

# Politics After WWII and Cold War Tensions

By Jeremi Suri, The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, adapted by Newsela staff on 11.28.16

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TOP and MAPS: Courtesy of Creative Commons. BELOW: In 1962, students at a Brooklyn middle school have a "duck and cover" practice drill in case of a nuclear attack. From the New York World-Telegram archive. Courtesy of Getty Images.

The late summer of 1945 was the height of American power. American soldiers had defeated the seemingly unbeatable German and Japanese armies. American science and technology was the best in the world. The United States had developed the ability to produce more military and civilian goods — including aircraft, cars, radios and guns — than the rest of the world combined. At the war's end, American farmers were selling enough food to feed populations around the globe.

Happiness could be seen in the street parades, the family reunions and the new babies that filled the country immediately after the war. At the same time, the postwar world was dangerous, difficult and violent. In 1945, the U.S. dropped atomic bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Americans began to worry about other countries, especially the Soviet Union,

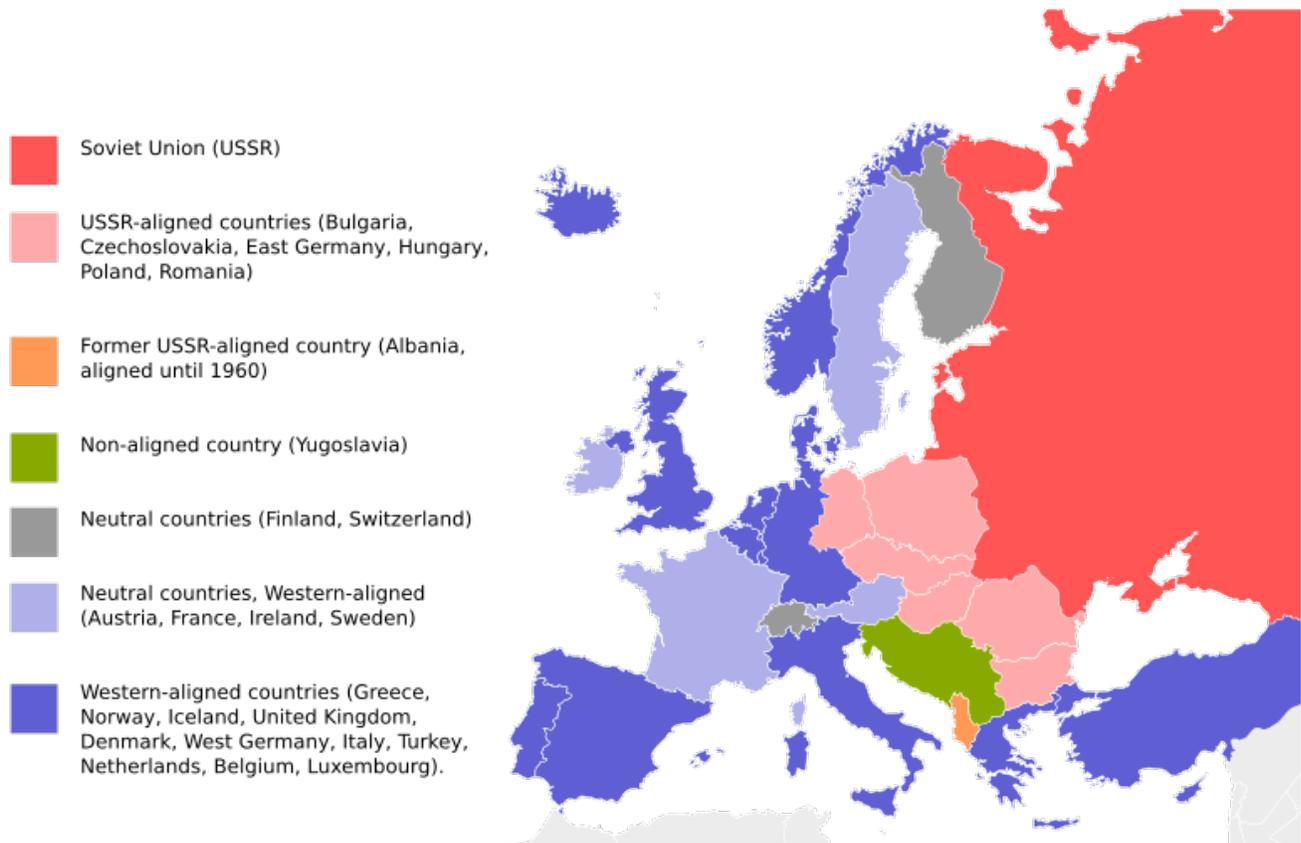
getting and using the atomic bomb. The U.S. and Soviet Union were allies during World War II. However, the Soviet Union was communist, which meant the government owned all the property and people had few freedoms. Even before the war ended, the two countries began competing for power in Europe and Asia. The next 40 or so years were called the "Cold War," because the U.S. and the Soviet Union fought for influence over the world.



## Divided into halves

After World War II, Europe was divided into Eastern and Western halves. American forces mainly held the Western half and Soviet forces held the Eastern half. The United States controlled the entire country of Japan and many other areas captured by the Japanese during the war.

The war caused much destruction, and Americans worried about how much they would have to pay to help rebuild allies, like Great Britain and France, and former enemies, like Germany and Japan. Would this affect the American economy at home? They also worried about new enemies: Would the Soviet Union and its allies try to spread communism? Would Soviet leader Joseph Stalin start a new empire in the areas formerly held by the Germans and the Japanese?



President Harry Truman felt strongly that the United States had to stop other countries from becoming communist. Yet, he also wanted to create new opportunities, especially for returning soldiers, at home.

