After heavy fighting the battle lines stabilized in the spring of 1951. When an armistice was finally arranged in July 1953, the dividing line between the two Koreas remained at the thirty-eighth parallel. Before it ended, the Korean War cost over 3 million people their lives, including over 50,000 US servicemen and women and a much higher number of Chinese and Korean lives. The war also set in motion a number of changes that led to the militarization and intensification of the Cold War.

The Korean War (1950–53) transformed the nature of the Cold War and world politics. Its initial impact was to solidify the division of the world into political, military, and economic spheres. Europe remained tense and divided, and the arms race and competition in the Third World emerged as active and fluid aspects of the Cold War. Although the Soviets matched the United States in the development of nuclear weapons and made impressive advances in missile technology, the United States maintained its lead in the arms race. The struggle of the Third World for political independence, economic justice, racial equality, and cultural respect became an increasingly important source of international tension and conflict during the 1950s. Fighting against Western control, Third World countries and movements challenged Western hegemony and provided an opportunity for the expansion of Soviet influence. Soviet–American competition in the Third World intersected with the arms race in 1962 to bring about the Cuban Missile Crisis, the single most dangerous crisis of the Cold War era.

The increased focus on the arms race and the Third World did not mean that Western Europe and Japan were no longer important. One of the greatest challenges the United States faced during the 1950s was how to foster economic growth in Germany and Japan, help them restructure their politics along more or less democratic lines, and integrate them into the Western alliance. The three tasks were interrelated: economic growth and prosperity made democratization and international integration possible. Achievement of economic growth, political stability, and reintegration of these former “rogue” states into the Western alliance was a huge victory for the United States, the West and the capitalist system.
SHIFTING POWER BALANCES

Despite impressive economic and political gains by the Soviet Union, the United States remained by far the stronger of the two superpowers. The world economy almost doubled in size between 1953 and 1963, and although US growth rates lagged behind those of the other major industrial nations (with the exception of Britain), the high growth rates achieved by Western Europe and Japan widened the gap between the West and the rest of the world. Economic growth, in turn, helped alleviate class tensions and undercut the appeal of leftist parties. Economic growth and political stability in Western Europe, West Germany, and Japan, and their integration into the US-led Western alliance enhanced the relative position of the West. In contrast, the Soviets experienced difficulty in maintaining control of Eastern Europe, and the Sino-Soviet alliance, which had joined the two communist giants, began to fall apart at the end of the 1950s.

The Cold War in Europe had largely stabilized by 1950 following the end of the Berlin Blockade, the establishment of separate German states, and the victory of the anti-communist forces in the Greek civil war. Moreover, Marshall Plan aid and covert assistance to anti-communist groups helped ensure the dominance of pro-US parties in Western Europe. Soviet power kept the lid on the much more unsettled conditions in Eastern Europe. Although the two camps maintained massive forces along the East-West divide in central Europe for the rest of the Cold War, only the anomalous situation of West Berlin as a Western outpost deep within East Germany remained a major source of territorial tension between the superpowers in Europe.

The North Korean attack on South Korea, however, raised fears of a similar move by the Soviets in Europe, especially the use of East German forces to attack West Germany. The Truman administration sent four divisions of troops to Western Europe in the fall of 1950, and set in motion the process that turned the North Atlantic Treaty into the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. In place of a political alliance emerged a military organization with an integrated central command structure under US control. This structure not only made coordinated planning against the Soviet threat possible; it also effectively demilitarized West European armed forces, making it very difficult for them to be used against each other.

This was especially important in the case of Germany. US military planners believed that rearming West Germany was necessary to ensure the Federal Republic's Western orientation and to gain manpower for the forward defense of Western Europe. In addition, West German

Debate over creation of the EDC stretched out until the summer of 1954 when the French parliament failed to approve the plan. Despite the Anglo-French action, the Western allies adopted an alternative plan that permitted the Federal Republic to rearm and join NATO in exchange for a pledge not to develop atomic, biological, or chemical weapons. In addition, the United States and Great Britain pledged to maintain forces in West Germany. The Federal Republic joined NATO in May 1955. Shortly thereafter, the United States, Britain, and France formally ended their occupation of West Germany while maintaining a strong military presence there.

West German rearmament and membership in NATO represented a major defeat for Soviet policies toward Germany. The Soviets had tried to head off Western plans to arm West Germany with a series of proposals beginning in the spring of 1952 calling for unification and neutralization of Germany. Convinced that the proposals were merely an attempt to sow confusion in the West, the United States and its allies ignored them and subsequent Soviet calls for German reunification and neutralization.

The combination of US economic strength and technology with German manpower and military prowess was a strategic nightmare for the Soviet Union. To salvage what they could from a bad situation, the Soviets moved in mid-May to formalize their security ties with Eastern Europe by signing a Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance with Albania, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, the German Democratic Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Romania. In combination with West German membership in NATO, this alliance, which became known as the Warsaw Pact, seemed to seal the division of the continent by adding a military dimension to the existing political and economic divisions.

Mainly a reactive and defensive move to maintain the status quo in Eastern Europe, the formation of the Warsaw Pact also precluded the "Austrian option" for the rest of Eastern Europe. A day after signing the Warsaw Pact Treaty, the Soviets ratified the Austrian State Treaty, which
ended the allied occupation of Austria in exchange for Austrian neutrality. In addition to removing their occupation forces, the Soviets sold Soviet properties in Austria. Under the post-Stalin leadership of Nikita Khrushchev, the Soviets also sought to mend fences with Yugoslavia. Finally, in September 1955, the Soviets recognized the Federal Republic, and granted the German Democratic Republic control over its foreign affairs, formalizing the division of Germany and Europe. Meanwhile, the leaders of the United States, Great Britain, France, and the Soviet Union had met in July in Geneva. The first high-level meeting between US and Soviet leaders in ten years led to no agreements, but the very fact that such a meeting could take place helped lessen tensions.

Korean War military spending set in motion a prolonged period of economic prosperity in the West that lasted until the early 1970s. US military expenditures ran at around 10 percent of GNP in the 1950s, peaking at 12.7 percent in 1954. Massive military spending generated a high level of aggregate demand and transformed the US economy as military spending shifted the nation’s manufacturing base from the northeast and midwest to the southern and western states. Some scholars argue that military spending was not only beneficial but necessary because the key actors in the US political system could not agree on any other form of significant government involvement in the economy. Other scholars point out that military spending came at the expense of domestic reforms, and that in order to gain political support for increased military spending the US government exaggerated the Soviet threat and curtailed civil liberties at home. Military spending maintained demand and economic growth in the short run, but the distorted allocation of resources probably proved harmful in the long run by diverting investment and manpower from the civilian economy.

