothing independent about how the western half was rebuilding. The French, British and Americans (the capitalist democracies) made no secret of their partnership in rebuilding their German spheres, leaving the Soviets isolated and able to mold their chunk into yet another satellite communist nation. And all attempts to mask alliances were shattered in 1948, when the three western sections of Germany each adopted one currency, the Deutsche Mark, and agreed to exist as one united economy.

This was too much for Stalin. He couldn't believe Germany was being rebuilt into a regime entirely incompatible with his own desires. In fact, in 1946, he had optimistically assumed that it was only a matter of time before the Americans, French and Brits grew weary of occupation and pulled out of Western Germany altogether, leaving the Soviet Union to reunite all of Germany under the Soviet banner.

The Marshall Plan put a wrinkle in his scheme. The Deutsche Mark adoption went one step further. Unification couldn't be tolerated. If the three sections united under the same currency, it was only a matter of time before they became one nation. Stalin would have to make a stand, and he would do it in Berlin, the capital city of Germany. Like all of Germany, Berlin was also divided into four occupied sections, but Berlin's situation was dangerously unique. The city was located 100 miles inside the Soviet zone, which meant West Berlin was a little democratic, free- market nugget surrounded by communism. Stalin wanted that nugget for himself.

On June 24, 1948, Stalin cut off all trade to the French, British and American sections of Berlin. All roads, all canals, all railroad tracks were severed. Nothing could come in. Nothing could go out. Stalin would cut off the fuel and the food to West Berlin. He thought he could starve his former allies into capitulation. There's no way they would help out the West Berliners. It would only be a matter of time before the French, British and American starving sections came crawling to the Soviets for survival. Stalin would be waiting with open arms.

The US and Britain had a few choices – do nothing and let Stalin win, send in military forces to open up the trade routes or ignore the blockade.

The first two options were unacceptable. The first would only empower Stalin to keep pushing his communist agenda. The second would lead to World War III.

So they chose option three. American and British governments ignored the blockade and instead coordinated an endless stream of supplies to be delivered over the heads of Soviet- occupied East Germany and into the destitute hands of the West Berliners. This Berlin Airlift became the Cold War's first “defense of freedom,” lasting close to eleven months, keeping three million Berliners alive through the winter of 1948. Coordinating

the air forces of Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Britain and America, Operation Vittles dropped over two million tons of cargo – everything from blankets to medicine to food to clothing to coal.

And the Soviet Union didn't retaliate. They didn't shoot down the planes or mobilize their troops to stop the dispersal of supplies. And then Stalin gave up, admitting he'd been bested. He re-opened supply lines from Berlin to the West, and on May 12, the airlift ended. Berlin had survived without turning communist, but the battle lines were officially drawn. Two new nations were created. The Soviet section became the ironically named German Democratic Republic (East Germany) and the remaining three sections became the Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany).

America took the alliance that made the airlift possible and expanded it to become NATO, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. The fifteen founding members of NATO each vowed to come to each other's aid should any ally be attacked. In response, the Soviet Union established its own military alliance - the Warsaw Pact. The European powers had chosen sides. You were either with NATO, or you were with the Warsaw Pact. The Americans and Soviets then started pouring weapons, money and troops into their allies' borders, hoping this massive armament would maintain the status quo for years to come. And it worked. By 1950, the European alliances that had been established in the early days of the Cold War would remain until the downfall of the Soviet Union in 1989. The Soviet Union would have its network of satellite nations across Eastern Europe. And the United States of America had firmly ensconced itself in the future of Western Europe. No more nations would shift alliances after 1950. The expansion of communism had been contained.

But the Cold War was by no means over. It had merely shifted to Latin America, Africa and Asia.

And then to the skies.

Technology Race

One of the signature components of the Cold War was the ceaseless risk of nuclear war. When America dropped its two atomic bombs in 1945, they thought they would have a monopoly on the super weapon for at least a decade. Not exactly. By 1949, the Soviets had perfected their own atomic bomb. Then, in 1952, America regained its military prestige when it successfully tested the considerably more deadly hydrogen bomb (867 times more deadly to be exact). But this time it only took a year before the Soviets caught up and detonated their own hydrogen bomb. American scientific supremacy was under assault. The American hyper-confidence of the post-war years was coming to an end, and on October 4, 1957, technological superiority seemed like it had shifted once again.

