

### 3. Cold War Conflicts

**Although the United States and the Soviet Union never went to war directly, Cold War tensions provoked conflicts in other parts of the world.** Both superpowers competed for the loyalty and resources of the world's less-developed nations. This competition fueled civil wars and other violent struggles. The fiercest fighting took place in Korea and Vietnam, but conflicts also erupted in Latin America, the Middle East, and Africa.

**War in Korea** **The first major battle of the Cold War took place in Korea.** The **Korean War** lasted from 1950 to 1953 and nearly caused a wider war.

At the end of World War II, Korea was liberated from Japanese control and divided in half. The Soviet Union occupied the northern half, while the United States occupied the south. By 1949, both countries had withdrawn their forces, but Korea remained divided between the communist north and noncommunist south. In June 1950, North Korea invaded the south with Soviet and Chinese backing. The United States responded immediately by sending troops to defend South Korea. It also gained support from the United Nations, which called on member-states to form a UN army to repel the invasion.

At first it appeared that North Korea would defeat the UN army. But General Douglas MacArthur, the UN commander, managed to encircle and isolate the North Korean forces. He then moved north, all the way to the Chinese border at the Yalu River.

**To prevent a UN victory, China got involved.** It sent 300,000 troops into North Korea and pushed the UN forces back. MacArthur called for airstrikes against China, possibly with nuclear weapons. President Truman rejected the idea, fearing it could draw the Soviet Union into the war. Eventually, the fighting reached an impasse. North and South Korea returned to their 1949 borders and signed an armistice, or end to the fighting.



For a time, the Korean conflict had raised the threat of a nuclear war between the superpowers. Instead, it ended in a stalemate. Today, Korea remains divided. South Korea has prospered as a capitalist and democratic state. North Korea, on the other hand, is a strict communist dictatorship. Relations between the two Koreas remain tense.



**The Vietnam War** **The next major conflict arose in Vietnam.** It began as an anti-colonial fight for independence, but it soon became a Cold War struggle between communist and noncommunist forces.

At the end of World War II, Vietnam was still part of the French colony of Indochina. After the war, Vietnamese nationalists—led by the communist

leader Ho Chi Minh—declared independence. For eight years, French and Vietnamese forces battled in the Indochina War.

In 1954, the French were defeated. Vietnam was divided into a communist north—backed by China and the USSR—and an anti-communist south, backed by the United States. Within a few years, communist-led rebels, known as the **Viet Cong**, rose up against the southern government. The **Vietnam War** was about to begin.

The United States entered the war in stages. At first it provided South Vietnam with military aid and assistance, including military advisers. These advisers trained the South Vietnamese army and also took part in combat. By late 1963, some 17,000 U.S. advisers were on the ground in Vietnam.



In 1964, after reports of an attack on a U.S. ship off the North Vietnamese coast, President Lyndon Johnson called for an escalation of U.S. involvement. He argued that the United States had a duty to defend South Vietnam from communist aggression. “If we are driven from the field in Vietnam,” Johnson declared, “then no nation can ever have the same confidence in . . . American protection.” If Vietnam fell to communism, he said, other Asian nations might also fall. This idea became known as the [domino theory](#).