### The GI Bill

The Servicemen’s Readjustment Act, also known as the “GI Bill,” was signed into law on June 22, 1944, by President Roosevelt. It helped eight million veterans get an education. More than two million of them attended colleges and universities paid for by the government. It also gave more than two million veterans government loans to buy new houses.

The GI Bill helped the soldiers move into the growing American middle class. As part of the middle class, they read more, bought more and saved more. They also paid more taxes than any previous generation of Americans.

There was much racism, sexism and prejudice in postwar America. Yet, women, African-Americans and other minorities also had opportunities unthinkable in earlier generations. A growing movement of African-Americans was demanding equal rights. African-Americans and other minorities had served in combat during the Second World War, and they now strongly argued for equal citizenship.

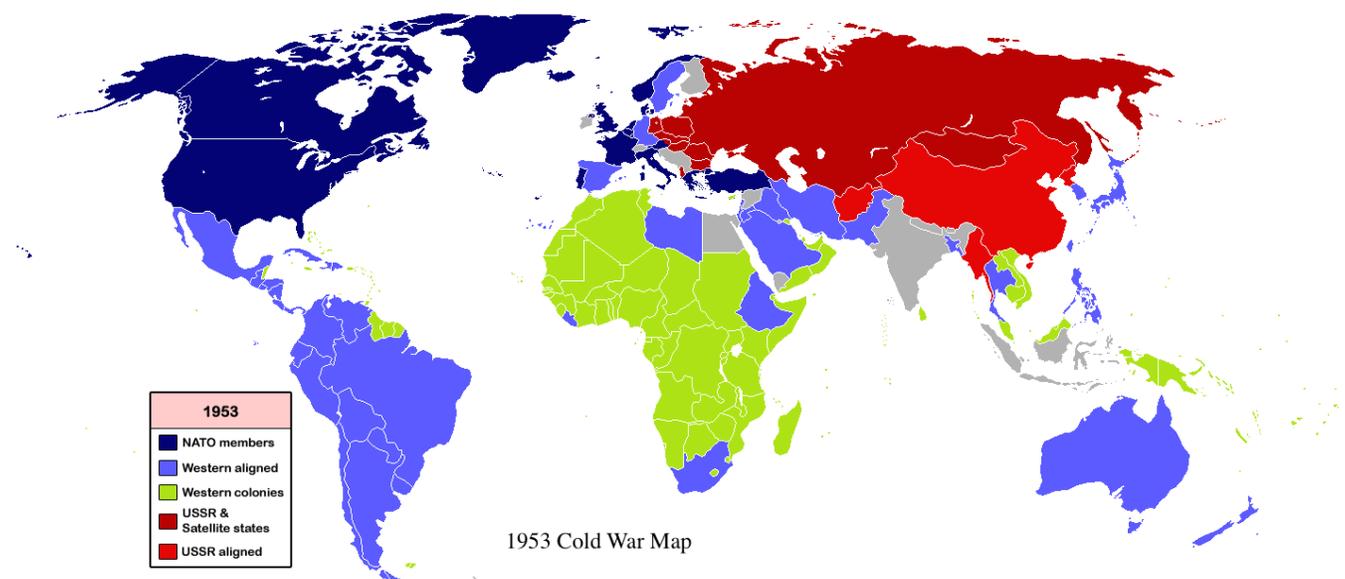
## The search for equality

Truman supported equal rights, but did not want to move quickly on racial integration. He was worried that white voters would not vote for him if he supported African-American rights.

As the 1948 presidential election approached, Truman recognized that he needed African-American votes. Despite opposition from many military leaders, on July 26, 1948, he signed Executive Order 9881. It required “equality of treatment and opportunity for all persons in the armed services without regard to race, color, religion or national origin.”

Until then, the U.S. army was segregated, and blacks and whites served separately.

In 1947, Truman announced what became known as the “Truman Doctrine.” In it, the United States would give money and military help to stop communism around the world.



In 1948, Soviet-supported communists took over Czechoslovakia. In 1949, communists in China carried out a successful revolution. By the end of the 1940s, the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union was behind many major government decisions.

## Protecting America

On June 25, 1950, the communist North Korean army attacked South Korea, shocking everyone in Washington. Truman sent American forces to fight in the Korean War. At home, many prominent Americans became obsessed that communism was seeping into the U.S. It began a period in which many American actors, scientists, politicians and writers were accused of supporting communism.

Through this all, President Truman remained steadfast about protecting American power and wealth. His violent anti-communism became a cornerstone of the next 40 years of American policy, and Cold War politics lasted for more than four decades.

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**Quiz**

- 1 Which detail from the article BEST explains the political situation of the world after World War II?
- (A) Happiness could be seen in the street parades, the family reunions and the new babies that filled the country immediately after the war.
  - (B) By the end of the 1940s, the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union was behind many major government decisions.
  - (C) There was much racism, sexism and prejudice in postwar America. Yet, women, African-Americans and other minorities also had opportunities unthinkable in earlier generations.
  - (D) President Harry Truman felt strongly that the United States had to stop other countries from becoming communist.
- 2 Select the paragraph from the section "The GI Bill" that explains the direct outcome of the bill.
- 3 Based on the article, which of the following would BEST describe Americans' attitude about the future?
- (A) enthusiastic and optimistic
  - (B) constructive and cautious
  - (C) enraged and rebellious
  - (D) scared and pessimistic
- 4 What was the MOST important reason that Truman had for signing Executive Order 9881?
- (A) He wanted to get military support for the war.
  - (B) He wanted to act quickly to desegregate the military.
  - (C) He wanted to make sure that all soldiers were treated equally.
  - (D) He wanted to gain the African-American votes for his re-election.