Course Learning Outcomes for Unit VI

Upon completion of this unit, students should be able to:

4. Summarize the impact of the civil rights movement on social, political, and economic infrastructure of society from the mid-20th century to today.

Reading Assignment

In order to access the following resource(s), click the link(s) below:


To gain further knowledge of the material, please view the PowerPoint presentations below. These will help you identify key people discussed in this unit, important details not covered within the lesson, and political cartoons from the time period to have a view into the mindset of people towards key topics.

For the Unit VI PowerPoint, please click here. For a PDF version, please click here.


Unit Lesson

Unit V focused on the Second World War, which left us with one lasting front of political, militaristic, and cultural hostility. The Allied Powers, who had so effectively worked together in the extermination of the Nazi threat, were not as fortunate in overlooking their own differences.

In the West, the traditional powers of Great Britain and France remained aligned with the United States, which had been the one superpower still left standing after WWII. On the other side stood the Russians, who, unlike in the aftermath of World War I, possessed an established, commanding leader in Joseph Stalin. Stalin demanded the respect and loyalty of his people, which was a power he gained through utopian promises and brutal aggression. Hitler’s defeat would ultimately lead to tense negotiations for the fate of the German people, and finally, a new struggle to find the world’s one true world power.
Developing a historical perspective of a time, even one that you yourself or those around you remember, requires more than one snapshot of that era; to build a complete understanding of the American experience during the Cold War, it is necessary to engage in multiple points of view with varied experiences of the time.

Cold War Hostility

This unit will focus on the early hostilities of the Cold War, including the Korean conflict and troubles at home. This would be the ultimate test for democratic resolve, as it was attacked on the world stage by individuals of immense power and influence who wanted nothing more than to spread their utopian ideals to the nations of the West.

Germany, at the end of the war, was literally divided in half between the Allied West and Russia. To put it in simplest terms, excluding Berlin, the fate of the once-Axis territory now rested in the hands of the nations that liberated it. Berlin, the capital of Germany and the opposition’s seat of power during the previous world war, was also divided between the two sides. To enforce this border, a wall was constructed which, over time, would become more than just a symbol of the differences between geographic rivals, but of political validation. The Western powers were not going to repeat the mistake of abandoning the rebuilding process, which could again lead to further hostilities, but Stalin demanded that German suffering stand as payment for Russian losses and casualties as well as a symbol of the strength of Eastern Europe and of his own ruthless nature.

Communism, in its purest form, was popular in poorer nations because it publicly guaranteed equal treatment and promised to provide what was necessary to live. Its failures, in practice, were ultimately due to corrupt management and limited incentive, which was the hallmark of the free market economy.

In the fallout of the Second World War, Soviet Russia would be influential in the spread of Communism throughout its new borders, which now resided all the way into Western Europe, having been invited by some and bullying their way into others. With the efforts of other aspiring dictators, such as China’s Mao Zedong, other war-weary and struggling nations, including Vietnam and Korea, would also soon face strong communist pressure.

In the U.S., communism was a source of constant headlines. Senator Joseph McCarthy’s red scare was effective at swaying social consciousness against anything “red.” The Soviet growth across Eastern Europe and Asia provided his campaign with a continuous source of propaganda.

This period of tension would be dubbed a “Cold War” in reference to the absence of violence between the powers. However, all the while, there was a lingering threat that only supported further political action, including espionage on both sides and relentless speculation of who was an enemy and who could be trusted. In the aftermath of previous wars, the United States would instinctively renew its isolationist policy, retreating back to its natural borders and leaving Europe to address its own problems. With the quick and ominous threat that communism brought, however, this was no longer an option. As the only world power with the potential to rival the strength of the Soviets, the United States found itself in the middle of a political firestorm and in a state of constant alert.

In 1950, the dominos started to fall, and the first real conflict emerged out of this situation. (For more information, see http://gcveteransmemorial.org/photo-panels/.)

