About The Early Cold War, 1945–1960s

The term *cold war*, coined by writer George Orwell, came to describe relations between the United States and the Soviet Union after World War II. Neither side wanted to engage in a "hot war" involving atomic weapons. Instead, the two sides fought indirectly—by engaging in regional conflicts called proxy wars and by providing economic aid to groups and nations with similar ideologies.

The Cold War Begins, 1945–49

After World War II, political and economic differences between the United States and the Soviet Union (officially the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, or U.S.S.R.) led to the Cold War. Politically, the United States and its allies generally promoted democratic values, political openness, and freedoms such as free expression, even though these ideals were not applied consistently in all places. By contrast, the Soviet Union promoted authoritarian governance that concentrated power in the hands of a single ruling party, claiming to wield that power in the service of a communist revolution. Citizens had little input in government, and dissent was harshly punished; freedom of expression was also severely restricted. Economically, American capitalism—with its emphasis on limited government control and private property ownership—was diametrically opposed to the Soviet system of communism, in which the state controlled major industries and made key economic decisions through centralized planning.

By the end of World War II, the Soviet military had occupied most central and eastern European nations. The United States and its allies wanted free and fair elections in these nations, but Soviet leader Joseph Stalin wanted a "buffer zone" of friendly countries in central and eastern Europe to protect the U.S.S.R. against future invasion. Despite promising to hold fair elections, Stalin installed communist governments in Poland, Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia. These countries became satellites of the Soviet Union—ostensibly independent nations that were more or less under Soviet control. British leader Winston Churchill summarized the situation by declaring that "an iron curtain has descended across" Europe. The term *iron curtain* referred to a safety curtain used in theaters, designed to drop down and seal off the stage from the audience in case of fire. Churchill used the metaphor to describe how the continent was divided by physical and political barriers designed to seal off one side from the other, such as walls, checkpoints, barbed wire, and armed guards, that cut off central and eastern Europe from the West. On one side lay the Soviet Union and the Eastern bloc; on the other, there were Western democracies.

Containment

By 1947, U.S. president Harry S. Truman and his advisers had begun to craft a foreign policy to check Soviet expansion. U.S. containment policy was largely framed by U.S. diplomat George F. Kennan, who said that the United States should intervene anywhere the Soviets and their allies seemed at risk of gaining influence. Containment did not involve "liberating" existing communist states; it involved preventing communism from spreading.

The Truman Doctrine was the first application of Kennan's containment policy. Under this doctrine, the United States promised to provide aid to any nation resisting communist aggression. In early 1947, Britain informed the United States that it could no longer afford to support forces battling communist uprisings in Greece and Turkey. Truman asked Congress for large-scale financial aid to support Greece and Turkey, emphasizing that "it must be the policy of the United States to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures."

The United States upheld this commitment "to support free peoples" selectively. This was especially notable when it came to issues of race and gender equality within its own borders. At the same time, the United States supported authoritarian regimes around the world, some of which were repressive, in its attempt to contain communism. As historian Eric Foner explains, Truman's speech to Congress "set a precedent for American

assistance to anticommunist regimes throughout the world, no matter how undemocratic, and for the creation of a set of global military alliances directed against the Soviet Union."

The Marshall Plan was an extension of Truman's thinking. In June 1947, U.S. secretary of state George Marshall proposed a massive economic assistance program to rebuild war-ravaged Europe. The Marshall Plan was multifaceted: Besides providing funds for construction and economic revival, it also aimed to stabilize western European politics and prevent economic conditions that could foster communist movements. Stalin rejected the aid because he did not want the United States to influence the Soviet economy; he then pressured the Eastern bloc to also deny the aid. Over time, Congress approved more than $12 billion (more than $165 billion today) for western Europe. The Marshall Plan was a huge success. Western European economies revived, strong markets for American goods were established, and most importantly, the appeal of communism to western Europeans faded.

Berlin Blockade and Airlift

After World War II, per their agreement at the Yalta Conference, the Allies divided and occupied Germany and its capital city, Berlin. The United States, Great Britain, and France each controlled a portion of West Germany and West Berlin; the Soviet Union controlled East Germany and East Berlin. Berlin itself lay within East Germany; the city's location deep within the Soviet occupation zone made it a symbolic and strategic focal point for both the United States and the Soviet Union. In June 1948, the Soviet Union blocked all road and railroad entrances into West Berlin, making it impossible for goods from West Germany or anywhere else outside Soviet-controlled areas to reach the western sector of the city.

Relinquishing Berlin to the Soviets, however, would have dealt a severe blow to U.S. containment policy. To keep West Berlin supplied, the United States and Great Britain began the eleven-month Berlin airlift that brought vital supplies to the city. They flew planes laden with cargo from their zones in West Germany to Tempelhof Airport in West Berlin, landing as often as one plane every forty-five seconds at the airlift's peak. Unwilling to risk war, the Soviets lifted the blockade in May 1949. The Berlin airlift demonstrated the United States' commitment to containment and reflected Truman's broader strategy to maintain Western influence in Europe and prevent Soviet expansion. It also highlighted how postwar tensions between the superpowers could escalate even without direct military conflict.

During the Berlin airlift, Truman was running for reelection against Thomas Dewey. Truman was widely expected to lose due to economic dissatisfaction and disagreements within the Democratic coalition over both domestic and foreign policy. He scored an unexpected win, aided in part by his support among the general electorate for his containment policies and the Berlin airlift.

Between 1949 and 1961, more than two million East Germans migrated into West Germany, many of them skilled workers and professionals. This migration intensified Soviet concerns about the stability of East Germany. To stop the exodus, the Soviets ordered the construction of a barrier to close East Germans' access to West Berlin. The Berlin Wall became the supreme symbol of the Cold War until it was dismantled in 1989. It physically divided East and West Berlin and powerfully represented the ideological divide between the capitalist West and communist East. In June 1963, President John F. Kennedy delivered his famous "*Ich bin ein Berliner*" ("I am a Berliner") speech in West Berlin, expressing solidarity with the citizens of West Berlin and emphasizing that the United States would stand firmly against communist oppression. His speech reinforced the symbolic importance of the city in the Cold War and reassured West Berliners of U.S. support.

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization

Tensions in Greece and Turkey, combined with the Soviet blockade against West Berlin in 1948, convinced western European nations of the need for a collective security agreement with the United States to counterbalance Soviet military strength in Eastern Europe. In April 1949, the United States established a military

alliance with eleven western European nations and Canada to form the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Under the terms of the alliance, if one member nation were attacked, all other member nations would unite beside them. West Germany's admission into NATO in 1955 prompted the Soviet Union to create its own military alliance, the Warsaw Pact, which included the Soviet Union and states in the Eastern bloc.

The Warsaw Pact dissolved in 1991 following the collapse of the Soviet Union. NATO, however, remains in existence; as of 2025, its membership comprises thirty-two nations, including some former Soviet states. NATO is the largest peacetime military alliance in the world.

The Cold War in East Asia

When World War II ended, full-scale civil war broke out between the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), led by Mao Zedong, and the Nationalist Party, led by Chiang Kai-shek (/chahng/ky*shek/). Although the Communists and Nationalists had united to fight the Japanese, this did not end their disagreement about China's future. Negotiations between the two broke down, and the Nationalists launched an offensive against the Communists in 1946. Though the U.S. government was critical of Chiang's corrupt and authoritarian regime, it provided the Nationalists with military and financial aid. President Truman supported Chiang largely because he opposed communism, reflecting the U.S. policy of containment and the United States' prioritization of the prevention of communist expansion over concerns about corruption or authoritarianism.

The Nationalist Party promoted private property rights and individual freedoms and was supported by traditionally wealthy and powerful groups in China, including landowners and government officials. The CCP, by contrast, drew its support from China's lower classes, especially the peasantry, who supported the party's promises of land reform and better living conditions.

By 1949, Mao's forces had pushed the Nationalists onto the nearby island of Taiwan. Mao and his supporters established the People's Republic of China (PRC) with Mao as the nation's communist dictator. The United States supported the Nationalist Chinese government of Taiwan, recognizing it as the "true" government of China and refusing to establish official diplomatic relations with the PRC. Trade and diplomatic relations with the PRC would not be established until the 1970s.

Food scarcity and famine became significant issues during the Great Leap Forward, the CCP's program to expand agricultural production and rapidly industrialize the country between 1958 and 1960. The civil war disrupted agricultural production, and the Great Leap Forward's misguided policies led to widespread starvation. These events had devastating consequences, including millions of deaths and long-term impacts on health and economic development.

The Korean War

The formation of the People's Republic of China heightened fears over the spread of communism throughout Asia, including on the Korean Peninsula. After Japan's defeat in World War II, no native government existed in Korea. To fill the power vacuum, the United States and the Soviet Union divided the nation along the thirty-eighth parallel. The Soviets administered a communist government in the north, and the United States administered a democratic government in the south. The division was intended to be temporary, but rivalry between the superpowers prevented unification.