Military spending also revitalized the Western alliance. Following the end of the Marshall Plan in 1951, US aid to Western Europe continued under the Mutual Security Administration which provided around $25 billion over a four-year period (1951–55). The United States also pumped money into Western Europe with an offshore procurement program under which the US military contracted for some of its supplies in Europe. The Korean War “boom” had an especially strong impact on the West German economy, which had not revived under the Marshall Plan. West Germany was able to take advantage of increased demand due to the existence of spare industrial capacity and an ample supply of skilled and trained labor. Although German militarism did not revive, the West German economic miracle was, to a significant extent, based on the twin foundations of the World War II build-up of German industry and US military spending.

Economic integration also stimulated the West European economy. With the formation of the European Coal and Steel Community in 1951, France, West Germany, Italy, Belgium, The Netherlands, and Luxembourg explicitly surrendered national control over production and use of two raw materials vital to modern industry and warfare to a multinational authority. Western European integration continued with the Treaty of Rome in 1957, which joined the same six countries in a European Economic Community (EEC). (The British decided not to join the EEC, setting up a looser European Free Trade Association.) The EEC eliminated trade barriers among its members, thus creating an economic unit large and efficient enough to compete internationally. Creation of the EEC, with its common tariff on imports, also led to a massive increase in US investment in Western Europe, climbing from $1.7 billion in 1950 to $21.5 billion by the end of the 1960s. While Europeans worried about the American invasion, investment flows coupled with the costs of US troops abroad, tourism, and increased imports led to serious US balance of payments difficulties by the end of the 1950s. Growth rates in that decade averaged around 3 percent a year in Great Britain; 5.9 percent in Italy; and 7.6 percent in West Germany, with the West German share of world exports tripling between 1950 and 1970. Economic growth and increasing international competitiveness allowed the major European states to restore the international convertibility of their currencies at the end of 1958.

Economic growth also underwrote the creation of welfare states throughout Western Europe and the moderation of class conflict, and together with the Cold War led to a decade of center-right hegemony in Western European politics. In 1959, the West German Social Democratic Party (SPD) renounced Marxism, accepted the mixed economy, and ended its opposition to rearmament. Economic integration contributed to better relations among the nations of Western Europe, and by tying the West European economies together made autarkic development and aggression much more difficult.

The Korean War also boosted economic growth and political stability in Japan. Known in Japan as “divine aid,” US military expenditure pulled Japan out of the economic stagnation resulting from US-imposed austerity programs. As in Europe, the US special procurement program allowed US armed forces to buy needed supplies locally rather than in the United States. This system pumped around $4 billion into the Japanese economy as the US military bought trucks, uniforms, medical supplies, and a host of other items in Japan for use in Korea, rather than shipping them across the Pacific. Between 1951 and 1956, US military procurement expenditures in Japan paid for over one-quarter of Japan’s
imports. This massive infusion of US public funds stimulated the struggling Japanese economy. Japanese industrial production increased almost 50 percent between March 1950 and March 1951, and by 1953 manufacturing output stood at more than twice the 1949 level. Growth rates averaged close to 10 percent annually during the 1950s as the government worked closely with business and banking groups to modernize and expand Japanese industry.

The Korean War also changed the political relationship between Japan and the United States. In September 1951, a peace treaty, largely drafted by the United States, formally ended hostilities and restored Japanese sovereignty over the home islands. In separate agreements the United States guaranteed Japanese security, secured the right to military bases in Japan, and retained control over the Ryukyu Islands. By the 1960s, the US base complex on Okinawa, the largest of the Ryukyu Islands, had become key to US offensive and intervention capabilities in the region. In accordance with Article 9 of its 1947 constitution, Japan remained formally demilitarized. The Japanese Self-defense Force, set up during the US occupation, grew to 130,000 troops by 1954, and added air and naval arms. To reassure Japan’s neighbors, the United States in 1951 signed a mutual security treaty with the Philippines and entered into a loose alliance with Australia and New Zealand (the ANZUS Pact) which also symbolized US displacement of British influence in the Pacific. The Soviets protested these developments but were powerless to stop them.

Following the Korean War, the United States provided South Korea and Taiwan with massive economic assistance. US economic assistance to South Korea between 1953 and 1962 financed around 70 percent of South Korea’s imports and amounted to around 80 percent of total fixed capital formation. In Taiwan, US aid financed almost 40 percent of gross domestic capital formation. The United States also supported land reform in both countries in order to win over the peasantry and to free resources for industrial development. (Unusual circumstances, the replacement of the native Taiwanese elite by Nationalist mainlanders and the disruption caused by the Korean War, facilitated land reform in the two countries.) Economic reform and US aid stimulated rapid economic growth in Taiwan beginning in the late 1950s. South Korean growth rates in the 1950s were lower, but began to rise sharply after a policy shift toward export-led growth following a military coup in 1961.

The Korean War also changed the political relationship between the United States and South Korea and Taiwan. One of Truman’s initial actions on June 25, 1950, was to order the US Seventh Fleet into the Taiwan Strait to defend Taiwan against PRC attack. In 1955, the United States signed a security treaty with Taiwan, and supported it during the Taiwan Strait Crises in 1954-55 and 1958 when the PRC shelled offshore islands held by Taiwan. The United States also forged a close security relationship with South Korea, and US combat troops remained in South Korea following the war.

In comparison with Western Europe, the situation in Eastern Europe was much less stable. Although vital to Soviet security, the countries of Eastern Europe were also a security problem for the Soviet Union. East European reaction to attempts to liberalize communism demonstrated the depth of anti-Soviet sentiment and the fragility of the Soviet position in the region. As part of the “New Course” following Stalin’s death, the Soviets ended the most repressive features of Stalinism in Eastern Europe and backed reformist leaders. Attempts at political liberalization and inconsistent economic policies resulted in strikes and riots in East Germany in June 1953, forcing the Soviets to send in troops to restore control. In a pattern that would be repeated in the rest of Eastern Europe, East Germany was transformed from an aid donor to the Soviet economy to an aid recipient.

At the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in February 1956, Nikita Khrushchev, who had emerged as Stalin’s successor, denounced Stalin and Stalinism in a “secret” speech whose content was leaked to the West. Earlier, in open remarks, Khrushchev had rejected the thesis of inevitable war between communism and capitalism and proclaimed the possibility of peaceful coexistence of states with different social systems. Khrushchev also acknowledged that socialism could come about through parliamentary democracy as well as through revolution.

