Politics After WWII and Cold War Tensions

By Jeremi Suri, The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, adapted by Newsela staff on 11.28.16

World War II ended in 1945. Many countries fought in World War II. At the war’s end, America was the most powerful country in the world. American soldiers had defeated the German and Japanese armies. American science and technology was now the best in the world. The U.S. was able to make more goods than other countries. American farmers were selling enough food to feed people around the world.

After the war, soldiers came home from Europe and Asia. There were street parades and family parties. People were happy. Yet, the world was dangerous, difficult and violent. In 1945, the U.S. ended the war with Japan. It dropped atomic bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Americans began to worry about other countries getting and using the atomic bomb. They were especially worried about the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union was a huge country in Europe and Asia. It was communist. Under communism, the government
owned everything. People had few rights. The two countries began competing for power. The next 40 years was called the "Cold War." The U.S. and the Soviet Union argued. Their soldiers did not fight each other, though.

The threat of new enemies

Americans worried about new enemies. They especially worried about the Soviet Union spreading communism.

President Harry Truman was against communism. He wanted to stop the Soviet Union. He wanted to keep other countries from becoming communist. He also wanted to help soldiers returning from war.

Lawmakers passed the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act. It is also known as the “GI Bill.” It helped eight million soldiers get an education. It also gave more than two million soldiers loans to buy new houses. The GI Bill had a big effect on the whole country.
Many people were treated unfairly in postwar America. In 1948, Truman signed an order. It said African-American soldiers must be treated equally. At the time, black and white soldiers were kept separate. They did not serve together.

**Stopping communism**

In 1947, Truman announced a new plan. It was called the “Truman Doctrine.” The United States gave money and military help to other countries to stop communism.

For many Americans, it looked like the Soviet Union was winning. In 1948, communists took over Czechoslovakia. It was a country in Europe. In 1949, China became communist.
The next year, the North Korean army attacked South Korea. North Korea was communist. Truman sent the American army to fight in the Korean War. At home, many Americans worried about communism. They could not stop thinking about it. They thought it would spread to the U.S. Many Americans were accused of supporting communism.

The Cold War lasted more than 40 years.

*Jeremi Suri holds the Mack Brown Distinguished Chair for Global Leadership at the University of Texas at Austin. He is the author of five major books on contemporary politics and foreign policy, including "American Foreign Relations since 1898" (2010) and "Liberty’s Surest Guardian: American Nation-Building from the Founders to Obama" (2011).*