Space Race

America had symbolically fallen behind the Soviets. It was on this day that the Soviets successfully deposited Sputnik, a basketball-sized satellite with four seven-foot long antenna tales, into space. America was now not only confronted technologically, they were vulnerable. If the Soviets could put satellites into space, could they also hypothetically watch over all American activities, chart its military's every movement and drop bombs out of the sky like a kid dropping water balloons off an apartment balcony?

The US couldn't tolerate any notion of Soviet superiority.

The space race had begun. Whoever controlled the technology that could put satellites into space would also control the technology to deploy nuclear weapons. One man's rocket is another man's missile, and whoever could design a ship that could propel man and machines into space could just as easily deliver nuclear bombs anywhere on the planet.

The US rushed to get the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) up and running. They had to get something into space. They had to prove that they were back in the competition. The first few years of America's space program weren't terribly reassuring. Some rockets exploded before even taking off. Others

lifted a few feet off the ground and then crumpled back down to earth. And some made it a few miles into the sky, only to spin wildly out of control or burst into flames high above the anxious spectators. Every failure was public. Every failure made America wonder if the Soviets might now actually possess the better society. The Soviets were first with a satellite, the first with a man in space and the first to make it to the moon to take some pictures.

But America would catch up. Vowing in 1961 to put a man on the moon before the end of the decade, President John F. Kennedy put the full weight of the federal government behind the space program. It was a race America could not lose, and on July 20, 1969, Buzz Aldrin and Neil Armstrong landed on the moon, taking “a few small steps” and making a “giant leap for mankind.” Since the dawn of the first hunter-gatherers hundreds of thousands of years ago, the moon always sat just beyond our world, bordering the heavens. But in 1969, because of Cold War posturing and the threat of scientific mediocrity, the wealthiest nation on the planet finally bridged the two worlds together, and yet again man had conquered nature.

After the initial landing, the hype surrounding the Soviet and American space programs died down, and funding was steadily withdrawn. But the money kept flowing toward the defense programs in record numbers. At its height in the 1960s, America spent 20% of its GDP on military expenditures, and the Soviets spent over 40%. Much of this went to the production of nuclear weapons as both sides stockpiled arsenals far in excess of what was needed to destroy their foe. At their peak, the Soviets had amassed over 45,000 warheads, the Americans over 32,000. Scientists argued over whether we had enough bombs to blow up the planet five times or fifty times. Tough to say since some bombs are duds, the earth does a pretty good job absorbing radiation and some pesky pieces of life are bound to just not succumb to the blasts. But that wasn't the point of piling up bomb after bomb after bomb.

Atomic Weapons & MAD

It was all part of a policy of Mutually Assured Destruction. This MAD scheme promised that whoever fired first would assuredly doom its own nation to nuclear annihilation. You kill me. I kill you. After the Soviet Union and the USA planted their missile silos all across their allies' territories (and even in submarines scouring the depths of the oceans), there wasn't a point on the planet that couldn't be reached by a nuclear bomb within 30 minutes.

Neither side would be stupid enough to use these weapons. Some argue it was the threat of nuclear war that actually kept the peace throughout the Cold War. But “kept the peace” was a bit of an overstatement, considering that just because the two sides couldn't attack each other directly, didn't mean they resisted putting weapons and wars in the hands of developing nations and revolutionaries. No, there was no World War III, but twenty million people did lose their lives because of Cold War aggression, and it was in these proxy wars that tensions would burn hottest.

Decolonization

The world made the mistake of decolonizing at the exact moment the Cold War was heating up. Europe was giving up on its empires. They were too expensive and their people wanted their leaders to focus on domestic issues, not on taking care of some distant peoples on the other side of the world. Western Europe chose to instead use their tax base to fund health care, unemployment benefits, paternity care, college, public housing and pension plans. Though defense spending continued as part of any Western European budget, it no longer dominated discourse, and with the United States bearing the brunt of NATO weapons funding and troop deployment, Europe moved closer toward a welfare state.

And as Europe was focused on rebuilding their economies and protecting their people, the nations of Latin America, Africa and Asia pushed further away from colonial control. The world was soon divided into three types of countries – First World countries that followed America, Second World countries that followed the Soviet Union and Third World countries that were figuring out which way to turn. It was in the Third World that the two superpowers would yield their mighty influence. Every emerging nation would have to choose – trade

with America or trade with the Soviet Union. For some the “choice” was never an option. In 1945, America occupied Western Germany, South Korea and Japan. The Soviet Union occupied Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, Yugoslavia, Bulgaria and Albania. For these satellite nations, their alliances were already set.