In the late 1940s, U.S. forces withdrew from South Korea. In June 1950, North Korea, under the leadership of Kim Il-sung, invaded the south. Troops sent by the United Nations (UN) and led primarily by the United States quickly intervened to push the North Koreans back above the thirty-eighth parallel. At the end of the summer, President Truman decided to liberate North Korea via support of South Korea, in what would become the first proxy war—a military conflict in which a nation offers support but does not directly participate—of the Cold War. In September 1950, U.S. general Douglas MacArthur, commander of the UN forces, attacked the South Korean port

city of Inchon, about 150 miles (240 km) behind enemy lines. Within days, North Korean troops retreated, and by October 9, UN troops had crossed the thirty-eighth parallel into North Korea. By the end of October, MacArthur had reached North Korea's border with China at the Yalu River.

In late November, the Chinese launched a massive counterattack, pushing the front lines back to the thirty-eighth parallel. In early 1951, the Truman administration attempted to negotiate a ceasefire in Korea. General MacArthur disagreed with Truman's foreign policy, instead favoring an escalation of the conflict with China. President Truman dismissed General MacArthur from his post in April 1951 after MacArthur publicly criticized the president. The war settled into a lengthy stalemate. In July 1953, an armistice agreement ended the fighting and established the demilitarized zone (DMZ) along the thirty-eighth parallel. To this day, Korea remains divided.

Fighting Communism at Home

In the early 1950s, the U.S. government began investigating suspected communists in government and business. The House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) accused some Hollywood film industry executives, writers, and actors of supporting communism. Under pressure from the government, some film companies created blacklists of people suspected of being communists or communist sympathizers and refused to hire them. This included the Hollywood Ten, a group of ten film directors, producers, and screenwriters who were called to appear before the HUAC in October 1947. When they refused to answer questions about their political leanings and affiliations, they were held in contempt of Congress the next month, convicted the following year, and sentenced to between six months and one year in prison. Upon their release, they were all blacklisted.

In particular, Joseph McCarthy established himself as America's preeminent anti-communist crusader. McCarthy was an attorney and a circuit judge in Wisconsin before serving in World War II. In 1946, he secured the Republican nomination for the U.S. Senate in Wisconsin and took office the following year. He became a national figure in 1950 after claiming during a speech that more than two hundred communists worked for the State Department. The term *McCarthyism* came into use, not to describe opposition to communism, but to refer to the senator's bullying and innuendo-laden personal attacks in the absence of evidence. As a member of the Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigation—generally focused on investigating fraudulent activities in the executive branch—he called dozens of hearings and hundreds of witnesses from a variety of government departments. McCarthyism was at its peak from 1950 to 1954. McCarthy's televised hearings ultimately turned public opinion against him and led to his censure in the Senate.

The Eisenhower Years, 1953–61

In the 1950s, the United States entered a period of great prosperity. The suburbanization of the country led to a boom in consumer spending that helped spur economic growth and quality-of-life improvements for millions of Americans. Abroad, the United States used its growing power to influence events in the Middle East. Competition with the Soviet Union spurred the U.S. government to invest in its space program.

Domestic Prosperity

The end of the war, combined with a strong U.S. economy, made many young Americans eager to start families. The average marriage age dropped (for women, from twenty-two in 1940 to twenty in 1956), and the birth rate (the number of live births per one thousand women) shot up from 18.7 in the mid-1930s to 25.3 in the mid-1950s. This "baby boom" contributed to cultural changes, including the rise of youth culture, suburban schools, and increased consumerism. More than four million babies were born each year from 1954 until 1964, when the birth rate began to decline. By then, more than seventy-five million "baby boomers" had been born.

The baby boom was accompanied by remarkable growth in the U.S. economy. From 1945 to 1965, the gross domestic product (GDP) of the United States tripled. Low inflation, higher incomes, and an increased standard of living left millions of Americans better off than they had ever been. Pent-up consumer demand after years of wartime rationing made Americans eager to spend. Businesses applied technologies developed during the war years, such as plastics and synthetic fibers, to consumer goods. The G.I. Bill provided returning veterans with benefits, including low-interest home loans, funds for college or vocational training, and loans to start businesses or farms, which helped fuel postwar economic growth. Many of the homes purchased via G.I. Bill loans and other federal housing loan programs were soon filled with modern appliances such as refrigerators, washing machines, and televisions, in addition to children. Postwar prosperity often emphasized women returning to domestic roles, but many women remained in the workforce, particularly in service and clerical jobs.

Postwar economic prosperity enabled a housing boom that led to rapid suburban migration across America. Housing developers such as William J. Levitt applied mass-production techniques to construction, building thousands of affordable homes on the outskirts of cities. In many cases, low mortgage rates on inexpensive houses made it cheaper to buy a house in the suburbs than to rent an apartment in the city. Between 1945 and 1965, millions of Americans escaped crowded cities.

The suburbanization of America was expedited by the availability of affordable automobiles and good highways. In 1945, about twenty-five million cars were on American roads; by 1965, the number had tripled. The construction of new highways, spurred most importantly by the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956, helped move Americans out of the cities and into the suburbs. The act created a forty-one-thousand-mile (66,000 km) system of interstate highways. In many cases, African American neighborhoods were demolished to make room for these new highways.

Suez Crisis

In 1854, the viceroy of Egypt granted French engineer Ferdinand de Lesseps an "act of concession" that gave him permission to dig the Suez Canal. The concession also allowed the joint-stock company that financed the venture to control the canal for ninety-nine years, effective when the canal was finished. Work on the canal lasted from 1859 to 1869. At the time of the canal's completion, the French controlled half of the joint-stock company's shares, and the viceroy of Egypt owned a little over 40 percent. Financial trouble led the viceroy to sell his shares to British interests in 1875. The Suez Canal already provided little material benefit to the Egyptian government and people. When the viceroy sold his shares, the country also lost its right to 15 percent of the canal's profits as well as representation on its board of directors.

The Suez Crisis occurred three years after the Korean War. The Suez Canal connects the Red Sea and the Mediterranean Sea, making it a strategically important and lucrative shipping lane for trade between Europe, Asia, and East Africa. The canal had been controlled by Great Britain and France since its completion in 1869. On July 26, 1956, Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser seized control of the Suez Canal and Egypt's waters. His plan was to use revenues from the canal to pay for construction of the Aswan High Dam in Upper Egypt. The United States and Great Britain had initially promised to fund the dam project but reneged in light of the Egyptian government's close ties to the Soviet Union.

The United States, working to prevent Soviet intervention, proposed a new association of eighteen countries to run the Suez Canal. The proposal was supported by the UN. However, negotiations ultimately failed. French, British, and Israeli forces invaded Egypt in the fall of 1956. The UN ordered a ceasefire, which was accepted by Great Britain and France on November 6. All foreign troops were removed from Egypt by the spring of 1957, and Egypt maintained control over the canal. The Suez Crisis contributed to an economic crisis in Great Britain. It also changed the balance of power in the Middle East by diminishing the influence of Great Britain and France and increasing the U.S. presence.

The Arms Race and Space Race

During the Cold War, the United States and the Soviet Union engaged in an arms race, increasing the power and quantity of their weaponry. The United States first developed atomic weapons near the end of World War II; by August 1949, the Soviet Union had its own atomic bomb. The United States detonated the more powerful hydrogen bomb in 1952; the Soviets followed suit the next year. By the mid-1950s, both nations had developed intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) that could hit targets thousands of miles from launch sites. Both sides eventually grew their arsenals to thousands of warheads. Americans built bomb shelters, and schools held "duck and cover" drills for students. The nuclear arms race was based on a deterrence theory known as mutual assured destruction (MAD). Massive nuclear arsenals acted as a deterrent to war—anyone who launched a nuclear strike first could count on massive retaliation and the complete destruction of their own country.

Americans were shocked when the Soviets launched the first artificial satellite, *Sputnik 1*, in October 1957. The United States responded by launching its own satellite, *Explorer 1*, in 1958. That same year, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) was founded to advance U.S. space technology. However, the Soviets again took the lead in the space race in April 1961 when Yuri Gagarin became the first person to orbit Earth. Three weeks later, Alan Shepard became the first American in space. Later that year, President Kennedy announced plans to send an American to the moon. Thousands of brilliant scientists and mathematicians went to work. NASA employed nearly eighty African American women as "human computers" to manually perform the complex calculations that made space travel possible. Kennedy's goal was achieved in July 1969 when Americans Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin stepped onto the moon's surface.