Rather than gain support for communism, Khrushchev’s remarks and efforts to promote reforms in Eastern Europe provoked increased popular discontent in the region. In the summer of 1956, liberalization efforts in Poland threatened to move out of control when the army opened fire on striking workers. With backing from the Chinese, the Polish Communists brought back Wladyslaw Gomulka, a nationalist Communist who had been imprisoned during the purge trials of the early 1950s. Gomulka headed off Soviet intervention by assuring the Soviets that Poland would continue to be a firm ally of the Soviet Union and remain in the Warsaw Pact. Convinced that the Polish people, including the Polish Army, would resist intervention, the Soviets decided to allow Poland to pursue its own path to socialism. Under Gomulka, Poland abandoned collectivization of agriculture, improved relations with the Catholic Church, raised wages, and regained control of its armed forces.
A similar scenario in Hungary led to different results. Following two years of disputes within the Hungarian Communist Party over liberalization, the party, spurred by events in Poland, brought back former party leader Imre Nagy, a nationalist Communist who had been purged during the Stalin years. Nagy was unable to control the momentum of events, and as popular discontent mounted, he announced that Hungary was leaving the Warsaw Pact, proclaimed Hungarian neutrality, and appealed to the United Nations for support. The Soviets made a deal with János Kádár, a prominent Communist who had served a prison term in Stalin's day for nationalist deviation. In return for Kádár's pledge to keep Hungary in the Warsaw Pact, the Soviets agreed to allow Hungary a large degree of latitude in its internal affairs—once Nagy was removed. On November 4, in the midst of the Suez Crisis in the Middle East that was dominating international attention (see below), Soviet and other Warsaw Pact troops re-entered Budapest and brutally crushed the Hungarian revolution.

Although the Chinese and the Yugoslavs supported the intervention, the result was devastating to communist parties in the West, leading to widespread resignations and disillusionment. The intervention also undercut Khrushchev's efforts at liberalization by making it clear that they did not include self-determination for Eastern Europe. On the other hand, the Soviet intervention also demonstrated the hollowness of the “liberation” rhetoric of the Eisenhower administration. With few means short of war to affect the outcome, and its attention focused on the Middle East, the United States limited its response to diplomatic protest.

Soviet reaction to events in Poland and Hungary set limits to political change in Eastern Europe. After restoring Communist Party control, the Soviets relaxed their political and economic pressures on Eastern Europe. In an effort to buy loyalty, the Soviet Union reversed the flow of resources and began subsidizing Eastern European development through increasingly favorable trade arrangements. These policies, coupled with a relaxation of Soviet political controls, resulted in the revival of national communism in Eastern Europe. On the other hand, increased aid to Eastern Europe sharply reduced the amount of aid available for the PRC.

Following the Korean armistice, the Soviets sought to repair relations with the PRC that had been strained during the Korean War. The Soviets backed the PRC in September 1954 when Chinese artillery began shelling the offshore islands of Jinmen and Matsu. The following month, Khrushchev, who was in China to celebrate the fifth anniversary of the revolution, announced the return of the military bases in Lushun (Port Arthur) and the Soviet-run Manchurian railway system to Chinese control and promised generous economic assistance. Then, in April 1955, Khrushchev agreed to help the PRC develop atomic weapons.

Although the Chinese no doubt appreciated these gestures, Sino-Soviet relations began to deteriorate following Khrushchev’s secret speech, whose passages attacking Stalin’s cult of personality could also be read as criticism of Mao’s rule in China. In 1958, the Chinese embarked on the Great Leap Forward, attempting to reduce their reliance on foreign countries by militarizing the economy and accelerating industrialization. The disastrous results, including widespread famine claiming perhaps as many as 30 million lives, undermined Soviet confidence in Mao’s leadership. Soviet unease increased when the PRC escalated the dispute over the offshore islands and Taiwan in August 1958, in part to mobilize internal support for the Great Leap Forward. Moreover, Mao, who believed that the Soviet Union was ahead in the arms race, argued that the Soviets should act boldly and not be afraid of a nuclear confrontation with the United States, which he derided as a “paper tiger.” Khrushchev, who knew the true state of the strategic balance (see below), limited his support to promises that he would aid the PRC only if the United States attacked China.

Khrushchev also disliked Chinese criticism of his efforts to improve relations with the United States. Chinese pressure on India and the PRC’s brutal subjugation of Tibet in 1959 further increased Soviet concerns. In August 1959, Khrushchev halted nuclear cooperation, informing the PRC that the Soviet Union had decided not to provide a prototype atomic bomb as earlier promised. After the Chinese reiterated their belief in the inevitability of war as long as imperialism existed, Khrushchev, in July 1960, decided to withdraw all Soviet military and technical advisers from the PRC.

The Sino-Soviet split made it clear that international communism was neither a monolithic bloc nor a coherent alliance, let alone a viable alternative world order. The United States was slow to recognize the split and to realize its implications, however. At first, US officials feared the split was a sham or, at best, only temporary. After realizing that a key element in the split was Chinese opposition to improved relations between the Soviet Union and the United States, US officials began viewing the PRC as more dangerous than the Soviet Union. Chinese support for national liberation movements and vitriolic anti-American rhetoric further fed American fears.
While the United States maintained its atomic monopoly (1945–49), US leaders had felt free to rebuild Germany and Japan without fear of war with the Soviet Union. Following the Soviet Union’s acquisition of atomic weapons in 1949, the United States sought to maintain nuclear superiority through increased production of atomic weapons and development of the hydrogen bomb. The Korean War led to a massive increase in US military spending. Between 1950 and 1953, the United States expanded its armed forces by over a million troops and dramatically increased production of aircraft, ships, combat vehicles, and other conventional weapons. Only a small part of the increase was directly related to the Korean War. Most was devoted to countering Soviet conventional superiority in central Europe. US leaders believed that a rough balance of power in Europe coupled with nuclear superiority would extend deterrence and preserve US freedom of action all over the world.

Concerned that conventional forces were too costly, and determined to avoid future Korean-type conflicts, the administration of Dwight D. Eisenhower (1953–61) determined to pursue containment “on the cheap” by cutting back conventional forces while threatening to respond to aggression by launching a massive nuclear strike on the Soviet Union. To take care of lesser contingencies, the Eisenhower administration relied heavily on the Central Intelligence Agency, whose covert-action arm had mushroomed in size during the Korean War.