But for every other nation, the revolutionaries would have to choose. Some tried to stay neutral and play the Soviet Union against the United States. Friends with one country one day, the other the next. Some ended up getting caught in civil wars, as regional factions failed to decide unanimously on their ideological course. This was how the proxy wars started.

Proxy Wars

For America, the two most consequential proxy wars were in Korea and Vietnam. For the Soviet Union, Afghanistan was the quagmire that marked the beginning of the end.

Korean War

Korea had been divided at the end of World War II. On August 10, 1945 a couple military officers pulled out a National Geographic magazine and decided on the 38th parallel for a division between a Soviet occupied zone and an American zone. The Soviets gained the manufacturing north and the Americans gained control of the capital and agrarian south. The North Koreans had no desire to live in a divided nation, and in 1950, with passive permission from Josef Stalin to proceed, they crossed the 38th parallel, pushing South Korean forces down to the southern tip of the peninsula. The freshly formed United Nations had its first test of legitimacy. How could it claim to be a proprietor of peace if it allowed unprovoked aggression? But the problem was in the makeup of the war-making branch of the United Nations. The Security Council was made up of five permanent members – the USA, Britain, China, France and the Soviet Union – each with veto power. If any one nation vetoed a resolution, the United Nations could not legally take action. So of course, with the Soviets supporting North Korea’s offensive, they would inevitably veto any resolution condemning the North Korean invasion. But the Soviet Union made a mistake. They boycotted this meeting of the Security Council, never entered their vote and their absence meant the United Nations could launch their first “peacekeeping” mission.

The United States was way ahead of them. With hundreds of thousands of troops stationed in occupied Japan, the Americans were in Korea within weeks. General Douglas MacArthur, the hero of the WW2 Pacific Theater, swept in behind North Korean troops and eventually pushed them to the Chinese-Korean border. At this point, he pressured President Truman for permission to drop some nuclear bombs on China, who was obviously aiding the North Koreans.

Truman refused. He wasn’t going to use nukes again.

China took advantage of America’s reticence. Recently crowned Chinese premier Mao Tse Tung ordered 700,000 troops to the border, ultimately commanding them to cross into Korea on October 25, 1950. Over the next three years, the conflict devolved into a murky stalemate. Though both sides agreed to a ceasefire, they could never settle on a peace agreement. To this day, the Korean War has never officially ended and the 38th parallel remains the spot where tensions could one day end the 60-year “break.”

Vietnam War

Like in Korea, the conflict in Vietnam stemmed from borders created by Westerners and a nationalistic desire to reunite the nation under one government. Following World War II, even under advisement from the United States, France refused to give up their holdings in French Indochina (Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam). The Vietnamese revolutionary Ho Chi Minh was less than pleased, as he had fought to expel the Japanese in the 1940s and felt his proclamation that “all men are created equal” would rally American support for a free Vietnam. He was wrong. America had to have France’s support in Europe, and if that meant America had to hypocritically backtrack on their previous anti-imperialistic stance, they would. But Ho Chi Minh’s forces were too determined. They’d had enough of strangers in their land. These French soldiers and their American

backers were just the latest in a string of foreign oppressors dating back five centuries. During the first few years of the 1950s, Ho's forces slaughtered and embarrassed the French, bringing both sides to Geneva to talk peace treaty.

But in Geneva, the Western powers decided to create two new countries - North Vietnam and South Vietnam – until the region was stable enough to have a united government. General Ho was less than pleased. He believed he had earned the right to rule a united Vietnam.

America's role in this story could have ended at the Geneva Convention of 1954 when the two Vietnams were created, but instead they made the choice to make Vietnam their Asian Berlin. They would not back down and give in to the spread of communism. They saw Ho Chi Minh not merely as a nationalist revolutionary, but as the Southeast Asian transmitter of communism. If America let him take over Vietnam, the dominos would topple one after another – first Laos, then Cambodia, then Thailand, then Malaysia, then the Philippines and then Indonesia. If they didn't hold the line in Vietnam, within a decade another half a billion souls (and consumers) would be lost to communism.

So America backed the wrong horse. To run South Vietnam, the Americans brought in Ngo Dinh Diem, a Catholic Vietnamese exile, educated in the United States, who was totally unfamiliar with the plight of his Vietnamese brethren. He didn't make any by stealing from the government coffers, giving the prime government posts to his family and friends and persecuting Buddhists. Back in the United States, Americans started questioning their role in this Southeast Asian struggle, as on the nightly news Buddhist monks could be seen dousing themselves with gasoline and lighting themselves on fire to protest the Diem's policies.

