

The US and the World: The American Cold War in Global Perspective

by Dave Neumann

For the last ten to fifteen years, historians have brought fresh perspectives to familiar American stories by viewing them through an international or global lens. This trend toward “transnational” history or “globalizing the United States” might seem redundant in approaching the Cold War, since this conflict was by definition an international phenomenon. But a good deal of recent scholarship has enlivened our understanding of the Cold War, and insights from this work can enrich the way teachers think about the period. This article will briefly describe the emergence of this field, then it will sketch out three ways newer scholarship has deepened our understanding of the Cold War United States. It will conclude with some brief suggestions for teaching this topic.

Long before journalist Thomas Friedman announced that globalization was creating a “flat” world, some scholars had become dissatisfied with a narrative centered on nation-states. These scholars noted that a number of important trends defied national borders—from trade goods, to technology, to religious belief, to pop culture. This conviction gave rise to the World History movement in the 1980s with the formation of the World History Association and its *Journal of World History*. Around the start of the new century, historians of the United States began to give serious consideration to the implications of this movement for their own field. A number of scholars took up the challenge of globalizing American history. While some sought to ignore or at least minimize national borders, many made less radical departures from traditional scholarship—primarily by placing the US in a larger context and linking domestic and foreign developments.

This new scholarship has the potential to reinvigorate secondary history instruction. While it is generally easier for college faculty to reshape their courses than it is for high school teachers, the disappearance of the California Standards Test seems to offer teachers more flexibility. Here are three important ways that teachers might globalize their teaching of the Cold War in classroom instruction.

First, the common Cold War narrative in both 10th and 11th grade California classrooms centers heavily on the East-West binary established by superpower tensions. Teachers, particularly in US history courses, often give little

attention to a tremendously important movement happening simultaneously: decolonization. The post-World War II movement for independence across Africa and Asia gave rise to dozens of new nations in a few short decades. These movements often intersected with Cold War tensions, making it difficult to adequately understand US intervention in this period outside of the context of the collapse of European empires—including unofficial neo-colonial empires in the Middle East and Latin America. Paying closer attention to the establishment of nationalist regimes helps students better understand the motives and actions of leaders the US confronted in the Cold War. For example, Vietnamese leader Ho Chi Minh was motivated not just by communism, but also by nationalist desires for an independent nation-state. The comingling of nationalist and communist dynamics became a common pattern among nations where the US intervened either covertly or through more direct means. John F. Kennedy’s inaugural address, a portion of which teachers often use in 11th grade classrooms, addresses this connection: “To those new states whom we welcome to the ranks of the free, we pledge our word that one form of colonial control shall not have passed away merely to be replaced by a far more iron tyranny. We shall not always expect to find them supporting our view. But we shall always hope to find them strongly supporting their own freedom—and to remember that, in the past, those who foolishly sought power by riding the back of the tiger ended up inside.”