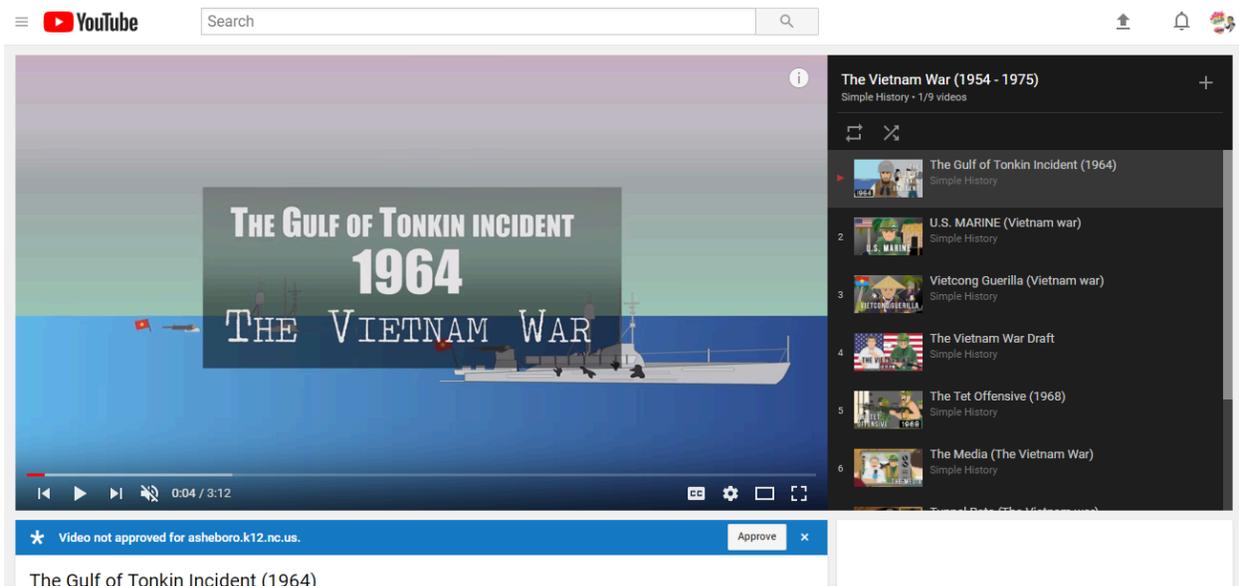
In early 1965, the United States carried out airstrikes against targets in North Vietnam. Soon after, it sent its first combat troops into Vietnam. Over the next two years, U.S. forces in the country increased rapidly. By 1969, more than half a million American soldiers were serving in Vietnam.

The United States dedicated vast military resources to the war effort. Yet despite its superior firepower, it could not achieve victory. The U.S. government faced mounting opposition at home and abroad to its war in Vietnam. In contrast, the Viet Cong were committed to fight to their last resources to drive the Americans out of Vietnam. By the early 1970s, the United States had begun to pull its troops out and shift responsibility to the army of South Vietnam.

In 1973, the last American soldiers left Vietnam. Within three years, North Vietnam had conquered the south and united the country. Many southerners fled communist rule. Most made their way to refugee camps in other parts of Southeast Asia, and later to the United States.

Like China, Vietnam eventually adopted reforms and opened up its economy. Communist officials continued to retain a tight grip on the government.

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**Troubles in Latin America** Latin America also became a battleground in the Cold War. Widespread poverty and sharp divisions among social classes made the region ripe for political upheaval. As in other parts of the world, communists promoted class struggle in Latin America as a means to achieve social justice and diminish economic inequalities. The United States, which had long dominated the hemisphere, remained alert to the growth of communism in the western hemisphere.



**The first Cold War incident in Latin America occurred in Guatemala.** In 1953, a nationalist president—Jacobo Arbenz Guzmán—began a program of land reform. He took unused land from the American-owned United Fruit Company and gave it to poor peasants. Arbenz was not a communist, but he had communist support. A year later, the United States staged a covert action to oust Arbenz and replace him with a military dictator. The Guatemalan army held power for most of the next three decades.

**In Cuba, a revolution led by Fidel Castro overthrew the nation's U.S.-supported dictator, Fulgencio Batista, in 1959.** Castro sided with the poor against Cuba's wealthy middle and upper classes. He soon declared his communist sympathies and made Cuba a Soviet ally. The United States responded with efforts to remove Castro from power, including a [failed invasion at Cuba's Bay of Pigs in 1961](#). (READ THIS)