Needing to go in a new direction, the CIA supported both the assassination of Diem and the election of a series of equally incompetent leaders. By the mid-1960s, Ho Chi Minh's efforts in South Vietnam accelerated, forcing President Kennedy to increase the number of "advisors" in the region to 12,000. When you think "advisor," you have to think of a soldier, a helicopter pilot, a medic or a military officer. These enlisted American men "advised" the South Vietnamese military on how to defend themselves, sometimes even leading them into battle. As Chinese and Soviet money continued to trickle into North Vietnam and southern Vietnamese communist guerrillas (the Vietcong) expanded their terrorist activities, the US had a choice – escalate or pull out. The ensuing president, Lyndon B. Johnson knew he would have to either "go in with great casualty lists or get out with disgrace." He ended up assuring both.

By 1968, 580,000 Americans were serving in Vietnam, many of whom were forced into combat through a compulsory draft. As the death tolls mounted and the war goals were lost in a haze of rhetoric, an anti-war movement gained momentum. It first started in the quads of colleges across the country, but eventually spread to all classes of society. This was a war Americans no longer wanted to fight, and when they found out their military had expanded the conflict to include bombings of neighboring Laos and Cambodia, the anti-war protests hit an even higher fever pitch. Enough was enough. The government and military brass so no clear path victory. America conceded to "peace with honor," pulling out troops in 1973. With the American forces out of the picture, within two years, the communists took over the southern capital. Vietnam united under communist leadership and across the region...

Nothing happened.

No dominos fell. No other nation succumbed to what once was seen as an inevitability. Vietnam eventually entered into the global market and a generation of Americans was left wondering why they'd ever been sent to Southeast Asia.

The Vietnam War was the most glaring example of American intrusion in regional conflicts, but it was by no means the end of US interference in foreign affairs. The CIA would again prop up dubious figures. Government advisors would again believe the domino theory was a preordained certainty, not merely a cleverly worded

geopolitical guess. American military forces would again be challenged by local populations yielding inferior weapons. And America again would be embarrassed on foreign soil. By 1980, a series of questionable involvements in Guatemala, the Congo, Cuba, Angola, Iran, Grenada, Nicaragua and El Salvador each diminished American prestige, gradually fostering an anti- American sentiment that still lingers today.

Soviet-Afghanistan War

Vietnam forever damaged America's international stature. The Soviet Union would have its own Vietnam. It would have Afghanistan. After the Soviet Union had secured its western borders by creating the Eastern Bloc, it set its sights on securing a buffer zone to the south by incorporating all the "stans" behind the Soviet shield. By the 1950s, Krygyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan all fell to Soviet influence, both for their geographic importance (as grain producers, as links to the Indian Ocean and for their proximity to the oil fields of the Middle East) and for their symbolic currency in the great battle for superpower bragging rights.

One nation held out for decades. Afghanistan. By playing both sides against each other, never formally granting their allegiance to either, Afghanistan benefited from trade with both the Soviet Union and the United States, using these contacts to improve their infrastructure and protect them from outside influences. This all changed in 1979 when the Soviet Union decided to invade and lend support to the local communist revolutionaries. America in turn, through the efforts of Senator Charlie Wilson and CIA operatives, coordinated the transfer of billions of dollars of money and arms (specifically surface to air missiles) to the Mujahideen. The Mujahideen were virulently anti- communist and were willing to protect the autonomy of their nation to the death (they also boasted the membership of one wealthy expatriate from Saudi Arabia who would later play a much different role in America's story...this man was named Osama Bin Laden). The Mujahideen eventually taught the Soviets a lesson others have had to learn the hard way – you might be able to invade Afghanistan, but you're not going to be able to control Afghanistan. After a decade of futile fighting, like with America's foray into Vietnam, close to two million civilians were killed, hundreds of thousands of refugees fled to neighboring countries, tens of thousands of Soviet soldiers died and over \$80 billion was needlessly lost in the mountains of Afghanistan. This failed assault not only damaged the Soviet image internationally, but it also caused great tension within the upper echelons of Soviet government as the course of the Soviet's future came under heightening scrutiny.

