



Section 4. History

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THE COLD WAR NEVER THAWED: RIGHTS, RESPONSIBILITIES, AND THE POLITICS OF FEAR

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Abstract

When people are asked which war in history they think is the most interesting, the answer that usually prevails is “World War 2” because of the sheer amount of significant events, bloodshed, and huge scale it was fought on. However, my answer was always the Cold War. The Cold War plays such a huge role in American history, arguably more than WW2. Its international “responsibility” can be seen in the various other nations such as Vietnam, Cuba, Afghanistan, and Korea that the United States either manipulated to remove communism from or the two countries fought proxy wars in. Not only did the Cold War have many implications outside the United States, but it also dramatically changed the domestic landscape. As I was writing, I realized that the “rights” part is clearly documented in the chain of progressive movements that kickstarted within the nation as a direct result of the Cold War.

The first thing I did to conduct my research was go to YouTube and look at archived news reports or speeches on significant historical figures during the Cold War period such as JFK, Nixon, LBJ, and Gorbachev. I also examined many government documents from the Congress, Senate, and pretty much any branch of government I could look at. As for secondary sources, I looked into journals, articles, books, and news from a series of institutions such as RAND, Council on Foreign Relation, and research universities.

The creation of my project was largely based on the sources I had worked with initially. I structured my piece as chronologically as possible, switching back and forth between what happened during the Cold War and the implications it has on the US today. After the initial structure of my paper was laid down, I began looking for quotes from books or significant figures to include my arguments to make them stronger. I made sure that my analysis was balanced by incorporating multiple perspectives from many historians and political leaders.

My historical argument is an expanded version of “history always repeats itself.” The Cold War fears of communism and foreign influence fundamentally shaped American politics in that time period and continue to impact modern conflicts about social justice, foreign relations, and

national security. My paper argues that by studying the Cold War's impact on rights and responsibilities, we can better understand current US political conflicts and avoid putting ourselves in the same situation we were in during the Cold War.

This topic is greatly significant because it demonstrates the long term impact of Cold War policies on many modern American issues. It is important to understand where our current political standings come from and how we can further improve our own society by analyzing the mistakes we have made in the past. The Vietnam War serves as a lesson on unnecessary intervention and McCarthyism demonstrates the consequences of paranoia driven decisions. Today, similar mistakes could be repeated in US relations with China and Russia, and it is critical to ensure that never happens.

Keywords: *Cold War, McCarthyism, communism, war, US, Soviet*

Historical Paper

In October of 1962, the world held its breath. All eyes were on the United States. Soviet missiles just 90 miles away from American shores were scattered across Cuba. President Kennedy was faced with an impossible choice; risk a nuclear war or risk looking weak. As classrooms across the nation taught its schoolchildren evacuation drills and as citizens stocked their shelters, the Cold War's tension became clear: strength is survival. The debates over US relations with Beijing and Moscow, which are deeply rooted in Cold War history continue to influence American politics today. John Mearsheimer, a professor of political science at the University of Chicago, argues that since 2015, the world has become multipolar – a phenomenon in which more than 2 states hold similar significant amounts of power – with the US, Russia, and China competing in various ways for influence in global politics (Mearsheimer, 2017). This “multipolar” arrangement closely mirrors the Cold War, particularly the US strategy of manipulating tensions between Moscow and Beijing to their own advantage, as demonstrated during the Sino-Soviet split of the 1960s-1980s (USHISTORY.org, ND). The legacy of the Cold War continues to shape the American political landscape, specifically domestic debates about individual freedoms and government intervention (Harry S. Truman Library & Museum, n.d.). This paper will explore how historical and modern US presidents have been accused of being “soft” on China and Russia, how interventionist policies involving intergovernmental hotspots have been handled, and how US domestic concerns have been shaped by worries about Eastern ideological influence.

