

Part II: Cold War Tension

World War II transformed U.S. foreign policy, including American relations with the Caribbean and Central America. The explosion of atomic bombs over Japan and the conclusion of the war in 1945 left the United States the most powerful country on earth. Soon after the defeat of Nazi Germany, however, the United States faced a new challenge from its former ally, the Soviet Union. Despite their enormous war losses, the Soviets had built up an army of twelve million soldiers to defeat Nazi Germany.

What did Winston Churchill mean by the “Iron Curtain”?

The alliance of World War II quickly dissolved once the fighting ended. By February 1946, Soviet Premier Stalin predicted that the conflict between communism and capitalism would lead to a new war. Meanwhile, his troops remained firmly in place throughout much of Eastern Europe. British Prime Minister Winston Churchill had warned his U.S. allies about the Soviet threat even while World War II was raging. In 1946, after losing the prime minister’s post, he became more convinced that Stalin was seeking to divide Europe in two. In March, Churchill presented his concerns to an American audience in Fulton, Missouri, that included a sympathetic President Harry Truman.

“From Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic, an iron curtain has descended across the Continent. Behind that line lie all the capitals of the ancient states of Central and Eastern Europe. Warsaw, Berlin, Prague, Vienna, Budapest, Belgrade, Bucharest, and Sofia, all these famous cities and the populations around them lie in what I must call the Soviet sphere.”

—Winston Churchill

Why was containing the Soviet Union a priority for the United States after World War II?

By the late 1940s, the tension known as the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union had cast a shadow over international relations. The Soviets remained in Eastern Europe and imposed their rule. U.S. leaders feared that the Soviets would attempt to extend communist rule over the entire continent. Containing the influence of the Soviet Union and the spread of communism became the top priority of the United States. In March 1947, President Truman announced his intent to “support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressure.”

Known as the Truman Doctrine, the policy statement was linked to a request to Congress for military aid to Greece and Turkey. Although few Americans were deeply interested in the Greek civil war or Soviet territorial claims in Turkey, Americans increasingly viewed communist aggression as a serious menace.

What two policies were the basis for the Truman Doctrine?

The Truman Doctrine rested on two expensive U.S. commitments. In April 1948, Congress approved the European Recovery Program after lengthy debate. Better known as the Marshall Plan, the program was an economic aid package that invested \$12.5 billion (about \$100 billion in 2006 dollars) into the reconstruction of sixteen European states from 1948 to 1952. Although they were invited to participate, the Soviets refused U.S. assistance and barred their Eastern European satellites from accepting aid.

The United States also joined with ten countries of Western Europe and Canada in 1949 to form a military organization, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). By 1955, NATO had expanded to include thirteen European members, including West Germany and

"Are You Tryin' to Start a War?"

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Turkey. With the signing of the NATO Treaty, the United States committed itself to the defense of Western Europe and pledged for the first time in history to maintain a substantial U.S. troop presence overseas.

Why were Americans worried about the global political climate of the early 1950s?

The United States in 1950 was in many respects at its zenith in global power. The U.S. share of the world's income was 52 percent. Americans held 49 percent of international financial reserves. The United States produced approximately half of the world's oil and steel. And yet, many Americans were deeply worried by the international political climate.

International events in large part shaped the consensus that emerged around U.S. Cold War policies. In June 1948, the Soviets imposed a blockade on the western part of Berlin to unify the German capital under communism. (The United States, Britain, and France took control of West Berlin after the division of the city following the war.) With overland traffic cut off by the surrounding Soviet forces, the United States and its allies airlifted eight thousand tons of supplies daily to western Berlin. The Berlin blockade lasted almost a year until the Soviets backed down.

More ominous developments followed. In September 1949, the Soviets exploded their first atomic bomb. The next month, communists led by Mao Zedong won control of mainland China and joined Moscow in pressing for the spread of communism worldwide. In June 1950, communist North Korean forces invaded South Korea, drawing the United States into a three-year conflict that ended in a stalemate.

By the mid-1950s, U.S. leaders had given up on the idea that the frontier of communism in Eastern Europe could be rolled back by force. President Dwight D. Eisenhower rejected appeals that the United States respond militarily when the Soviets sent tanks into Hungary in 1956 to crush the independent-minded government there. Rather, U.S. leaders reluctantly accepted the Soviet sphere of influence in Hungary and elsewhere behind the "Iron Curtain." At the same time, Eisenhower and his successors believed that the United States had no choice but to maintain its role as a military superpower.

How did Soviet nuclear weapons force the United States to rethink national security?

