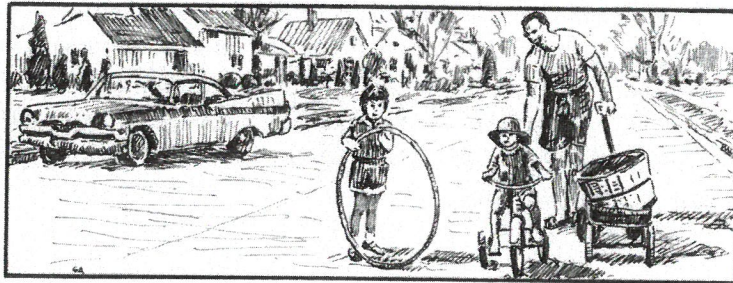


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SUPERPOWER



OUT OF THE FLAMES OF war an ashen world appeared, one hugely different from the prewar world of 1939. To begin with, there were the ruins. City buildings caved in, rubble, broken glass, streets black at night because electric plants had been bombed. Twelve million prisoners of war to be seen to. Food and money so scarce, people often traded goods: a bracelet for some bacon or an old coat for a chicken. Strange sights and sounds—sad, horrifying, or just plain odd. Young girls hitching a ride in a Russian tank. An old German gentleman in a business suit clubbing a duck to death with his cane. The eerie quiet outside a concentration camp. “The first thing you get is the stench. That’s human stench,” said one American soldier. “You begin to realize something terrible had happened.”

That was the human tragedy and the physical wreckage. But the world of politics and nations was wrecked, too. The big powers that had once competed for empires now faced broken economies and uncertain futures. The defeated lost their colonies, of course. But

so did victorious Allied nations, for after the war many peoples in Asia and Africa threw off their European masters. India won its independence from Britain, Indonesia from the Dutch, and Indochina launched a rebellion against the French.

What of the United States? The war had killed some four hundred thousand Americans, but that number looked small when set next to the 60 million deaths worldwide. Also, the United States had no ruined cities or bombed-out factories to rebuild. The country had been in the midst of a depression when the war began; by its end the economy was booming. The American navy was the world’s biggest, the air force the largest, the army the best equipped. Winston Churchill put the matter simply: the United States now stood “at the summit of the world.” It had become not just a big power but a superpower. No other nation could challenge it. Except perhaps one.

That was the Soviet Union, known formally as the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. Two centuries earlier, it had been called the Russian empire, which had expanded east across Asia during the same years that the United States was pushing west across North America. Americans built a nineteen-hundred-mile transcontinental railroad to the Pacific; Russia’s Trans-Siberian Railway snaked over fifty-seven hundred miles and also ended along Pacific waters. The United States spanned four time zones; Russian possessions stretched over twelve. Long ruled by powerful tsars, the empire had been overturned in 1917 by the Russian Revolution, whose leader Vladimir Lenin pushed the idea of equality in a radical new direction. Aristocrats would no longer have power; nor would the “capitalists” who built factories and ran banks or businesses. Instead, workers and peasants would set the government’s course by meeting in revolutionary councils known as Soviets. Lenin rejected the equality of opportunity that Andrew Jackson proclaimed, whereby citizens could succeed—become *more* equal—through hard work or ingenuity. Instead, Lenin’s Communist Party declared an end to private property. No one would

be rich. Everyone would work to the best of his or her ability and receive only what each needed to live decently.

That was the ideal, at least, but in carrying out their revolution, the Communist rulers quickly made themselves as powerful as the old tsars. Lenin launched a campaign of terror to eliminate his opponents. His successor, Joseph Stalin, was even more brutal. During the 1920s and 1930s millions died from badly thought-out reforms; millions more were sent to labor camps or executed.

Most Americans condemned Stalin's acts. But when Hitler launched his surprise invasion of Russia, the Soviet Union immediately became an ally of Britain and the United States. Indeed, the Soviets were essential to victory, and their country paid dearly with blood and treasure. In their fight with Germany over 20 million citizens were killed, seventy thousand villages destroyed, and 25 million people left homeless. Yet the Soviet Union remained the only other nation strong enough to become a superpower. In the eastern European countries where it had driven Germany out, Stalin took power, doing away with free elections and setting up governments friendly to the Soviets. "An iron curtain has descended across the continent," Churchill warned, which served to wall off Communist nations. "A fairy tale," replied Stalin blandly. But it was not. And so a new conflict began: not a hot war in which the vast armies of two superpowers battled, but a Cold War that simmered for nearly fifty years, sparking constant crises and sometimes open fighting.