John F. Kennedy and the Cuban Missile Crisis

In 1959, Fidel Castro and other left-wing revolutionaries overthrew the president of Cuba and established a regime closely aligned with the Soviet Union. The success of a communist revolution just ninety miles (145 km) from the United States alarmed American leaders, who feared the spread of Soviet influence in the Western Hemisphere. The following year, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) began training anti-Castro Cuban exiles to invade Cuba and topple the regime. The program was initially approved by President Dwight D. Eisenhower, and the invasion was authorized by his successor, President John F. Kennedy. The invasion was a disaster from the start. An air strike by American bombers poorly disguised as Cuban planes missed its targets and revealed U.S. support for the invasion. Also, Cuban intelligence knew about the CIA's plans in advance. When the invasion force landed at the Bay of Pigs on April 17, they quickly came under fire and were overwhelmed by twenty thousand Cuban troops. More than one hundred Cuban exiles were killed, and another thousand surrendered and were held captive for nearly two years as the Kennedy administration negotiated their release.

Following the Bay of Pigs invasion, Cuba turned to the Soviet Union for protection. Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev agreed and began the installation of Soviet medium- and intermediate-range nuclear missiles in Cuba. In October 1962, U.S. spy planes found evidence of the missiles' presence. Though the missiles could reach targets in the United States, Khrushchev did not believe that President Kennedy would retaliate.

To Khrushchev's surprise, Kennedy ordered a naval quarantine—purposely not termed a blockade—of Cuba. He also demanded that existing missiles in Cuba be removed, initiating a standoff that could have triggered a nuclear war. After several tense days, the Soviets agreed to Kennedy's terms. In return, the United States removed its own missile sites in Turkey.

The Cuban missile crisis was the closest the world had come to global nuclear war. In its wake, the United States and the Soviet Union created a direct telephone "hotline" between the White House and the Kremlin to improve communications between the two nations. The crisis also led directly to the August 1963 Nuclear Test-Ban Treaty between the United States, the Soviet Union, and Great Britain.

About Social and Civil Rights Movements

The mid-twentieth century was a time of profound change in the United States. The Civil Rights Movement that emerged during the 1950s gave way to other social reform movements that helped transform American society in myriad ways.

Origins of the Civil Rights Movement, 1945–54

Despite playing an important role in World War II, African Americans experienced significant discrimination in the defense industry and the military, just as they did in wider American society. A. Philip Randolph, president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, and other African American leaders demanded that President Franklin D. Roosevelt issue an executive order to end workplace discrimination in wartime industries and threatened to march on the White House. Roosevelt acquiesced on June 25, 1941, and issued Executive Order 8802. The order stated, "There shall be no discrimination in the employment of workers in defense industries or government because of race, creed, color, or national origin."

African Americans in the military served in segregated units, something that would continue until the Korean War. The incongruity of their situation was apparent: They were fighting for the freedom of others while their own freedoms were severely curtailed at home. In 1939, the *Pittsburgh Courier*, the country's largest African American newspaper, called out this incongruity. Three years later, the paper published a letter from an African American defense worker detailing the discrimination he faced at work. The letter introduced the idea of a "double V for victory" sign symbolizing victories abroad and for African Americans on the home front. The *Pittsburg Courier* championed the Double V campaign and called for an end to domestic racism and an end to segregation in the military. The campaign achieved the latter goal when President Harry S. Truman issued Executive Order 9981 in 1948. Although the Double V campaign was short-lived, the experiences of African Americans during World War II laid the groundwork for the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s.

Desegregating Education

Challenging segregation in education was a core strategy of the Legal Defense Fund of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), established by NAACP lawyer Thurgood Marshall, who would later become the first African American Supreme Court justice. Marshall was born in 1908 in the segregated city of Baltimore, Maryland, and his early experiences with discrimination had a significant impact on his career. After graduating from Lincoln University in Pennsylvania, he went on to earn his law degree from Howard University in Washington, D.C. Marshall took over the NAACP's Legal Defense Committee in 1938, and two years later, he created the Legal Education and Defense Fund to raise money for the committee's efforts. Their strategy was to focus initially on higher education and expose the fallacy that separate facilities could be equal.

An early case that Marshall took on was in response to the denial of admission to Heman Sweatt by the University of Texas Law School in 1946 because he was African American. Sweatt challenged the admissions decision in a state court. Instead of integrating its existing law school, the University of Texas attempted to hastily establish a separate law school for African American students. Sweatt challenged the school's actions again, and Marshall argued Sweatt's case before the Supreme Court. In 1950, the nine justices ruled unanimously in *Sweatt v. Painter* that the law school the University of Texas established for African American students was inferior to its whites-only law school and therefore violated the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment.

That same year, Marshall and his team achieved a similar victory in *McLaurin v. Oklahoma Board of Regents of Higher Education*. George McLaurin, like Heman Sweatt, was denied admission to a university based on the color of his skin. The University of Oklahoma defended its admissions policy on the grounds that it followed a state law that made integrated education illegal. The University of Oklahoma was forced to admit McLaurin after

a federal court struck down the state's segregation law, yet it attempted to force him to learn, study, and eat apart from his fellow graduate students. When a federal appeals court upheld the school's segregation policy, the NAACP appealed McLaurin's case to the Supreme Court. Once again, the nine justices ruled unanimously in favor of Marshall's client per the equal protection clause. Chief Justice Fred Vinson wrote that treating a student differently because of his race will "impair and inhibit his ability to study, to engage in discussions and exchange views with other students, and, in general, to learn his profession."

The culmination of the NAACP's legal assault on segregated education was the Supreme Court's ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (1954). The court ruled in *Brown* that state-mandated, or de jure (by law), racial segregation in public schools was unconstitutional, in violation of the Fourteenth Amendment's equal protection clause. *Brown* overturned the court's earlier decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) that had established the doctrine of "separate but equal." Although separate schools were never in fact equal, the doctrine had been used to explain how segregation did not violate the Fourteenth Amendment. The *Brown* court ruled that segregated education never could be equal. In 1955, the Supreme Court ruled in *Brown II* that the desegregation of public schools had to be undertaken "with all deliberate speed."

The *Brown* ruling faced backlash throughout the South. The "Southern Manifesto," a document issued by 101 Southern congressmen, affirmed their commitment to oppose desegregation. Civil rights organizers such as Arkansas activist and publisher Daisy Bates, however, began assembling groups of students to enroll in and desegregate white public schools. Bates selected Minnijean Brown, Elizabeth Eckford, Ernest Green, Thelma Mothershed, Melba Pattillo, Gloria Ray, Terrence Roberts, Jefferson Thomas, and Carlotta Walls—known collectively as the Little Rock Nine—to enroll at Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas.

On September 2, 1957, Governor Orval Faubus announced that he was deploying the Arkansas National Guard to Central High School to help keep the peace. Classes started on September 3; however, the Little Rock Nine were instructed to enroll the following day, ostensibly for their safety. A member of the NAACP arranged for the Little Rock Nine to meet at one of the school's entrances on September 4 around 8:30 a.m., where they would be accompanied into the building by a group of local ministers. But the family of one student, Elizabeth Eckford, did not own a phone, and she did not receive word of this plan. She arrived at the school on her own a little before 8 a.m. and quickly learned that the Arkansas National Guard was not there for her protection; the guardsmen were there to prevent her and the rest of the Little Rock Nine from entering Central High School. The guardsmen then stood by as a mob of angry segregationists surrounded Eckford. The other students arrived a little while later and, like Eckford, were accosted by an angry mob and denied entrance to the school by the Arkansas National Guard. President Dwight D. Eisenhower eventually sent troops from the 101st U.S. Airborne Division to protect the Little Rock Nine from crowds of angry white mobs as they attended school each day. Still, Alabama governor George Wallace, who would figure prominently in the violence experienced by those involved in the Selma-to-Montgomery marches, vowed to keep his state's schools segregated.

Despite very real threats of violence, African American students persisted. In 1960, six-year-old Ruby Bridges became one of six African American children to pass New Orleans's entrance exams, which were designed to prevent African American students from attending all-white schools. Although the school district repeatedly delayed her enrollment, Bridges and her parents did not give up. She became the first African American student to attend William Frantz Elementary School in New Orleans, Louisiana, in November 1960. Ruby Bridges had perfect attendance despite the angry crowds she passed each morning on her way into school. She became a class of just one after angry white parents withdrew their children from the school. However, Ruby Bridges's efforts led to the enrollment of more African American students the following school year. James Meredith integrated the University of Mississippi in 1963 after successfully suing the school for repeatedly denying his admission based on race.

Though the Supreme Court's 1954 ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* prohibited de jure school segregation, most American schools remained segregated de facto, or in effect, because patterns of residency were heavily influenced by racial discrimination, and school assignments were based on geography and gerrymandered school districts. This de facto segregation was not limited to the South; many Northern and Midwestern cities, including Boston, Detroit, and Chicago, also experienced racially segregated schools due to housing patterns

and local policies. In the 1960s, many school districts began the practice of school busing: transporting students to schools outside of their local districts to ameliorate racial segregation. Some districts voluntarily chose to bus students, while others were required to do so by court order. The highly controversial practice sparked protests around the country, particularly among white suburban parents who objected to their children being bused to inner-city schools. In *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education* (1971), the Supreme Court let stand the practice of using mandatory busing to racially integrate schools.