The US nuclear arsenal grew during the Eisenhower administration from around 1,000 warheads in 1953 to approximately 18,000 by 1960. This arsenal included thermonuclear weapons. The United States successfully tested a powerful thermonuclear device in October 1952, and in February 1954 successfully tested an even more powerful, deliverable hydrogen bomb. Work on delivery systems resulted in the development of medium- and intermediate-range ballistic missiles (MRBMs and IRBMs), medium-range bombers, and finally the B-52 transcontinental bomber which entered service in the late 1950s. In September 1955, President Eisenhower approved plans calling for the development of intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) as the “highest national priority.” The United States also began to develop and deploy large numbers of tactical nuclear weapons to compensate for the relative weakness of its ground forces.

Overseas bases were crucial to US strategy. Until the deployment of B-52 intercontinental bombers in the late 1950s and long-range land- and submarine-launched missiles beginning in 1960, the US nuclear deterrent was heavily dependent on bombers that could not reach the Soviet Union from bases in the United States. This technological reality made the United States dependent on bases on the territory of its allies, and helps explain US efforts during the 1950s to ring the Soviet Union and the People’s Republic of China with bilateral and regional security pacts. These arrangements enabled the United States to project its power deep inside Soviet and Chinese territory. By the mid-1960s, the United States had 375 military bases in foreign countries and 3,000 other facilities encircling the Soviet Union and its allies.

The Korean War also led to changes in Soviet policies, though the greatest changes came after the death of Stalin in March 1953. As in the United States, the initial impact was increased military spending, and the Red Army swelled from around 2.8 million troops in 1950 to almost 5.8 million by 1955. Stalin’s successors, in contrast, wanted to reduce military spending and adopt less confrontational policies toward the West in order to shift economic priorities from heavy industry and military production to light industry, agriculture, and consumer goods. Georgi Malenkov, who became chairman of the Council of Ministers (or prime minister) following Stalin’s death, had been associated with the nuclear program and believed that the advent of nuclear weapons made peaceful coexistence both essential and possible. Malenkov was replaced in February 1955, but the new leader, Nikita Khrushchev, adopted a similar program of economic reform and controlled political liberalization. In foreign policy, Khrushchev stressed a defensive orientation toward the West, reconciliation with Yugoslavia, and a more active policy toward the Third World.

Stalin’s successors cut military spending sharply and in 1955 began a large-scale demobilization of active-duty military personnel. By 1960, Soviet forces were down to around 3.6 million troops. On the other hand, the Soviets continued the development of their strategic nuclear forces, testing a relatively small thermonuclear bomb in August 1953 and a somewhat larger hydrogen bomb in November 1955. Some Soviet writers claim that the Soviet Union was first to develop a hydrogen bomb because what the United States tested in 1952 was a huge thermonuclear device rather than a deliverable bomb. David Holloway, however, points out that the bomb the Soviets tested in 1953 was not based on the same principles that make “true” hydrogen bombs capable of almost unlimited destructive power.6

The Soviets also developed and deployed long-range bombers with the theoretical capacity to reach the United States on one-way missions. Despite US fears of a “bomber gap,” the Soviets did not produce long-range bombers in large numbers, turning instead to ballistic missiles. In 1958, the Soviets had only 85 intercontinental bombers compared to
1,769 for the United States; a ratio of almost 22:1 in favor of the United States. 

In August 1957, the Soviets successfully tested an intercontinental ballistic missile, a feat underlined in October 1957 when they successfully launched Sputnik, an earth-orbiting satellite. The Soviets also developed intermediate-range missiles that could reach targets in Western Europe.

Soviet ICBMs transformed the strategic environment by making it possible for the Soviet Union to threaten the United States directly. There was no known means of defending against a ballistic missile attack, and with warning times reduced from hours to minutes, many analysts feared that US nuclear forces, almost entirely bombers, could be decimated in a Soviet surprise attack. Without a guaranteed retaliatory force, the United States would have no credible deterrent. In addition, the new Soviet ability to strike the United States directly also raised concerns that the United States might be reluctant to resist a Soviet attack on Western Europe if in doing so it risked Soviet retaliation against US territory. How to convince its NATO allies that it would stand by them if they were attacked by the Soviet Union became a chronic preoccupation of US strategists.

In the wake of Sputnik, many people in the United States feared that the Soviet Union was poised to take the lead in the arms race. Due to a super-secret surveillance program, President Eisenhower knew that the situation was not as serious as it seemed. Beginning in 1956, U-2 spy planes, which flew too high for Soviet anti-aircraft missiles or fighters to stop, mapped and photographed the Soviet Union. From these flights and other information, the United States learned that the Soviet ICBM program was experiencing serious problems. Eisenhower also knew that the United States had plenty of medium-range missiles and bombers in Europe that could strike the Soviet Union, and that US ICBMs would be operational in a few years. (The first US ICBM went on alert in October 1959.) Therefore, he saw no need for massive increases in military spending. In addition, Eisenhower was concerned that overspending on the military would damage the US economy and increase the influence of what he called the “military-industrial complex,” the “conjunction of an immense military establishment and a large arms industry.”

Nevertheless, pressure mounted for the United States to increase military spending sharply. Although the U-2 flights failed to detect any operational ICBM launch sites, their coverage of the Soviet Union was not complete. In late 1957, the CIA claimed that the Soviets had the ability to build and deploy 500 ICBMs by 1962. In addition, a top-level commission issued a report that warned that US strategic forces were vulnerable to a surprise attack. The report called for a 50 percent increase in US military spending, including over $20 billion for fallout shelters. The “missile gap” became an issue in the 1960 presidential campaign, with the Democrats charging that the Eisenhower administration had allowed the Soviets to gain a dangerous lead in the arms race.

After taking office, President John F. Kennedy (1961-63) convinced Congress to fund a massive increase in US military spending, including a doubling of the Polaris submarine missile program and the Minuteman solid-fueled missile program. Kennedy also put US bomber forces on a crisis footing. Military spending increased by 15 percent between 1960 and 1962, and spending on the space program soared from $400 million in 1960 to $5 billion in 1965. The result of the ongoing and accelerated development and deployment of US strategic weapons systems, coupled with Soviet technical and economic problems, was a massive US lead in strategic weapons.

Shortly before Kennedy took office, a new satellite-based surveillance program began providing greater coverage of the Soviet Union and removed any lingering doubts about US strategic superiority. In February 1961, US Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara declared that there was no missile gap. In October, a Defense Department official announced that the United States was aware of the true strength of Soviet strategic forces and pointed out that the arsenal the United States would have left after a Soviet first strike greatly exceeded what the Soviets would possess before such an attack. Indeed, it appeared that the United States had developed sufficient forces for a successful first strike against the Soviet Union.