You can see the flashpoints by viewing the globe from above. To the east, the Soviet Union was joined by China, which fell to Communists in 1949 at the end of a twenty-two-year civil war led by Mao Zedong. To the west stood the United States and Canada along with their allies in western Europe. Around the edges of these rival territories hot spots flared. The most serious among many were Germany, Korea, Vietnam, and Cuba.

The American president who faced this changed world was Harry Truman, a former senator from Missouri who was little known be-



The world of the superpowers. As the United States and the Soviet Union formed alliances, conflicts flared. The most serious involved nations divided after World War II: East and West Germany, North and South Korea, and North and South Vietnam. But many other hot spots erupted in violence. The most serious, as we will see in chapter 35, involved Cuba.

fore FDR picked him to run for vice president in 1944. "Who the hell is Harry Truman?" asked one admiral when Roosevelt told him his choice. A scrappy, plainspoken farmer who had given up the plow for politics, Truman said he felt "like the moon, the stars, and all the planets" had fallen on him when he was suddenly ushered into the White House. But he was determined—perhaps too determined—not to seem weak or inexperienced and to make the hard decisions. "The buck stops here," announced the sign he placed on his desk in the Oval Office. At the urging of his secretary of state, George Marshall, Truman convinced Congress to create a billion-dollar foreign aid program to help Europeans build new factories, railroads, and bridges. With so many people starving and restless, it seemed the Communists might sweep into power much as Hitler had done during Germany's depression.

The Marshall Plan was an immense success in helping put Europe squarely back on its feet—and perhaps Truman's greatest achievement, along with the GI Bill, which helped over 2 million veterans go to college. ("GI," short for "government issue," was a nickname for American soldiers that became popular during World War II.) But Truman also used military and diplomatic pressure to deal with the Soviet Union, in a strategy known as "containment." If Stalin tried to expand his power in any part of the globe, Truman was ready to apply a counterforce to contain that expansion. Even the president's mother in Missouri passed along her own warning about Stalin. "Tell Harry to be good, be honest, and behave himself, but I think it is now time for him to get tough with someone."

At first, that seemed easy. After all, the United States possessed the most powerful weapon in the world—a weapon no one else had. Truman had been meeting with Stalin and Churchill during the war when he received the secret news of the atom bomb's successful test. Churchill noticed that the president suddenly seemed "a changed man. He told the Russians just where they got on and got off and generally bossed the whole meeting." Having

a weapon like that gave great confidence. Indeed, many Americans rejoiced that the war had been ended by this mysterious but seemingly marvelous new technology. A bar in Washington began offering "atomic cocktails." A store on fashionable Fifth Avenue in New York advertised "atomic jewelry" offered in "a fury of dazzling colors." Kids could even order an atomic bomb ring from Kix breakfast cereal for 15¢ plus a box top. "Slide the Tail-Fin off—" read the instructions, "look in Observation Lens—and you'll see frenzied flashes of light—caused by released energy of atoms splitting like crazy." Amazingly, the rings actually contained tiny amounts of polonium-210, whose stream of slightly radioactive particles caused the view screen to light up.

At the same time, the fearsome dangers of atomic weapons began to sink in. American medics and reporters in occupied Japan saw what the bomb's radiation did to survivors, their skin covered by red blotches and their hair falling out. Magazines warned what could happen if other nations developed atomic bombs and put them on guided missiles. "Every city will be wiped out in thirty minutes," predicted one article. "New York will be a slag heap." And as radioactive energy from the bomb spread for hundreds of miles through the air as fallout, it would "leave the land uninhabitable" for decades or even hundreds of years. An atomic war, predicted a Chicago newspaper, could turn the globe into "a barren waste, in which the survivors of the [human] race will hide in caves or live among ruins." Truman began to realize that using atomic weapons was no routine matter. When a crisis in Berlin broke out after Stalin closed the roads into the American section of the German capital, the president organized a massive airlift to keep food coming. But he refused to give American officers control of atomic bombs. He didn't want to have "some dashing lieutenant colonel decide when would be the proper time to drop one." In the end, Stalin backed down, and Berlin became the divided capital of both West Germany and Communist East Germany.

