

Escalation and Major Events in the Cold War MAD at Each Other

In the years following the successful detonation of a “Super Bomb,” the Americans and Soviets entered an era of **Mutually Assured Destruction**. Mutually Assured Destruction meant that either side could obliterate the opposition at any moment with nuclear war. This era was therefore plagued by the threat of a nuclear apocalypse.

It was also complicated with other technological successes, such as the Soviet launch of Sputnik into space in 1957. The Sputnik launch led to widespread fear in America. Americans believed that the Soviets could launch nuclear missiles across the world. Both sides continued to **stockpile** nuclear weapons and experiment with nuclear capacities throughout the 1950s and 1960s.

The Nuclear Age

Shortly after Dwight D. Eisenhower was elected president, the U.S. military tested the first **hydrogen bomb**. The United States had begun developing this nuclear weapon in January 1950. It was far more

powerful than the atomic bombs dropped on Japan in World War II. The first test of the new bomb took place on an island in the West Pacific. An observer recalled the event.



“The fireball expanded to three miles in diameter. Observers, all evacuated to 40 miles or more away, saw . . . that the island . . . had vanished, vaporized also. In its place a crater 1/2 mile deep and two miles wide had been born.”

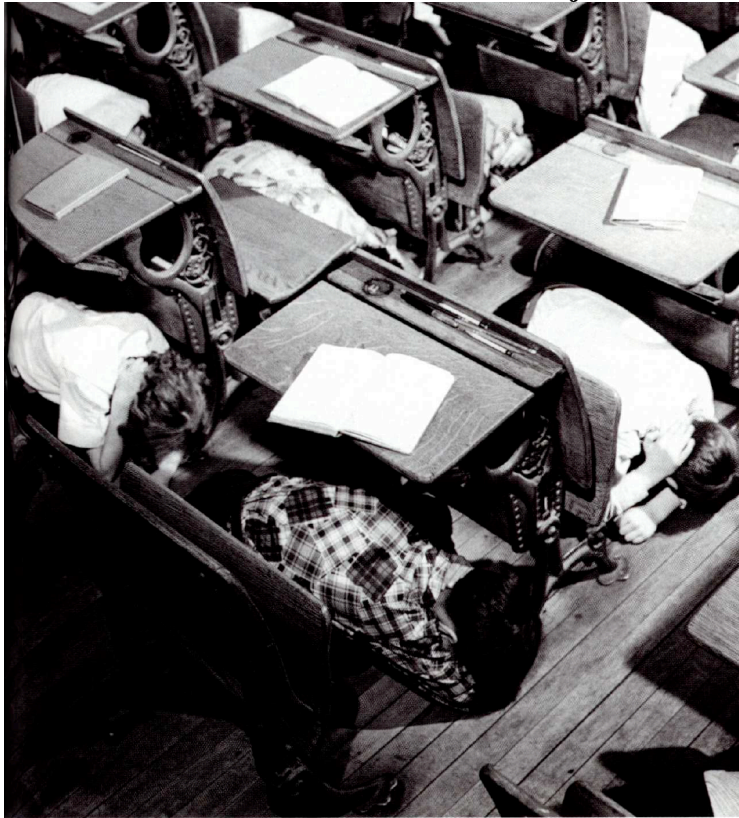
—Leona Marshall Libby, quoted in *The Fifties*, by David Halberstam

Less than a year later, the Soviet Union tested its own hydrogen bomb. “The United States no longer has a monopoly,” one Soviet official bragged. Both countries were afraid to let the other side gain nuclear superiority. As a result, each nation built more nuclear bombs.

The nuclear arms race frightened many Americans. Some families built underground bomb shelters in which to stay safe in case of attack. Children practiced “duck-and-cover” drills at school, ducking under their desks and covering their heads in case of emergency. A few Americans formed antinuclear groups, such as the Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy. They protested the arms race and argued that nuclear weapons tests released radioactive particles that caused birth defects and disease.

Despite such protests, the arms race went on. In October 1957 the Soviet Union launched Sputnik, the first artificial satellite, into orbit. Many Americans worried that *Sputnik* gave the Soviets a military advantage. One reporter asked President Eisenhower, “What are we going to do about it?”

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Duck and Cover!

