

# A Cold War Update for a High School Teacher

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Recently, I experienced the best in professional development for high school history teachers. I attended a week-long seminar entitled "U.S. and the Cold War" in Washington D.C., co-sponsored by the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars and the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History. Alongside 24 teachers from across the country, I studied with two of the country's most eminent scholars, Melvyn P. Leffler of the University of Virginia and Christian Ostermann, director of the Center's History and Public Policy Program and the Cold War International History Project. Dr. Leffler provided a framework for understanding the Cold War, while other leading scholars and writers such as Michael Dobbs, Thomas Blanton, and Marc Selverstone led discussions on specific questions. These historians gave us an in-depth look at the latest research on the Cold War while preparing us to take what we learned back to our classrooms. Together, we crafted primary-source activities and shared teaching strategies that will make the Cold War real for our students.

For teachers, the opportunity to immerse ourselves in one topic with the world's leading scholars is invaluable. This seminar's content was both broad in scope and expansive in detail. Prior to meeting in Washington D.C., we were given homework assignments: reading books, analyzing primary documents, and sharing Cold War lesson plans online with colleagues across the nation whom I would soon meet in person. Upon reading Melvyn Leffler's *For the Soul of Mankind: The United States, the Soviet Union, and the Cold War*, I understood the high quality of the program I was about to attend. In his book, Leffler examines the complex interplay of fear, ideological constructs, national interests, and historical memory that gave the Cold War its animus and enabled it to persist for fifty years despite occasional realizations by policy makers that continuing

it defied rationality. The book, as well as Leffler's lectures, addressed the characters of both Mikhail Gorbachev and Ronald Reagan that led them finally to end the Cold War peacefully, which was by no means inevitable. In preparation for the seminar, we also read Odd Arne Westad's *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Time* to understand the centrality of the third world to developments of the Cold War. In addition, we read journalist Michael Dobbs' *One Minute to Midnight*, which examined the unfolding of the Cuban Missile Crisis from the perspective of all parties involved.

Upon arriving in Washington D.C., I was excited to spend six days around so many knowledgeable and talented people who share my interests. Staying in a hotel only blocks away from the White House, I met my colleagues at a welcome dinner. Among this group of teachers from literally the four corners of the U.S., conversations were intense. The next morning we encountered heavy security as we went to class at the Ronald Reagan Building. It turned out that President Obama and Secretary Clinton were making an unannounced visit that morning to address a trade mission from China.

In his first lecture, Leffler laid out the critical inquiries for the seminar: What is the Cold War? Why did it begin? Why did it escalate? Why did it become global? Why did it end? How did it end peacefully? The questions seemed basic, but the answers were nuanced and complex. Over the next six days, we traced the development of the Cold War using a chronological outline. Along the way, we listened to lectures, analyzed primary documents from the time period, created document activities for our students, gave presentations on successful lesson plans, and watched Errol Morris' documentary *The Fog of War*. Many of the ideas developed throughout the class would be the subject of informal discussions with colleagues at the coffee table or at meals.

A recurring theme in the course was the meaning of the containment doctrine and how U.S. policy makers applied it for 50 years. Leffler made the case that containment was not just a principle to stop the expansion of communism but was tied to the objective of defeating communism. According to Leffler, the U.S. was not worried as much about Soviet military activities as communism's ideological appeal to other countries. He stressed that this was a battle of capitalism and liberal democracy against communism. The only way to lose that battle would be to tolerate continued poor economic conditions in Europe, which could lead to the political success of budding socialist and communist parties in European countries and eventual linkage of those nations with the Soviet Union.

Fearing this scenario, the U.S. pursued three main objectives throughout the Cold War. First, it committed to building up the industrial core of Europe and northeast Asia and keeping countries in those regions allied with the U.S. A revived Germany and Japan would provide capitalism and democracy a decisive advantage against the Soviet Union. The U.S. and its allies would have access to its resources and people. This eventually created a security dilemma for the U.S. since a strengthened Germany and Japan would fuel Soviet fears and lead to more conflict. On the other hand, if Germany and Japan were allowed to wither, communist parties throughout Western Europe and the world would continue to proliferate and weaken U.S. authority in the world.

Second, the U.S. resolved to shore up vulnerabilities in the Third World, since economic success of the West and its allies required access to trade with their regional trading partners. During the seminar, we traced U.S. covert as well as military interventions in key regions around the world which had this objective in mind. At a time when great proliferation of national independence movements

and conflicts were occurring, the prospects for U.S.-Soviet conflicts in those countries increased. In addition, conflicts intensified since the U.S. was not always successful in this arena. Yet, U.S. policymakers frequently argued that such "test case" efforts were necessary because U.S. credibility was at stake and failure to intervene would cause more dominoes to fall.