Then in 1949 American scientists reported sobering news. Radio-

active rain falling in the Pacific provided evidence that the Soviet Union had secretly tested its own atomic weapon. The United States was no longer the only nuclear nation. And the following year Communist North Korea invaded South Korea, an American ally. Truman sent troops immediately, though he stopped short of declaring war. The operation would be a "police action" on behalf of the United Nations, the new organization designed to replace the League of Nations. As Americans pushed North Korean forces back toward China's border with North Korea, hundreds of thousands of Chinese crossed into Korea, pushing the Americans back. On the defensive, Truman told reporters he would "take whatever steps are necessary to meet the military situation." Including using the atomic bomb? asked one reporter. "There has always been active consideration of its use," the president replied. This bit of news alarmed his European allies so badly that the British prime minister took the first plane to Washington to protest. Atomic war was not something to threaten so easily, he insisted. The war dragged on for two more years until a new president took office: Republican Dwight Eisenhower, the war hero from D-Day. Ike, as he was nicknamed, brought the Korean conflict to an end, though not before fifty-four thousand Americans had died.

With international tensions high, politics at home also heated up. Americans learned that a few scientists had passed atomic secrets to the Russians, helping them build their own bombs more quickly. A State Department official who had worked for Franklin Roosevelt was also accused of spying. Were there other Communists hiding in the government? Republicans accused Truman—a Democrat—of not doing enough to root out officials who were "soft" on Communism, and Truman—again on the defensive—set up a loyalty program requiring government supervisors to fire anyone who seemed suspect. In Congress, the House Un-American Activities Committee called a parade of movie stars to testify, hoping to expose Hollywood directors and actors who portrayed Communists too favorably. The accused were "blacklisted," often

with little or no proof of any crime, which prevented them from working. In the Senate, Joseph McCarthy, a Republican from Wisconsin, made headlines when he announced that he had a list of 205 Communists working in the State Department. Or perhaps it was 57 or 81; at any rate, it was "a lot of" Communists. No one, including McCarthy, could ever be sure of the number he first used. These wild charges, which became more exaggerated every month, ruined the careers of many decent Americans until finally the public tired of the senator's grandstanding. President Eisenhower, who considered himself a "modern" Republican, refused to "get in the gutter with that guy." In 1954 the Senate formally condemned McCarthy's reckless behavior. By then Stalin had died of a stroke. The fear of Communist secret agents slowly faded.

But the Cold War continued, as both the Soviets and the Americans raced to build atomic missiles. People were learning to live with the threat of nuclear war. First graders were taught to cover their heads and duck under their desks if they should see the atomic flash. Some families built fallout shelters in their basements and filled them with canned goods and bottled water in case they needed to wait out a radioactive blast. Truman's secretary of defense encouraged one of his associates to write a question-and-answer book, *How to Survive an Atomic Bomb*.

All right. Let's say I've taken all the safety steps. I've gone down on my face with my head in my arms. The bomb has gone off. I've waited for the all-clear. . . . What do I do then?

The first thing is—get set for a shock. . . .

Why should I get set for a shock?

Because things are going to look different. . . . If the bomb hit within a mile and a half of the place where you are, things are going to look very different. Understand that beforehand. Then you won't get such a jolt when you come out later and see a lot of places that you knew very well—and find them damaged or destroyed.

Did people pay attention to such advice? Yes and no. Growing up during those years, my friends and I talked about fallout shelters and what we might do if the air-raid siren sounded. But we also played baseball in the backyard, watched westerns on the nifty new television sets our families had bought, and in summer splashed in our inflatable pools. Life went on.

All that changed suddenly in the autumn of 1962.

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THE END OF THE WORLD



THE FIRST ATOMIC BOMB dropped on Japan had the power of fifteen kilotons of TNT. That is, you would need fifteen thousand tons of an "ordinary" explosive like TNT to get the same bang as the new five-ton atomic bomb. Lining up 150 railroad cars of TNT would about do it. But by 1962 the United States was testing *megaton* bombs, each megaton as powerful as a million tons of TNT. One fifty-megaton bomb had more power than a string of railcars stretching TNT from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean and half-way back. If a new world war broke out, American plans called for 3,423 nuclear weapons to be launched—weapons that would also spread poisonous radiation through the air. Even to consider such an event was horrifying. When the new president, John F. Kennedy, was briefed about the plan, he shook his head. "And we call ourselves the human race." Military planners hoped that such a catastrophe would never come. Surely neither side would start an atomic war if it knew the other had enough bombs to blast its own country into ruins. This idea was known as the theory of Mu-