These destructive, exhaustive proxy wars weren't the only hot spots in the Cold War. Several incidents not only soured Soviet-American relations, but pushed the world into a state of perpetual panic as the question of nuclear war became more one of when than if.

Side Shows

Rosenberg Scandal

In 1951, Americans Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were arrested and put on trial for sharing Army military weapons secrets with the Soviets. Their trial and eventual execution set off a wave of paranoia in the United States, as everyone might be a spy. The CIA strengthened their counter-espionage efforts and the government, through the obsessive, paranoid leadership of Senator Joseph McCarthy, went on a "witch hunt" to weed out potential conspirators.

U2 Incident

In 1960, the US and the Soviets continually denounced each other's intelligence networks. The Soviets even accused the Americans of flying high-speed spy planes over Soviet soil, recording troop movements and missile construction sites. America fervently denied these actions, but were soon internationally mocked when the Soviets put a captured Gary Powers, a U-2 pilot shot down over Soviet airspace, in front of a television camera. This American embarrassment was soon overshadowed in 1961 when the Soviets erected the Berlin Wall, a series of barbed wire and stone fences created to prevent East Germans from escaping into the capitalist, democratic mecca of West Berlin. America could do nothing, and for the duration of the Cold War, the Berlin Wall would stand as the symbol of the conflict.

Cuban Missile Crisis

Although these incidents each amplified the mistrust and apprehension of the day, it was the Cuban Missile Crisis that brought the world within minutes of World War III. After World War II, Cuba, an island 90 miles off the coast of Florida, had become America's Las Vegas of the Caribbean. The high rollers of America would head down to Havana to party, gamble and mingle with the locals. Cuba had become essentially America's own satellite nation; even President Kennedy later commented how "United States companies owned about 40 percent of the Cuban sugar lands—almost all the cattle ranches—90 percent of the mines and mineral concessions—80 percent of the utilities— practically all the oil industry—and supplied two-thirds of Cuba's imports."

This all changed when Fidel Castro, aided by Latin American revolutionary Che Guevara, lead a small invasion force across the Gulf of Mexico, hid in the hills for months and gradually increased his influence through terrorism, guerrilla activities and very persuasive propaganda. Gaining support against the dictator Fulencio Batista didn't prove too difficult, as he had been for years living the life of a billionaire playboy, crafting crooked deals with American businesses and leaving his people to suffer below the poverty line. In 1958, Castro's army overthrew Batista and within a few years he had nationalized American businesses, ensuring that profits from Cuban resources went into the hands of Cubans.

America couldn't have this. They couldn't have a Marxist demagogue less than 100 miles from the mainland and they couldn't afford to set the precedent that overseas American businesses in Latin America could not be protected. The CIA devised possible coups to overthrow Castro, eventually settling on tacit support for the Bay of Pigs Invasion where Cuban exiles would be trained in Panama, given American ships and planes and then supported officially once they took the island and rallied the locals behind them. The "taking the island" part was a failure. No one rallied behind the counter-revolutionary forces, and America was left trying to convince the world that the B-26 bombers flown by Cubans were somehow stolen from US Air Force bases.

With a bounty on his head, Fidel Castro looked to the East for allies, and the Soviets were more than willing to lend a hand. They first bought all of Cuba's sugar at above market prices and later supplied farm equipment, fuel and nuclear missiles. When American spy planes filmed the construction of missile silos, President Kennedy was faced with a choice.

Allow the missiles or forbid the missiles. Allowing the missiles so close to America's border meant that Washington D.C. could be destroyed within a few minutes and the entire eastern seaboard could not be protected from nuclear attack. Forbidding the missiles meant a global standoff with Premier Krushchev and the Soviet Union, neither known for their willingness to compromise. Kennedy settled on the blockade of Cuba, but cleverly called it a "quarantine." He declared that if the Soviets attempted to break the quarantine, he would be forced to fire on Soviet ships, effectively starting World War III. For thirteen days in October 1961, the world watched, hoping one side would concede. Krushchev blinked first, returning his ships and promising to remove the missiles. In exchange, the Americans promised to never, ever invade Cuba again and even remove some of their missiles from Turkey. The world was saved, but the two sides grasped the severity of the situation, agreeing to put in a direct phone line – the Red Phone – between the two leaders and to tone down the public rhetoric. The world almost blew itself up over an island with sugar plantations. This lethal face-off would never again be repeated.