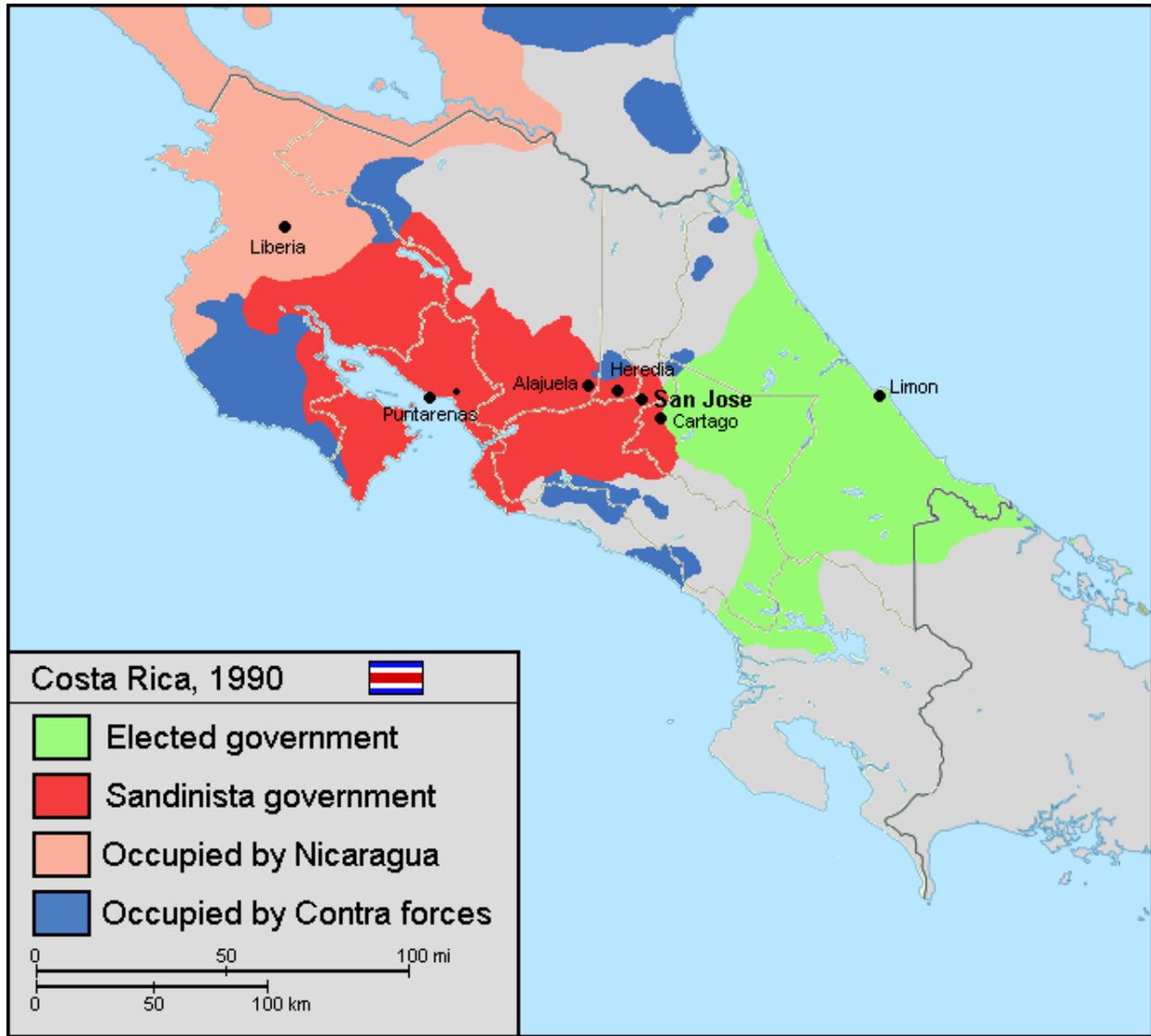
**Cold War tensions with Cuba reached their height in October 1962, during the Cuban Missile Crisis.** Castro had allowed the Soviet Union to install nuclear missiles in Cuba, within striking distance of American cities. Though the United States claimed these missiles were placed in Cuba unprovoked, in reality the United States had placed their own nuclear missiles in Turkey in April of 1962. These missiles were well in range of hitting Soviet targets.