Americans were stunned in 1953 when the Soviet Union exploded a nuclear bomb, achieving parity in the post-World War II arms race. The discovery that physicist Klaus Fuchs had turned over atom-bomb secrets to the Soviets only fed the “red scare” chill of the early 1950s. With the U.S. locked in an arms stalemate with the Soviets under the apocalyptic strategy of mutual assured destruction (its stunning acronym: MAD), American schoolkids were taught to “duck and cover,” left—a pitifully ineffective defense against nuclear fallout. Some families built survivalist bomb shelters, as seen in a 1955 picture above.

Educational films such as this one were popular in the 1950s. They were used to teach life skills to students across the country in a uniform way. *Duck and Cover* taught children to hide under a desk or against a wall and cover their neck and face for safety during a

nuclear attack. It was first screened on January 7, 1952, as part of the Alert America civil defense exhibit convoy in Washington DC. Two weeks later, it was shown to school officials in New York City, and it debuted in the classroom on March 6, 1952.



Bert the Turtle encounters danger in Duck and Cover. (National Archives)

★ U.S. Nuclear Policy

In January 1958 the United States launched its first satellite. Later that same year, Congress created the **National Aeronautics and Space Administration** (NASA) to carry out space research. Congress also began special school programs to improve math, science, and foreign language education in public schools. Officials hoped that better-educated students would help the country win the arms and space races.

While President Truman was in office, the United States had tried to contain the spread of communism around the world. President Eisenhower and Secretary of State **John Foster Dulles** created a “New Look” for U.S. foreign policy. Instead of just containing communism, Eisenhower wanted the United States to actually “roll back” communism from certain areas.

The New Look used a strategy known as **massive retaliation**, or the threat of using nuclear weapons to stop communist aggression. Few diplomats favored the use of nuclear weapons. However, some accepted

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that the United States might have to come to the brink of, or come close to, war to stop communism. Dulles explained this idea, known as **brinkmanship**. “The ability to get to the verge [brink, or edge] without getting into war is the necessary art,” he said. Brinkmanship was a difficult policy to pursue, however. For example, in 1953 the Soviets crushed anticommunist protests in three East German cities. U.S. leaders sympathized with the protesters, but they did not want to become involved and risk a nuclear war.

Some Americans were against brinkmanship. They believed that not every Cold War conflict called for the threat of nuclear weapons. A single nuclear attack might lead to a nuclear war that could destroy the world. President



Cold War Crises

In 1953 **Nikita Khrushchev** (kroosh-CHAWF) took the place of Soviet premier Joseph Stalin after his death. Khrushchev soon shocked the communist world. He announced that Stalin had committed criminal acts, including mass murder, against the Soviet people. He said that people should no longer follow Stalin’s policies. Khrushchev also said that capitalism and communism could exist together peacefully in the world.

Unrest in communist Eastern Europe followed Stalin’s death and Khrushchev’s speech. Observers hoped this move signaled a new era of reform. In 1956, Polish reformers tested Khrushchev by calling for greater political freedom. Inspired by Poland’s boldness, a new Hungarian government then called for Western-style democracy. To stop this uprising, the Soviet army invaded Hungary in November 1956. Hungarians fought back with stones, rifles, and homemade bombs. The United States wanted to avoid a nuclear war with the Soviets and refused to get involved. The Soviets easily crushed the revolt.



The U-2 Incident

In 1959 Vice President Richard M. Nixon visited the Soviet Union. Nikita Khrushchev then visited the United States. Touring Iowa farms and Hollywood, Khrushchev charmed the American media. He and Eisenhower agreed to discuss arms reductions at a summit in Paris the following year. It appeared that the Cold War might be thawing. But a new crisis soon began. On May 5, 1960, Khrushchev announced that the Soviets had shot down a U.S. spy plane. At first, U.S. officials denied the

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charge. Khrushchev then revealed that the pilot, Francis Gary Powers, had survived. Powers admitted that he had been on a secret mission in a U-2 spy plane. The event became known as the **U-2 incident**.

Eisenhower admitted that he had approved the U-2 flight. In a speech he explained his reasons for approving the flight.



“Our safety, and that of the free world, demand, of course, effective systems for gathering information about the military capabilities of other powerful nations . . . to guard ourselves and our allies against surprise attack.”

—Dwight D. Eisenhower, “Department of State Bulletin, June 6, 1960”

Despite the U-2 incident, Eisenhower and Khrushchev both attended a summit in Paris, France. But the meeting was a disaster. The summit talks collapsed, and the thaw in the Cold War was over.



