

# USA, 1929 – 2000: The Cold War and US foreign policy

## **Truman Doctrine and the policy of containment**

Winston Churchill made a speech in 1946 where he stated that an 'Iron Curtain' had descended across Europe – split between a capitalist west and a communist east. The Truman Doctrine established the idea of containing communism so that it didn't spread further across the world. The USA feared the 'domino effect' – that if one country fell to communism, this would trigger the fall of its neighbouring countries. Therefore, the USA said they would help any country facing a communist revolution with financial and military aid. This was known as the Marshall Plan (the European Recovery Plan'. In return for aid, the benefitting country would agree to buy US goods and allow US companies to invest capital in their industries.

## **The Berlin Crisis, 1948/49**

The peace conferences at Yalta and Potsdam had agreed the division of Germany (and Berlin) in 1945. Berlin was in the Soviet zone in East Germany. Allies had been allowed access to their Berlin zones via road, rail, air and canal. Western zones were given huge amounts of Marshall Aid and Stalin feared a strong and democratic Germany on the borders of the USSR. On 24<sup>th</sup> June 1948, Stalin cut off road, rail and canal traffic to Berlin from the western zones of Germany. The aim was to starve the allies out of Berlin.

In response to the Berlin Blockade, Truman started an airlift of resources. This lasted for 10 months and dropped an average of 4,000 tonnes of resources per day across 275,000 flights in total.

Stalin called the blockade off on 12<sup>th</sup> May 1949. That evening west-Berliners put on evening dress and danced in the streets. Stalin had failed to starve them out. Truman claimed a great victory for the west. The crisis increased east-west rivalry and led to the establishment of NATO.

## **Cuban Missile Crisis, 1962**

A revolution in Cuba in 1959 provided the background for the Cuban Missile Crisis. There was conflict between Castro and the USA over trade, especially sugar. The USSR offered to buy Cuban sugar – Khrushchev wanted to extend Soviet influence in the Caribbean and outmanoeuvre JFK. JFK sanctioned a US invasion of Cuba (Bay of Pigs) but this was a massive failure – it strengthened Castro's position and drew them closer to the USSR. In 1961 Castro announced a conversion to communism. Khrushchev was worried about US missiles in Turkey and Italy. In Sept 1962, Soviet missiles were installed on Cuba. This triggered 13 days of intense negotiation and threats / warnings between JFK and Khrushchev. Eventually, a deal was reached where the USSR would remove its Cuba missiles if the USA removed theirs from Turkey (on the basis that the USA removing missiles was kept secret). The USA claimed a win as it appeared the Khrushchev had backed down. The shock over how close nuclear war had come led to an easing of the tensions between the 2 superpowers. Talks began about limits on nuclear weapons and testing, and a phone line was established between Washington DC and the Kremlin.

## **Vietnam**

3 reasons for US involvement – to contain communism, defend democracy and extend US influence. US involvement was not supported at home and led to protests and Johnson's decision not to run for re-election.

3 methods of US warfare – 'operation rolling thunder', chemical warfare, and 'search and destroy'. US tactics made them unpopular with the people they were supposed to be protecting / fighting for.

2 key reasons for US defeat in Vietnam – the strengths of the communists (supported cause, experience of jungle fighting, support of USSR etc.), and the weaknesses of the USA (opposition at home, inexperienced troops, failure of tactics). The war was very expensive and undermined domestic policies. US defeat showed the policy of containment had failed. It was a propaganda disaster for the USA. A different approach to Cold War was needed, and this led to a period of détente.

## **Détente (a relaxing of tensions)**

Key reasons for détente include - threat of nuclear war following the Cuban Missile Crisis had a sobering effect and the USA and USSR were keen on arms limitation talks. The US relationship with China was improving, and the Soviet leader didn't want to see a Chinese-US alliance at their expense.

Key agreements in the détente phase:

- SALT I, 1972
- Helsinki Agreements, 1975
- SALT II, 1979 (never ratified by the US)

All were focused on broader cooperation and transparency over nuclear weapons and nuclear testing. Limits were placed on the numbers of nuclear weapons a country could have.

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## China

2 reasons for better relationship with China – Nixon saw an opportunity to take advantage of the relationship between China and the USSR getting worse at this time. Nixon hoped better relations with China would help end the war in Vietnam (policy of linkage).

Ping-Pong diplomacy – US table tennis team formally invited to play in China. The US lifted a trade embargo with China that had lasted for 20 years. Talks led to a meeting between Nixon and China's leader Mao Zedong. In Feb 1972, Nixon became the first US President to visit China. Ping-Pong diplomacy led to the restoration of Sin-US relations that had been cut off for more than two decades.

## Relationship with the USSR

A second phase of Cold War was triggered with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. President Carter developed a hard line approach towards the USSR in response (Carter Doctrine). President Reagan took an even tougher line with the USSR – he called the USSR 'an evil empire' and believed the USSR could be forced to disarm with his 'Star Wars' plan (SDI = Strategic Defence Initiative). This proved to be a turning point in the Cold War as it was clear that the USSR was not in a position to fund the developments needed to keep up with SDI. The current Soviet leader, Gorbachev, had no choice but to seek a better relationship with the USA. He started with internal reforms (perestroika and glasnost) and he ended the arms race with various arms reduction agreements.

## The end of the Cold War

Reagan was initially negative towards Gorbachev's changes, but over time came to support them. For Gorbachev, the reforms were a double edge sword and in some part led to the downfall of the USSR – the more freedoms people gained, the more they wanted – this made it difficult for the USSR to stay united.

A range of treaties / summits led to the end of the arms race and the declaration of the end of the Cold War. These include:

- Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty, 1987
  - Moscow Summit, 1988
- Malta Conference, 1989 – President Bush Snr declared the Cold War was over
  - Sinatra Doctrine, 1989 – start of the collapse of the Soviet Union
    - Fall of the Berlin Wall, 1989
    - Washington Summit, 1990
  - East and West Germany formally reunited, 1990
    - Germany joined NATO
    - Warsaw Pact dissolved, 1991
- START 1 – Treaty for the Reduction and Limitation of Strategic Arms, 1991

By 1991, there was only one superpower left. The Cold War was over.

## US and the Middle East - Iran

During the 1980s and 1990s the US became increasingly involved in the Middle East, particularly with Iran and Iraq. In Jan 1979 the Shah of Iran, who received US backing, was forced to abdicate. Iran fell under the control of a fundamentalist religious leader, the Ayatollah Khomeini, who denounced the USA as the 'Great Satan'.

In Nov 1979 the US embassy in Tehran was stormed by Iranian students and 66 Americans were taken hostage and held for 66 days. President Carter authorised a rescue mission, but it failed and worsened relations with Iran.

## US and the Middle East - Iraq

In Aug 1990, Iraq captured neighbouring Kuwait. Saddam Hussain (Iraq's leader) saw Kuwait as a rich prize that would help lessen his country's debts. The US wanted to protect its economic (oil) interests in the area. The UN imposed sanctions on Iraq and the US, Britain and other states sent forces to Saudi Arabia to help protect its oil reserves (known as Operation Desert Shield). In Jan 1991, the allies launched an air assault against Iraq (Operation Desert Storm) and in Feb land forces began to liberate Kuwait.

With the defeat of Saddam, Pres. Bush Snr's reputation was high in the US as it was perceived that America had successfully restored order to the oil producing states of the Middle East. However, in time Bush Snr was criticised as Saddam was allowed to withdraw with many of his forces intact, meaning the Allies had not pressed home their advantage and had allowed Saddam to remain in power. Saddam went on to brutally suppress rebellions by Shia Muslims in the south and Kurds in the north.