Thawing the World

But by the 1980s, the Cold War didn't appear any closer to coming to a close. To an outsider, it even looked like the hostilities were getting ramped up a bit. The Soviets continued to stockpile nuclear weapons, and President Ronald Reagan vowed he would end the "evil empire." Taking another page from the script of George Lucas, Reagan spoke of a Star Wars-esque Strategic Defense Initiative program (SDI) where the American military could shoot down any missile before it re-entered the atmosphere. Though this project only existed in theory (and to this day has never been successfully pulled off), the Soviet military brass felt their

hearts stop for a bit as they foresaw a future where they housed 45,000 missiles that could never be used. This became the beginning of the end.

Reagan believed that if we can't beat you, we'll economically bury you. There was no way the Soviet economy could even consider spending more money on the military. They were tapped out. For decades, the Soviet Union tried to mask the weaknesses of their government-controlled economy. Unlike the United States and other capitalist economies where consumers and the market determine what goods are made and what they should cost, in the Soviet Union, government officials determined what was made, who would make it, how much it would cost and who would buy it. This didn't work so well. Workers had no incentive to work harder. Planners either overestimated or underestimated production quotas. And too much money was spent on defense.

Though the Soviet scientific and military successes might have been the envy of the world, their economy was a joke. Consumers had little choice on what to purchase, and what they could purchase was never produced in enough quantity. Stories surfaced of men attaching dozens of rolls of toilet paper to their bodies, not knowing when the next batch would arrive in the stores. It got so bad that the Soviet Union even turned to America and Canada for help, frequently begging for billions of dollars in grain supplies when their harvests fell short of demand. For too long, the Soviets had focused on military expenditures, and by the 1980s, with the value of all those expenditures seemingly for naught, they had to revisit the Soviet model.

Perestroika & Glasnost

Enter Mikhail Gorbachev. Upon his election, Gorbachev inherited a country on the verge of collapse. Their consumer products were garbage, their environment was becoming an industrial cesspool, their farming had become completely ineffective and their recent string of premiers didn't inspire confidence (one would even frequently drool on himself while speaking publicly). With the improvements in communication and the spread of tourism, the Soviets could no longer keep the curtain closed on the advances of the Western world. The Soviet standard of living fell far below that of Western Europe, and their citizens were no longer appeased by stories of space and military victories. They wanted a higher quality of life. They wanted more freedom.

Gorbachev would deliver. Through his two buzzwords of perestroika (restructuring) and glasnost (openness), Gorbachev promised to reform the system, but what he really did was set the groundwork for a dramatic shift to a capitalist, democratic republic. He invited a more free press, encouraged entrepreneurialism, lobbied for more candidates for all government posts, ended the war in Afghanistan, and most importantly, eased up on control of the Soviet satellite nations. By 1989, the Ukraine, Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, Romania and even East Germany pushed for more autonomy, and Gorbachev did little to stop these revolutionary movements. When on November 9th Communist Party spokesman Gunter Shabowski misread a Soviet mandate and erroneously told a room full of newspaper reporters that the wall would be brought down "immediately, without delay," the floodgates of revolution ripped open.

Thousands gathered at the wall, started knocking out chunks of concrete and then moving back and forth from East to West, daring the East Berlin soldiers to stop them. But the East German forces did nothing. The Soviet military did nothing. And one by one, the Eastern Bloc countries pulled away from Soviet control.

And still, nothing.

By 1991, the Soviet Union was in disarray, and on Christmas Day, the union was dissolved, leaving the fifteen republics to recreate themselves autonomously, and that included Russia.

Life After the Cold War

The Cold War had finally come to an end. For over four decades, the competition between the USSR and the USA had overshadowed all other foreign policy concerns, oftentimes masking regional issues that would explode in the next two decades. Some erroneously believed that with the demise of the Soviet Union and only one superpower remaining, war would come to an end.

Not even close.

The decades of naively looking at the world's problems through the lens of capitalism vs. communism meant that many immoral, flawed and dangerous regimes had endured. Ethnic minorities had been subjugated, and religious intolerance had been concealed. But with the cover of bipolar alliances ripped away, a new generation of political leaders demanded self-rule, a new generation of disenfranchised peoples demanded access to the fruits of the global market, a new generation of ignored nations pushed for their own nuclear warheads and a new generation of religious extremists demanded a return to the adherence of orthodox decrees that would combat the spread of liberal ideals.

The Cold War might have come to a close, but a Pandora's Box of challenges had been opened. How the world would confront these challenges would determine the safety and prosperity of humanity.

But that is for another chapter.