

J. The Cold War

1. When Germany and Japan were defeated, and France and Britain found themselves exhausted, only two countries remained as cardinal cultures in the world: the United States and the Soviet Union (i.e. Communist Russia).
2. The Cold War was thus truly *the* Cold War of history, because it was the only time two global superpowers competed to decide the fate of the world, with each having the power to destroy the other and indeed the world.
3. Because of the destructive power of their nuclear weapons, the two enemies tried to avoid a direct confrontation. In most cases, the Cold War was a series of “proxy” wars, where the two main contestants never fought, and instead the major powers fought some ally of the other, or two sets of allies fought one another.
4. Europe itself was fairly stable. The Soviet Union created a military “alliance” called the Warsaw Pact, which kept its eastern European members in line, even invading Hungary and Czechoslovakia at different points in order to prevent the overthrow of communism in each country.
5. When the Truman Doctrine had been announced in 1947, it was specifically aimed at preventing the communist takeover of Greece & Turkey, who both became members of NATO.
6. Most of the conflicts in the Cold War were in Asia, where the United States, acting as world police power prevented the communist takeover of South Korea in the Korean War of 1950-3, and by entering into military alliances with Saudi Arabia and Iran, prevented any communist aggression in the Middle East as well.
7. The greatest crisis of the period came when Cuba, a close neighbor of America, underwent a revolution from 1953-9, resulting in a communist government under Fidel Castro. Castro obtained a nuclear missile defense from Russia, and upon learning of it, American president John F. Kennedy realized that such weapons could be used to destroy the United States before it could respond. He thus had to threaten a world war against Cuba and Russia to compel Russia to withdraw its weapons. The *Cuban Missile Crisis* of 1962 was the closest the two sides came to World War III.
8. After so many Americans died in America’s failed attempt to stop the spread of communism in the Vietnam War (1964-73), the military contest between the two sides became less intense.
9. The final major proxy war of the period resulted from the Russian occupation of Afghanistan (1979-89). America made the decision to arm and fund the jihadists of Islamic Afghanistan against Russia, and Russia eventually abandoned its hold on the country, but, as is tragically known, those same jihadists—including Osama Bin Laden—became the terrorists who defined the wars of the next era.
10. The clear resolve of the United States to fight communism just about anywhere, and its growing military power decade after decade, were one key factor in the Soviet Union retiring from the contest.

K. The Economic and Cultural Triumph of America

1. Apart from the military contest between the superpowers, there was also an economic and cultural contest for the “hearts and minds” of people. Which system—communism or “democracy” (for lack of a single better encompassing term)—was the most productive and benevolent?
2. To prove the relative merit of their systems, the United States and Russia engaged not only in an “arms race,” but in other “races” as well, the most famous of which was the “space race.”
3. Russia won the first two legs of the space race, by putting the first man-made object into orbit around the earth in 1957. It was a small satellite called Sputnik. Then, Russia put the first man into space, Yuri Gagarin, in 1961.
4. America achieved the most spectacular comeback, however, and in 1969, put the first man on the moon, Neil Armstrong. This event allowed America to regain lost prestige as a cardinal culture, and Russia was never able to match that feat.
5. In truth, rocket technology was never the most advanced technological field. The most important “races” were in the field of nuclear power and computing.
6. In the 1980s, the United States began to develop a fast growing and dynamic computing industry, with companies like IBM, Microsoft, and Apple creating new products at an amazing rate. This kind of innovation was only possible in a free society. Russia’s leaders knew they could not reproduce this trend, and the emergence of commercial computer technology spelled the beginning of the end for communism as an economic model.
7. The death blow to communism probably came in 1986, when a nuclear reactor at Chernobyl, which is now in Ukraine, exploded in a catastrophic accident. The heroic efforts of Russian firemen, soldiers, and nuclear scientists saved the world from a total meltdown and the radioactive poisoning of a huge area, but an investigation into the crisis showed that it was in essence the communist way of suppressing the truth for the benefit of communist leaders that led to a fatal flaw in Russian nuclear designs and almost ruined all of human life. When Russian leader Mikhail Gorbachev later considered the collapse of the Soviet Union he felt compelled to name the Chernobyl disaster as the key moment.
8. It was Gorbachev himself who began to implement reforms to communism (called the “perestroika” movement) and to create a new “openness” to the outside world (called “glasnost.”) It was like the opening of a floodgate that could not be closed. Soon reforms in Poland and Germany and elsewhere were demanding changes. Russia declared that it would no longer impose its will on Eastern Europe. The Berlin wall fell in 1989, and in short order, the whole of the communist Russian empire crumbled.
9. For Europe, which had been rehearsing the creation of the European Union, the reunion of East and West Germany gave the final impulse to long-developed supranationalist plans. The European Union was created in **1993**. Europe was itself reborn as a cardinal culture, and Russia’s decline as a cardinal culture began with its descent into post-communist uncertainty. Both cultures continue to be defined by their struggle to assert their own identity in a world of American *primacy*.