Moscow's development of nuclear weapons forced American defense planners to devise a new approach to national security. Without a nuclear monopoly, Truman and Eisenhower bolstered the U.S. presence in Western Europe to deter Soviet aggression. The military built up U.S. conventional, or non-nuclear, forces. By 1955, the number of American troops in the region had reached 431,000, and over half of the U.S. military budget was earmarked for defending Europe. Meanwhile, American policymakers hoped to maintain their head start in the arms race. In 1947, Truman ordered that four hundred nuclear weapons be ready by 1953. Under Eisenhower, the doctrine of "massive retaliation" committed the United States to use nuclear weapons to counter a Soviet attack on Western Europe.

The Cold War in the Western Hemisphere

U.S. leaders were also determined to prevent communism from gaining a foothold in the Western Hemisphere. They believed that the establishment of a single communist regime would set off a chain reaction, toppling governments friendly to the United States one after the other. According to this theory, communism could eventually reach the U.S. border with Mexico.

The Cold War struggle with the Soviets caused the United States to be more concerned about stability in the Caribbean and Central America than democratic reform. The first example of this policy occurred in 1947, when the president of Nicaragua, Anastasio Somoza, refused to honor election results in his country. Instead, Somoza reclaimed power with the help of the Nicaraguan National Guard. For a few months, President Truman denied Somoza's regime official recognition, but in the end the United States resumed close relations with Nicaragua. The Truman administration worried that instability in the region would open the door to communist revolution.

What was the purpose of the Rio Pact?

That same year, the United States unified the Western Hemisphere in a mutual defense treaty known as the Rio Pact. The agreement, signed in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, called on the countries of Latin America to come to the aid of a neighbor under attack. The Rio Pact was one of Washington's first steps designed to enlist Latin America on the U.S. side in the Cold War. In 1948, Washington took the lead in forming the Organization of American States (OAS) to strengthen alliances within the Western Hemisphere further. The United States also signed military treaties with ten different countries in the region. Under these agreements, the United States supplied equipment and training to armies in Latin America, and the governments pledged to reduce trade with the Soviet bloc.

Why did the United States sponsor a military coup in Guatemala?

The United States saw another threat to its security in Guatemala. Since 1950, Guatemalan President Jacobo Arbenz had been pursuing an economic reform program. His government had confiscated the unplanted fields of large landowners and had divided the land among 100,000 peasant families. The United Fruit Company lost land under the reform and claimed Arbenz was a communist sympathizer. The United States grew particularly concerned when Guatemala received a shipment of weapons from communist Czechoslovakia in 1954. Many U.S. policymakers feared that the Soviets were courting Guatemala to gain an ally in the region.

In response, the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) began a secret operation to overthrow the Arbenz government. The CIA gave a few hundred Guatemalan exiles military training at a base in neighboring Honduras. It also paid pilots to conduct bombing raids on the Guatemalan capital to undermine the government's resolve. Meanwhile, CIA radio broadcasts convinced Arbenz that a huge rebel force was preparing to invade. In less than two months, the CIA campaign forced Arbenz to flee the country. Carlos Castillo, an army colonel friendly to the United States, replaced him in 1954.

Castillo returned the land of the United Fruit Company and signed a defense pact with the United States. From Washington's point of view, the overthrow of Arbenz had succeeded in removing a potentially troublesome regime. For Guatemala, however, the events of 1954 only deepened the country's divisions. Castillo himself was assassinated in 1957. In the years that followed, large landowners increasingly turned to the military to crush calls for land reform. By the 1960s, paramilitary squads were killing thousands of peasants, mostly Indians, in a desperate attempt to maintain the status quo. Within Latin America, U.S. policy received much of the blame for Guatemala's plight.

Why was Cuba a concern for the United States in the 1950s?

U.S. worries in the Caribbean and Central America, however, did not end with Arbenz. On the contrary, Cuba was an even bigger concern in the 1950s. Politically, Cuba had been fairly stable since Fulgencio Batista seized power from a reform-minded government in 1934. Washington supported Batista as a strongman who would maintain order on the island and not upset U.S. interests. Even after Batista's defeat in elections in 1944, Cuba remained close to the United States. At the same time, though, official corruption was mounting. Hope for reform suffered a setback when Batista staged a coup to take power in 1952. Few Cubans expected the Batista regime to tolerate democratic change in their country. As a result, resentment against the government grew during the 1950s.

Few Americans were aware of Cuba's political troubles. In the United States, Cuba was known best as a glamorous resort. A boom in tourism to the island began in the 1920s and reshaped Cuba's image. Cuba was associated with casinos, nightclubs, and tropical beaches.

American money helped provide Havana, Cuba's capital, with more Cadillacs per capita than any city in the world during the 1950s. But the wealth also brought problems to Cuba. By the 1950s, American organized crime was firmly established on the island, along with drugs and prostitution.