Flexible Response

President Kennedy shared some of the foreign-policy aims of the Eisenhower administration. He wanted a strong military and increased the country’s stockpile of nuclear weapons. However, he thought that Eisenhower had relied too heavily on the threat of nuclear attack as a deterrent to Soviet aggression. Such weapons were not practical for use in regional conflicts. Kennedy wanted to increase military forces and conventional, or nonnuclear, weapons such as tanks. He hoped that this

buildup would give the United States more military options. He called this new policy **flexible response**, which he explained in July 1961. “We intend to have a wider choice than humiliation or all-out war,” he said. Part of Kennedy’s new flexible-response policy involved the use of “counter-insurgency” forces. These troops would lead secret operations to weaken communist revolutionary movements in other countries.

Kennedy also took a nonmilitary approach to foreign policy. While the spread of communism around the world was clearly a concern, some Americans believed that people in developing countries simply wanted to introduce reforms and to free themselves from foreign domination. To address these issues, Kennedy focused on economic aid rather than military aid. The Kennedy administration developed the **Alliance for Progress**, an aid program that encouraged economic development and tried to promote democracy in Latin America. However, the program did little to improve conditions in Latin America or U.S. relations with the region.

As part of his New Frontier, Kennedy also created the **Peace Corps**. This program sends American volunteers to developing countries to work on various improvement projects. Thousands of young people responded

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The Bay of Pigs

President Kennedy was particularly interested in aid to Latin America because of the new political situation in Cuba. This island nation is only 90 miles from Florida. In 1959 Fidel Castro had led a rebellion there that overthrew an unpopular dictator. Castro began a social and economic revolution, promising all Cubans “neither bread without liberty nor liberty without bread.” However, by 1960 he had set up a communist dictatorship in Cuba and formed an alliance with the Soviet Union. Many Americans feared that the Soviet Union might use Cuba as a base from which to attack the United States and spread communism in Latin America.

Castro improved the lives of many Cubans by advancing their health care and education systems. In addition to appreciating his actions, people liked Castro’s charismatic style. However, Castro did not tolerate bold **dissent**, and despite the good he was doing, he ruthlessly jailed those who expressed disagreement with his policies. When he did not allow free elections and then brutally murdered members of the previous Cuban **regime**, it became clear to the world that he was a **dictator**.

Castro’s goal was to build a communist country. He, like the Soviets, was suspicious of capitalism and wanted to see its demise. When he took over Cuba, he put the government in charge of the economy by seizing control of all major private businesses. He worked especially hard to take over American-owned businesses in Cuba.

Initially, Soviet leaders took no notice of Cuba, thinking it too inconsequential to be of value to them. However, after a visit to Cuba by a senior Soviet official in 1960, the Soviets began to warm to the idea of supporting a communist regime so close to U.S. borders. They also began to believe that Castro meant what he said. Because of this, the USSR provided economic help to Cuba by trading fuel for sugar. This cemented the relationship between the two countries, and from that point forward the USSR defended Cuba, helped Cuba economically, and used Cuba’s location to its advantage.

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Before he left office, President Eisenhower had approved a secret plan to deal with this threat. The Central Intelligence Agency trained Cuban exiles and helped them plan an invasion of the island. When Kennedy took office, he approved the final plan. In April 1961 some 1,500 exiles waded

ashore at the **Bay of Pigs** on the southwest coast of Cuba. Castro's forces quickly attacked them, and the invasion turned into a disaster. Kennedy decided not to send in U.S. military air support. After three days of fighting, about 1,200 of the invaders had been captured and the rest killed. Castro remained firmly in power. At a news conference, Kennedy admitted that the U.S. government had sponsored the invasion and accepted blame for its failure, which reflected poorly on his administration.



The Berlin Wall

Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev viewed the Bay of Pigs disaster as a sign of American weakness. He decided to test the will of the U.S. government to continue the Cold War. He chose the city of Berlin, in East Germany, as the testing ground. After World War II, the Soviet Union and the Western Allies had divided Berlin. The western sections became West Berlin, while the Soviet section became East Berlin. For many East Berliners, West Berlin was a model of economic prosperity and freedom. In the summer of 1961, thousands of East Germans were fleeing to the West.

On the morning of August 13, 1961, Berliners woke to find East German workers building the **Berlin Wall**. This wall of barbed wire and cement created a 27-mile barrier between East and West Berlin. To protest the border closing, President Kennedy sent 1,500 U.S. troops as well as tanks to West Berlin.

