



TIMELINE ACTIVITY:

COLD WAR

High School (9-12)

OVERVIEW:

This timeline activity is adaptable and can be used as an introduction, a review, or at any time throughout a Cold War lesson/unit. Cards can be printed and then ordered to give students an overview of important Cold War events. The resources include a base timeline with expansion timelines that cover Armed Conflict, Nuclear Competition, and the Space Race. Timelines can be printed as full- or half-page images.

Teachers are encouraged to use the ideas and questions that would best support your learners. If students have never made a timeline before, Activity 1 would be the most relevant. If students are familiar with timelines, Activities 2 or 3 would provide them with more of a challenge. Similarly, do not expect to use all of the questions. It is recommended that you focus on one category of questions and choose 2-3 to discuss deeply or ask 1-2 a day as a warm-up or review.

If you have used other ANC timelines, you will notice that the Cold War covers a much larger time period and includes more events. To give teachers flexibility, related events were grouped into expansion timelines. Using just the base timeline leaves out many important Cold War events. At a minimum, we recommend using the base timeline with the Armed Conflict expansion. Ideally, the base timeline and all three expansions should be used.

This lesson plan also includes a “Make Your Own Event” extension activity. If the timeline is used at the end of a unit about the Cold War, “Make Your Own Event” templates can be copied so students can write up summaries of contemporary events, such as those related to the Civil Rights movement, Women’s Rights, etc., that were studied in class but are not included in this Cold War timeline.

Estimated time:

- Activity 1: 1 class period of 60-75 minutes or 2-4 class periods of 15-20 minutes each

STANDARDS:

Social studies standards vary by state. This lesson can be used to teach the following standards and similar wording may be found in your state standards.

National Council for the Social Studies Standards

- NCSS.D2.His.1.9-12: Evaluate how historical events and developments were shaped by unique circumstances of time and place as well as broader historical contexts.



- NCSS.D2.His.2.9-12: Analyze change and continuity in historical eras.
- NCSS.D2.His.14.9-12: Analyze multiple and complex causes and effects of events in the past.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES:

- Students will explain the relationships between events leading up to, during, and/or after the period of the Cold War, including causes, effects, and the possibility of different outcomes.
- Students will organize events related to the Cold War on a timeline.

RESOURCES NEEDED:

- 1 copy per group of:
 - Cold War Timeline_High School
 - Armed Conflict Timeline_High School
 - Nuclear Competition Timeline_High School
 - Space Race Timeline_High School
- Optional: Copies of:
 - “Make Your Own” Event slide

IDEAS FOR DISPLAYING TIMELINES:

- Flat on Floor: spread the years out evenly across a large floor area. Students put events in order on timeline. Events can partially overlap.
- On Wall: Use a large wall to display the timeline. Using tape or another material that adheres to your wall, attach the years equal distances apart. Students post events in order on the timeline. Events should not overlap but can be layered above/below each other as needed. String can be used to indicate the position of events on the timeline.
- On Clothesline: String a clothesline from one end of the room to the other. Attach years to clothespins equal distances apart. Students use additional clothespins to attach events.

ACTIVITY 1: BUILD THE TIMELINE

- **Activity Part 1: Introduction and Build the Timeline: 15-20 minutes**
 - Lead a class discussion using the following questions:
 - What is a timeline?
 - Why are timelines useful for historians?
 - Timelines allow us to see how events are connected and influence each other. Seeing events in order can also help us understand how people were making decisions with limited information - they didn't know what would happen in two years or 10 years; they didn't know how other peoples or



countries would react to events; they didn't know how things would turn out.