The Civil Rights Movement: Protest

Although organizations like the NAACP had existed since the early 1900s, it was not until the early 1950s that the Civil Rights Movement truly captured much of the nation's attention. The death of Emmett Till certainly increased this attention. Till was a fourteen-year-old African American boy who was visiting his family in Money, Mississippi. On August 24, 1955, Till allegedly offended a white woman, Carolyn Bryant, in a grocery store. In response, the woman's husband, Roy Bryant, and his half brother kidnapped and murdered the teenager. The two men were accused of murder, but an all-white, all-male jury acquitted them. Roy Bryant later confessed to Till's murder in a magazine interview. Emmett Till's family and organizations like the NAACP made his gruesome death a symbol of the violence and injustice that African Americans endured. Images of Emmett Till's mangled body shocked and horrified people around the United States and the world.

Emmett Till's murder was just one of countless examples of violence against African Americans. In stark contrast, civil rights leaders, especially Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., largely embraced nonviolent civil disobedience. Nonviolent direct action took many forms during the 1950s and 1960s, including marches, protests, and sit-ins. In 1960, four African American college students in Greensboro, North Carolina, sat at a segregated Woolworth's department store lunch counter and politely asked for coffee. Soon, the sit-in movement spread across the South, including to New Orleans. In September 1960, the Supreme Court ruled in *Lombard v. Louisiana* that segregation policies like those at McCrory's Five and Dime in New Orleans were unconstitutional.

Bus Boycotts

Baton Rouge, Louisiana

The first major segregated bus system boycott took place in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. In 1950, the Baton Rouge Bus Company (BRBC) secured an exclusive contract with the city of Baton Rouge that prevented African American–owned bus services from operating routes to African American neighborhoods in the city. On BRBC buses, African American passengers sat at the back of the bus, and white passengers sat at the front. If the back was full, African American passengers were forced to stand, even if there were open seats in the "whites only" section.

Reverend T. J. Jemison, a local civil rights activist and religious leader, petitioned the city council. He argued that because all passengers paid the same fare, African American passengers should be allowed to sit in open seats in the "whites only" section. In response, the city council passed Ordinance 222 that instituted a "first come, first served" model. African American passengers entered from the back of the bus while white passengers entered from the front so that seats were filled toward the middle.

When Ordinance 222 was overturned, Jemison and other local African American leaders organized a boycott of the BRBC. Some 80 percent of passengers were African American, and the BRBC felt the financial pinch after just a few days. Jemison struck a deal with the city council after five days, resulting in Ordinance 251. This ordinance designated fewer "whites only" seats, but African American passengers still had to stand if there

were open seats at the front of a bus filled at the back. Although many African Americans were angered by the arrangement, the Baton Rouge bus boycott did gain national attention and help inspire other transportation boycotts, including the Montgomery bus boycott.

Montgomery, Alabama

In 1955, a fifteen-year-old girl, Claudette Colvin, remained in her seat on a crowded, segregated bus in Montgomery, Alabama, rather than give it up to a white passenger. She was arrested. Later that same year, on December 1, a seamstress named Rosa Parks was also arrested in Montgomery for refusing to give up her seat to a white passenger. Four days later, the Women's Political Council and the local NAACP chapter organized a one-day boycott of Montgomery's bus system in protest of its segregation policies. Seventy-five percent of the system's riders were African American. About 90 percent of these riders participated in the boycott. Civil rights leaders, inspired by this success, decided to extend the boycott until their demands for desegregation were met. They organized the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA) to coordinate the boycott and elected Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. as its president. In February 1956, the MIA filed a lawsuit against the bus company's policies. A federal district court ruled that segregation on public buses was unconstitutional. The Montgomery bus boycott came to an end after the ruling, upheld by the Supreme Court, went into effect on December 20, 1956.

The Montgomery bus boycott also resulted in the creation of a new civil rights organization: the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). The SCLC was formed in 1957 by members of the MIA and other civil rights groups from ten Southern states. Members of its executive board of directors included King, Ralph David Abernathy, and Jemison.

A few years later, in *Boynton v. Virginia* (1960), the Supreme Court ruled that bus terminals also could not be segregated. The next year, interracial groups of Freedom Riders tested the court's ruling by riding interstate buses into a South that was still very segregated. Organized by the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the rides had the goal of seeing the *Boynton* ruling enforced. The riders faced extreme violence. However, their actions succeeded in desegregating public transportation in the South.

The Birmingham Campaign

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., the SCLC, and other civil rights leaders and groups organized the Birmingham campaign in April 1963 with the goal of desegregating Birmingham, Alabama. The campaign relied on a variety of tactics, including sit-ins, marches, and a boycott of local stores. Dr. King was arrested on April 12 after protesters refused to obey a court order obtained by the city to end the campaign. During his eight days in jail, King penned his "Letter from Birmingham Jail." The letter addressed a criticism published in the local paper by eight white religious leaders who urged African Americans to stop protesting and instead exercise patience as they negotiated for their civil rights. King's response reaffirmed his stance that African Americans neither could nor should wait any longer for their civil rights.

The Birmingham campaign gained national attention after the city's public safety commissioner, Eugene "Bull" Connor, authorized the use of fire hoses and police dogs against children. Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy eventually intervened in Birmingham. His office mediated an agreement between the campaign's leaders and city officials, leading to the desegregation of lunch counters and other public spaces. White supremacists who opposed the deal took violent action. Members of the Ku Klux Klan bombed the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, where much of the work organizing the Birmingham campaign was conducted, resulting in four deaths. National television coverage of the violence in Birmingham played a key role in mobilizing public opinion in favor of civil rights. The Birmingham campaign was a turning point in the movement and helped lay the groundwork for the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

The March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom

On August 28, 1963, a multiracial crowd of about 250,000 walked peacefully through the nation's capital, carrying signs urging Congress to end racial discrimination. The March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom was the culmination of months of organizing by union leader and activist A. Philip Randolph, James Farmer of CORE, Roy Wilkins of the NAACP, Whitney Young of the National Urban League, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. of the SCLC, and John Lewis of SNCC. Farmer was one of the original planners of the 1961 Freedom Rides, and Lewis had helped organize the rides and participated as a Freedom Rider. This group, known as the "Big Six," was later joined by leaders from the American Jewish Congress, the Commission on Religion and Race of the National Council of Churches, the National Catholic Conference for Interracial Justice, the National Council of Negro Women, and the United Auto Workers.

A. Philip Randolph appointed civil rights strategist Bayard Rustin as his deputy director. Rustin was instrumental to the event's success. He oversaw countless logistical details, from setting up sound systems to training people in nonviolent methods to help manage the crowds. Rustin also managed more than two hundred volunteers who helped fundraise, publicize the march, and coordinate transportation for participants. Rustin expected about 100,000 marchers to participate in the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom; an estimated 250,000 demonstrators participated in the event.

Civil Rights Act of 1964

Enacting the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was a challenging task. The House of Representatives passed the civil rights bill (introduced by President John F. Kennedy in 1963) on February 10, 1964, and it was then referred to the Senate. Many Southern senators, both Democrats and Republicans, were segregationists and opposed the civil rights bill. Beginning on March 26, Southern senators used a tactic called a filibuster to block the Senate from voting on the bill. The senators refused to stop speaking, and debate dragged on day after day, week after week. The Senate majority leader, Democrat Mike Mansfield, needed sixty-seven votes to end debate on the bill and break the filibuster, a procedure called cloture. And for that, he would need bipartisan support.

At President Johnson's urging, Democratic Senate leaders worked closely with the Senate minority leader, Everett Dirksen, to build a bipartisan team to end the filibuster and maneuver the civil rights bill through Congress. On June 10, 1964, the Senate voted to initiate cloture and end debate on the bill in a 71–29 vote, with twenty-seven Republicans joining forty-four Democrats. The Senate passed the bill on June 19, and President Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964 into law on July 2.

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 forbade discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, or national origin, especially in public accommodations and federally funded programs. It also strengthened voting rights enforcement and school desegregation.

Civil rights issues continued to dominate American politics in the late 1960s. The 1968 Fair Housing Act prohibited discrimination in the sale, rental, or financing of housing based on race, religion, national origin, or sex.

The Johnson administration also promoted affirmative action policies to improve opportunities for African Americans and other historically underrepresented groups. Affirmative action is an approach that favors disadvantaged groups in job hiring and promotions, admission to colleges and universities, and other social benefits. By the late 1970s, the use of affirmative action and racial quotas had led to charges of "reverse discrimination," the notion that majority groups (particularly white men) were being unfairly passed over in favor of "less qualified" individuals. In *Bakke v. Regents* (1978), the Supreme Court ruled that public universities and government institutions could set "goals" or "timetables" for integration but could not set specific numerical targets based on race for admission or employment. Decades later, the Supreme Court would reconsider this decision.