Economically, Cuba could claim one of the highest per capita incomes in Latin America. In reality, however, many Cubans could not find full-time employment, especially in the countryside. Meanwhile, many middle-class Cubans depended on expensive imports from the United States to maintain their lifestyle, which was far below the standard of their American neighbors. With inflation rising, prospects for the future were not reassuring. Cuba in the 1950s relied more than ever on the export of sugar. Price increases in the 1940s had brought prosperity to the island, but the ups and downs of the sugar market in the 1950s badly shook the economy.

The New Good Neighbor Policy



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The Castro Era

Opposition to Batista developed gradually in the 1950s. Most Cuban political parties gave up on the democratic process when Batista rigged elections in 1954. The next year, the police and army broke up student demonstrations. Seeing few alternatives, a handful of opponents to the regime turned to armed struggle. A young lawyer named Fidel Castro was one of the most noteworthy. The son of an impoverished Spanish immigrant who had become a wealthy landowner, Castro attended Cuba's top schools. Tall and athletic, he was even offered \$5,000 by the New York Giants to play professional baseball in the United States. Castro's true interest, however, was politics.

Castro first captured public attention with an almost suicidal attack on an army base in 1953. He hoped that a dramatic blow against the Batista regime would spark an insurrection throughout Cuba. The assault, however, failed to set off a larger uprising. Instead, most of Castro's nearly two hundred followers were killed, and Castro himself was jailed for two years. Sailing a small yacht from Mexico to

Cuba in 1956, Castro and eighty fellow revolutionaries launched another attack against Batista. Most were killed by Batista's forces before reaching shore. Without arms or supplies, the eighteen survivors of the landing straggled into Cuba's isolated eastern mountains. Far from the center of power, Castro began his guerrilla war by attacking outposts of the unpopular Rural Guard. Thousands of landless peasants joined the struggle against Batista in 1957 and 1958, especially after the government forced many villagers into military camps.

As Castro's movement gathered strength in the countryside, other opponents of Batista disrupted life in the cities. The rebels bombed government offices, cut power lines, and derailed trains. Batista responded with still greater violence and repression against those who challenged his rule. By 1958, even factions in the military and police were joining the opposition. In February of that year, Catholic bishops in Cuba called for a new government.

Why did U.S. public opinion turn against Batista?

Batista's human rights violations also turned U.S. opinion against him and led the United States to halt arms deliveries to Cuba. Facing opposition from almost every direction, Batista had little hope for survival. On January 1, 1959, he resigned and fled the country. Castro's forces quickly assumed the leadership of the revolutionary movement, and on January 8, Castro entered Havana.

In April 1959, The United States welcomed Castro, who spoke to large enthusiastic crowds at U.S. universities. Although Castro stated that he was against communism and dictatorship, U.S. government officials remained unsure of Castro's stance towards the Soviet Union. Nonetheless he was briefed by the CIA about U.S. perceptions of the Soviet threat and met with Vice-President Nixon.

“The one fact that we can be sure of is that he has those indefinable

qualities which make him a leader of men. Whatever we may think of him, he is going to be a great factor in the development of Cuba and very possibly in Latin American affairs generally. He has the power to lead.”

—Vice-President Richard M. Nixon

By the middle of 1959, the United States no longer felt unsure of Castro. Mindful of the long history of U.S. involvement in Cuba and Latin America, Castro increasingly viewed the United States as a threat. His government began taking American-owned property in Cuba without compensating the owners. He suppressed Cubans who were critical of him by exiling them or putting them in jail, and he became increasingly critical of the United States. Perhaps more important to the United States during the Cold War, Castro's speeches seemed to align him with the Soviet Union. Cuba increasingly came to be regarded as a base for communist subversion in the United States' backyard.

What role did Cuba and the Cold War play in the presidential election of 1960?

Candidates Senator John F. Kennedy and Vice-President Richard M. Nixon both tried to show that they would be better able to stand up to the Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev. In fact, in their campaigns both candidates talked mostly about the Cold War and the competition with the Soviet Union. For example, they discussed a traditional subject of domestic politics—increasing economic growth—in the terms of the Cold War. Kennedy argued that increasing economic growth would allow the United States to win the arms race and to demonstrate capitalism's superiority over communism. Kennedy also harshly criticized Nixon and the Eisenhower administration for failing to support Cuban “freedom fighters” who wanted to return to Cuba and overthrow Castro.