During the Cold War, the accusation of being “soft” on communism wasn't only a po-

litical talking point, but it also had significant consequences for leadership and policy-making (Truman, 1950). Political figures such as Joseph McCarthy leveraged allegations of communist ties to discredit his adversaries, a trend that has continued to persist to this day (U. S. Senate, 1954). In the words of Canadian politician Lester Pearson during the 10th anniversary signing of the UN Charter; “the balance of terror has succeeded the balance of power” (United Nations, 1955). The Cold War was no longer just about the balance of power, but also the balance of fear – how each side perceived the capabilities of the other (Wohlstetter, 1958). Modern accusations against US presidents about their stance on China and Russia often stem from these Cold War era fears about foreign communist influence (Summers, 2018). Although it may not seem like it, the lingering impact of these fears can still be observed through the discourse surrounding military alliances, election security, and diplomatic relations within the US (John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, 2021). McCarthyism, which the American Heritage Dictionary defines as “the political practice of publicizing accusations of disloyalty or subversion with insufficient regard to evidence” continues to play a major role in American politics, even though the threat of communist infiltration is no longer immediate (Eisenhower Presidential Library, 1954). The perception that US leaders must maintain aggressive stances towards geopolitical rivals has increased criticisms in American foreign policy across many administrations, with the Truman administration being one (Hamby, ND). An essential aspect of these criticisms is a broader ideological divide shaping American political discourse. The perception of being “soft” on

political rivals has been weaponized in various political campaigns, influencing election outcomes (Forest, 2021). During the Cold War, politicians exploited fears of communist expansion to garner political support. The idea that leaders must project strength has shaped a certain foreign diplomacy rhetoric, often at the expense of proper diplomatic engagement (Matush, 2023).

One of the most persistent themes in US foreign policy debates involves accusations that presidents are too lenient on geopolitical adversaries. Critics of Donald Trump accuse him of being too lenient on Russia in its bad relations with Ukraine and other European regional allies, saying that he is too hesitant to confront Vladimir Putin, especially in the context of the Russia-Ukraine conflict and support for the former Assad regime of Syria (Collinson, 2019). Meanwhile, Joe Biden has faced accusations of being “soft” towards China and its increased influence on Pacific allies like Taipei and Singapore and Southeast Asian ASEAN regional countries relations (U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, 2023). In the case of Trump, accusations against him being too soft on Russia in its growing military presence in Europe can be seen in an MSNBC report done by TV show host Rachel Maddow in 2018 (MSNBC, 2018). The report details a situation that happened in the United Kingdom where former Russian double agent Sergei Skripal and his daughter were poisoned by a Russian nerve agent. Trump’s response to this incident was, “as soon as we get the facts straight, if we agree with them we will condemn Russia” and made no further remark (Guardian News, 2018). Furthermore, on March 13th of 2018, only a day before this broadcast went live, a 21 page report done by the Democratic Intelligence Agency on the US’s standing with Russia stated that “as the Committee has learned, candidate Trump’s private business was actively negotiating a business deal in Moscow with a sanctioned Russian bank during the election period” (House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, 2018). Regarding former president Joe Biden, accusations against him being too soft on China in its growing military [bases] or presence in the Pacific can be seen by accusations from Republican senator Tom Cotton in a Fox

News report done in November of 2023 (Fox News, 2023). In this report, Cotton commented on a meeting that was going to occur between Biden and Xi, stating that, “what we should be doing is focusing on ways that we can get the better of China to stop them from cheating on their trade deals or hacking into US government computers or floating spy balloons over America, none which I’m sure Biden is going to raise with Xi Jinping today” (Fox News, 2023).