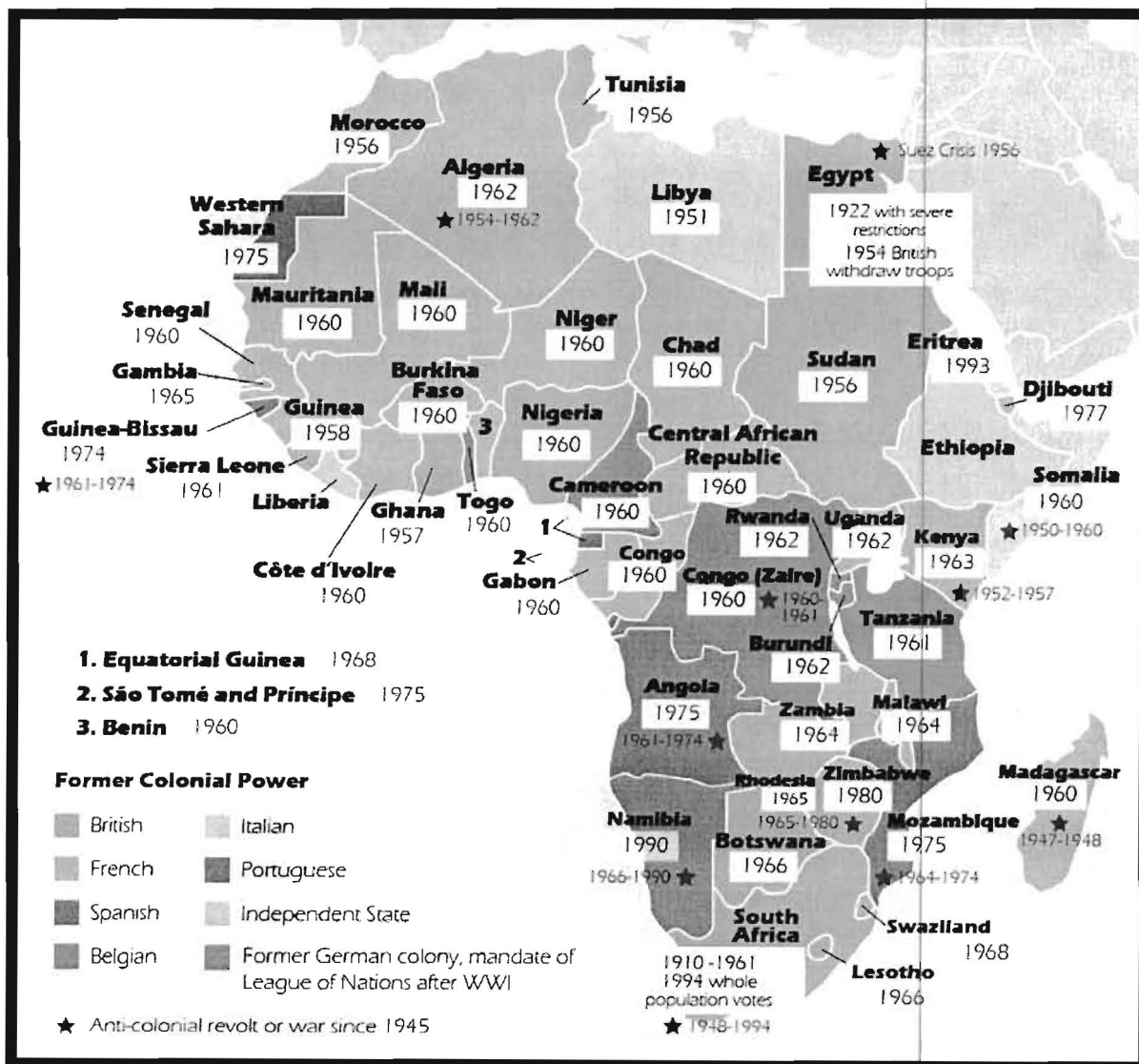


29 December 1962, Miami, Address to the 2506 Cuban Invasion Brigade. Mrs. Kennedy speaks informally with Brigade leaders Oliva, San Roman, Artime, and former Cuban President Cardona. JFK Presidential Library and Museum: <http://www.jfklibrary.org/Asset-Viewer/H55aY5ncgkGYZPzBYLT0IA.aspx>

Second, scholars have increasingly viewed the civil rights movement in a global perspective, as many leaders of the time did. African Americans often sympathized with the plight of colonized Africans seeking independence from white colonial overlords. Cold War politics often prompted the US to side with these colonial powers, perhaps most notoriously in the case of South Africa, which began to develop a coherent apartheid policy in the post-World War II period. African Americans often saw the newly-formed United Nations as an international forum to air the common grievances they shared with their compatriots in Africa. Cold War dynamics prompted American government officials to fear that the civil rights

movement was riddled with communists; more constructively, American racism tarnished the image of the US in the eyes of a Third World that government officials hoped to win over. These concerns sometimes spurred positive engagement in the civil rights movement, as when the State Department filed a friend of the court brief in *Brown v. Board of Education*, or President Kennedy announced new civil rights legislation in the wake of violence in Birmingham. Again, key figures of the time were aware of these global-domestic connections. In Martin Luther King's famous "Letter from Birmingham Jail," another text teachers often use, King explicitly contrasts the nature of racial progress in the US with that

Decolonization in Africa



Map Source: *The Cold War History Blueprint, CWW Lesson #2: Decolonization*. Map created by Sonali Judari for the California History-Social Science Project. Copyright © 2013, The Regents of the University of California. All Rights Reserved.

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of the Third World: "We have waited for more than 340 years for our constitutional and God-given rights. The nations of Asia and Africa are moving with jetlike speed toward the goal of political independence, and we still creep at horse-and-buggy pace toward the gaining of a cup of coffee at a lunch counter."

Another key domestic development of the Cold War period is the postwar boom; while teachers often teach this separately from the Cold War for practical reasons, considering these two topics together makes a lot of sense. It is difficult to exaggerate the degree to which the postwar economy depended upon government spending, on infrastructure such as highway construction but most directly on the military-industrial complex. This connection is most evident in Sunbelt locations like Southern California, where suburban affluence rested on aerospace manufacturing and its subsidiary industries, as well as on the military itself. Thus, the domesticity of the period was linked directly to foreign policy concerns. Historian Elaine Tyler May effectively employed the foreign policy concept of "containment" to make sense of developments within the home during the Cold War era, thus linking Cold War-generated anxieties to conservative marriage and family patterns. The American home became an area of ideological contestation in the Cold War quite literally during the famed Kitchen Debate in 1959. Vice President Nixon and Nikita Khrushchev, the senior Soviet leader, held an impromptu debate in a simulated kitchen set up in the US Embassy in Moscow. Nixon, a native of sunbelt Southern California, began the kitchen debate by noting that the kind of kitchen on display could be found in California houses. Nixon sought to link technology, domesticity, and gender as he announced the superiority of the American system: "This is our newest model. This is the kind which is built in thousands of units for direct installations in the houses. In America, we like to make life easier for women..."

The US was "international at the creation," and has remained so ever since. Recognizing this does not mean abandoning a nation-centered history, but it does suggest helping students see how the US has been affected by the rest of the world, and has affected it in turn. Making connections between the foreign and the domestic facilitates historical thinking by underscoring the importance of context and the complex factors that cause historical change. On a more basic level, making connections that weave an intricate web and demonstrating the complexity of events makes history more interesting, and helps students better understand the way the world works.



Electric Institute of Washington. Woman cooking on electric range. Image from Library of Congress: <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/thc1995004405/PP/>

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