On June 26, 1963, Kennedy restated publicly his support for West Berlin in a speech at the Berlin Wall. He told thousands of West Berliners that the United States was prepared to "risk its cities to defend yours because we need your freedom to protect ours." Kennedy's words and actions helped convince Americans that he would not back down from Communists. However, neither Kennedy nor Congress wanted to go to war with the Soviet Union. Thus the Berlin Wall would stand for many years as a symbol of the Cold War.

Since 1949, 3 million unhappy East Germans had fled to West Berlin. They then continued on to West Germany. The flight of so many people embarrassed East Germany and the Soviet Union. East Germany decided to build the wall to cut off East Berliners from freedom in the West. For decades, the **Berlin Wall** remained a symbol of the Cold War that divided Europe.

Additional Fact:

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The Cuban Missile Crisis

The most serious Cold War crisis once again involved Cuba. Beginning in 1961 the Soviet Union sent increasing numbers of military personnel to Cuba. The Soviets started arming Cuba with missiles during the summer of 1962. Cuban and Soviet officials defended the installation of missiles. They claimed that these weapons were only to protect the country against another invasion like the Bay of Pigs.

In a contest over who had more nuclear weapons, the Soviets knew the U.S. had the advantage. They also knew that some of those nuclear weapons, specifically missiles in Turkey, pointed towards the USSR. To the Soviets, having a friend in the western hemisphere could provide them the leverage they needed.

Meanwhile, the United States viewed the Cuban-Soviet relationship with trepidation. Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev, knowing about the U.S. missiles in Turkey, decided to fight fire with fire and use his new friend Cuba as a home for Soviet missiles, pointing them towards the U.S.

In September, Kennedy warned Soviet leader Khrushchev not to place missiles in Cuba that could attack U.S. targets. Khrushchev denied he was doing so. In mid-October, however, photographs from U.S. spy planes

proved otherwise. The photos provided evidence that the Soviets were installing launching pads for nuclear missiles with enough range to hit major U.S. population centers located in the southeastern United States. Over the next several days, the Soviets prepared to install the missiles. Kennedy met with his advisers to plan his response.

During a televised address on October 22, Kennedy demanded that Khrushchev remove the missiles. He said the United States would attack the Soviet Union if the Soviets fired a missile in the Western Hemisphere. Kennedy warned that the U.S. Navy would surround Cuba to stop Soviet ships from bringing more missiles. Despite this warning, Soviet ships loaded with missile parts continued toward the island.

The confrontation became known as the Cuban missile crisis, and the world waited nervously to see what would happen. Attorney General Robert Kennedy later recalled the president's reaction as Soviet ships approached the blockade, and the superpowers came closer to war.

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Soon word came that the Soviet ships had turned back at the last moment. One Kennedy adviser described the moment. “We’re eyeball to eyeball, and the other fellow just blinked.” Later, Kennedy and Khrushchev agreed to a compromise. The Soviets removed their missiles from Cuba in return for a U.S. promise not to invade the island. Kennedy also agreed to remove some U.S. missiles from Italy and Turkey. In 1963 Kennedy and Khrushchev set up a teletype “hot line” to communicate with each other at a moment’s notice. The two leaders also signed the **Limited Nuclear Test Ban Treaty** in August 1963, which banned the testing of nuclear weapons aboveground. The treaty was quickly signed by some 100 nations.



In 1968, the Soviet Union again moved to limit freedom—this time in Czechoslovakia. There, government leaders had introduced reforms that allowed citizens to express their opinions more freely. Alarmed at

this show of independence, the Soviets sent thousands of troops into Czechoslovakia in August 1968. They occupied Prague, the capital, and ended the new freedoms. The United States spoke out against the invasion of Czechoslovakia but took no direct action.

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Recognizing China

When Richard Nixon became President in 1969, he looked for ways to ease world tensions. Soon, he moved to improve relations with the People's Republic of China.

In 1949, Mao Zedong had won control of the Chinese mainland. At that time, the United States refused to recognize Mao's communist government. In fact, throughout the 1950s, Nixon had spoken strongly against dealing with communist China.

By 1971, however, Nixon thought it was time for a change. In secret talks, he began exploring closer ties with China. To show that it was willing to be more flexible, China invited the United States ping pong team to a competition in Beijing.

To the surprise of many Americans, President Nixon himself visited the People's Republic of China in February 1972. Television cameras captured the President walking along the Great Wall of China and attending state dinners with Chinese leaders.