Voting Rights

The Freedom Summer

Voter registration drives were another important part of the Civil Rights Movement. Less than 7 percent of eligible African Americans in Mississippi were registered to vote. In 1961, SNCC organizer Bob Moses began working to change this. In 1964, Moses helped organize the Mississippi Freedom Summer Project. The project had two main goals: to draw national attention to racial oppression and violence in Mississippi and to register as many African American voters as possible.

Hundreds of mostly white volunteers joined with Black Mississippians to register African American voters. Despite violent acts of intimidation, volunteers registered 1,600 new voters. While this was an important step, this figure represented less than 10 percent of the African Americans who attempted to register.

The Selma-to-Montgomery Marches

The 1965 Selma-to-Montgomery marches were a series of three marches organized by SNCC and the SCLC to protest injustice in denying African Americans the right to vote. On March 7 and March 9, unarmed protesters were met by white segregationists and by police, who used whips, nightsticks, and tear gas on them. After the first march, which came to be known as "Bloody Sunday," at least fifty protesters required hospital treatment. During the second march, upon seeing police, Dr. King paused the marchers, led the group in prayer, and then led them back to Selma. Before the third march began, President Lyndon B. Johnson asked Congress for federal voting rights legislation.

Passed in the wake of the Selma marches, the Voting Rights Act of 1965 banned literacy tests as a requirement for voting, mandated federal oversight of voter registration in areas where tests had previously been used, and gave the U.S. attorney general the duty to challenge poll taxes for state and local elections. It also granted federal oversight of voter registration in areas where less than 50 percent of the non-white population had registered to vote. While this did not end discrimination at the polls, it did greatly improve voter turnout among African Americans.

Other Social Movements of the 1960s and 1970s

Civil rights legislation was far from the end of the story. While African Americans secured more legal rights, many continued to face poverty, discrimination, and systemic inequality. Encounters with police sometimes turned violent, leading to riots in places such as Harlem, Rochester, and Philadelphia in 1964 and Los Angeles in 1965. These uprisings reflected frustrations over persistent racial injustice and economic hardship, even amid broader social and political gains.

Malcolm X and Black Power

By the early 1960s, some African American activists had come to disagree with King's peaceful, nonviolent tactics. Among them was a leader in the Nation of Islam named Malcom X. The Nation of Islam is a Black nationalist organization that includes elements of the religion of Islam. Unlike Dr. King, Malcolm X did not advocate for integration. Instead, he supported the complete separation of African Americans from white Americans, highlighting economic self-sufficiency and a message of racial pride. These goals, Malcolm X felt, needed to be achieved "by any means necessary," including violence. Malcolm X's father was a follower of Marcus Garvey. As a result, Malcolm X was influenced by Garvey's ideas of Black pride, self-reliance, and

Pan-African unity, which shaped his focus on racial dignity and empowerment within the African American community. It should be noted that the rhetoric of the Nation of Islam, particularly under the later leadership of Louis Farrakhan, is also deeply anti-Semitic.

Having completed the hajj to Mecca and reconsidered his interpretation of the Quran, Malcolm X renounced violence and the Nation of Islam in 1964 after being disillusioned by a sex scandal involving the group's leader, Elijah Muhammad. His break with the organization was also influenced by public backlash against his assessment of John F. Kennedy's assassination. (He referred to the assassination as the "chickens coming home to roost," highlighting other instances of violence about which he believed Kennedy and the federal government had been complacent.) Malcolm X himself was assassinated in 1966; members of the Nation of Islam were convicted of the crime.

Stokely Carmichael was a key figure in the Black Power movement. Born in Trinidad and raised in Harlem, Carmichael went on to attend Howard University, where he embraced the Civil Rights Movement and student activism. He was the youngest participant in the 1961 Freedom Rides at just nineteen years old; spent his summers in Mississippi working on voter registration drives with SNCC, including the 1964 Freedom Summer; and helped organize the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP). This party was formed to challenge the state's segregationist, all-white Democratic Party.

Carmichael, like so many other members of the Civil Rights Movement, believed in the value of nonviolent resistance. However, he began to take a selectively confrontational approach to expanding civil rights as the 1960s progressed. In 1964, Mississippi sent an all-white slate of delegates to the Democratic National Convention and refused to seat African American members of the MFDP. Frustrated by resistance to integration of the Democratic Party in Mississippi, Carmichael began focusing on building an independent Black political party in Alabama, called the Lowndes County Freedom Organization (LCFO). The LCFO candidates adopted the slogan "Black Power for Black People." Stokely Carmichael became the SNCC chairman in May 1966. Later that year, while participating in the Meredith March Against Fear in Mississippi, he led protesters in a "We want Black power" chant.

In 1966, Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale founded the Black Panther Party in Oakland, California. Originally called the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, the organization was initially intended to provide protection for African Americans against police violence. It explained the racially unequal social conditions of African Americans through the lens of economic exploitation under capitalism, and its initiatives included social aid programs such as the Free Breakfast for Children Program, legal aid, and tuberculosis testing. Black Panther Party members gained national and international attention in 1967 when they entered the state capitol building in Sacramento, California, fully armed. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) declared the Black Panther Party a threat to the country and embarked on a mission to destabilize the group. In a 1969 raid on one of the group's headquarters, the FBI killed several people, including party leader Fred Hampton.

American Indian Movement (AIM)

In 1968, several Native American activists created the American Indian Movement (AIM) to demand equal rights and improved living conditions for Indigenous Americans. AIM also wanted the U.S. government to recognize the sovereignty of Native American nations. To call attention to these concerns, AIM joined other Native American groups in occupying Alcatraz Island—a former U.S. prison located in San Francisco Bay—from November 1969 to June 1971. In 1972, AIM organized the Trail of Broken Treaties March on Washington, D.C., culminating in the marchers' occupation of the Bureau of Indian Affairs offices. AIM was also involved in the 1973 takeover of a site at Wounded Knee, South Dakota, to protest U.S. policy toward Native Americans.

Thanks in part to the work of AIM and other Native activists, Congress passed the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act in 1975. This act gave Native groups greater autonomy over their own affairs, strengthening tribal governments and empowering tribes to operate their own schools. As a result, Native children have had the opportunity to learn more about traditional languages and cultures.

The Women's Rights Movement

In her 1963 book *The Feminine Mystique*, Betty Friedan described the dissatisfaction many women felt with their roles in modern American society. Three years later, Friedan and other feminists founded the National Organization for Women (NOW) to fight for equal rights and opportunities and greater personal freedom for women. The women's liberation movement was underway. In the early 1970s, NOW began a campaign for an Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) to the Constitution. NOW and other activists, such as Gloria Steinem, founder of *Ms.* magazine, worked to pass the ERA and to bring feminist issues to the attention of mainstream Americans.

Not all women supported women's liberation. Writer and political activist Phyllis Schlafly emerged as a key leader opposing the women's movement, particularly the ERA. Schlafly and her allies feared that the ERA would upset traditional gender roles and damage families.

Although the ERA fell short of ratification, women's rights activists won several victories. In 1972, Congress passed Title IX, which prohibits sex-based discrimination in any school or other education program that receives federal money. In 1973, the Supreme Court's ruling in *Roe v. Wade* struck down overly restrictive state abortion laws, establishing a legal framework that protected a woman's right to choose. In 2022, the Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade*, returning the authority to regulate abortion to individual states.

Second-Wave Feminism

Second-wave feminism contributed to significant advancement for women in all areas of life, including in government and professionally. It is called the "second wave" because it built on the earlier, first-wave feminist movement that focused largely on legal rights such as women's suffrage, expanding its goals to address workplace equality, political representation, education, and social and cultural expectations. In 1971, a group of activists—Bella Abzug, Shirley Chisholm, Betty Friedan, Fannie Lou Hamer, and Gloria Steinem—founded the National Women's Political Caucus (NWPC). The goal of the NWPC was and is to bring more women into government at the federal, state, and local levels in a range of positions, from elected offices to appointed roles to jobs as lobbyists and campaign organizers. There were just 15 women in the House and Senate at the start of the Ninety-Second Congress in 1971. This number grew to 23 in 1981, 65 in 2001, and 146 in 2021. Women have also gone on to serve increasingly prominent roles in the government. For example, in 1975, Ella Grasso of Connecticut became the first woman elected governor in her own right, not as a successor to a husband who had died or could not serve.

In 1960, women made up about a third of the country's workforce; as of 2021, women accounted for 47 percent of U.S. workers and held 52 percent of management and professional jobs. This is important growth, but there is still considerable work to be done. Despite the fact that women earn 47.5 percent of all medical degrees, only 16 percent of medical school deans are women. At the same time, women earn more doctoral degrees than men but account for less than a third of full-time professors and only 30 percent of college and university presidents. Women are represented even less in corporate leadership. Katharine Graham became the first woman chief executive officer (CEO) of a Fortune 500 company in 1972; as of 2025, 11 percent of Fortune 500 CEOs were women. While systemic barriers contribute to these gaps, some analysts note that personal career choices, work-life balance considerations, and historical differences in career trajectories also play a role in shaping women's representation in top leadership positions.