Historically, these accusations are not new. Both John F Kennedy and Ronald Reagan, although remembered for their striking influence on the United States, faced many criticisms of their leniency towards America’s geopolitical rivals (House Select Committee on Assassinations, 1979). In the 1960s, Kennedy was criticized for his dealings with Soviet expansion in Europe, particularly the Cuban Missile Crisis and Berlin Crisis (Morgan, 2023). This raised many concerns about his capability to confront the “enemy” head on. Similarly, Reagan spoke out about his anti-communist beliefs but he failed to recognize the communism growing in East Asia, particularly China. This allowed China’s growing communist influence to seep into Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the Koreas relatively unchecked by Reagan (Reagan, 1988). Critics such as Senator Barry Goldwater stated that Kennedy’s reluctance to take direct military action against communism reflected weakness (Goldwater, 1964). During his run for presidency, Senator Goldwater created a map highlighting the countries that had gone communist in the 24 years prior to 1964. He furiously claimed that, “The Democrats have been in power twice as long as the Republicans (since 1940); but the Democrats have lost 10 times as many countries and 50 times as many people as the Republicans!” (Boston Rare Maps, ND) This statement was a direct attack on the way JFK and his democratic party dealt with communist threats. Similarly, Ronald Reagan was accused of failing to curb China’s growing influence in Asia (Christian Science Monitor, 1984). While Reagan pushed the Soviet Union towards collapse, he still maintained trade and diplomatic relations with China, which was criticized by conservative extremists such as Senator Jesse Helms (Baron Public Affairs, 2020). Additionally, Nixon’s opening of dip-

lomatic relations with China was framed as betrayal by certain conservatives who argued that engaging with the Chinese Communist Party meant condoning authoritarianism (Schneider, ND). However, Nixon's administration defended its strategy by saying it was an attempt to divide China from the USSR, weakening the communist bloc (Hughes, ND). Nevertheless, debates on how to balance diplomacy with conflicting ideologies remain a critical point of US foreign policy today.

Economic influence has been a historical battleground in the global power struggle between the US, China, and Russia. During the Cold War, both the US and the USSR expanded their ideological reach by investing in developing nations, using economics as a ploy to secure interventionist policies. Today, this dynamic continues to persist with China's Belt and Road Initiative being an extension of Cold War era expansionism that challenged US influence in Afro Eurasia, simultaneously allowing Beijing to build infrastructure in key geopolitical regions (Maizland & Zheng, 2023). Meanwhile, Russia weaponized energy resources to exercise political pressure and justify its own interventionism, such as its invasion of Ukraine (Slakaityte & Surwillo, 2024). The US response to Russia's actions in Ukraine consisted of economic sanctions which targeted Russian banks, industries, and energy exports which aimed to cripple Russia's ability to finance war (U.S. Department of State, 2014). Additionally, the US has provided over 75 billion dollars in aid to Ukraine, supplying weaponry like HIMARS rocket systems, Patriot air defense systems, and Javelin anti-tank missiles (U.S. Department of Defense, 2024). This response mirrors previous Cold War tactics where the US undermined Soviet expansion by funding anti-communist movements such as the Mujahideen fighters in Afghanistan during the 1980s to weaken USSR military presence (Office of the Historian, ND). However, just as the US refrained from direct military engagement during the Cold War, today's policymakers opted for an economic and military support strategy to avoid head on confrontation with Russian troops.

In the Pacific theatre, China's increasing military presence in Taiwan and the South China Sea has pushed the US to increase

its alliances with regional partners. Washington responded by expanding arms sales to Taiwan, including naval defense technologies and F-16 fighter jets (Forum on the Arms Trade, ND). Additionally, the US has reinforced military partnerships through the AUKUS agreement – an alliance between the US, UK, and Australia – to counter the PRC's expanding maritime influence (Albanese, Biden, & Sunak, 2023). The Biden administration has also focused on military drills with South Korea, Japan, and the Philippines which are reminiscent of Cold War era US military alliances designed to deter Soviet and Chinese expansion in certain areas (Military.com, 2024). The debate over how interventionist the US should be in these geopolitical hotspots reflect on the bigger debate that has persisted since the Cold War period. Cold War fears of losing global influence continue to shape modern US policies, reinforcing a pattern of diplomatic, military, and economic strategies that continue decades after the end of the conflict.

