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The Transition of the United States from World Leader to Hegemony During the Cold War

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Abstract: This text scrutinizes how, during the span of the Cold War, particularly at the commencement of hostilities, the United States metamorphosed from a world leader to a dominion of hegemonic might. It perceives the Cold War as a period of ideological corruption within a nation's ethos. The article first assesses the United States' geopolitical status before World War II and signs of its role as a world leader, then discusses the role and performance of the United States as a world leader through its actions during and after World War II. Subsequently, it analyzes the transition to U.S. hegemony, using Modelski's model and Wallerstein's theory to study the shift in U.S. global strategy and influence, with key events such as the Marshall Plan. The article also examines the ideological shift within the United States during this period, including the impacts of policies from Roosevelt to Truman to Eisenhower. This study provides a comprehensive understanding of key shifts in the geopolitical image of the United States during the Cold War. It bridges geopolitical analysis with critical theory, providing fresh insights into the subtleties of U.S. foreign policy and its global impact.

Keywords: Cold War; Geopolitics; United States; Hegemony; World Leader

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1. Introduction

The Cold War marked a period of intense geopolitical conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union, altering the global power dynamics of the 20th century and continuing to influence the 21st century. This study examines a critical element of the Cold War, which is the evolution of the United States from an acknowledged global leader to a position of hegemony. In the context of this document, the term world leader refers to someone who has significant influence globally, primarily through soft power and diplomatic leadership, and who provides innovation to geopolitical order and security. It refers to a country whose power is reflected in its ability in agenda setting and implementation [1]. This attracts other countries, which means a certain level of global political goodwill.

Hegemony, on the other hand, implies a more active and dominant role and is usually characterized by economic, political, and military control. While, like a world leader, it emerged from global wars, its target is a self-serving economic process that has nothing to do with global political philanthropy. Unlike a world leader,

which is considered to always exist, hegemony is rare, and periods without a clear hegemon are possible [2]. Moreover, hegemony may not be confined to a particular country, as it may be or become a larger social system.

2. The United States in its role as a world leader

Before World War II, the geopolitical landscape indicated that the United States was on its way to becoming a significant force on the world stage, despite its stance on isolationism. Meanwhile, the declining British Empire faced a formidable challenge from Germany as a world leader.

World War II represented a pivotal change for the United States, moving from a stance of isolationism to taking on the mantle of global leadership. Following the onset of the Cold War, the U.S. expanded its alliances, took a more active role in global politics, and showed marked resistance and apprehension towards the Soviet Union and its communist ideology [3]. Under Stalin's leadership, the Soviet Union also responded belligerently, sparking several conflicts in the early Cold War.

For the first time after Stalin's death, Khrushchev attempted to ease tensions with the West through a policy of peaceful coexistence. However, Soviet intervention in the 1956 Hungarian Revolution and its role in the Cuban Missile Crisis demonstrate a long-term Soviet threat to the United States. This pattern continued until the second phase of the Cold War, when leaders on both sides became acutely aware of the real possibility of global nuclear annihilation, leading to a relative easing of tensions.

Modelski argues that after the world wars, the world and its new world leaders entered a "second phase" of 25 years of relative peace, during which the diplomatic ideas of world leaders spread widely among the most influential countries. He argued that it would stabilize an acceptable international order.

However, the outbreak of the Cold War posed a direct challenge to Modelski's vision of a single world leader promoting an era of relative peace. Hence, this paper posits that the United States progressively transitioned from its position as a global leader to that of a hegemonic force in the initial stages of the Cold War.

The following sections will delve into detailed discussions on how the U.S., as a world leader, transformed into a hegemonic power during the Cold War, the ideological shifts in these two types of power, the global reactions to these changes, and their legacy, revealing the subtle shifts in America's geopolitical image.

In the period leading up to World War II, the multifaceted strengths of the United States laid the foundation for its emergence as a global leader in the pre-Cold War era. Following the Great Depression, a series of radio broadcasts by President Franklin D. Roosevelt played a critical role in helping the public understand national affairs and garnering support for his New Deal policies. Roosevelt's use of simple language in these broadcasts, known as the Fireside Chats, effectively clarified complex policies and events, making them understandable to all listeners and eventually becoming a source of hope and security for all Americans [4].