However, Kennedy learned after his inauguration as president in January 1961 that the Eisenhower administration had planned an operation to overthrow Castro. Encour-

aged by their success in Guatemala in 1954, the CIA had trained fourteen hundred Cuban exiles to invade Cuba, march toward Havana, and start a rebellion against Castro. Kennedy worried that an invasion might cause Khrushchev to react militarily in Berlin or elsewhere. Nonetheless, Kennedy approved the invasion, with the provision that U.S. military forces not be used. The landing at the Bay of Pigs on April 17, 1961, was a complete failure and an embarrassment to the Kennedy administration. Castro's forces overwhelmed the invaders within days and forced them to surrender.

What were the consequences of the Bay of Pigs?

Kennedy took responsibility for the failure of the Bay of Pigs operation. Nonetheless, his unwillingness to commit U.S. military forces to the operation brought him criticism from staunch anti-communists and anti-Castro forces. Kennedy also realized that he had not listened to enough advisers nor had he taken enough time to consider the issues carefully.

The humiliating failure of the Bay of Pigs

nurtured a deep dislike for Castro in Kennedy, his brother, Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy, and his advisers. They authorized another set of CIA-sponsored operations. The operations, code-named Mongoose, included sabotage and assassination—all designed to get rid of Castro.

“The purpose of the program...is to bring about the replacement of the Castro regime with one more devoted to the true interests of the Cuban people and more acceptable to the United States in such a manner as to avoid any appearance of U.S. intervention.”

—CIA Memorandum

Why did Castro and Khrushchev believe the United States would invade Cuba?

The failure of the U.S.-sponsored landing at the Bay of Pigs in 1961 and Operation Mongoose convinced Fidel Castro that the United States would soon make another, more forceful attempt to attack Cuba. Next time, he

Washington vs. Havana

Much of the conflict between the United States and Cuba in the early 1960s took place far from public view, especially after the failure of the Bay of Pigs invasion. In the United States, President Kennedy approved a secret campaign in the fall of 1961 to overthrow the Castro regime. Known as Operation Mongoose, the CIA directed the effort. Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy summarized the intent of the plan: “My idea is to stir things up on the island with espionage, sabotage, general disorder, run and operated by Cubans themselves.” Through Operation Mongoose, the CIA and Cuban exiles worked to undermine the Cuban economy and focus popular anger against the Castro government. Some agents also tried to enlist organized crime leaders in a plot to assassinate Castro. One failed scheme centered on poison pills, which were smuggled into the kitchen of a hotel cafeteria where Castro often ate. Other plans featured deadly bacteria imbedded in Castro's skin-diving suit and cigars, a seashell packed with explosives, and a pen firing poisoned darts.

Castro's strategy against Washington took a different approach. Rather than striking directly against the United States, Castro jabbed at U.S. allies in Latin America. Until 1961, Cuba's most important weapon was propaganda. Castro stressed the need for revolution throughout the Western Hemisphere and claimed that the United States was blocking progress in the region. After the Bay of Pigs invasion, Cuba began giving revolutionary movements more active support. Cuba established a training school for guerrillas and Cuban military advisers. It sent arms to aid rebels in Guatemala in hopes of disrupting free elections. According to Castro, Cuba was only defending its revolution against the United States.

assumed, U.S. troops would lead the invasion. As a result, Castro believed that he needed to strengthen Cuba's defenses. To protect Cuba from the might of the United States, Castro turned to the other superpower, the Soviet Union. Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev had already threatened to respond if the United States intervened in Cuba. After the Bay of Pigs, he backed up his commitment to Cuba by supplying the Cuban military with sophisticated weapons. Soviet officers and technicians also arrived to teach Cuban soldiers the tactics of modern warfare.

How did the United States respond to Cuba's alliance with the Soviet Union?

The United States denounced Cuba's alliance with the Soviet Union as an affront to the principles of both the Rio Pact and the Monroe Doctrine. President Kennedy developed a two-pronged approach to pressure the Castro regime. On the one hand, he sought to promote economic growth and democratic reform in Latin America to provide an attractive alternative to Castro's revolution. On the other

hand, the United States led the campaign to expel Cuba from the Organization of American States (OAS) and organized a corps of counter-insurgency specialists to help Latin American leaders fight communist guerrilla movements.

By early 1962, the triangle of U.S.-Soviet-Cuban relations seemed to be pointing toward confrontation. Castro announced that he was a Marxist-Leninist and that Cuba was a communist state. To defend his revolutionary government against the United States, he relied on his Soviet allies to supply Cuba with arms. For their part, the Soviets readily built up Castro's arsenal. They hoped to use Cuba as a staging ground for extending their influence in the Western Hemisphere. Securing a strong communist Cuba located only ninety miles off the coast of Florida represented an important move for Moscow on the global chessboard. American policymakers saw the Soviet presence in Cuba as a threat to U.S. national security. Political pressure at home was mounting in 1962 for Kennedy to take action against Castro's revolution and the threat of communism in Latin America.