As Cold War tensions shaped US foreign policy, they also pushed a wave of liberal activism domestically that continues to modern times. The conflict between democracy and communism put pressure on the United States to further represent the "freedom" that it argued abroad, leading to a drastic surge in movements advocating for civil rights, social justice, and political reform back home. As a result, liberalism became a prevalent force in American politics throughout this time, influencing every corner of decision making. One of the most notable consequences of this movement was its influence on the Civil Rights Movement. The global criticism of American democracy particularly focused on its treatment of racial minorities which forced US leaders to address its institutionalized segregation. Soviet propaganda frequently reiterated the contradiction between America's constant calls for freedom and its domestic racial violence (PBS, 2018). This paved the way for legislative changes within America such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 (John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, 2022). Key figures in the Civil Rights Movement, including MLK, were often accused of having communist ties.

The FBI, under President Hoover, launched surveillance campaigns against civil rights activists through COINTELPRO, manipulating social justice efforts as communist subversion (King Institute, 1909). Not only were communist accusations perpetuating corruption within the government, but they also worked at shutting down progressive movements. Nonetheless, the movement ultimately succeeded in pushing major reforming and paving the way for modern racial justice movements.

The Vietnam War, which was a conflict caused by Cold War tensions in the Eastern frontier, amplified liberal activism specifically among the American youth. As Cold War interventionism escalated, the US spent more and more money in Southeast Asia even though the payoff was barely anything. Not only did the war have a devastating amount of deaths in American troops, but the draft system which required men to go to war based off of a lottery system caused unrest amongst the younger generation (Selective Service System, ND). The youth organized marches and protests, chanting their anger towards the government through phrases such as “Hey, hey, LBJ, how many kids did you kill today?” and “One! Two! Three! Four! We don’t want your fucking war!” (Alpha History, ND) Notable demonstrations included the 1968 Columbia University protests where students occupied campus buildings to oppose the university’s support of the war and the 1970 Kent State shootings, where National Guardsmen opened fire on student protesters, killing four and further igniting the anti-war movement (Center for Contemporary Critical Thought, ND). This shift of protests focusing on the younger generation did much more than just foster anti-war movements. Younger people were more open to feminist changes, economic reforms, and relatively progressive policies in general. The power of the people was now in the hands of a completely different demographic which pushed the United States even further in the realm of liberalism. Specifically, the anti-war movement was closely tied to the rise of second-war feminism. Many wom-

en viewed US militarism as an extension of patriarchal power structures, believing that a government willing to send young men to die abroad was also complicit in keeping systemic inequalities at home. As the feminist movement expanded, more and more women were given a choice in their actions. Title IX of Education Amendments prohibited gender discrimination in education programs which gave women the choice of higher education, and Roe v. Wade allowed women to terminate their pregnancy within the first trimester which gave them the choice over their own bodies (U.S. Department of Justice, 2015). In her book *The Feminine Mystique*, activist Betty Friedan stated, “Chosen motherhood is the real liberation. The choice to have a child makes the whole experience of motherhood different, and the choice to be generative in other ways can at last be made, and is being made by many women now, without guilt” (Friedan, 1963). Despite this, many of their efforts were still shut down with the idea that they were too radical or subversive, some even stating that feminism was a Marxist ideology that sought to undermine traditional American values.

«Democrats have tended, through regulation and other ways, to be more empowering of the federal government and in regulating the economy than the Republicans,» says Vanderbilt University political science professor Thomas Alan Schwartz, «and this has been called socialism» (Naylor, 2020). McCarthyism’s legacy has persisted in modern discussions of leftist movements. Figures such as Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez are still being accused by opponents of promoting socialist policies. The ideological divide that persisted during the Cold War continues to frame domestic political debates in the US, significantly influencing how Americans view policies on labor rights, social justice, racial inequality, and healthcare. The fear of communism embedded in America’s social and political culture continues to serve as a tool to discredit progressive movements, proving that even three decades after the end of the Cold War, tensions are far from over.

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