The first phase of the New Deal was immediately implemented following Roosevelt's inauguration in March 1933 [5]. In the initial period of his tenure, legislation was enacted to address banking restructuring, crisis assistance, employment relief initiatives, and agricultural enhancements. Following this, the New Deal entered its second phase, encompassing measures for labor union safeguards, the introduction of the Social Security Act, and support for tenant farmers as well as migrant laborers. Numerous initiatives and agencies from the New Deal era were commonly identified by their abbreviations, including the Works Progress Administration (WPA) and the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC).

The success of these measures not only pulled America out of economic despair but also laid the groundwork for sustained economic growth and stability. In 1938, the GDP of the United States reached $800 billion, dwarfing European powers such as the United Kingdom ($284 billion), France ($186 billion), and Germany ($351 billion) [6].

Regarding the military, before World War II, the size of the United States Army, especially the ground forces, was relatively small compared to other major countries at that time. However, President Roosevelt urged the United States to abandon isolationism after the start of World War II and planned the largest military mobilization in American history.

In 1940, the U.S. government passed the Selective Training and Service Act, initiating the country's first conscription during a time of peace. This legislation mandated that males between the ages of 21 and 45 sign up for military duty. Following the attack on Pearl Harbor, the age range for draft eligibility was broadened to include all healthy men from 18 to 64 years old. Over the course of the conflict, conscription mobilized over 10 million individuals into the military forces, including the Army, Navy, and Marine Corps, as noted by Vergun, with numerous others enlisting voluntarily [7].

Regarding the enhancement of military capabilities, in response to the looming global threat and the U.S.'s involvement in the conflict, President Roosevelt spearheaded a historic augmentation of the country's military might. By 1942, he had sanctioned the most extensive military equipment production effort ever seen in the U.S., aiming to construct 45,000 aircraft, 45,000 tanks, 20,000 anti-aircraft artillery pieces, and 8 million tons of ships within the span of just one year [8].

The United States' rapid mobilization and expansion of its military forces was largely attributed to its significant industrial capacity and economic resources. As the leading industrial nation of the time, the U.S. had the infrastructure and resources necessary to increase military production swiftly. This industrial strength enabled the rapid manufacturing of a vast array of military equipment and vehicles. Therefore, while the U.S. military initially started smaller than some other nations, a combination of policies and its robust industrial and economic base led to a rapid growth in personnel and armaments, establishing the U.S. as a major military power by the time it entered World War II.

From a geopolitical perspective, the United States' location on the North American continent kept it distant from the chaos and internal conflicts of European nations, and far from ambitious Asian countries like Japan. The Atlantic Ocean to the east and the Pacific Ocean to the west provided the U.S. with strong natural defense barriers. These oceans were effective obstacles against potential aggressors given the technological conditions of the time. This geographical isolation protected the U.S. from direct military attacks in the early stages of World War II, offering a relatively safe environment for economic and military mobilization. President Roosevelt focused on regional defense during this period, strengthening naval forces and signing mutual security agreements with other countries in North and South America, fully utilizing America's geographical advantages to enhance national security.

In 1940, under the guidance of Blitzkrieg tactics, Germany rapidly invaded France and the Low Countries. The British Expeditionary Force and allied troops were surrounded by the German army in northern France. This led to the famous Dunkirk evacuation, where about 330,000 Allied soldiers were evacuated from Dunkirk back to Britain under desperate conditions. Although this was a successful retreat that had a lasting impact on Germany's failure, it also exposed the vulnerability of the British army when facing German military strength. World War II veteran Harry Leigh-Dugmore mentioned in his memoirs that during the Dunkirk event, there was severe chaos among the troops and a lack of information, "None of us had any idea where we were supposed to be going" [9].

Over the subsequent months, Germany shifted its focus to conducting air raids over mainland Britain, most notably throughout the 1940 Battle of Britain. Despite the Royal Air Force achieving victory in this critical conflict, Britain experienced intense bombardment, with significant damage inflicted on London and other key urban centers.

On March 11, 1941, the U.S. Congress enacted the Lend-Lease Act, allowing the United States to supply its allies with military gear, aircraft, armored vehicles, transportation means, sustenance, and other critical supplies. A distinctive aspect of this legislation was its provision for allies to receive supplies without immediate payment under the principle of "No Victory, No Return," indicating that any resources used or lost during the conflict were not required to be compensated to the United States. Initially aimed at supporting Britain, which had depleted its reserves by buying American armaments, the scope of this act widened by the year's end to include other allies like France, China, and the Soviet Union. In the course of World War II, the United States disbursed approximately $50 billion in assistance (valued at around $690 billion in today's dollars) to over 30 nations globally. Britain benefited from $30 billion of this aid, while Russia and other nations received $10.7 billion and $2.9 billion, respectively, contributing to roughly 11% of the U.S.'s overall war expenditures [10].

