The Cold War: Crash Course US History #37

Crash Course: U.S. History
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===== Intro (0:00) =====

John: Hi, I'm John Green. This is Crash Course US History, and today we're going to talk about the Cold War. The Cold War is called "cold" because it supposedly never heated up into actual armed conflict. Which means, you know, that it wasn't a war.

Past John: Mr. Green, Mr. Green, but if the war on Christmas is a war and the war on drugs is a war...

Present John: You're not going to hear me say this often in your life, me from the past, but that was a good point. At least the Cold War was not an attempt to make war on a noun, which almost never works, because nouns are so resilient.

And to be fair, the Cold War did involve quite a lot of actual war, from Korea to Afghanistan as the world's two superpowers, the United States and the USSR, sought ideological and strategic influence throughout the world. So perhaps it's best to think of the Cold War as an era lasting roughly from 1945 to 1990.

Discussions of the Cold War tend to center on international and political history, and those are very important, which is why we've talked about them in the past. This, however, is United States history, so let us heroically gaze, as Americans so often do, at our own navel.

Stan, why did you turn the globe to the green parts of not-America? I mean I guess to be fair, we were a little bit obsessed with this guy.

So the Cold War gave us great spy novels, independence movements, an arms race, cool movies, like "*Doctor Strange Love*" and "*War Games*", one of the most evil mustaches in history, but it also gave us a growing awareness that the greatest existential threat to human beings is ourselves. It changed the way we imagined the world and humanity's role in it.

In his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, William Faulkner famously said, "Our tragedy today is a general and universal physical fear so long sustained by now that we can even bear it. There are no longer problems of the spirit. There is only the question: When will I be blown up?" So today we're going to look at how that came to be the dominant question of human existence and whether we can ever get past it.

(Intro plays)

So after World War II the US and the USSR were the only two nations with any power left. The United States was a lot stronger. We had atomic weapons for starters, and also the Soviets had lost twenty million people in the war, and they were lead by a sociopathic, mustachioed Joseph Stalin. But the US still had worries, we needed a strong free market oriented Europe and, to a lesser extent, Asia, so that all the goods we were making could find happy homes.

The Soviets, meanwhile, were concerned with something more immediate, a powerful Germany invading them, again. Germany, and please do not take this personally Germans, was very, very slow to learn the central lesson of world history: do not invade Russia, unless you're the Mongols. [Mongoltage]

So at the end of World War II, the USSR encouraged the creation of pro communist governments in Bulgaria, Romania, and Poland, which was a relatively easy thing to encourage, because those nations were occupied by Soviet troops.

The idea for the Soviets was to create a communist buffer between them and Germany, but to the US it looked like communism might just keep expanding, and that would be really bad for us because who would buy all of our sweet, sweet industrial goods?

So America responded with the policy of containment, as introduced in diplomat George F. Kennan's famous Long Telegram. Communism could stay where it was, but it would not be allowed to spread. And ultimately this was why we fought very real wars in both Korea and Vietnam. As a government report from 1950 put it, the goals of containment were one: block further expansion of Soviet power, two: expose the falsities of Soviet pretensions, three: induce a retraction of the Kremlin's control and influence, and four: in general, foster the seeds of destruction within the Soviet system.

Harry Truman, who as you'll recall became president in 1945 after Franklin Delano pres-for-life Roosevelt died, was a big fan of containment, and the first real test of it came in Greece and Turkey in 1947.

This was a very strategically valuable region, because it was near the Middle East. And I don't know if you've noticed this, but the United States has been just like a smidge interested in the Middle East the last several decades because of oil, glorious oil.

Right, so Truman announced the so called Truman Doctrine, because, you know, why not name a doctrine after yourself, in which he pledged to support "Freedom loving peoples against Communist threats." Which is all fine and good, but who will protect us against "peoples," the pluralization of an already plural noun.

Anyway, we eventually sent $400 million in aid to Greece and Turkey and we were off to the Cold War races.