- Build the timeline:
 - Pass out the Cold War Timeline cards to students and have them place the events in chronological order on the timeline.
- Discussion:
 - Decide what you want to highlight from the timeline.
 - Use relevant questions to discuss the timeline and events with your students.
 - Suggested questions:
 - Do you notice any patterns or themes in the timeline events?
 - Choose an event. Why was this included in the timeline?
 - Choose two events from the timeline. Is there a relationship between these events? If so, what is it? If not, why are they both included in this timeline?
- **Activity Part 2: Add to the timeline: Armed Conflict: 10-15 minutes**
 - Pass out the Armed Conflict Timeline cards to students and have them place the events in order on the timeline.
 - Use relevant questions to discuss the timeline and events with your students.
 - Suggested questions:
 - How does the addition of the Korean War and the Vietnam War change the timeline?
 - Are there events that didn't make sense before that are clearer now?
 - Looking at the events of the Cold War, how do these additions change your understanding of it?
 - What do you see that makes this conflict different from other wars we've studied, such as World War II?
 - How might Armed Conflict have affected everyday Americans perceptions of the Cold War and America's role in it?
- **Activity Part 3: Add to the timeline: Nuclear Competition: 10-15 minutes**
 - Pass out the Nuclear Competition Timeline cards to students and have them place the events in order on the timeline.
 - Use relevant questions to discuss the timeline and events with your students.
 - Suggested questions:
 - How does the addition of information on Nuclear-related events change the timeline?
 - Are there events that didn't make sense before that are clearer now?
 - How might Nuclear Competition have affected everyday Americans perceptions of the Cold War and America's role in it?



- While the United States and the Soviet Union never engaged in open conflict, the proliferation of nuclear weapons was a defining feature of the Cold War. How did nuclear weapons play a different role than military technological advances during other eras?
 - How did having nuclear weapons affect decisions that leaders made during the Cold War?
 - *Teacher notes:*
 - *If you discussed trench warfare and related advances in military technology, such as gas mask or tanks, you may want to begin by reminding students of previous content.*
 - *Additional information on advances in military technology, including weaponry, in the American Revolution, the Civil War, World War I, and World War II can be found in the middle school Military Technology lesson plans on the ANC Education website:
<https://education.arlingtoncemetery.mil/Themes/Military-Technology>.*
- **Activity 4: Add to the timeline: Space Race: 10-15 minutes**
 - Pass out the Space Race Timeline cards to students and have them place the events in order on the timeline.
 - Use relevant questions to discuss the timeline and events with your students.
 - Suggested questions:
 - How does the addition of the Space Race change the timeline?
 - Are there events that didn't make sense before that are clearer now?
 - Why could the Space Race be considered an important part of the Cold War?
 - Do you agree that it is important? Why or why not?
 - How might the Space Race have affected everyday Americans perceptions of the Cold War and America's role in it?
- **Activity 5: Conclusion: 10-15 minutes**
 - Now that all of the event cards have been added, conclude the lesson by discussing the timeline as a whole. If students have already been studying the Cold War, this discussion could include comparisons of what they learned about in class to the events that are included on the timeline.
 - Suggested questions:
 - What is a Cold War? Looking at the events of the Cold War, how does your understanding of it change?
 - Are there any events that you think might not belong on a Cold War timeline?
 - Why do you think it doesn't belong?
 - What's a justification for including it?



- How does the timeline for the Cold War compare to other periods of U.S. history that we've studied?
 - Do you see any parallels between the events of the Cold War and any other historical period?
- What's the message of the timeline?
 - What main themes emerge?
 - Containment, scientific advancement, nuclear fears, etc.
 - What major themes could describe the timeline?
 - What kind of title/subtitle could we give this timeline?

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND FOR TEACHERS:

THE COLD WAR:

While the United States and the Soviet Union were allies during World War II, the end of that war made it clear that conflict between the two emerging superpowers was brewing. What followed would be a 45-year geopolitical struggle in which the two superpowers never directly engaged in military conflict. Instead, the conflict played out through espionage, economic sanctions, proxy wars in other nations, and technological competition (in particular, the nuclear race and the space race).

This section provides an overview of key timeline themes and events (referenced timeline card title is italicized in parenthesis) for use in student discussion. Additional background information can be found at:

- https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/sites/default/files/TrumanCIA_Timeline.pdf
- <https://www.britannica.com/event/Cold-War>

The Cold War began in the aftermath of World War II (1939-1948) and ended with the collapse of the Soviet Union and Eastern European communist regimes in the late 1980s and early 1990s — marked, most dramatically, by the fall of the Berlin Wall on November 9, 1989.