Kennedy’s build-up also called for significant increases in US conventional forces, including the deployment in Europe of several thousand tactical nuclear weapons. NATO forces also grew in size, with West Germany completing its build-up in 1963. US defense officials believed that the strengthening of their conventional forces, including new counter-insurgency forces to deal with instability in the Third World, would enable them to respond flexibly to different levels of threat.

To the Soviets, however, the US build-up looked like the United States was planning to fight a war, including a nuclear war, rather than avoid one. The rocket that had launched Sputnik was unsuitable for military use, and the Soviets had limited deployment to only a few missiles. Improved versions were not scheduled to be ready for deployment until 1962. Wanting to cut back military spending in favor of focusing on economic problems, Krushchev tried to bridge the gap until the newer missiles were ready by a policy of bluff, claiming that the Soviet Union...
was producing missiles “like sausages.” Believing this would deter the United States, Khrushchev announced plans in early 1960 to cut another 1.2 million troops, which would reduce force levels to 2.4 million, the lowest since 1938. Khrushchev argued that ICBMs and nuclear weapons meant that Soviet security was no longer dependent on mass armies. Rather than deter the West, however, Khrushchev’s claims stimulated a Western build-up of forces to meet the increased threat.

The US build-up, coupled with the deepening Sino-Soviet split, not only forced Khrushchev to end his cuts but also ended his efforts to revamp Soviet military doctrine. Khrushchev had hoped to rely on ICBMs and cut costly conventional forces in order to devote scarce resources to social and economic programs. Although they continued to have doubts about the reliability of their allies, the Soviets decided to build up the conventional war-fighting capacity of the Warsaw Pact forces. Otherwise, the United States could launch a conventional attack in central Europe under cover of its ICBMs, leaving the Soviet Union with a choice between losing Eastern Europe or a nuclear war with the United States with attacks on the Soviet Union. Khrushchev also ended the moratorium on nuclear testing he had announced earlier, and in October 1961 the Soviet Union detonated a 50-megaton hydrogen bomb.

THE THIRD WORLD

Developments in the Third World were another major source of Cold War tensions. Most of the crises in the Third World in this period grew out of colonialism or other issues that predated the Cold War. Nevertheless, the intrusion of the Cold War exacerbated regional and local struggles as groups in the Third World sought external support and the superpowers looked for allies. In addition, many Third World nations, led by India, Indonesia, and Egypt, sought to define a political space between the two blocs for Third World states to pursue a neutral course in the Cold War. Together with Yugoslavia’s non-alignment and the Sino-Soviet split, these efforts, beginning with the Bandung Conference of African and Asian States in April 1955, added a new dimension to transnational ideological conflict.

Radicalized by years of colonial control and repression, many independence movements wanted to nationalize foreign-owned properties, overthrow repressive power structures whether based on traditional practices or on structures of oppression implanted by the colonial powers, and to challenge the West’s cultural hegemony through the regeneration of their peoples’ customs and culture. Thus decolonization had the potential to bring to power movements hostile to Western capitalism and receptive to statist formulas for rapidly modernizing underdeveloped economies. Such outcomes would not only disrupt the economies and undercut the power of the United States’s key allies but could also alter the balance of power and remove vast areas, and their raw materials, markets, and labor forces, from the Western-dominated world economy.

These characteristics of many Third World movements and regimes seemed to align them with the Soviet Union and against the United States. While Lenin had been prepared to support non-communist independence movements in the Third World as part of the global struggle against imperialism, Stalin had limited Soviet support to movements under communist control. Khrushchev, recognizing the opportunities inherent in the Third World’s “revolt against the West,” tried to gain the support of newly independent, non-communist Third World countries through economic and military assistance. In early 1961, under pressure from the Chinese to demonstrate his revolutionary credentials, Khrushchev announced Soviet support for wars of national liberation. Although many Third World states and movements were happy to accept Soviet assistance, the Soviets gained little lasting advantage from these efforts. Instead, their actions, coupled with continued instability in the Third World, stimulated increased US involvement in the Third World.

The United States had extensive political ties with the Third World, either directly as in Latin America, the Philippines, and South Korea or indirectly through its allies. And, unlike the Soviet Union, the United States had important economic interests throughout much of the Third World. During the 1950s, US policy toward the Third World focused on maintaining the integration of the Third World in the Western-dominated international economy and assuring the Third World’s alignment with the West in the Cold War. Increased reliance on imported oil and strategic minerals and the decline of European colonialism made a more active US role seem both desirable and necessary. The United States worked with the Western colonial powers, who were also US allies in the Cold War, to try to control the pace of political and economic change in the Third World. Although for reasons of history, ideology, and enlightened self-interest the United States preferred to work with democratic forces in the Third World, in practice it often sided with monarchs, military dictators, and other anti-democratic but anti-communist elements.

Although the Cold War heightened Western anxieties about social and political change in the Middle East, the crises in the region grew out
of Western attempts to maintain their position against indigenous threats rather than threats from Soviet actions. The Iranian Crisis of 1951–53 grew out of Iran's nationalization of the British-owned Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC) in the spring of 1951. AIOC's Iranian operations were Britain's most valuable remaining overseas asset and the British feared that if Iran succeeded in taking over the company all of Britain's overseas investments would be jeopardized. The United States, which also had extensive overseas investments, opposed the Iranian action. On the other hand, the United States feared that British use of force to reverse nationalization could result in turmoil in Iran that could undercut the pro-Western Shah, boost the prospects of the pro-Soviet Tudeh Party, and might even result in intervention by the Soviets at Iranian invitation. Therefore, the United States urged the British to try to reach a negotiated settlement. The British, however, preferred to "stand on their rights," and force Iran to give in by organizing an international boycott of Iranian oil and attempting to manipulate Iranian politics.

US efforts to mediate a settlement failed, as did less public attempts to convince the Shah to remove nationalist Prime Minister Muhammad Musaddiq. By 1953, the oil boycott had sharply reduced Iran's export earnings and decimated government revenues. Fearing that Musaddiq might displace the Shah and that Tudeh influence was increasing, the United States and Britain covertly organized, financed, and implemented a coup that removed Musaddiq and installed a government willing to reach an oil settlement. Following the coup, US economic and financial assistance helped the Shah establish a royal dictatorship, ending the progress Iran had been making toward more representative government.