The role of the United States transformed from an isolated observer to the "Arsenal of Democracy," and by the time the United States joined the war on December 7, 1941, Britain had completely withdrawn from its former position as a world leader, leaving the role naturally to the United States. The U.S. grew to become one of the strongest nations in the world during the war.

In 1945, the founding of the United Nations was significantly shaped by the principles of the Atlantic Charter, a crucial agreement between Roosevelt and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill that envisioned the future of the world after World War II [11]. This document highlighted the importance of self-governance, collaborative economic efforts, and disarmament, advocating for policies such as the avoidance of territorial expansion, ensuring that territorial adjustments reflect the wishes of the populace, reinstating self-rule to those from whom it had been taken, guaranteeing unrestricted access to resources, easing trade barriers, fostering worldwide cooperation for improved economic and social well-being, securing freedom from fear and scarcity, maintaining freedom of navigation, and promoting the peaceful resolution of conflicts alongside the disarmament of belligerent states.

Subsequently, the main purpose of the UN's establishment was to prevent future wars and peacefully resolve international conflicts, responding to the League of Nations' failure to prevent World War II. To ensure U.S. involvement, the UN's headquarters were based in the U.S., warmly supported by the UK and USSR. Both the UN and the Atlantic Charter symbolized the U.S.'s significance in the post-World War II new world order, bearing a sense of care and benevolence. Hosting the UN further affirmed the U.S.'s accepted role as a world leader, capable not only of exerting power but also of leading in establishing a geopolitically agreed-upon structure by the world's nations.

The rise of the United States to world leadership before the Cold War was marked by a series of strategic, economic, and diplomatic milestones, partly linked to Roosevelt's personal diplomatic character, as evidenced in various sources. From fundamental economic capabilities to transformative New Deal policies and Fireside Chats to nationwide military mobilization, wartime economic support, and the founding of the United Nations, these actions and policies highlighted not only America's growing geopolitical power but also its commitment to shaping a world order based on cooperation and mutual benefit, making it a world leader before the Cold War, in line with Modelski's definition. However, with Roosevelt's passing and the end of the common fight against fascism, the U.S. gradually shifted towards hegemony.

3. Transition to hegemony

The Trinity Test, led by J. Robert Oppenheimer, was successfully conducted on July 16, 1945. Held in Alamogordo, New Mexico, it marked the world's first successful nuclear weapon explosion. In August of the

same year, the U.S. bombed Hiroshima and Nagasaki. A few days after the Nagasaki bombing, on August 15, 1945, Japan surrendered, abruptly ending the war. Soviet leader Stalin pretended to be indifferent to the atomic bomb but actually saw the U.S. bombing of Japan as a direct threat to the Soviet Union.

President Harry S. Truman, the figure behind the authorization of the bombings, expressed in correspondence to Professor James L. Cate on January 12, 1953, that the action of dropping the bombs brought the conflict to a close, preserved lives, and allowed democratic countries to confront reality [12]. He noted that just as Japan seemed on the verge of capitulation, the Soviet Union swiftly engaged in the conflict shortly before Japan's surrender, aiming to be part of the peace negotiations despite not having contributed militarily to the victory over Japan.

This letter reflects Truman's definitive view of the atomic bomb as a lifesaving measure. Japan's Emperor had contemplated the "Gyokusai" idea, which meant the entire population, including the elderly, women, and children, would rather die than surrender. However, the atomic bombings led to the realization of military disparity and Japan's imminent downfall, thus averting the plan and saving countless lives, including many Japanese.

However, Truman's letter also hints at a moral ambiguity in America's decision, casting a shadow over the Cold War that followed. With the end of WWII, U.S. focus shifted from a unified wartime effort to a strategic emphasis on containing communism, overtaking global development and world peace as America's priority. In his 1946 address at Westminster College in Missouri, Churchill introduced the concept of the "Iron Curtain," a metaphorical division he used to describe the burgeoning Cold War. He cautioned against the expansion of the Soviet-communist influence in Eastern Europe, portraying it as a barrier isolating it from the Western nations.

Immanuel Wallerstein developed the World-System Theory, a macro-sociological view of the world as a system characterized by interconnected political and economic dynamics. Wallerstein categorizes nations into three types: core nations, peripheral nations, and semi-peripheral nations.

