

How the United States Fought the Cold War

Today's lecture is about the history of the Cold War and how the United States fought the Cold War. Before we start, I would like to talk for just a bit about the Cold War, what it was, and how it affected people in the world, wherever they lived.

1. Introduction

The Cold War refers to a conflict between the United States and the former Soviet Union that lasted longer than 40 years, from the end of World War Two until the fall of the Soviet Union in 1989. It is called a "cold" war because it never led to direct fighting between the two superpowers, but it was still very much a war, and it was fought in many places and in many different ways. In many ways it has created the political structures of the world we live in now.

A conflict of ideologies and of economic systems was at the heart of the Cold War. The western nations, led by the United States, embraced capitalism and democratically elected governments. The bloc led by the Soviet Union embraced communism and centrally controlled governments run by one single political party, the Communist Party. Western nations were dominated by large corporations and consumer driven economies while communist nations were characterized by central economic planning and state ownership of industries. Each side believed that the entire world should follow their ideology and economic system, and each tried to influence the other countries of the world both economically and militarily.

The Cold War began almost immediately after World War Two and was officially declared by former British Prime Minister Winston Churchill on 1946 when he said that an "iron curtain" had descended upon Soviet controlled sections of Eastern Europe. While not officially at war, the Soviet and American spheres of influence became hostile to one another and there was no more free movement across borders between Eastern and Western Europe by the late 1940s.

During the 1950s and 1960s the Cold War was characterized by an escalating arms race between the United States and the Soviet Union. The Soviets developed the atomic bomb in 1949. Throughout the 1950s both superpowers raced to build more and bigger bombs. In the mid-fifties, both countries developed thermonuclear, or H-bombs. By the end of the 1950s, both countries were developing rocket technology with the aim of creating intercontinental missiles with nuclear weapons mounted on top of them. This created a situation in which each country had built tens of thousands of nuclear weapons, and could

use them to attack the other country in a matter of half an hour. Before this nuclear weapons had to be dropped from airplanes. Launching a nuclear attack by airplanes would be easy for the other side to detect ahead of time, would take days to accomplish and many of the attacking planes might be shot down. A nuclear missile attack would be very difficult to detect ahead of time, would be very quick to execute, and would be almost impossible to stop.

For the next few decades, both countries continued to build and deploy new nuclear weapons, but there was stability to the standoff. Each side knew that if they attacked the other side, they would probably be attacked in return. It would be very difficult to take out the opponent without suffering a retaliatory attack. This was an actual strategy known as Mutually Assured Destruction.

There were times when the Cold War came perilously close to breaking out into a catastrophic global war. There were several crises focused on Berlin, a city that was split into an Eastern and a Western section. The Berlin Wall was eventually built by the Soviets to separate these two sections and to keep people from crossing over to the Western section. But the most intense crisis was the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962. After US spy planes took pictures of the Soviet Union building a missile base on the island of Cuba which was capable of launching missiles against the US, American President Kennedy decided to challenge the Soviets to take out the base and missiles or face attack. This led to a several day standoff as Soviet naval vessels carrying nuclear weapons to Cuba were blockaded by American navy ships at sea. Many people worried that the world was on the brink of a full nuclear war. Historians have learned that in fact, the world did come very close to a nuclear war during that October in 1962. Eventually the US and the Soviets arranged a deal in which the missiles were withdrawn from Cuba, and the US later withdrew some missiles from Turkey.

The Cuban Missile Crisis shows that one way the United States fought the Cold War was by bullying the Soviets. At the time of the crisis, the United States had nuclear missiles stationed at bases in several countries that bordered the Soviet Union. In fact, the United States had the Soviet Union ringed with nuclear weapons. But they would not tolerate the Soviet nuclear having weapons close to the US, and threatened nuclear war if they were not removed. Since the Soviets backed down, the US would perceive them as weak as the Cold War unfolded further.

The Cold War ended with the collapse of the Soviet Union in the autumn of 1989. Probably right around the time that most of you were born. The Soviet Union opened up its borders and the borders of the nations that it controlled. The Berlin Wall fell in October,

and communist governments throughout Europe fell one after another throughout the next few months. The Soviet Union, which was made up of many smaller nations, began to break up with nation after nation declaring independence. In 1991, the Communist Party lost control and the Soviet Union ceased to exist. It was replaced by Russia, which remains today.

2. Fighting the Cold War

In looking at how the US fought the Cold War, there will be a number of things that we will consider. How the US fought the Soviet Union both directly and indirectly.

The primary concept which guided US policy towards the Soviet Union was called containment. The idea of containment was that the goal of the Soviet Union was to expand and take over the world. The US believed that the Soviet Union wanted the whole world to be communist. They believed that the Soviet Union worked both by taking over nations directly, like the countries of Eastern Europe, and by supporting communist revolutions in countries around the world. The goal of the policy of containment was to limit the ability of the Soviet Union to expand and to export revolution. The United States worked hard to coax the nations around the Soviet Union to become US allies and to create a border around the Soviets in which the US military could operate, and from which the US could spy.

The main way that the US fought the Soviet Union directly was through the nuclear arms race. The purpose of the nuclear arms race was twofold. First, the US worked to create a larger and more intimidating stockpile of nuclear weapons than the Soviet Union. The possession of superior numbers of larger nuclear weapons would supposedly force the Soviet Union to bend to the will of the US, and would prevent them from launching a surprise nuclear attack. Second, the cost of the accelerating arms race was supposed to bankrupt the Soviet Union by forcing all the wealth of Soviet society to be used for military purposes, leaving the Soviet citizens hungry, cold and unhappy. For this reason, the US produced thousands and thousands of nuclear weapons. Far more than was actually needed to fight a nuclear war. If the US had 30,000 or 40,000 nuclear weapons, then the Soviets had to keep building more and more nuclear weapons in order to match the US stockpile. This inevitably led to a standoff in which each country had an incredibly large number of nuclear weapons.