The Iranian Crisis combined Cold War concerns with efforts by a Third World country to gain greater control over its internal affairs and to break the hold of the Western-dominated world economy. Similarly, the Suez Crisis of 1956 grew out of the Arab-Israeli dispute and Egyptian efforts to finance a massive development project centered on construction of a gigantic dam on the Nile River at Aswan. After Egypt turned to the Soviet Bloc for arms in 1955, the United States and Britain decided to withdraw their support for the Aswan Dam project. Egyptian nationalist leader Gamal Abdel Nasser responded by nationalizing the British- and French-owned Suez Canal Company. The Suez Canal was a major artery of international trade, and the British viewed Nasser's action as an intolerable challenge to their weakening position in the Middle East and the world.

The British, together with the French, who resented Nasser's support for Algerian rebels, and the Israelis, who felt threatened by Nasser's support for guerrilla attacks on their territory, developed a complex scheme to recapture control of the canal through military action. Hoping to minimize US reaction, they attacked in late October, on the eve of US presidential elections. Upset with not being consulted, and concerned about the overall impact on the Western position in the Middle East, the United States opposed the Anglo-French-Israeli action. Using its economic power, the United States forced them to withdraw their forces. The Soviets, who were busy suppressing the Hungarian revolution, played almost no role at all, though they tried to gain Egyptian and Arab favor by issuing threats against the attackers after the United States had already brought the invasion to a halt.

In the wake of the Suez Crisis the United States pledged to protect Middle East states from the Soviet Union and its allies. The crisis in Lebanon that led to US intervention in July 1958 stemmed from internal instability and regional rivalries that had little to do with the Soviet Union. Regionally, US leaders feared the growing influence of Egyptian leader Nasser, whom they viewed as dangerously anti-Western. Within Lebanon, the problem comprised efforts by pro-Western President Kamil Sham'un to stay in power by amending the constitution to allow him to run for a second term. Sham'un's action threatened the internal stability of Lebanese society and resulted in increased opposition to his rule. After a coup by army officers in Iraq in July 1958 overthrew the pro-Western monarchy there, the United States, fearing a similar revolt in Beirut, sent over 14,000 troops to Lebanon and brokered a settlement that maintained the country's pro-Western alignment. The British undertook a simultaneous operation in Jordan to bolster King Hussein.

The Iraqi coup resulted in the withdrawal of Iraq from the Baghdad Pact (Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, and Great Britain) which had been organized with US support in 1955 to solidify the "northern tier" of countries separating the Soviet Union from the eastern Mediterranean and the Persian Gulf. The culmination of several schemes to bolster the Western position in the Middle East, the Baghdad Pact, through the inclusion of Pakistan, also further injected the Cold War into the regional rivalry between India and Pakistan. In 1954, in what amounted to an effort to recreate the old Indian Army, the United States had begun supplying Pakistan with military assistance. And, in the same year, Pakistan had joined the US-sponsored Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), to gain leverage in its regional rivalry with India.

The ongoing conflict in Vietnam also had roots that reached deeper than the Cold War. While the Vietnamese independence movement, the Viet Minh, was communist-led and supported by the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China, the war in Vietnam was at its heart a
struggle against outside domination. The United States, though urging the French to grant independence to Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, had indirectly supported French efforts to regain control of their colonies due to concerns about the stability of the French government, desire to maintain access to Southeast Asian raw materials and markets for European and Japanese reconstruction, and fear of the political impact of “losing” another area to communism. By 1954, the United States, which had begun direct aid to the French forces fighting in Vietnam on the eve of the Korean War, was paying for around 80 percent of the French war effort.

After a disastrous defeat at Dien Bien Phu in the spring of 1954, the French, tired of the costly and unpopular struggle, negotiated their withdrawal at an international conference held in Geneva from May to July. The Geneva settlement provided for the independence of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, with Vietnam divided temporarily at the seventeenth parallel to facilitate the peaceful regrouping of French and Viet Minh forces to the south and north respectively. The Democratic Republic of Vietnam, established by the Viet Minh in 1950, would have control of the area north of the seventeenth parallel, while the pro-Western State of Vietnam would control the southern part of the country. Internationally supervised elections to reunify the country were scheduled to take place in two years.

Although the United States had refused to come to the rescue of the French forces trapped at Dien Bien Phu, it was not ready to accept what it viewed as a communist victory in Southeast Asia. To draw the line against further communist gains, the United States sponsored the formation of SEATO, which pledged its members – the United States, Great Britain, France, Australia, New Zealand, Pakistan, Thailand, and the Philippines – to resist communist aggression in the region. Although not members, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam south of the seventeenth parallel were included in the area under SEATO’s protection.

Inside Vietnam, the United States sought to build up a non-communist government in the South under the leadership of Ngo Dinh Diem, a prominent non-communist nationalist. US aid, and the support of the nearly 900,000 anti-communist Vietnamese who fled the North, enabled Diem to gain control of the government in the South. Convinced that Viet Minh leader and DRVN head Ho Chi Minh would win reunification elections, the United States, which had refused to sign the Geneva settlement, supported Diem’s decision not to participate in the proposed election.

The Viet Minh, who were preoccupied with consolidating their control of the North, protested against Diem’s decision but took no action. The Soviet Union and the PRC were also not prepared to go beyond verbal protests. Diem’s persecution of his opponents and his reversal of Viet Minh-implemented land reforms soon led to the revival of armed resistance. In 1960, Viet Minh members who had remained in the South, supported by their comrades in the North, organized a broadly based National Liberation Front and embarked on a full-scale military and political struggle to overthrow Diem and reunify the nation.

By this time, the settlement in Laos had also broken down. The royalist government that had taken power in 1954 had formed a neutralist coalition with the communist-led Pathet Lao in 1957. The following year, rightist forces supported by the United States overthrew the neutralist government and adopted a pro-Western position. The neutralists regained control in August 1960, only to lose power to the right again in a December 1960 coup. With the United States supporting the rightist groups, and the North Vietnamese, the Chinese, and the Soviets supporting the left and the neutralists, Laos was in a state of civil war as the new decade began.

An unexpected consequence of the Suez Crisis was to hasten the end of European colonialism in Africa by exposing the vulnerability of the European colonial powers. Morocco and Tunisia had gained their independence in 1956, and in 1957 Ghana became the first sub-Saharan African colony to gain independence. Although Algeria did not become independent until 1962, dissension caused by the war there led to the collapse of the French Fourth Republic in 1958 and the coming to power of a new government, led by Charles De Gaulle, pledged to end the war by granting independence. By 1962, most of Africa, with the notable exceptions of the Portuguese colonies, Southern Rhodesia, and South African-controlled Namibia, had won its independence.