United Farm Workers

Throughout American history, the agricultural industry has relied heavily on the labor of farmworkers. Historically, these workers did backbreaking work for long hours and low wages, and these conditions persisted into the twentieth century. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, two organizations were formed to improve farmworkers' wages and working conditions. The Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee (AWOC),

composed mainly of Filipino migrants, was formed in 1959 and led by labor activist Larry Itliong. The National Farm Workers Association (NFWA) was founded in 1962 by labor leaders César Chávez and Dolores Huerta. NFWA membership consisted mainly of Mexican migrants.

Farming was in César Chávez's blood. He was born on his grandparents' farm in Arizona in 1927, which his family lost during the Great Depression. Like so many other families during this time, the Chávez family relocated to California, where they became migrant farmworkers, moving from one place to another in search of work. Chávez experienced firsthand the long hours and hard work of a migrant worker for pitiful wages. He also experienced the growers' corrupt labor practices, including renting houses and campsites to their migrant workers for exorbitantly high rates deducted from the workers' already low wages.

After serving in the U.S. Navy, Chávez returned to California and joined the Community Service Organization (CSO), a grassroots organization founded in 1947 to increase civic participation and activism within California's Hispanic communities. As an organizer, Chávez led voter registration and unionization efforts. It was at the CSO that he met Dolores Huerta, a California teacher who worked with many children of poor, hungry migrant farmworker families. Huerta decided to leave the classroom and address the discrimination and economic injustice that Hispanic Americans experienced. She worked with a variety of civic organizations before eventually joining the CSO.

In 1962, Chávez formed the NFWA, a labor union for farmworkers, and he invited Huerta to join him in the effort. Soft-spoken and deeply committed to nonviolence, Chávez became the face of the NFWA. Huerta, a brilliant organizer in her own right, was outspoken, opinionated, and unafraid of confrontation. Together, they worked to increase wages and improve working conditions for farmworkers. To do this, they used boycotts, marches, and strikes to raise awareness about conditions in the agricultural industry and to advocate for reforms. The NFWA gained more than two thousand members within two years, most of whom lived in California.

In September 1965, Itliong and the AWOC organized a series of strikes against grape growers in Delano, California, to demand better working conditions and pay and the right to form a labor union. Filipino workers who belonged to the AWOC first went on strike. At this time, Hispanic workers earned $1.40 an hour through a World War II–era guest worker program, while Filipino workers earned $1.25 an hour. Within days, the NFWA joined the effort, organizing a strike of five thousand grape workers. Huerta also helped organize a consumer boycott of grapes. Soon, national and international media brought attention to *La Causa* (the cause), and other unions, including the United Auto Workers, supported the strike and the boycott.

In 1966, Chávez led a 340-mile (547 km) march from Delano to Sacramento, the state's capital, to raise greater awareness. The AWOC and the NFWA merged that same year to form the United Farm Workers (UFW) union Delano's grape growers eventually agreed to sign a new labor contract with the workers, negotiated by Dolores Huerta, in 1970. This contract included both higher wages and health insurance benefits for farmworkers.

The UFW continued to use boycotts, marches, and strikes through the 1970s, including against California's lettuce growers and grape growers (for a second time) in 1973. The UFW's constant pressure resulted in a major victory when California enacted the Agricultural Relations Act in 1975. This law gave farmworkers the legal rights to unionize and to bargain collectively. Today, the UFW serves as a farmworkers' labor union and continues to fight for farmworkers' rights, including safe working conditions and livable wages.

The Chicano Movement

In 1965, the same year as the Delano grape strike, the Chicano Movement began to take shape as Mexican Americans formed their own organizations to advocate for economic, political, and social equality. The Chicano Movement was similar to the Black Power movement in that it did not push for assimilation into mainstream American society; rather, it celebrated Mexican American identity and culture.

Labor groups such as the United Farm Workers and student groups such as El Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano/a de Aztlan (MEChA) fought to end school segregation, expand voting rights, counter discrimination and stereotyping, secure wage equality, and promote self-determination. Meanwhile, the Raza Unida Party (RUP) worked to promote Hispanic American political participation. Like the Civil Rights Movement, the Chicano Movement used nonviolent tactics such as boycotts, marches, protests, and strikes to achieve its goals, including increased political and educational empowerment of Mexican Americans.

The Environmental Movement

Organizations dedicated to environmental preservation have existed in the United States since the late 1800s. For example, the Sierra Club was founded in 1892 to promote conservationism and wildlife protection.

Rachel Carson and *Silent Spring*

After World War II, farmers began to increasingly rely on chemical pesticides to deter insects from destroying their crops. Farmers were using hundreds of millions of pounds of chemicals annually by the end of the late 1960s, including a pesticide called DDT. DDT was hailed as a miracle chemical because it controlled a variety of insect species, including malaria-spreading mosquitos. Farmers did not realize, however, that the hundreds of thousands of pounds of DDT they sprayed on their farms caused harm to other species, especially birds. This caused bird populations across the United States to decline, including bald eagles and brown pelicans, the Louisiana state bird.

Rachel Carson, a biologist who had worked for years with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, helped bring this mounting crisis to light. In 1957, Carson received a letter from a friend in Massachusetts about the connection between pesticides and declining bird populations. This letter inspired Carson to research and write her groundbreaking book *Silent Spring*. Carson's work was initially published by *The New Yorker* magazine in a serialized format in 1962. *Silent Spring* stunned readers with its opening fable about a force that causes birds to stop singing, bees to stop buzzing, and animals and humans alike to fall ill. The book detailed the overwhelming evidence, carefully compiled from numerous scientific studies, of DDT's harmful effects on the environment and humans.

Rachel Carson's work was groundbreaking for many reasons. She openly criticized pesticide companies and the government for their complicity, a move that drew significant backlash, including attempts to discredit her. Despite this, President Kennedy's Science Advisory Committee Report ultimately corroborated her account. *Silent Spring* brought to light the impacts of human actions on the planet. It also brought environmental issues into the mainstream and laid the groundwork for the environmental movement of the 1960s and 1970s.

Continuation of the Movement

The modern environmental movement gained momentum through the 1960s. Between 1963 and 1965, Congress passed three major laws aimed at studying and reducing pollution, increasing federal control over water quality, and establishing the first federal standards for automobile emissions. In 1966, the secretary of the interior began publishing an annual list of endangered species and was given federal funds to help protect these vulnerable populations. The end of the decade, however, was marked by environmental tragedies. In 1969, a massive oil spill caused widespread harm to California's coast, and oil and chemicals floating on the surface of the Cuyahoga River in Ohio caught on fire.

These events prompted Gaylord Nelson, a Democratic U.S. senator from Wisconsin, to take action. Nelson enlisted the help of another environmentally conscious senator, Republican Pete McCloskey, and a twenty-five-year-old activist named Denis Hayes to organize Earth Day, a nationwide teach-in about the growing crisis. The three assembled an eighty-five-person team to conduct events at college campuses,

auditoriums, religious venues, city centers, and parks around the United States. Approximately 10 percent of the U.S. population, or around twenty million people, participated in the first Earth Day in 1970. At the same time, some business leaders and politicians criticized the growing movement, arguing that regulations would harm industry, limit economic growth, or exaggerate environmental risks. Certain communities also resisted government interventions, particularly when they required relocating people or limiting local industrial activities.

Later that year, the federal government established the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), consolidating multiple existing government environmental responsibilities under a single agency. The EPA was given a range of powers to protect the environment, including conducting research, establishing "environmental baselines" to monitor improvements or regressions, setting and enforcing air and water quality standards, and supporting states as they created their own programs to control pollution. The creation of the EPA contributed to the expansion of existing environmental protections through the Clean Air Act of 1970 and the Clean Water Act of 1972. The former authorized the EPA to establish national air quality standards and regulate emissions, and the latter allowed the agency to set new standards to control water pollution.

Since the 1970s, the world has faced a number of major environmental disasters. Several have occurred at nuclear power plants. In April 1979, a nuclear reactor near Three Mile Island in Pennsylvania partially melted down. Though little radioactive gas escaped the plant and the incident cost no lives, fears about nuclear waste spread across the nation. The facility at Three Mile Island stayed in operation until 2019. A much more serious nuclear incident occurred in April 1986, when a reactor at the Chernobyl power plant in Ukraine exploded and sent huge amounts of radiation into the atmosphere. Fallout drifted across the Soviet Union and into Europe and has been linked to thousands of cases of long-term illnesses, including cancer and radiation poisoning. An almost twenty-mile (30 km) radius around the plant remains off-limits. Throughout the 1970s, anti-nuclear protests were held around the world to raise awareness of these environmental and health issues.