The Truman Doctrine created the language through which Americans would view the world, with America as "free" and Communists as tyrannical. According to our old friend Eric Foner: "The speech set a precedent for American assistance to anti-communists regimes throughout the world no matter how undemocratic, and for the creation of a set of global military alliances directed against the Soviet Union."

It also led to the creation of a new security apparatus: the National Security Council, the Central Intelligence Agency, the Atomic Energy Commission, all of which were somewhat immune from government oversight and definitely not democratically elected. And the Containment Policy and the Truman Doctrine also lay the foundations for a military build up, an 'Arms Race', which would become a key feature of the Cold War.

But it wasn't all about the military, at least at first: like the Marshall Plan was first introduced at Harvard's commencement address in June 1947 by, get this, George Marshall, in what turned out to be, like, the second most important commencement address in all of American history.

Yes, yes Stan, okay, it was a great speech, thank you for noticing.

===== Thought Bubble (5:18) =====

Alright let's go to the Thought Bubble.

The Marshall Plan was a response to economic chaos in Europe brought on by a particularly harsh winter that strengthened support for communism in France and Italy. The plan sought to use US aid to combat the economic instability that provided fertile fields for communism: as Marshall said, "Our policy is not directed against any country or doctrine, but against hunger, poverty, desperation, and chaos."

Basically, it was a New Deal for Europe, and it worked. Western

Europe was rebuilt so that by 1950 production levels in industry had eclipsed pre-war levels, and Europe was on its way to becoming a US-style, capitalist, mass-consumer society, which it still is... kind of.

Japan, although not technically part of the Marshall Plan, was also rebuilt. General Douglas MacArthur was basically the dictator there, forcing Japan to adopt a new constitution, giving women the vote, and pledging that Japan would forswear war, in exchange for which the United States effectively became Japan's defense force. This allowed Japan to spend its money on other things, like industry, which worked out really well for them.

Meanwhile, Germany was experiencing the first Berlin crisis. At the end of the war, Germany was divided into East and West, and even though the capital, Berlin, was entirely in the East, it was also divided into East and West. This meant that West Berlin was dependant on shipments of goods from West Germany, through East Germany, and then in 1948 Stalin cut off the roads to West Berlin. So the Americans responded with an 11 month long airlift of supplies that eventually led to Stalin lifting the blockade in 1948 and building the Berlin Wall which stood until 1991 when the Kool-Aid Guy - no, wait, wait, wait, wait, wait, that wasn't when the Berlin Wall was built, that was in 1961, I just wanted to give Thought Bubble the opportunity to make that joke.

Thanks Thought Bubble. So, right, the Wall wasn't built until 1961, but 1949 did see Germany officially split into 2 nations, and also the Soviets detonated their first Atomic Bomb, and NATO was established, and the Chinese Revolution ended in Communist victory.

So by the end of the 1950 the contours of the Cold War had been established; West vs East, Capitalist freedom vs Communist totalitarianism.

At least from where I'm sitting. Although now apparently I'm gonna change where I'm sitting because it's time for the mystery document.

===== Mystery document (7:23) =====

The rules here are simple: I guess the author of the mystery document and about 55% of the time I get shocked by the shock pen.

"We must organize and enlist the energies and resources of the free world in a positive program for peace which will frustrate the Kremlin design for world domination by creating a situation in the free world to which the Kremlin will be compelled to adjust. Without such a cooperative effort led by the United States, we will have to make gradual withdrawals under pressure until we discover one day that we have sacrificed positions of vital interest. It is imperative that this trend be reversed by a much more rapid and concerted build-up of the actual strength of both the United States and the other nations of the free world."

I mean all I can say about it is that it sounds American and like it was written in like 1951 and it seems kind of like a policy paper or something really boring, so I... I mean... Yeah I'm just going to have to take the shock. Ahh!

National Security Council report NSC-68? Are you kidding me Stan? Not-not 64 or 81 - 68?! This is ridiculous! I call injustice!

===== Cold War Policy in the US (8:27) =====

Anyway, as the apparently wildly famous NSC-68 shows: the US government cast the Cold War as a rather epic struggle between freedom and tyranny, and that led to remarkable political consensus, both democrats and republicans supported most aspects of Cold War policy, especially the military buildup part.