Although the result of a historical dynamic that had little to do with the Cold War, decolonization in Africa was deeply influenced by the international environment dominated by Soviet-American rivalry. Nowhere was this more evident than in the Congo, where Belgium’s sudden grant of independence in June 1960 led to a Cold War crisis that significantly shaped the new state’s development. Shortly after independence, secessionist forces supported by Belgian and other Western mining interests seized control of the mineral-rich province of Katanga. Dissatisfied by the actions of the United Nations, which sent a peacekeeping force to the Congo but did not assist the central government in regaining control of Katanga, Congolese Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba appealed to the United States and the Soviet Union for help. The United States, suspecting Lumumba of communist sym-
the leader of the exile army replaced Arbenz. The new government reversed Arbenz’s reforms and inaugurated forty years of repressive rule by a succession of military or military-dominated governments that cost over 100,000 Guatemalans their lives and led to the disappearance, and probable death, of another 40,000.

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Although the receipt of Soviet arms in May 1954 provided an opportunity to condemn Guatemala before the Organization of American States, the United States had already undertaken measures to overthrow Arbenz. The CIA organized, financed, and supported an attack on Guatemala by a small exile army as part of a larger plan to intimidate the Guatemalan Army into removing Arbenz. The plan succeeded, and the leader of the exile army replaced Arbenz. The new government reversed Arbenz’s reforms and inaugurated forty years of repressive rule by a succession of military or military-dominated governments that cost over 100,000 Guatemalans their lives and led to the disappearance, and probable death, of another 40,000.

pathies, refused. Although the Soviets sent some assistance, the UN decision to close Congo’s airfields to all but UN-approved flights limited what the Soviets could provide. In contrast, covert US assistance to anti-communist Congolese led to Lumumba’s removal and replacement by pro-Western military officers. Nevertheless, it took several more years of fighting and US covert aid to secure the Congo and its mineral wealth for the West.

The key issue in Latin America was what kinds of internal political, economic, and social arrangements and external ties would best ensure political stability and economic development. These issues inevitably involved the United States, since it had long sought to control the pace and scope of political and social change in Latin America and to regulate the region’s relations with non-hemispheric powers. In the 1950s, the United States sought to increase its influence in Latin America by strengthening its ties with the region’s powerful military establishments through a large-scale program of military assistance and training.

As noted earlier, the window of opportunity for political and economic reform that arose during World War II had in most countries been closed before the Korean War. In Guatemala, however, the reformist government that had come to power as a result of the 1944 revolution managed to survive despite the hostility of the US-owned United Fruit Company, which dominated Guatemala’s economy. In 1950, free elections brought Jacobo Arbenz, a reform-minded military officer, to power. Two years later Arbenz’s government passed land-reform legislation that expropriated several thousand acres of United Fruit property. Arbenz’s action confirmed US suspicions that Guatemala was in danger of slipping under communist control. In reality, despite the presence of individual communists in Arbenz’s inner circle and in some government agencies, there were only a handful of communists in the legislature and the army remained free from communist influence. Moreover, the Soviet Union took little interest in Guatemala.""

Like Guatemala, the Cuban revolution began as a broadly based indigenous struggle against a corrupt, repressive, US-supported military dictator. And, as in Guatemala, once in power the new Cuban government, which took over in January 1959, soon found itself in conflict with US economic interests that dominated the Cuban economy. Unlike Guatemala, the Cuban government, led by the charismatic Fidel Castro, gained control of the Cuban Army. And, again in contrast with Guatemala, the Soviet Union provided the Cuban revolutionaries with enough economic and military assistance to ensure their survival.

The Cuban revolution came during a period when the United States was trying to adjust to the overthrow of several Latin American military dictatorships and their replacement by civilian governments. Although the collapse of Cuban dictator Fulgencio Batista’s regime had caught the United States by surprise, the United States was confident that it could control Cuban developments due to the dependence of the Cuban economy on the United States and the presence of a large, pro-US, professional middle class. As Castro implemented reforms that struck at US economic interests and pro-US Cubans chose exile over resistance, the United States became convinced that stronger measures would be necessary. In addition to economic sanctions that included cutting off Cuban sugar exports to the United States, the Eisenhower administration, in an attempt to repeat its Guatemalan success, organized an invasion force composed of Cuban exiles. Castro, who had received little help from the Soviets during his struggle against Batista, countered the economic sanctions by concluding trade and economic assistance agreements with the Soviet Union. This aid, along with the popularity of the revolution’s reforms, Cuban nationalism, and Castro’s control of the army, enabled Cuba to defeat the invasion by the US-supported exile force at the Bay of Pigs in April 1961. Following the Bay of Pigs, Castro moved Cuba steadily toward communism and a military alliance with the Soviet Union.

CRISIES IN BERLIN AND CUBA

At the same time as the Cuban revolution was being transformed from a revolt against US domination of Cuban society to a major Cold War conflict, a protracted crisis over Berlin was coming to a head. Although West German membership in NATO coupled with the creation of the Warsaw Pact increased order and predictability by lessening uncertainty about the future of Germany and setting limits on permissible behavior, the Soviets remained concerned about Germany. The lack of a formal
peace settlement with Germany was a continuing problem, and the Soviets feared that the West was delaying a settlement in the hope that the West German economic “miracle” would pull East Germany and other East European states out of the socialist bloc.

The Soviets also continued to have difficulty constructing a viable state in East Germany. The East German leadership had resistant pressures for reform, and its inhabitants had increasingly reacted to lack of economic and political liberalization by fleeing to the West via West Berlin. The Soviets were also concerned about US plans to furnish West Germany with nuclear weapons delivery systems and feared that the Germans might acquire the weapons themselves. Khrushchev and his generation viewed the Soviet position in Eastern Europe, and especially in East Germany, not only as a strategic imperative but as just compensation for wartime sacrifices, and they were determined not to give it up without a fight.

After the West ignored a plan proposed by the Polish foreign minister to create a nuclear-free zone in central Europe, the Soviets focused on West Berlin, which lay 100 miles inside East German territory, as a way to force the West to recognize the division of Germany and the danger of West Germany acquiring nuclear weapons. In November 1958, Khrushchev proposed a German peace treaty that would recognize the existence of two Germanies. In addition, he called for the end of four-power control of Berlin, with the Western sectors of the city becoming a demilitarized and self-governing free city, its independence guaranteed by the four powers and the two German states. If the West did not agree to these changes within six months, Khrushchev warned, he would turn over control of access routes to the Western sectors of Berlin to the German Democratic Republic.