The Republic of Korea (ROK), more commonly known as South Korea, was invaded by the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK), also known as North Korea. Once united under the control of Japan, these two neighbors were, like Germany, divided at the mutually agreed upon 38th Parallel as part of negotiations (For more information, see https://history.state.gov/milestones/1945-1952/korean-war-2 and Illustration of the domino theory put in place during the Cold War.

(Domino theory, 2010)
Following World War II, the North fell under the control of the Soviets, and the South, which had long been part of a trade network, fell under the united Western control. Following the pattern of their Soviet brothers, the North Koreans became communist and desired a reunification of the Korean peninsula. South Korea, having been supported in their rebuilding, had become quite Westernized in the years since the war, and no longer shared many cultural, social, economic, or political traits with their neighbors to the north.

For the Western powers, this was a situation in need of containment. United Nations (UN) forces would be brought into the region to enforce the Truman Doctrine and ensure that South Korea would not sustain losses due to the invasion. Things did not entirely go as planned for the heavily U.S.-backed UN. Early losses would lead to moderate success and momentum, but conflicting leadership would lead to China stepping in to support their communist allies.

The United States was not ready for this conflict. Despite this, Truman would not be seen as afraid or unable to back up his promises, and 1.8 million Americans would be deployed to Korea. The first success would not come until Douglas MacArthur successfully retook Incheon, then Seoul, and finally the original border. Truman wanted to reunite Korea, rather than simply reinforcing the border from five years prior, but he knew the risk of threatening the Chinese border. MacArthur, as brilliant and charismatic as he was, did not see eye-to-eye with this strategy. Since his experience in the Pacific padded his confidence in the U.S. strength, he decided to ignore his Commander in Chief, and China did indeed enter the fray with a force of 300,000 soldiers to aid the northern cause.

Truman knew the U.S. would struggle with this interference. He decided to forego his attack, and instead chose to negotiate his original goal of reinstating the border at the 38th parallel. MacArthur and Truman would have a very loud, and public, falling out because of this decision. MacArthur, like many Americans, did not count out the U.S. and saw the situation at the time as an opportunity to strike against the communists. Truman, frustrated and angered at MacArthur’s blatant refusal to follow orders, removed the WWII hero from his post as Commander of the Pacific in 1951, whereupon the first round of peace negotiations began. (For more information, see http://strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pubs/parameters/articles/00spring/boose.htm.)

Finally, in 1953, with North Korea battered from continuous air raids and South Korea unable to match Chinese forces on the ground, an armistice was signed at Panmunjom. In addition to ceasing hostilities, this agreement instilled a 2.5-mile mutually shared buffer zone, called the demilitarized zone, surrounding the new border. The last impact of this conflict was the fear of future problems. It was decided that the military was not up to the standard of a superpower, and with that, the federal budget would allot approximately 70% of the 1952 budget to restocking the military in case of later aggression. This controversial, and secret, decision would be known as NSC 68.

Truman would not recover from Korea, and he would not even attempt to challenge as the incumbent in the 1952 Presidential election. The Republicans would take the White House, with Eisenhower at the helm; he chose California Senator Richard Milhous Nixon as his running mate and eventual Vice President.

Eisenhower knew the nation was war-weary and chose to be a moderate during his term of service. He proposed a plan that most Americans would see benefit in, but which had pretty much the opposite of the flash of FDR’s New Deal. Eisenhower’s “Middle Way” sought to reinforce the liberties and rights of the American people by “avoiding government by bureaucracy as carefully as it avoids neglect of the helpless” (Eisenhower, 1953, para. 12).
Eisenhower saw benefit in public works, such as the New Deal, but did not think that the government needed to interfere with every aspect of personal life.

The Cold War was a time of high alert. It is perhaps because Eisenhower’s style of “modern Republicanism” was focused on public works (such as the Interstate Highway and Defense System Act of 1956) and jobs, instead of constant threats and overbearing government interference, that he was popular.

