

# To what extent was the usa losing the cold war 1949-196



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During this period the USA was increasingly concerned with its global position and the need to contain the growing threat of international communism. The period started badly with the 'fall' of China to communism in 1949. The measure of US success in the Cold War at this time depends upon perception of the American position and whether the USA was content to keep communism contained or showed a willingness to 'roll back' the influence of the USSR and communist expansion.

The USA showed different levels of success and failure in different regions and with different technologies. American success overall was much higher than critics have suggested. In 1949 the USA held the nuclear monopoly, this gave an additional force to US diplomacy throughout the world. With the development of the Soviet A-bomb, nuclear stalemate was established. This was a setback for the Americans who then carried out a massive investment programme to develop the more powerful H-bomb, the US dismay it took the Soviets only a year to catch up on this new technology. Although the USA was not behind in this part of the Cold War, the loss of advantage was acutely felt within Washington and broader American society, fear of the Bomb and the effects of radiation were common in US culture and attitudes.

American citizens no longer felt as safe and this was one of the key reasons for US anti-communist paranoia and the perception of losing the Cold War in the early 1950s. Eisenhower came to power in 1953 stating that he would be more vigorous in the challenge towards communism than the democrats had previously been. His Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles, took a tough line on containment and the roll back of communism. This was after the failure of this policy in the Korean War where American efforts to push communism

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out of Korea under General MacArthur failed and containment was all that was achieved by the armistice in 1953.

Dulles policy of brinkmanship, the willingness to push an opponent to the brink of nuclear war was a dangerous strategy backed up by the notion of massive retaliation, nuclear arsenals capable of total destruction of the enemy. In some respects such a policy was counter-productive in showing a USA in control of the Cold War as it heightened anxieties about conflict. In spite of the tough talk of Eisenhower's 'New Look' the policy remained one of containment, as shown in response to Soviet problems in the Eastern Bloc during the 1950s where the USA failed to intervene. The shared destructive capability of both sides made them come to the negotiating table and under 'Ike' and Khrushchev there was a thaw in the Cold War. This warming of relations made critics of the US government claim that they had gone soft on communism, there was fear that the USSR would overtake the USA in nuclear technology and the means to deliver it on US targets.

In the mid-1950s there was concern over a 'bomber gap' in which the Soviets seemed to hold the advantage in the number of long-range bombers, in reality this was a hoax fabricated to intimidate the USA. This led to increased military spending in the USA, up from \$15 billion to \$50 billion per annum. With the 'bomber gap' patched up, concern after 1957 switched to missiles. The Soviet lead in the space race was a clear propaganda coup for Khrushchev, the launch of Sputnik in 1957 and the first man in space in 1961 were clear landmarks which the US had missed out on. The early failures of the American space programme also gave the interpretation that the USA were losing the technological battle in the Cold War.

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The US response with the creation and high funding of NASA showed that the USA was not willing to see itself as behind in the frontiers of new technology. The Soviet ability to get a satellite in space meant that they could also launch ICBM which could hit American targets from launch sites within the Soviet Union. There was the perception that this meant the USSR had a distinct lead in warhead delivery systems, in reality the Soviet technology was slipping behind the USA and the numbers of combat-ready missiles they possessed was well below American levels. This was known to the US government through the U2 spy plane programme, the public though perceived this new threat and the Democrats were deeply critical that Eisenhower had allowed a non-existent 'missile gap' to develop.

The USA was able to successfully contain communist expansion in many parts of the world. But any communist success would be deemed to be a failure in American strategy of containment. It is probably unrealistic to assume that the USA could have maintained total containment at a time of decolonisation and the rise of socialist independence movements. In the Americas, the CIA was successful in Guatemala in removing a socialist premier, the rise of Castro in Cuba though did present a clear danger for the future. US policy towards Castro forced Cuba towards friendlier terms with the USSR, to many Americans, a pro-Soviet regime so close to their shores was an intolerable lapse in the containment strategy.

In the Middle East the US were able to remove the Iranian socialist Mossadeq from power and establish a more pro-US regime, the establishment of the Baghdad Pact meant that the US perimeter of containment was almost complete: from NATO through CENTO and SEATO to ANZUS. In East and

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South East Asia the US were unsuccessful in rolling back communism, China remained the strong communist power with the potential to support neighbouring regimes. American support for Taiwan and non-recognition of the PRC caused difficulties, especially over disputes offshore islands but the USA was cautious enough to restrain the demands to the most fervent Chinese Nationalists who wanted to see China 'rolled back'. As mentioned, communism was contained in Korea but at massive human cost.

Read about In Vietnam, the withdrawal of France in 1954 caused clear problems as Vietnam could have all fallen to communists under Ho Chi Minh. The division of Vietnam into North and South was an unsustainable measure, especially as the US sponsored government of the South under Diem was notoriously corrupt and unpopular. American ideology which placed all socialist independence movements as part of a conspiracy from Moscow, the reality was more to do with peasant hostility to existing elites and nationalist fervour.

Policy in SE Asia was one of the clear areas of failure though this would not become clear for another decade. In judging the overall success or failure of the US in the 1950s, there are varied factors to consider. In the military confrontation with the Soviet Union, the USA maintained the advantage in spite of Soviet technology catching up and in the space race overtaking the USA. Communism was contained effectively in all areas of the globe - save Vietnam and Cuba.

The USA went to the negotiating tables with the USSR from a position of strength. Popular perception within the USA placed them in a much worse

situation than the reality suggested, the 'fall' of Cuba and Vietnam were concerns, propaganda coups for the Soviets in Space and over the U2 crisis made it seem as if the Soviets held the advantage, Khrushchev's confidence suggested a USSR winning the Cold War. The calm and steady policy of Eisenhower, not over-reacting to the new challenges presented, ensured that the USA had maintained advantage in the Cold War without escalating it to a position which would threaten confrontation.