Tensions Begin:

The ideological differences between the democratic West and the communist East were apparent during World War II peace negotiations (*The Iron Curtain*). In the years after the war, the lines became more clearly drawn as the U.S. committed to aiding governments that faced pressure from the Soviet Union or communists within their borders (*The Truman Doctrine*) and the Soviet Union rejected United States aid (*The Marshall Plan*) for itself and its satellite nations in Eastern Europe.

In 1946, while working as a Foreign Service officer in Moscow, George Kennan sent an 8,000-word telegram to the State Department. In the “long telegram,” Kennan outlined his analysis of Soviet influence and potential conduct as well as his policy recommendations. A year later, while serving as the director of policy planning at the State Department, Kennan made these recommendations public. In an



anonymous article in *Foreign Affairs*, Kennan publicly introduced the idea of containment (*Containment*). Containment was the strategy of preventing global communist expansion as an alternative to direct military conflict with the Soviet Union and dominated foreign policy discussions for much of the Cold War.

In the same year, the United States reorganized its military and foreign policy agencies in an effort to promote national security (*National Security Act of 1947*). This reorganization created the Department of Defense (DOD), the National Security Council (NSC), and Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). Intelligence gathering and military planning that had been reserved for periods of armed conflict were now used during peacetime. Throughout the Cold War, the CIA gathered intelligence, strategically supported coups (such as the Iranian Coup in 1953, the Guatemalan Coup in 1954, and the overthrow of the Dominican Republic in 1965) and worked to stop the spread of communism. These conflicts complicate the standard narrative of the Cold War as a competition between the United States and the Soviet Union, communism versus capitalism.

In June 1948, the first major international crisis of the Cold War began when the Soviet Union blocked supply lines to Allied-controlled West Berlin (*Berlin Blockade and Airlift*). The U.S. and U.K. responded by airdropping over 2 million tons of supplies in West Berlin. Before the blockade ended, the United States and other western nations had joined together to form NATO: the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (*NATO Formed*). Six years later, when West Germany joined NATO, the Soviet Union and seven Soviet satellite states would create the Warsaw Pact in response (*Warsaw Pact*).¹

In 1949, the Soviet Union became the second nation with nuclear weapons (*USSR Tested Atom Bomb*). Four years later, Julius and Ethel Rosenberg became the first U.S. citizens executed for espionage, after being convicted of passing secret information about the atomic bomb to the Soviet Union (*Rosenbergs Convicted of Espionage*). Their trial took place during the “Red Scare” of McCarthyism that lasted from 1950 to 1954 (*McCarthyism*). During this time, Republican Senator Joe McCarthy launched a series of investigations which accused members of the State Department, the U.S. Army, and other government offices of being influenced by communism. On December 2, 1954, the Senate formally censured McCarthy for reckless accusations of Communist influence in the U.S. press and federal government. His censure marked the end of McCarthyism, per se, but not the end of the Red Scare itself. Fears of communist infiltration continued to pervade American culture and government.

Armed Conflict:

In 1950, U.S. forces entered armed conflict in Asia. After World War II, the formerly Japanese-occupied Korea was divided into two sections — the Soviet Union occupied the northern half, and the United States occupied the southern half. On June 25, 1950, North Korean forces invaded South Korea across the 38th parallel. The United Nations (UN) swiftly condemned the attack and called for member nations to help South Korea to “repel the armed attack.” The Truman administration — without seeking a

¹ While NATO still exists, the Warsaw Pact was dissolved in 1991.



Congressional declaration of war — proceeded to commit U.S. naval and air power to South Korea's defense (*Start of the Korean War*).² The Korean War resulted in three years of brutal combat, especially after communist China intervened in November 1950. The war ended in 1953, after the United States, North Korea, and China signed an armistice. To date, the Republic of Korea (South) and Democratic Peoples' Republic of Korea (North) have not signed a peace treaty (*End of Korean War*).

