The late summer of 1945 marked the height of American power. During World War II, American soldiers had decisively defeated the seemingly invincible German and Japanese armies. Thanks to government money and some of Europe’s best minds, American science and technology had advanced beyond all other countries. Above all, the United States had developed the capability to produce more military and civilian goods, including aircraft, cars, radios and guns, than the rest of the world combined. At the war's end, American farmers were selling enough food to feed populations around the globe. For American citizens who saved and sacrificed in the 1930s and early 1940s, the next decade promised unprecedented security and abundance. Happy days, it seemed, were here again.

Happiness was evident everywhere

Happiness was evident in the street parades, the family reunions and the new births, called the "baby boom," that filled the country immediately after the war. Yet, Americans also saw a dangerous, complex and potentially violent postwar world. In August 1946, journalist John Hersey published an account of the horrific suffering caused when America dropped an atomic bomb on the Japanese city of Hiroshima. Hersey’s descriptions warned that the greatest achievements of modern science promised more death and destruction, if not carefully controlled. Americans began to worry about other countries, especially the Soviet Union,
acquiring and using this new atomic technology. Although the U.S. and communist Soviet Union were allies during World War II, they began competing for power in Europe and Asia, which was called the "Cold War."

After World War II, Europe was divided into Eastern and Western halves, held largely by Soviet and American forces. The United States controlled postwar Japan, but the U.S. held the southern part of Korea and the Soviet Union held the northern part. American forces also remained in Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam, the Philippines, Indonesia and other areas captured by the Japanese during the war.
Americans worried about postwar costs. The war had caused much destruction. How much would they have to pay to help rebuild allies, like Great Britain and France, and former enemies, like Germany and Japan? Would these postwar projects undermine the American economy at home? Americans also worried about new enemies: Would the Soviet Union and its allies in Europe and Asia take advantage of postwar problems to spread communism? Would Soviet leader Joseph Stalin establish a new empire in the territories formerly held by the Germans and the Japanese?

**Stopping the growth of communism**

President Harry Truman felt strongly that the United States had to stop communism from growing in other countries. Yet, he also wanted to create new opportunities, especially for returning soldiers, at home.

The Servicemen’s Readjustment Act, also known as the “GI Bill,” was signed into law on June 22, 1944, by President Roosevelt. It became the foundation for the remarkable growth of the country. Eight million veterans received help with their education. More than two million of them attended colleges and universities, paid directly by the government. More than two million veterans also bought new homes with government loans provided by the GI Bill.

Returning soldiers used their new education to move into the growing American middle class. As part of the middle class, they read more, bought more and saved more, and they also paid more taxes than any previous generation of Americans.
Women, African-Americans and other minorities continued to deal with the ugliness of racism, sexism and ethnic prejudice in postwar America. But they also benefited from opportunities unthinkable in earlier generations. Although the GI Bill clearly favored white male veterans, it also led to higher levels of education and homeownership for other groups.

More rights for African-Americans

Truman pushed publicly for more fair and equal treatment of citizens, but he was reluctant to move quickly on racial integration because he did not want to alienate white voters. A growing movement of African-Americans was demanding equal rights. African-Americans and other minorities had served in combat during the Second World War, and they now had a strong argument for equal citizenship.

As the November 1948 presidential election approached, Truman recognized that he needed African-American votes. Despite opposition from many military leaders, on July 26, 1948, he signed Executive Order 9881, requiring “equality of treatment and opportunity for all persons in the armed services without regard to race, color, religion or national origin.” Until that point, the armed forces was segregated.

The "Truman Doctrine"

In 1947, he announced what became known as the “Truman Doctrine,” in which the United States would support anti-communist forces around the world. The United States would use economic and military aid to limit Soviet influence in other countries, and it would use police power at home to punish citizens who supported communism.

In February 1948, Soviet-supported communists took over Czechoslovakia, and in 1948 and 1949, the Soviet Union cut access to West Berlin, which was controlled by the U.S. and Western European powers. In October 1949, the Soviet Union scored a victory with the
successful communist revolution in China. These world events reinforced fears that Stalin and his allies were winning. By the end of the 1940s, Cold War tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union dominated foreign policy and domestic politics.

On June 25, 1950, the communist North Korean army attacked South Korea, and Truman sent American forces to fight what became the Korean War. At home, many prominent Americans became obsessed that communism was seeping into the U.S. It began a period of public witchhunts in which many American actors, scientists, politicians and writers were accused of being communist sympathizers.

Through this all, President Truman remained steadfast about protecting American power and wealth. He sought to expand opportunity for citizens at home and defeat enemies abroad. His violent anti-communism became the cornerstone of the next 40 years of American politics. American Cold War politics lasted for more than three decades.

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