Another key to the nuclear strategy was to build a number of different delivery systems for nuclear weapons. In the US, this concept led to what was called the nuclear triad. This means that the US nuclear weapons had three delivery systems. The first

delivery system was airplanes: nuclear bombers that could drop weapons on the Soviet Union. The second delivery system was to have missiles that were stationed underground in the United States, and the third leg of the triad was to have nuclear missiles that were based in submarines hiding in the ocean. The key concept of the triad was that even if the Soviet Union attacked the United States with all of their nuclear weapons, they would be unable to take out all of the US weapons. No matter what, there would be nuclear missiles that survived a surprise attack, and that could be used to retaliate against the Soviets. This was accomplished by keeping one third of all of the US nuclear bombers in the air at all times, so that they could not be attacked. And also, by keeping nuclear submarines hidden in the oceans at all times, then any Soviet attack could only take out part of the nuclear arsenal of the United States. The fact that no matter what kind of attack they launched against the United States, the US could always strike back against the Soviet Union was thought to act as a deterrent against a Soviet sneak attack. But of course this meant having a large number of nuclear weapons always ready to use, on a hair trigger. This was a very dangerous situation. And this cost a lot of money to maintain.

Another part of how the US fought the Cold War was to fight actual hot wars through client or satellite states. This means that sometimes countries or rebels that one side supported engaged in war with countries or rebels that the other side supported. The Korean War was just such a war, as was the Vietnam War and the Soviet war in Afghanistan in the 1980s. In each of these cases the United States and the Soviet Union each supported and armed opposing sides of the conflict. So while these conflicts did center on local causes and groups of people, there was another layer on which the two superpowers were making war against each other.

In the Korean War, the Soviets and the Chinese communists both supported the North Korean army. The United Nations troops that fought against them were primarily American soldiers, along with some of their allies. In Vietnam the US fought against Soviet supported North Vietnamese troops. In the Soviet war in Afghanistan in the 1980s, the Soviets fought against US supported and armed rebels.

3. The Costs and Legacies of the Cold War

There were several aspects of the Cold War that have had continuing negative effects on the societies of the two superpowers, their former client states, and on the world as a whole. One aspect that historians talk about quite a lot is the idea of "Cold War dualism." This means that for people inside the United States government and military all political actions had to be interpreted as being either pro-US or pro-Soviet. The big

problem with this kind of intellectual construct is that it becomes impossible to see some political events for what they really were. For example, the rise of the Vietcong in Vietnam in the 1950s and 1960s was very much an anti-colonial movement. The Vietcong were seeking to throw off a long history of foreign rule and occupation and take back control of their country. They had endured centuries of occupation by the Chinese and then by the French. But the United States could not see the rise of the Vietcong as an anti-colonial movement. They could only see communists, and therefore they assumed that Vietnam was taking orders from Moscow, and that part of “containing” the Soviets meant fighting a war against the Vietnamese. They were totally wrong. Cold War dualism led the United States to see every diplomatic and military event as part of the chess game of world domination that it was playing with the Soviet Union. This resulted in a largely dysfunctional foreign policy by the United States throughout the Cold War.

Another of the long-term consequences of the way the United States fought the Cold War is the impact of huge military budgets on the social infrastructure of American society. When we look at the Cold War we often talk about the arms race, how each country raced to build thermonuclear weapons, and then missiles and continued to try to develop newer and more sophisticated weapons and delivery systems for those weapons, it is important to remember that this arms race can also be seen as a spending race. Designing, building and deploying all of these high-tech advanced weapons cost an immense amount of money for both sides. This is money that was not spent on increasing the quality of life for the citizens of each country.

Lets consider the United States. The United States has typically spent, and still does spend, more on its military than the next ten countries combined, including the Soviet Union during the Cold War, and Russia today. The US accounts for nearly half of all military spending in the world. During the period of the Cold War, the United States was by far the richest country in the world. But at the end of the century, when the Cold War was over, American society is in terrible shape. America is the only industrially developed country in the world not to offer health care to its citizens. The typical American college student graduates from college with tens or hundreds of thousands of dollars of student loan debt. American schools at every level are underfunded and suffer from very large classes and broken down facilities. American infrastructure—bridges, roads, airports, and electrical grid—are all in terrible shape. In 2007 a bridge across the Mississippi River in Minnesota collapsed during rush hour killing 14 people and injuring 145. Since that time, almost nothing has been done to check or upgrade the bridges and roads. During the flooding that followed the collapse of the levies during Hurricane Katrina in 2005, very little

aid was provided to the injured and stranded people of New Orleans. These are all signs of the lack of social spending for decades in the United States. Where did all of that money go, all of the money from being the wealthiest country in the world? All of the tax money paid by the American people? It went to fund the Cold War: to buy nuclear weapons and missiles and airplanes and submarines. Remember, the United States kept one third of its nuclear bombers in the air at all times for over 30 years. Imagine how much jet fuel that required. The horrible shape that American infrastructure finds itself in is a direct result of the spending priorities of the last 50 years. And those priorities were always military spending before spending on infrastructure, on health care, on care for the elderly, and on schools. In America, we paid for the Cold War with our social welfare.

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