In 1978, industrial waste that had been buried underground in the 1940s and 1950s began to leak into yards and homes in the Love Canal neighborhood of Niagara Falls, New York. Most of the neighborhood was evacuated, and the abandoned land was purchased by New York. The incident led to the 1980 creation of the Superfund program, which helps pay for the cleanup of toxic sites. Despite this and other environmental policy efforts, critics continued to argue that environmental regulations imposed undue economic burdens, that some of the perceived dangers were exaggerated, and that local communities were sometimes unfairly affected by government mandates.

About The Later Years and End of the Cold War, 1960s–1991

The Cold War continued to evolve from the 1960s to its conclusion in 1991. This period of varying escalation and de-escalation of conflicts and hostilities coincided with significant domestic change, including the expansion of social safety nets, political polarization, and economic turmoil.

The Vietnam War

Before World War II, Vietnam was a French colony. After the war, communist rebel Ho Chi Minh led the fight for independence from France. The United States supported France, fearing that if Vietnam fell to communism, other neighboring nations would fall as well—an idea known as the *domino theory*. In May 1954, after a decisive defeat at Dien Bien Phu, France pulled out of Vietnam. A peace treaty divided Vietnam at the seventeenth parallel, leaving Ho and the communists in control of North Vietnam and a non-communist government controlling South Vietnam. Nationwide elections were to be held in 1956 to decide whether Vietnam should reunify.

Fears of communist expansion, however, led the United States to install a pro-American government in South Vietnam, run by Ngo Dinh Diem. The unpopular, dictatorial Diem refused to hold elections. This angered the South Vietnamese, many of whom then threw their support behind the National Liberation Front, or Viet Cong, which was allied with North Vietnam. At the same time, Ho Chi Minh began strengthening North Vietnam's ties to communist China and the Soviet Union. By the late 1950s, the United States was sending military advisers (military personnel meant to train and advise but not participate in combat) and millions of dollars to South Vietnam to keep Diem in power. In 1959, Ho Chi Minh declared war on South Vietnam, aided by South Vietnamese Viet Cong (Vietnamese communist) guerrillas.

By late 1961, it had become clear that South Vietnamese troops would be unable to stop a communist takeover of their country. President Kennedy sent more military advisers and, eventually, combat personnel to Vietnam.

Diem was assassinated in 1963 due to dissatisfaction with his authoritarian rule, favoritism toward Catholics, and inability to gain popular support in predominantly Buddhist Vietnam. His oppressive policies, especially against Buddhists, led to protests like the self-immolation of Buddhist monk Thich Quang Duc, drawing international condemnation. Despite U.S. support for Diem because of his anti-communist stance, his ineffectiveness and the resulting instability led President Kennedy not to oppose the coup that ultimately removed him, viewing it as necessary for U.S. interests in containing communism.

After two U.S. Navy vessels were said to have been attacked by North Vietnam in August 1964, an event known as the Gulf of Tonkin incident, American involvement escalated dramatically. U.S. planes began regular bombing raids on North Vietnam. By June 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson had sent more than eighty thousand combat troops to Vietnam.

Johnson justified this escalation to the American people by framing the conflict as a crucial battle against the spread of communism. However, as more young men were drafted and American casualties increased, the public became increasingly disenchanted with Johnson and his war policies. This growing anger fueled a powerful anti-war movement that harmed Johnson's popularity, ultimately leading to his decision not to seek reelection in 1968.

Johnson's Domestic Policies

The Great Society was a set of initiatives and programs put forth by President Lyndon B. Johnson that were meant to end poverty and inequality, improve the environment, and reduce crime. Many Great Society programs were part of Johnson's War on Poverty and still exist as part of the American social safety net. For example, the Economic Opportunity Act aims to help the underprivileged break the poverty cycle through education and job skills. Medicare and Medicaid are also Great Society programs. Medicare made health care more affordable for older Americans, and Medicaid was primarily created to help the poor afford health care. The Head Start program provides early learning opportunities for children aged three to five. The 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) guarantees federal funding for education in low-income school districts, funds preschool programs, and supports school libraries. The ESEA has been reauthorized several times, including in 1988 (during the Reagan administration) as the Hawkins-Stafford Elementary and Secondary School Improvement Act, in 1994 (during the Clinton administration) as the Improving America's Schools Act (IASA), in 2001 (during the George W. Bush administration) as No Child Left Behind, and in 2015 (during the Obama administration) as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA).

The Nixon Years

In 1969, President Richard Nixon announced the so-called Nixon Doctrine: The United States would no longer support allies with ground troops but would provide weapons and economic aid. A crucial part of the doctrine was the policy of "Vietnamization," which was intended to strengthen South Vietnam's ability to defend itself and gradually reduce U.S. military presence. This policy shift came in the wake of the Tet Offensive in 1968. During the Vietnamese new year (Tet), a combination of North Vietnamese and Viet Cong forces attacked one hundred South Vietnamese cities and towns. Days later, U.S. troops regained most of the territory that had been lost in the initial attacks but sustained heavy losses in the process. The Tet Offensive was a turning point in the war, as it led many Americans to question U.S. involvement in the war and made clear that the ongoing conflict in Vietnam could not be won at a reasonable cost.

A few months later, in March 1968, U.S. soldiers killed around five hundred Vietnamese civilians in what has become known as the My Lai massacre. The massacre occurred because soldiers were frustrated and scared from fighting in difficult conditions, and some leaders failed to control them or make sure they followed the rules of war. Villagers were often seen as enemies if they were suspected of helping the Viet Cong, which made it easier for soldiers to commit violence. Helicopter pilot Warrant Officer Hugh Thompson played a crucial role in stopping the massacre. Seeing the killings from the air, Thompson landed his helicopter between the soldiers and the villagers, threatened to open fire on U.S. troops if they continued, and helped evacuate civilians to safety.

The My Lai massacre was documented by a U.S. Army photographer. When his photographs appeared in American newspapers, they strengthened the growing anti-war movement in the United States. The images remain some of the most iconic ones of the war. As the war dragged on, American casualties continued to mount. Many Americans also opposed the draft, and anti-war protests were held in most major American cities throughout the late 1960s and early 1970s. Support for the Vietnam War weakened even more following the shooting of four unarmed student protesters by the Ohio National Guard at Kent State University in 1970 and the leak of the Pentagon Papers in 1971.

U.S. troops began withdrawing from Vietnam in July 1969 through the Vietnamization policy. While outwardly de-escalating the conflict, President Nixon began waging a secret war in Cambodia. Although Nixon eventually admitted to the escalation on April 30, 1970, he was determined to keep Americans in the dark about future actions in the region, specifically ordering military leaders to mislead the public. In one memo, he stated, "Publicly we say one thing. Actually, we do another."

A ceasefire was eventually announced in January 1973. The final U.S. troops to leave Vietnam departed in March 1973. That same year, perhaps regretting the blank check granted to President Lyndon B. Johnson by the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, Congress passed the War Powers Act, which requires presidents to notify Congress when sending troops into combat and limits how long armed conflicts involving U.S. forces can continue without congressional approval. In April 1975, after another North Vietnamese offensive, South Vietnam surrendered to North Vietnam, and the country unified as a communist nation. Saigon was renamed Ho Chi Minh City.

During his presidency, Nixon successfully improved U.S. relations with both China and the Soviet Union. In 1972, he visited mainland China, making him the first sitting president to do so. The visit was also significant because it laid the groundwork for formally reinstating diplomatic relations in 1979 after nearly thirty years of isolation between the two countries. Nixon signed two SALT (Strategic Arms Limitation Talks) agreements with the Soviet Union to reduce the buildup of nuclear weapons.

The Pentagon Papers

In an effort to better understand the challenges of the Vietnam War, the Department of Defense commissioned a classified study about its history. Known as the Pentagon Papers, the study showed that U.S military leaders had long thought that victory in Vietnam was unlikely. The Pentagon Papers were proof that some of these leaders and the Johnson administration had intentionally misled the American people about U.S. involvement in the conflict. Daniel Ellsberg, an analyst working on the project, was disillusioned by the study's findings and leaked the seven-thousand-page study to the press.

The New York Times started publishing articles about the Pentagon Papers on June 13, 1971. Within a matter of days, the Department of Justice obtained a temporary restraining order, arguing that continuing to publish the Pentagon Papers would threaten national security. This action constituted prior restraint: The government was prohibiting the newspaper's free speech before the free speech took place.

The New York Times was not the only newspaper in possession of the Pentagon Papers; the documents had also been sent to *The Washington Post*. Together, the two newspapers fought the restraining order all the way to the Supreme Court. In *New York Times Co. v. United States*, the Supreme Court ruled 6–3 in favor of the newspapers. It said the Nixon administration's prior restraint of publication would violate the newspapers' First Amendment rights to publish. The court's ruling was significant because it checked the power of the executive while simultaneously protecting the freedom of the press.