Now of course there were some critics like Walter Lippmann who worried that casting foreign policy in such stark ideological terms would result in the US getting on the wrong side of many conflicts, especially as former colonies sought to remove the bonds of empire and become independent nations.

But yeah, no, nothing like that ever happened. It's not like that happened in Iran, or Nicaragua, or Argentina, or Brazil, or Guatemala, or - Stan are you really gonna make me list all of them? Fine. Or Haiti, of Paraguay, or the Philippines, or Chile, or Iraq, or Indonesia, or Zaire - I'm sorry, there are a lot of them, okay?

But these interventions were viewed as necessary to prevent the spread of communism which was genuinely terrifying to people and it's important to understand that. Like, National Security agencies pushed Hollywood to produce anti-communist movies like *The Red Menace* which scared people and the CIA funded magazines, news broadcasts, concerts, art exhibitions, that gave examples of American freedom. It even supported painters like Jackson Pollock and the Museum of Modern Art in New York because American expressionism was the vanguard of artistic freedom and the exact opposite of Soviet socialist realism. I mean have you seen Soviet paintings? Look at the hardy ankles on these socialist comrade peasants.

Also, because the Soviets were atheists, at least in theory, Congress in 1954 added the words 'under God' to the Pledge of Allegiance as a sign of America's resistance to Communism.

The Cold War also shaped domestic policy. Anti-Communist sentiment, for instance, prevented Truman from extending the social policies of the New Deal. The program that he dubbed The Fair Deal would have increased the minimum wage, extended national health insurance, and increased public housing, social security, and aid to education, but the American Medical Association lobbied against Truman's plan for national health insurance calling it 'socialized medicine,' and congress was in no mood to pay money for socialized anything. That problem goes away... [headdesk]

But the government did make some domestic investments as a result of the Cold War. In the name of national security the government spent money on education, research in science, technology like computers, and transportation infrastructure. In fact, we largely have the Cold War to thank for our marvellous interstate highway system, although part of the reason congress approved it was to set up speedy evacuation routes in the event of nuclear war.

And speaking of nuclear war, it's worth noting that a big part of reason the Soviets were able to develop nuclear weapons so quickly was thanks to espionage, like for instance by physicist and spy Klaus Fuchs - I think I'm pronouncing that right. Fuchs worked on the Manhattan Project and leaked information to the Soviets and then later helped the Chinese to build their first bomb. Julius Rosenberg also gave atomic secrets to the Soviets and was eventually executed, as was his less clearly guilty wife Ethel.

And it's important to remember all that when thinking about the United States' obsessive fear that there were communists in our midst. This began in 1947 with Truman's loyalty review system which required government employees to prove their patriotism when accused of disloyalty. How do you prove your loyalty? Rat out

your co-workers as communists. No, seriously though, that program never found any communists.

This all culminated of course with the Red Scare and the rise of Wisconsin senator Joseph McCarthy, an inveterate liar who became enormously powerful after announcing in February 1950 that he had a list of 205 communists who worked in the State department. In fact, he had no such thing and McCarthy never identified a single disloyal American but the fear of Communism continued. In 1951's Dennis vs United States, the Supreme court upheld the notion that being a Communist leader itself was a crime.

In this climate of fear any criticism of the government and its policies or the US in general was seen as disloyalty. There was only one question: when will I be blown up? And it encouraged loyalty because only the government could prevent the spread of communism and keep us from being blown up.

We've talked a lot about different ways that Americans have imagined freedom this year, but this was a new definition of freedom: the government exists in part to keep us free from massive destruction.

So the Cold War changed America profoundly: the US has remained a leader on the world stage and continued to build a large, powerful, and expensive national state. But it also changed the way we imagined what it means to be free, and what it means to be safe.

Thanks for watching, I'll see you next week.

===== Credits (12:49) =====

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[Circus music] Do-do-do-do-do-do-do-do-do-do. Wait, wait, wait. Stan, is that music copyrighted, the do-do-do-do-do-do-do-do? Alright, it's not. Woo. That saved us a thousand dollars.