On the other end of the scale, the active muscle behind the Red Scare, Senator Joseph McCarthy, would finally step too far by accusing persons of the military of communist association, without any proof to validate his claims. He then experienced a very public falling out, and almost overnight, the public scare was over, though the threat was still very real. Today, the term McCarthyism is linked to false, or unproven, accusations. His model is common to popular media, such as Arthur Miller’s The Crucible, which uses the backdrop of the Salem Witch Trials of the 1690s as a comparison to the panic and fear of McCarthy’s time in the public limelight.

Adapting to Changes

With progress, there are often losses, some expected, others not. Such is the case with the success of Eisenhower’s interstate system. For the second time in American history, agreements between the federal government and Native American tribes would be broken over issues such as land rights and the assumption that the Native Americans wanted to become more “American” and less “Native.”

By the end of Eisenhower’s Administrations, there were plans for the forced removal of tribes from granted lands in exchange for compensation or replacement lands. Much of this was related to a Truman-era belief that the Native Americans needed federal aid to survive and that many Native Americans acted out their desires to be more “American” by undertaking roles with other Americans during the war years, such as enlistment or factory positions. However, the final outcomes would begin during Eisenhower’s time.

Similar to Jackson’s administration in the 19th century, not all went according to plan with the removals. Prices given for lands were often unfair to the tribes, federal funding stopped with the closing of federal care and aid facilities (as this became a state matter). Lastly, many Native Americans were sent to cities where they were promised all they would need for a prosperous opportunity, but they would face much of the same racism and bigotry that was seen by immigrants in the 1850s.

There would also be a great migration that witnessed the 1950s popularize and advertise the suburbs. Families who could quickly make their way out of the city and into the neighborhood did. This was done in hopes of finding their own paradise, like those seen in popular television programs such as Leave it to Beaver and Father Knows Best. In reality, what changed was the nature of work.

Technology was replacing the unskilled worker in industry. Also, many of the backbreaking farming tasks, which had required a large family in previous generations, were now almost automatic. Unions grew stronger as work opportunities were at a premium; many of the lower classes would move into the city to find there were still few opportunities to be had.

The greatest rate of population growth occurred in the Southeast and Southwest, which had traditionally much smaller populations and few major cities. With this influx of citizens, however, there came an effort to oust competition, starting with immigrants. Being in the Southwest, the group that would face the hardest criticism would be Mexicans.

Women did see their opportunities to work trend upward, but they were not considered equal to men in either wages or status in most companies. Women also became a more common population on university
campuses, but starting a family would often trump educational ambition. Perhaps the largest change for
women would be a new group of reform-minded activists, such as Betty Friedan and Edith Stern, who argued
against the homemaker expectation. They would advocate for women to not accept society's right to judge
their capability based on gender, but to challenge themselves to find personal fulfillment, which might be
outside of the home.

Equality was also a goal for African Americans, who still dealt with many of the Jim Crow attitudes that their
fathers and grandfathers had. The 1950s would provide some steps forward, but at the expense of a renewed
wave of racism and hostility. *Plessy v. Ferguson* was a landmark Supreme Court decision in 1896 that
legalized segregation. It had reinforced and supported racist attitudes and actions in America, which
inherently, also limited the opportunities for advancement of African-American communities.

*Brown v. Board of Education* of 1956 would change this by overturning the
Plessy decision. In short, multiple lawsuits were presented which showed that,
due to issues related to geography, facility, or funding, separate
institutions of learning were not equal. This pattern of hostility was not
unique to one region, population, or economic class; it had simply been
overlooked or excused for such a long time that generations continued to
grow in its shadow. Even with the Brown decision, there was little to no
enforcement in many cases. The American South, however, was still a
hotbed of activity, and a young activist named Rosa Parks would become
the face of one such event: the Montgomery bus boycott.