The visit was a triumph for Nixon and the start of a new era in relations with China. As tensions continued to ease, President Carter established formal diplomatic relations with China in 1979.

A Brief Thaw

President Nixon followed his visit to China with another historic trip. In May 1972, he became the first American President to visit the Soviet Union since the Cold War began. The trip was part of Nixon's effort to reduce tensions between the superpowers. This policy was known as **détente** (day TAHNT), or an easing of tensions.

Efforts at détente. Détente eased the Cold War by allowing more trade and other contacts between the United States and the Soviet Union. More important, the two nations signed a treaty agreeing to limit the number of nuclear warheads and missiles that they built. This treaty was known as the **SALT Agreement**. SALT stands for Strategic Arms Limitation Talks.

Détente continued under both Presidents Ford and Carter. Trade between the United States and the Soviet Union increased. The Soviets bought tons of American wheat. In 1975, Soviet and American astronauts conducted a joint space mission. In June 1979, President Carter met with Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev (BREHZH nehf). They worked out the details of a SALT II Treaty.

Détente ends. Before the Senate could ratify this new treaty, hopes for détente faded. In December, Soviet troops invaded Afghanistan. They seized major cities and gave military support to a pro-Soviet government. Afghan rebels fought back fiercely.

"The Soviet Union must pay a price for its aggression," President Carter declared. He withdrew the SALT II Treaty from the Senate and ended grain sales to the Soviet Union. He also announced that American athletes would not compete in the 1980 Olympic Games in Moscow.

In the long run, the war in Afghanistan became so costly for the Soviets that it contributed to the downfall of the Soviet Union. For the time being, however, détente ended.

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"Tear Down this Wall!"

The Cold War would continue for two decades and Berlin would take center stage again when U.S. President Ronald Reagan and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev began the first civil exchanges between the two nations in decades. Reagan expressed the thoughts of many when he famously stood in front of the Berlin Wall in 1987 and declared, "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!" Free West Berliners in attendance cheered heartily. The Berlin Wall was a symbol of the lack of freedom in the communist world. It would not be long before Reagan's words would be heeded.

Reagan and Gorbachev's warm relationship led to the melting of the Cold War. They worked to eliminate weapons in their arsenals, and the Soviet Union promised to lighten its heavy-handed leadership of its Eastern bloc countries. Testing this change, Hungary, as it did in 1956, once again demanded freedom. This time, the Soviets relented, left the country, and watched Hungary become a democracy. When they heard of freedom in Hungary, huge numbers of East Germans used Hungary as a route to get to Austria, and then to freedom in West Germany.

The Wall Comes Down

More and more East Germans began to protest the wall and its travel restrictions. In 1989, in an attempt for a compromise, the communist party leader in East Berlin was discharged with the duty of announcing a minor loosening of travel restrictions between East and West Germany. The party leader, who was not privy to official discussions that led to the decision, gave incorrect information to the press, essentially telling the world that all travel restrictions were lifted, immediately. This did

not give border guards time to prepare for the historic events that would follow.

Upon hearing the news that the Berlin Wall was open, thousands of East Germans assembled there and insisted the gates be opened. The guards, who had no directive, did not know what to do. They attempted to get instructions from their superiors, who were also at a loss. After several hours, the guards were told to open the gates and let the people through. Most passed into West Berlin without any inspection whatsoever. When the East Germans crossed the border, West Germans were there to greet them and celebrate. During the next several weeks, thousands of Berliners took hammers and picks and started their own demolition of the wall. Finally, in 1990, the job was finished, and the rest of the wall was torn down by the East German military.

Following this major event, Germany was reunified, and many Eastern bloc countries rejected communism and embraced democracy, essentially dissolving the USSR and making way for a newer, freer Russia. Freedom was theirs, and there was no going back now. The death knell of the Cold War had sounded.

Cuba After the Cold War

When the Cold War came to a close around 1989 with the destruction of the Berlin Wall, Cuba was left without its most loyal communist partner, the Soviet Union. The United States, which had had a longstanding trade **embargo** on Cuba, continued this policy. Relations with Cuba throughout these years were dependent on who was president of the United States, with some presidents forming warm relations with Castro, and others objecting to his dictatorial ways. In the 2000s, the relationship had warmed in a process known as the "Cuban Thaw" after the reign of Fidel Castro came to an end. While still a tenuous relationship, people on both sides are working to improve the association for the sake of both countries.