Third, the U.S. needed to build up its military dramatically even during peacetime. The containment policy required strong deterrence. War would not break out unless by accident or miscalculation, which unfortunately was not out of the realm of possibility. Because of the global nature of U.S. interests, nuclear build-up would be a more economical alternative than a build-up of conventional forces which would be far more costly.

Even though most teachers can remember the Cold War firsthand, it has only been in the past 15 years that Western historians have had access to materials from former Communist bloc countries and China. These resources provide invaluable insight into the dynamics of the Cold War as seen through the eyes of the "other" side.

The new information about the Cold War is startling. As Michael Dobbs, the author of *One Minute to Midnight*, explained to us, on October 27, 1962, known as "Black Saturday," the U.S. and Soviet Union were closer to the brink of nuclear war than was realized at the time. Even after both President Kennedy and Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev committed themselves to resolving the conflict peacefully, factors outside their control almost pushed both leaders to nuclear catastrophe. As President Kennedy so colorfully opined, "There's always some son of a bitch who doesn't get the message." Historians now know that had President Kennedy followed the advice of his advisors and launched a preemptive attack on Soviet missiles in Cuba, Soviet nuclear missiles could have reached New York City. Moreover, a sizable number of tactical nuclear weapons, each one the equivalent of the bombs used on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, would have been shot at the U.S. base in Guantanamo Bay and at any invading U.S. forces.

The new documents also provide insight into the depth of the Soviet-Sino split and the beginnings of détente. By the early 1960s, relations between the Soviet Union and China were tense due to divergent national interests and personality conflicts between their leaders, Nikita

Khrushchev and Mao Zedong. As early as 1963, the CIA understood not only that the communist world was not monolithic under the control of the Soviet Union, but also that China would seek to expand its influence in underdeveloped areas at Soviet expense. Kennedy responded by trying to compete with the Soviet Union rather than accommodate it. It was not until Nixon's presidency in the late 1960s that U.S. policy makers recognized the Sino-Soviet split created opportunities to lessen Cold War tensions. The Sino-Soviet split eventually resulted in a series of border clashes between the two communist neighbors. The depth of the split became apparent when Soviet officials approached the U.S. to gauge its reaction if the Soviets were to launch a preemptive attack on Chinese nuclear sites.

The Sino-Soviet split eventually proved partially responsible for providing the conditions for the U.S.-China rapprochement and for the beginnings of détente with the Soviet Union. Leffler skillfully made the case that policy makers accomplished détente because they recognized the openings for it despite the existence of significant obstacles. The Vietnam War was a major drain on U.S. resources and its reputation around the world. The U.S. was experiencing a decline in its relative power around the world. Yet, it was able to bolster its power because of the Sino-Soviet split. Nixon and other U.S. policymakers also recognized that the ideological appeal of communism in the Third World was declining. The Soviet economic model was beginning to slow down, while free markets were showing success in Asia. It was under these conditions that the U.S. sought to decrease tensions with the Soviet Union, which eventually led to agreements to reduce nuclear arms and bolster economic ties between the nations. Nixon believed that the Soviets would be motivated to work with the U.S. because of their economic difficulties. At the same time, the benefits to the U.S. would be significant. The risk of nuclear war would be lowered, the Soviets would be induced to cease their expansion into the Third World, and the Vietnam War would finally end, thus ending the source of the U.S. power drain.

Inspired by the seminar, I have recently examined the documents on the Korean War that are available online in the virtual archive of the Cold War International History Project. The documents portray North Korean leader Kim Il Sung as the prime instigator of the Korean

War. Leffler made the case that Kim sought to attack the South for indigenous Korean reasons related to its history and colonial past. It was not part of an international communist plot to take over the world. Kim Il Sung initially sought permission to attack South Korea on September 3, 1949. The Soviets at that time counseled patience despite Kim's assurances that an invasion would be over within two weeks to two months. The Soviets reasoned that a protracted conflict in Korea could be used by the U.S. to threaten Soviet interests and may provoke the U.S. to "interfere in Korean affairs." Even China opposed the idea of an attack because it was involved in its own military activities. Over the next nine months, Kim proved persistent and eventually acquired necessary war supplies and the green light for the invasion from Stalin. Kim also met with Chinese officials. A month before the outbreak of the war, Mao informed the North Korean ambassador that North Korea should not worry about a possible U.S. intervention in the event of war since the U.S. would not concern itself with such a small territory. This would prove to be a major miscalculation.