In 1956, conflict also erupted in the Middle East when Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser nationalized the Suez Canal. A valuable man-made waterway in Egypt that connects the Red Sea and the Mediterranean Sea, the Suez Canal had been owned and operated by a joint British-French company since it was built in 1869. Although Nasser offered economic compensation, the British and French governments were suspicious of him. In response, Israel, Great Britain, and France initiated a short-lived military campaign. Concerned about the conflict, the waning influence of western nations in the Middle East, and growing Soviet influence, President Dwight D. Eisenhower promised U.S. military and economic aid to any nation facing “overt armed aggression” from a communist nation (*Eisenhower Doctrine*).

Soviet-U.S. relations were also strained by incidents that did not result in armed conflict. When American U-2 pilot Francis Gary Powers was shot down in Soviet airspace during a secret mission, Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev responded by canceling diplomatic meetings with the United States in Paris (*U-2 Incident*). In the Western Hemisphere, the CIA backed Cuban exiles in a plan to overthrow Fidel Castro in 1961. However, the attempt failed, and Castro strengthened ties with the Soviet Union (*Failed Bay of Pigs Invasion*) as a result. To deter future invasion attempts, the Soviet Union began planning to add nuclear missiles in Cuba. In October 1962, American spy planes captured photographic evidence of the Soviet Union building nuclear missile sites in Cuba. The U.S. responded by surrounding Cuba with ships to “quarantine” the country and halt the delivery of weapons. After six days of negotiations and tension, the Soviet Union agreed to remove their nuclear missiles from Cuba if the United States removed its missiles from Turkey, which the U.S. did in April 1963.³

In August 1963, nuclear tensions decreased again when the United States, Great Britain, and the Soviet Union signed the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty, banning nuclear testing in the atmosphere, space, and underwater (*Limited Nuclear Test Ban Treaty*).⁴

Other Types of Competition:

As the threat of military conflict loomed, Soviet and U.S. competition moved into non-military arenas. In 1959, Khrushchev and U.S. Vice President Richard Nixon met in a model American kitchen at a Moscow

² U.S. intervention in the Korean War was largely based on Domino Theory. Domino Theory, which undergirded much of Cold War U.S. foreign policy, was the idea that if one nation came under communist control, then nearby nations would also succumb to communism, each falling like a row of dominos. The U.S. used this theory to justify its involvement in the Korean War and the Vietnam War, as well as armed interventions in Latin America and Africa.

³ While the removal of missiles in Cuba was announced publicly, the removal of missiles in Turkey remained secret for more than 25 years.

⁴ Negotiations between the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, France, and the Soviet Union over nuclear weapons testing began in 1959, but tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union had repeatedly slowed the process. After the Cuban Missile Crisis, Kennedy and Khrushchev both showed a renewed interest in nuclear test bans.



exhibition and debated the quality of life in their respective countries (*Kitchen Debate*).⁵ The space race had begun two years before when the Soviet Union launched Sputnik – the first manmade craft to reach space (*Sputnik Launched*). At the beginning, the Soviets hit milestone after milestone before the United States (*First Man in Space, Glenn Orbits the Earth*). But by the end of the 1960s, the United States had surpassed the Soviet Union and became the first, and so far only, country to have an astronaut walk on the moon (*Moon Landing*).

In 1961, the German Democratic Republic (East Germany) built the Berlin Wall (*Rise of Berlin Wall*). Physically dividing communist East Berlin and capitalist West Berlin, the wall was intended to stop East Germans from fleeing to West Berlin, the only area in East Germany that was not under communist control.

On the Homefront:

The United States also experienced unrest at home as the ongoing tensions shaped everyday life. In the 1950s, the nuclear threat prompted an idealization of the nuclear family – suburban, middle-class households with traditional gender roles – as an escape from a world in peril. Children participated in “duck and cover” nuclear attack drills at school; many families built fallout shelters in their backyards; and a notion of the “American way of life” emerged, which valorized material consumption and conformity to mainstream cultural norms. Meanwhile, as discussed earlier, fears of communism escalated into a wide-ranging “red scare.” At the same time, and continuing into the 1970s, fears of gender and sexual nonconformity escalated into a “lavender scare” that branded homosexuals a threat to national security. A congressional committee report encouraged the firing of suspected homosexual employees and discrimination in hiring. This continued until 1975, when the Civil Service Commission announced that gay people could no longer be fired or barred from employment solely on the basis of their sexuality.