Even with these tense times, the 1950s was the backdrop to many cases of
peaceful refusal to abide by Jim Crow era laws. If resisters were arrested, that
was fine, and attempts at public humiliation provided even greater exposure.
Finally, with the aid of leaders such as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and the
Southern Christian Leadership Conference, this unequal treatment was
becoming national news. Eisenhower would make some small strides to
advance equality, but in general, he focused on issues he was more comfortable
with, most notably, military and international affairs.

**Space Race**

Internationally, Eisenhower would face many struggles, starting with the premiere of a new Soviet leader:
Nikita Khrushchev. Both Eisenhower and Khrushchev feared what continued hostilities could mean, up to and
including the potential for nuclear war if the threat escalated. Under these two men, the competition between
these superpowers would take a turn in a new direction—the race for
space.

Though today there are numerous nations with the technology and
means for a space program, this was more a show of technological
progress and ability than a public spectacle. For example, if one
power could launch a rocket powerful enough to exit the atmosphere,
what could that mean for their military might? This is exactly the
question that was on the minds of many when *Sputnik*, an unmanned
satellite, was launched into space by Russia. The U.S. was quick to
respond, but the damage had been done. The U.S. still had the edge
in nuclear technology, but this was the first time since the Great War
that the U.S. public was not absolutely sure if it could protect itself
from a rival force.

To calm the public, the government made public service advertisements which, in hindsight, probably had
about the same chance of success as a placebo. For example, schools taught students to quickly crawl under
their desks if they heard an air raid siren, as well as other such drills that supposedly would protect them
during nuclear conditions. The U.S. and Soviet nations would continue their uneasy peace through the 1950s.
Any exchanges between the two would generally be related to espionage more than imminent catastrophe.
Many of the remaining international issues that Eisenhower would face would largely be related to containment, the same policy that had ultimately plunged the U.S. into the Korean conflict. Eisenhower, like Truman, saw the threat of not acting on the containment strategy.

Eisenhower’s perspective, though, was a bit different. He was more concerned about his domino theory and argued that failure to act on, or successfully prevent, one non-communist nation from being assimilated into the communist bloc would result in others following. Just as Truman had feared not to act with Greece, Turkey, and finally Korea, Eisenhower had his hands full with Latin America (Guatemala and Cuba), the Middle East (Iran and Egypt), and Vietnam.

This time the threat of communism was arising on a more global scale, but the epicenter of U.S. interest would be another Southeast Asian target: Vietnam. France lost its influence there in 1954. With that abdication, Vietnam was separated into communist north and independent south at the 17th parallel, just as Korea had been divided at the 38th parallel after WWII. The north, led by Ho Chi Minh, would become an increasingly desperate threat to Eisenhower’s policy. Despite the many comparisons, Vietnam would not be as clear a separation as Korea had been, the difference being that the Vietminh, those that supported the communist regime, were prevalent in both nations. Defense of the south would mean that the U.S. would very likely need to fight against some of the same people they were sent to protect if they were to stop the spread of communism.

Truman and Eisenhower together set a tone for the early Cold War era, which heavily emphasized the need for the U.S. to serve as an international power, even at the expense of some national programs. The U.S. embraced its position as a superpower and stayed true to its promise to help rebuild the world it had helped destroy. This was not a shared goal with the Soviets, however, and the Cold War would soon again ramp up, with both highs and lows for the U.S.

References


Suggested Reading

To listen to Arthur Phillips read an abridged version of his short story "Wenceslas Square," which takes place in Czechoslovakia at the end of the Cold War, click on the “right arrow” button located under the W in Wenceslas Square under Act Two.

The following motion pictures do a great job at depicting the atmosphere of society during the World War II era.


The following book paints a good, in-depth insight into the Cold War.


**Learning Activities (Non-Graded)**

**Power Point**

For a review of the key terms of the unit, click here to access the interactive Unit VI Questions in PowerPoint form. (Click here to access a PDF version.)

Non-graded Learning Activities are provided to aid students in their course of study. You do not have to submit them. If you have questions, contact your instructor for further guidance and information.