The communications among North Korea, China, and the Soviet Union during this time period are fascinating. Prior to the outbreak of war in June 1950, North Korea initially sought approval and military supplies primarily from the Soviet Union. As war approached, the North Koreans began to work more closely with the Chinese, while assuring the Soviets that they had provided all the weapons the North Koreans needed. Once war broke out, the Soviets agreed to the placement of nine Chinese volunteer divisions on the border in case U.S. forces crossed the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel. While providing military assistance to the North Koreans, the Soviets also encouraged the Chinese to become more involved, especially when it became apparent that the North Koreans would not achieve a quick victory. After the U.S. landing at Incheon, Kim Il Sung, knowing that his military position was in jeopardy, requested direct Soviet military assistance if attacked. Instead, the Soviets requested that Chinese volunteers be sent without prior notice to North Korea. At first, China resisted this proposal, partially out of fear of a widened conflict involving the U.S., China, and Soviet Union. After a series of communications between the three communist countries, Mao eventually agreed to send the divisions. Historians have recently learned that this step

took great personal courage for Mao since he was in the minority among Chinese leaders in supporting it. Once the Soviets persuaded the Chinese to join this war, they backed away from daily operations by telling the North Koreans to make concrete strategic arrangements with the Chinese. This policy enabled China to distance itself from any failures while avoiding a direct confrontation with the U.S.

The documents also reveal that once the Korean War was initiated, Cold War interests took over and prolonged it. Correspondence between Stalin and Mao show that they were motivated to delay the armistice talks so that the Chinese military could gain valuable combat experience and damage the prestige of Truman and the American military. It is clear that although the Soviet Union was not a party to the war or the peace talks, it played a major role behind the scenes. Moscow supplied the weapons, assisted in the strategic formulations, and dictated the pace and direction of the armistice talks.

Perhaps most significantly, this seminar showed me and my fellow teachers that examination of new primary sources offers us, as historians, a richer and more complex understanding of the fears

and motivations behind Soviet decision-making. One of the great lessons of the Cold War, according to Leffler, is the need to empathize with your opponent so that you can understand his actions. Fear may lead one nation to miss the signals for peace despite its being in the interest of both parties. Obviously, understanding may not lead to agreement, but understanding does lead to better decision-making. One of the tragedies of the Cold War was its enormous social and economic costs. During the decades-long conflict, overwhelming fear on both sides caused each side to misinterpret one another's actions and miss opportunities to de-escalate the conflict.

The U.S. and the Cold War seminar was an ideal professional development opportunity for teachers. It was a great opportunity to recharge our intellectual batteries and learn from the nation's best scholars. I look forward to sharing my new knowledge and enthusiasm for the subject with my students. One of my goals is to use many of the primary source document activities that were created this summer in my classroom. My students will utilize the Cold War International History Project's website, <http://www.cwhip.org>, for original research. This

remarkable archive contains the most recently released documents from all sides of the Cold War.

The seminar also let me and the other teachers share techniques and ideas that will enrich my classroom. Equally important, we laid the foundation for future collaboration. And I am excited to share all that I have learned with my colleagues at Rutland High School and other Vermont educators. For more information on this and other seminars, please visit the Gilder-Lehrman website: <http://www.gilderlehrman.org/>.

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## SHAFR Needs Faculty Teaching Partners

SHAFR is currently working with secondary teachers to create lesson plans for a series of topics in the history of American foreign relations. The project leaders hope to develop a list of SHAFR members who would be willing to serve as Faculty Partners on the project. Your role as a Faculty Partner would be to be available via email to a secondary teacher who is completing one of the lesson plans. Our hope is that having this partnership will encourage more teachers to write lesson plans for the project.

For example, if you were to volunteer to be a Faculty Partner for early American diplomacy, a teacher might send you a note about a couple of primary sources for the Louisiana Purchase and ask your thoughts about using them in the classroom. The Project will match SHAFR Faculty Partners with the teachers writing the lesson plans only when there are specific questions that need SHAFR expertise.

Please consider participating in this effort, which will be a valuable service to our teachers.

If you are interested, simply send a note to John Tully, SHAFR Director of Secondary Education, at [tullyj@ccsu.edu](mailto:tullyj@ccsu.edu), indicating which areas and/or lesson plans you would be willing to be available for should questions arise.

More information is available at:  
<http://www.shafr.org/teaching/secondary-education/>