As unrest continued at home and abroad, the nation was shocked by the assassination of President John F. Kennedy in 1963 (*JFK Assassination*). Riding in a motorcade through Dealey Plaza in Dallas, Texas, Kennedy was shot by Lee Harvey Oswald. Lyndon B. Johnson was sworn in as president and the nation’s attention soon turned to brewing conflict in southeast Asia (*Gulf of Tonkin Resolution*).⁶ By 1965, U.S. Air Force planes were bombing North Vietnam and American combat troops were landing in South Vietnam (*Operation Rolling Thunder, American Troops Arrive in Vietnam*).⁷

⁵ Watch a 1959 news report on the Kitchen Debate on the National Archives’ website:

<https://www.docsteach.org/documents/document/kitchen-debate>.

⁶ Johnson asked for Congress to pass the resolution in response to reports of two unprovoked attacks on American ships by North Vietnamese troops. However, information revealed later called that claim into question and led some to believe that Johnson had manipulated Congress.

⁷ U.S. leaders hoped the campaign would boost the morale of Southern Vietnamese soldiers and pressure North Vietnam to negotiate.

While the U.S. Marines were the first combat troops in Vietnam, American involvement in the country dated to the First Indochina War (1946-1954). The United States funded and advised the French military in their efforts to overthrow Vietnamese Communist leader Ho Chi Minh and reestablish French control. After the First Indochina War ended in 1954, the United States remained in Vietnam in an advisory role to non-communist South Vietnam.



Along with opposition to the Vietnam War, the cultural climate of fear, repression, and conformity in the United States led to the youth rebellions of the 1960s (*March to End the War in Vietnam*). Yet the social transformations of the 1960s began with the postwar civil rights movement, which took place within the geopolitical context of the Cold War. Soviet, Chinese, and Cuban propaganda emphasized racial inequalities in the United States, while Black and Brown activists in the United States forged important connections with anti-colonial movements in Asia and Africa. These international factors lent new urgency to landmark domestic reforms, such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964.⁸ The Cold War did not *cause* these reforms, but it served as the context in which the civil rights movement finally gained traction within the highest levels of the federal government.

The End of the Cold War

In 1969, the United States was celebrating the moon landing even as news of the My Lai Massacre and subsequent cover-up began trickling out. In 1968, U.S. soldiers killed over 300 unarmed South Vietnamese civilians, including women, children, and elderly people (*My Lai Massacre*). The soldiers also tortured and mutilated many of the victims. Initially covered up by senior military officials, the event and cover-up eroded public trust in the military and the war. By 1973, U.S. Troops withdrew from Vietnam (*U.S. Troops Withdraw from Vietnam*) and Congress ended the unpopular draft (*End of Selective Service*). Further signs of the United States' decreasing influence abroad were seen in Iran in 1979 when several hundred Iranian students occupied the American Embassy in Tehran, taking military and diplomatic personnel hostage (*Iran Hostage Crisis*).

In the 1980s, both the United States and the Soviet Union experienced public disasters (*Challenger Disaster*, *Chernobyl Disaster*) and faced the continued costs of maintaining their international positions, such as by competing in an arms race and by supporting costly foreign wars. Unable to support these costs with a stagnant economy, Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev began introducing liberal reforms in 1985.⁹ *Glasnost* – openness – expanded freedoms of speech for the public and press and increased government transparency. *Perestroika* – restructuring – introduced limited free-market economic policies, secret ballots, and multi-candidate elections. While these liberal reforms failed to improve the Soviet economy, opportunities for political reform were seized by Soviet member states. In June 1989, Poland declared its independence. Hungary soon followed, the Berlin Wall came down (*Fall of Berlin Wall*), and Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, Romania, and Lithuania elected non-communist governments.