Although Soviet motives were mainly defensive, Khrushchev’s ultimatum led to a crisis. Not only would such a solution run counter to Western German claims to represent all of Germany and call into question the Western commitment to reunification, leaving Berlin would deprive the West of a great propaganda asset and an invaluable intelligence listening post and base of operations. Resistance, on the other hand, raised the possibility of war, which, given Soviet superiority in conventional weapons in Europe, could lead to the use of nuclear weapons.

Khrushchev withdrew his ultimatum after Eisenhower invited him to visit the United States in the spring of 1959. Although the two leaders were not able to agree on what to do about Berlin, the meeting sparked hopes on both sides for improved relations and led to progress on negotiations to ban nuclear testing. Hopes for improved relations suffered a blow when the Soviets managed to shoot down a U-2 spy plane on May 1, 1960, on the eve of a planned summit meeting in Paris. In addition to revealing the most sensitive secrets of the Soviet defense position, the U-2 flights were a humiliating symbol of Soviet technological inferiority. In addition, Chinese criticism put pressure on Khrushchev to show results from peaceful coexistence. When Eisenhower took personal responsibility for the flights and refused to discontinue them, Khrushchev stormed out of the summit before anything could be accomplished.

Khrushchev renewed his ultimatum on Berlin in June 1961 in a tense and contentious meeting with newly elected US President John F. Kennedy in Vienna. Kennedy responded by calling for additional increases in military spending and more funding for civil defense. In a nationally televised address on July 25, 1961, Kennedy pledged that the United States would not let the communists drive the West out of Berlin.

With tensions high, the East Germans, with Soviet approval, sealed off access routes between East and West Berlin on August 13. The tide of refugees fleeing through Berlin had increased during the crisis and had reached 4,000 on the day before the border was closed. The East Germans and Soviets were careful not to interfere with Western access to Berlin. A potentially serious crisis arose in late October when General Lucius D. Clay, whom Kennedy had sent to Berlin to underline US commitment to the city, sent US tanks equipped with bulldozer blades to Checkpoint Charlie, an allied corridor between sectors, to demonstrate US determination to maintain its access rights. Suspecting that the United States was preparing to tear down the wall, the Soviets sent in tanks and a tense confrontation ensued, ending only after an exchange of assurances between Kennedy and Khrushchev.

The Berlin Wall was an ideological defeat of colossal proportions for the Soviet Union and world communism. The wall became a symbol of the Cold War, concrete evidence of the inability of East Germany to win the loyalty of its inhabitants. It was also seen as hard proof that Soviet-style socialism was losing its economic competition with capitalism. Although the wall ended the mass emigration that had been destabilizing East Germany and also led to a period of prolonged stability in Europe, no one at the time knew that this would be the outcome. When a crisis arose in October 1962 over Soviet missiles in Cuba, the initial US reaction was that the Soviets had put the missiles there as a way of forcing the West out of Berlin.

Following the failed Bay of Pigs invasion, the United States had continued its efforts to reverse the Cuban revolution through covert action designed to cripple the Cuban economy through sabotage, assassination plots against Castro and other Cuban leaders, diplomatic efforts to isolate Cuba, and military maneuvers that seemed to be pointing to a US
invasion. Aware of all of this, Castro successfully sought increased military assistance from the Soviet Union. In addition, Khrushchev decided to deploy medium- and intermediate-range ballistic missiles in Cuba. Convinced that the United States, which possessed clear naval superiority, would be able to prevent an open deployment of missiles to Cuba, the Soviets tried to deceive the United States about the missiles until they were installed.

The risk of sending missiles to Cuba was taken for several reasons. First, putting missiles in Cuba promised a quick fix to the problem of Soviet strategic inferiority. As noted earlier, both the Soviets and the United States were aware that the United States held a huge lead in strategic weapons. The Soviets feared that such a large lead might tempt US leaders to risk a first strike against the Soviet Union. At the least, the United States might try to exploit its lead by acting more aggressively against Soviet interests, for example, by invading Cuba. Losing Cuba would highlight the political consequences of strategic disparity in an especially embarrassing way and would constitute a tremendous setback for the Soviet Union and world communism. It could even embolden hardliners in the United States who wanted to roll back communism everywhere in the world. Medium- and intermediate-range missiles in Cuba would make a US first strike almost impossible and go a long way toward redressing the Soviet Union’s deficiency in ICBMs. The deployment would also allow Khrushchev to continue his plans to shift resources from military and heavy industry to agriculture and the consumer sector. Soviet missiles in Cuba would also be a psychological counter to US missiles in Turkey. Finally, Khrushchev apparently hoped that ending the Soviet Union’s massive strategic inferiority would force the United States to respect the Soviet Union and to negotiate a relaxation of tensions.

Khrushchev’s gamble almost led to disaster in October 1962 when the United States discovered the deception. A month earlier, Kennedy had warned the Soviets that the United States would not tolerate offensive weapons in Cuba. President Kennedy interpreted the Soviet move as an intolerable challenge to the political, as well as the strategic, status quo. Although not numerous or capable enough to change the overall strategic balance, the forty-two missiles sent to Cuba significantly increased the Soviet Union’s ability to strike targets within the United States. In addition, warning times for missiles fired from Cuba would be less than for missiles fired from the Soviet Union due to the shorter distances and to the fact that US early warning systems were designed to detect launches from the Soviet Union. Still, the missiles fell far short of giving the Soviet Union a first-strike capability.

Angry at the Soviets for deceiving him, convinced that he would be impeached if he failed to take action, and concerned that the Soviets would drag out negotiations until the missiles were operational, President Kennedy publicly demanded that the Soviets remove their missiles from Cuba. Although Kennedy rejected calls for air strikes followed by an invasion of Cuba to remove the missiles, he ordered a naval blockade of Cuba as a way of pressuring the Soviets to meet his demands. After several tense days, during which the world was poised on the brink of disaster, Kennedy and Khrushchev reached agreement on a settlement that led to the removal of the missiles as well as several thousand Soviet combat troops and Soviet-supplied tactical bombers in exchange for ending the blockade and a US pledge not to invade Cuba. Recent research has revealed that the United States also secretly agreed to remove nuclear-armed Jupiter missiles from Turkey as part of the understanding that ended the crisis.

The Cuban Missile Crisis dramatically demonstrated the need for Soviet-American cooperation to prevent a nuclear holocaust. Despite its sobering impact, it took the United States and the Soviet Union another decade to act on this insight.