The Watergate Scandal

In 1972, five men who worked for Nixon's reelection campaign were arrested after breaking into the Democratic Party's national headquarters at the Watergate Hotel in Washington, D.C., where they had been attempting to steal documents and plant listening devices to spy on Nixon's political opponents. This group was called "the Plumbers"; after the Pentagon Papers leaked, Nixon created the group to prevent more leaks. Nixon denied having sent the men to collect information on his opponent's campaign and set wiretaps, but he lied about the incident and conspired with his chief of staff, his White House counsel, and his former attorney general to cover it up.

Nixon had installed a secret recording system in key White House areas, including the Oval Office, to document conversations and meetings for memory, decision justification, and control. The existence of these tapes was revealed in July 1973 by Alexander Butterfield during the Senate Watergate Committee hearings, suggesting potential evidence of Nixon's involvement in the Watergate scandal. A subpoenaed tape was found to have eighteen minutes erased, which Nixon attributed to an accidental erasure by his secretary, raising suspicion of a cover-up. Citing executive privilege, Nixon initially refused to release the tapes, but the Supreme Court ruled in July 1974 in *United States v. Nixon* that he must do so. The tapes, along with the missing eighteen minutes, confirmed Nixon's role in the cover-up.

Nixon resigned the presidency in August 1974 after the House Judiciary Committee approved articles of impeachment but before the House of Representatives could consider them. His original vice president, Spiro Agnew, had previously resigned following accusations of tax evasion and bribery, and Nixon had appointed Gerald Ford, a representative from Michigan and the House minority leader, to fill Agnew's role, making Ford next in line for the presidency. When Nixon resigned, Ford became president. Gerald Ford remains the only president never to have won a presidential election.

The impeachment case against Nixon was dropped when he resigned, but he was still liable for criminal prosecution. Yet one month after Gerald Ford's inauguration, the new president issued a full pardon for the former president.

The 1970s

During the early 1970s, the U.S. economy faced serious inflation—a general increase in the prices of goods and services—along with slow economic growth and high unemployment. Nixon's economic policy cut federal spending and raised interest rates to limit public borrowing. However, these actions discouraged consumer spending, causing business production to fall. The economy entered a period of stagflation, or slow business activity combined with inflation.

Rather than introducing mandatory wage or price controls, President Ford began an unsuccessful public relations campaign known as Whip Inflation Now (WIN) to encourage personal saving and careful spending. He also cut taxes in 1975, which did help the economy grow. However, much of the stimulus to the economy was provided by an expansion in government spending.

Carter's Economic and Energy Policies

When Jimmy Carter took office in 1977, he inherited high inflation and high unemployment. After the Federal Reserve lowered interest rates, businesses grew, and millions of jobs were created. But inflation remained high until Carter appointed a new chair to the Fed, Paul Volcker, who again raised interest rates to end double-digit inflation. Relief was not immediate. The "Volcker shock" caused a temporary but difficult recession, and Carter was not reelected.

Energy policy was a cornerstone of Carter's administration. During the 1970s, the United States was highly dependent on foreign energy, and the country was still feeling the effects of the 1973 Arab oil embargo. Carter's policies were designed to promote energy independence with an emphasis on renewable energy. He created the Department of Energy, passed laws that mandated better fuel efficiency in vehicles, and extended tax credits and financial incentives to the private sector to invest in renewable energy.

Foreign Relations

While campaigning for president, Jimmy Carter identified human rights as an important part of his foreign policy goals. He believed the United States should be a world leader in this area. Carter's foreign policy was largely inspired by the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which was issued in 1948. The Carter administration spoke out against human rights abuses around the world and strategically suspended aid to oppressive governments.

Another major foreign policy goal of President Carter's was to bring peace to the Middle East. In 1978, he invited Israeli prime minister Menachem Begin and Egyptian president Anwar el-Sadat to Camp David, Maryland, for a meeting. After days of negotiations, the leaders reached an agreement known as the Camp David Accords, leading to an Egyptian–Israeli peace treaty signed in March 1979. The treaty marked the first time that Israel and an Arab nation had made peace.

Later in 1979, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan to support the Afghan communist government, which was fighting anti-communist Muslim rebels. In protest, the United States and other Western nations boycotted the 1980 Summer Olympic Games, scheduled to take place in Moscow. The United States also imposed economic and trade sanctions against the Soviets.

In July 1979, Islamist revolutionaries led by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini overthrew the pro-U.S. Iranian government and installed a militant Islamist government in its place, with Khomeini at its head. In November, pro-Khomeini students overran and occupied the U.S. embassy in Tehran and took fifty-two Americans hostage. Diplomatic negotiations failed to release the hostages, and a surprise military rescue attempt in April 1980 ended in disaster when eight American soldiers were killed in an accident before the operation got underway. Carter's failure to resolve the hostage crisis was a major factor in the 1980 presidential election.

Ronald Reagan and the Cold War

By the late 1970s, concerns over the social and cultural changes of the preceding decades—rising crime, social unrest, feminism, and a perceived erosion of traditional moral values—had led to a political movement called the New Right. New Right activists, including conservative Christian groups, business leaders, and middle-class suburban voters, tended to favor limited government, lower taxes, and reduced social welfare programs. They believed these policies would restore order, strengthen traditional values, and make the country more prosperous. They also favored a hard-line foreign policy, particularly toward the Soviet Union, and supported increases in defense spending. Running in support of New Right ideas, the Republican Party gained control of the U.S. Senate in 1980 and propelled Ronald Reagan to the presidency.

In the 1980s, the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) was a terrorist group headed by Yassir Arafat and dedicated to the creation of an independent Palestinian state and the destruction of Israel. (In 1993, the PLO recognized Israel's right to exist and renounced war as a means of acquiring territory.) The PLO operated in states surrounding Israel. In 1982, President Reagan sent U.S. Marines to assist in the removal of PLO rebels from Lebanon as part of an agreement between Israel and the PLO. In apparent retaliation, a car bombing at the U.S. embassy in Beirut in April 1983 was followed in October by terrorist attacks on U.S. and French military centers in the city, including one suicide bombing at the First Battalion, Eighth Marines barracks that killed more than 240 U.S. service members as well as 58 French personnel. Though never identified, the perpetrators were suspected to be terrorists associated with Iran. Rather than deepen U.S. involvement in the region, Reagan withdrew U.S. troops from Lebanon in 1984.

During Reagan's second term, the United States secretly agreed to sell weapons to Iran in exchange for Iran's help in freeing some American hostages in Lebanon. The sale violated an embargo on arms sales to Iran. Some officials in the Reagan administration illegally funneled funds from the sale to support the Contras, a rebel group fighting the communist government in Nicaragua. In 1987, Congress held hearings on the so-called Iran–Contra Affair. While several administration officials were prosecuted and convicted for their actions, Congress did not find evidence that President Reagan was directly involved.

In 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev became the leader of the Soviet Union, and relations between the United States and the Soviet Union began to improve. Gorbachev's policies of *glasnost* (openness) and *perestroika* (economic and political restructuring) greatly opened the door for democratization and liberalization and weakened communist rule.

Recognizing the opportunity for change, Reagan engaged Gorbachev directly in a series of diplomatic summits. This diplomacy culminated in the landmark Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty of 1987, which eliminated an entire class of nuclear weapons. The treaty built trust between the two superpowers and helped create the conditions for a peaceful end to the Cold War.

The First President Bush

George Herbert Walker Bush was born in Milton, Massachusetts, on June 12, 1924. He served in the U.S. Navy during World War II and earned the Distinguished Flying Cross. He later graduated from Yale University in 1948 before moving with his wife, Barbara, and their family to Texas, where he entered the oil industry. Bush became involved in the Republican Party during the late 1950s and successfully ran for the House of Representatives in 1966, marking the beginning of his political career. He was appointed U.S. ambassador to the United Nations by Richard Nixon, a position he held from 1971 to 1972 before becoming the chair of the Republican National Committee. Under Gerald Ford, he served as the chief of the U.S. Liaison Office in Beijing and then as head of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).

George H. W. Bush announced his presidential candidacy in 1979; he later dropped out of the race and became a loyal supporter of Ronald Reagan, and eventually his running mate. Bush served as Reagan's vice president for both of his terms. Bush ran again for president in 1988, this time securing the Republican Party's nomination. He ran on a continuation of Reagan's economic policies, stating, "Read my lips: no new taxes." He also promised "a kinder and gentler nation," a sentiment contradicted by the often negative campaign he ran against his opponent, Michael Dukakis. George H. W. Bush ultimately won the 1988 presidential election with 53 percent of the popular vote and 79.2 percent of the electoral vote.

The presidency of George H. W. Bush began as the Cold War was ending and democracy was being restored throughout Eastern Europe. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 (which resulted in fifteen independent countries) and the end of the Cold War, Bush began to promote a "new world order" in which the countries of the world would stand as one against tyranny and terrorism. The hope was for nations of goodwill to unite for the common good.