The United States placed a naval blockade around the island and demanded that the Soviets remove the missiles. It also considered a possible invasion of Cuba. For two anxious weeks, the world teetered on the brink of nuclear war. Eventually the Soviets backed down and withdrew the missiles, in return for a U.S. promise not to invade Cuba.



For the next few decades, Cuba remained a source of Cold War frictions. The United States accused Castro of promoting revolution in the Americas. To halt the spread of communism, the United States used covert methods to oppose leftist influence. For example, the United States helped overthrow a democratically elected socialist government of Chile in 1973. A brutal military dictatorship ruled Chile for the next two decades.

**A revolution in Nicaragua also aroused American concerns.** Leftist rebels, known as the Sandinistas, toppled a U.S.-backed dictatorship in 1979. The Sandinistas' ties to Cuba and aid to rebels in neighboring El Salvador soon sparked conflict with the United States. The United States began funding a rebel army, called the Contras, to fight the Sandinistas in 1981. The Contra war inflicted great damage and undermined Sandinista rule. In 1990, the Sandinistas lost power through elections.



**Tensions in the Middle East** **Cold War conflict also erupted in the Middle East. Egypt was the site of the first crisis.** In the early 1950s, a nationalist leader, Gamal Abdel Nasser, gained power in Egypt. To balance Western influence, Nasser accepted aid from the Soviet Union. Then, in July 1956, he seized the Suez Canal, a key waterway operated by France and Great Britain. In response, France, Britain, and Israel invaded Egypt and retook the canal. The United States, fearing a Soviet intervention,

persuaded the allies to withdraw. It then increased its own presence in the Middle East to secure its oil supplies and continue its support of Israel.

**Iran was another hot spot.** After World War II, Iranian nationalists rose up against the pro-Western policies of the shah, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. In 1951, Iran's parliament—led by Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadeq seized a British oil company. The new government also accepted Soviet aid and forced the shah to flee the country. Fearing that Iran might become a Soviet ally, the United States carried out a **covert action**, a secret operation by the Central Intelligence Agency, or CIA. The action resulted in Mossadeq's arrest and the shah's return to power. Over the next two decades, the shah continued his efforts to modernize Iran. However, he coupled his policies of Westernization with oppressive, authoritarian measures carried out against his people by the secret police. In 1979, he was overthrown and replaced by a strict Islamic regime. We will discuss this more in depth when we look at our Terrorism unit.

**Conflicts in Sub-Saharan Africa** The Cold War also made a deep impact on sub-Saharan Africa. In the more than two decades after World War II, nearly every African nation had gained independence from colonial rule. A number of these countries were caught up in the struggle between the two superpowers.

**Congo was the first flashpoint.** After gaining independence from Belgium in 1960, Congo desperately needed foreign aid and assistance. Its new prime minister, Patrice Lumumba, was an ardent nationalist. When the United Nations rejected his plea for aid, he turned to the USSR for help. Fearing increased Soviet influence in Africa, the CIA worked with local army officers to overthrow Lumumba and install a new pro-American regime.

**The superpowers also got involved in wars in various parts of Africa, including Angola and Ethiopia.** In Angola, a civil war in the mid-1970s

pitted three rebel armies against each other in a vicious struggle for power. The Soviet Union and Cuba supported one army, while the United States supported another. China also got involved. A cease-fire was only reached in 1989. In Ethiopia, the United States and Soviet Union backed opposing sides in a war with neighboring Somalia. Both countries are located in the Horn of Africa, a region of East Africa with close access to the Middle East. The superpowers' involvement in the war reflected their strategic interest in this region.

During the period from 1945 to 1990, wars around the world killed some 40 million people. Most of those conflicts were related, directly or indirectly, to the Cold War. Other factors, including the legacy of colonialism, also played a crucial role in promoting conflict. **But the power struggle between the United States and the USSR exacerbated those wars and made them more deadly.**