⁸ On May 17, 1954, the Supreme Court unanimously reversed *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), deciding in *Brown v. Board of Education* that separate schools were not equal and therefore the segregation of public schools was unlawful. This was a major victory for African Americans and civil rights activists, however, desegregation was neither immediate nor easy. Some white Americans opposed and even violently protested the integration of schools, restaurants and other public facilities. After *Brown v. Board*, which only applied to public schools, it took African American activists and their allies another 10 years to secure passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which barred racial discrimination in the workplace and public spaces. Additional civil rights legislation included the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which gave the federal government oversight in state and local elections to protect African Americans' right to vote, and the Civil Rights Act of 1968, which provided equal housing opportunities regardless of race, creed, or national origin and made it a federal crime to injure or intimidate anyone because of their race, color, religion, or national origin.

⁹ The Soviet Union's economy declined throughout the 1980s and the nation faced increased dissatisfaction from its citizenry. Gorbachev's *glasnost* and *perestroika* reforms were intended to improve the economy and end government corruption. He hoped to prove to the Soviet people that communism could meet their needs.



In August 1991, communists opposed to Gorbachev's reforms attempted a coup. They failed, but the coup marked the end of the Soviet Union. When he returned to office, Gorbachev dissolved the Communist Party. Between August and December 1991, more nations declared their independence from the U.S.S.R., including Russia. With no nation left to lead, Gorbachev resigned on December 25, 1991 (*Dissolution of the USSR*).

LESSON EXTENSION: ADD TIMELINE EVENTS

- **Prerequisite:** This activity would occur at the end of a Cold War unit.
- No timeline can include every event, especially a timeline that covers such a large time period. This extension activity asks students to consider other events or movements that occurred during the Cold War period that are not included in the timeline. This could include the Civil Rights Movement, the Women's movement, or other international events or domestic social movements. They then choose one of those events and create a timeline card for it.
- As a class, discuss events that you have studied that do not appear on the timeline.
 - What other events were happening between 1946-1991? (What was invented, what was happening in American life, what conflicts were countries involved in?)
 - Are there any movements or events that we've studied that occurred between 1946 and 1991 that weren't included in the timeline?
 - Why do you think this event wasn't included?
 - Should it have been included? Why or why not?
 - How would the timeline look different if these events were included?
- Working individually or in a small group, students create additional event cards for the timeline. Cards should include:
 - A title that explains the event
 - An image that would give additional information about the event
 - A caption to explain the image
 - 3-5 sentences that describe the event
 - Sources used (May include class notes, textbook, nonfiction books, website articles from reputable publications (ex. Arlington National Cemetery or the National Park Service), etc.)
- Whole class: After creating cards, discuss as a class what events students would add and why they think each event should be included. Events can now be added to the completed timeline.
- **Possible Questions to Ask:**
 - What does this event teach us about the Cold War?
 - Why do you think it's important that this event be included in the timeline?
 - How does this event relate to other events on the timeline?



- Does including this event in the timeline change your understanding of the Cold War?

CONNECT WITH US:

This timeline gives students an overview of the ways different pivotal events and people shaped the Cold War. But we know there is more about the Cold War for your students to discover. The Cold War impacted individuals and families throughout the United States and around the world. Stories of individuals who shaped and were shaped by the Cold War can be found in our Cold War School Walking Tour. The tour tells the stories of policy makers like President John F. Kennedy and John Foster Dulles as well as those of lesser-known individuals, including a female journalist who reported from the frontlines of the Korean War, a soldier who was designated Missing in Action from 1953 to 2017 when his remains were identified using DNA testing, a victim of a nuclear accident, and more. The tour is available on the ANC Education website: <https://education.arlingtoncemetery.mil/ColdWar>.

For additional Cold War lessons, visit the ANC Education website for a Cold War memorial lesson and a lesson on the all-Puerto Rican Borinqueneers military unit:

- In the memorial lesson, students analyze what and how we memorialize. They discuss why no national Cold War memorial exists and design their own Cold War memorial based on their knowledge of the Cold War.
- In the Borinqueneers lesson, students learn about the 65th Infantry Regiment, or the “Borinqueneers” (Korean War), and make connections to their prior knowledge in order to explore the significance of this celebrated military unit in historical and cultural context.

We love to see how our materials are being used in the classroom! Connect with us on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. @ArlingtonNatl #ANCEducation



SOURCES:

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