After World War II, the United States became a prime example of a core nation in Wallerstein's model. In Wallerstein's framework, core nations are not only the primary beneficiaries of the global economic system but also its principal architects. They shape global economic policies, control the flow of capital and goods, and exert significant political influence. Wallerstein's theory also posits that hegemonic powers within the world system achieve their status not only through direct economic and military might but also through ideological influence. His theory emphasizes economic dominance and exploitation by core nations, while Modelski's model of world leadership focuses on political leadership, innovation, and the ability to establish global order and governance.

During a presentation to the United States Congress on March 12, 1947, President Truman announced the need for U.S. policy to back free nations fighting against oppression by armed groups or external forces, primarily aimed at halting the proliferation of communism during that era.

Known as the Truman Doctrine, this statement was a clear departure from the previous U.S. policy of nonintervention. The Cold War foreign policy laid out in this doctrine centered on containing the Soviet Union and its communist ideology. Unlike Churchill's Iron Curtain speech, the Truman Doctrine marked an open admission by the United States of its resistance to communism. A powerful nation, the Soviet Union, threatened the new world leader, the United States, early in its life and caused it to acknowledge its resistance, not following the first and second stages of the world leader model, but in accordance with the definition of hegemony as ideological control, with policies that were exclusionary and focused on its own ideological interests rather than global benevolence.

At the same time, the enactment of the Marshall Plan further demonstrated the initial U.S. hegemonic

manifestations. After the end of World War II, Europe was left in ruins, with its cities ravaged, economies shattered, and populations facing unprecedented hardship. The destructive reach of fascist Germany had left most of the continent in dire need of reconstruction, and the war's aftermath saw millions of Europeans grappling with homelessness, hunger, and loss. The situation was further exacerbated by a historically severe winter between 1946 and 1947, which not only compounded the suffering of the war-weary populations through extreme cold, leading to numerous cases of frostbite and fatalities due to freezing but also highlighted the urgent need for recovery and rebuilding efforts. Essential infrastructure, including railroads and bridges crucial for transportation and communication, had been destroyed or severely damaged, disrupting the flow of goods and hampering relief efforts. The financial resources required for such massive reconstruction efforts were beyond the capacity of the war-torn nations, leaving them vulnerable to external influences and ideologies.

In this context, the ideological and political vacuum created by the devastation of the war facilitated the spread of communism and socialism in Europe. They promised rapid, centralized solutions to the problems of poverty and social injustice exacerbated by the war. Communism advocated a classless society with an equal distribution of resources and power, whereas the pre-war capitalist system was blamed for economic disparities and political instability by many who were suffering. In France, the French Communist Party (PCF) used its role in the resistance movement to mobilize workers for nationalization efforts and workers' rights through strikes and protests, which had a significant impact on the political landscape of post-war France [13]. The Greek Civil War (1946-1949), on the other hand, further exemplified the ideological rivalries of the era, as the Greek Democratic Army (GDA), the military wing of the Communist Party of Greece (KKE), clashed with the government forces, vying for control and influence in the post-war order [14].

In 1946, the publication known as the Clifford-Elsey Report was made public, authored jointly by Clark Clifford, a key advisor to the U.S. President at the time, and George Elsey, a representative from the State Department. Officially titled "American Relations with the Soviet Union," this document underscored the Soviet Union's ambitions to bolster its security and dominance through territorial expansion, presenting a challenge to both the United States and its allies. The document advocated for the U.S. to implement a more decisive and anticipatory strategy to curb the Soviet's growing influence. This strategy called for an enhancement of the military and economic power of the U.S. and its allies, coupled with efforts to pursue peace and stability via diplomatic channels. The significance of the report in shaping U.S. foreign policy is evident in the strategic pivot from a collaborative relationship post-World War II to a resolute oppositional stance towards the Soviet Union.

For these reasons, the United States realized that it was time to take stronger measures against the Soviet Union and that if they did not act in time, the countries of Western Europe might tilt towards the Soviet Union once it had completed its reconstruction. Thus, the Marshall Plan (1948) was born, also known as the European Recovery Program. This plan assisted in various forms, including financial, technical, and equipment support, amounting to $13.15 billion, with 90% being grants and only 10% as loans.

Although the Marshall Plan was framed in terms of providing generous aid to all European countries, including those affected by the Soviet Union, its implicit purpose was to contain the spread of communism by demonstrating the benefits of liberal democracy and market economies. The plan succeeded in revitalizing the economies of Western Europe and became the antithesis of the Soviet model, offering a more attractive alternative to communism. In addition to this, the aid provided by the Marshall Plan came with several implicit conditions, including the requirement that the beneficiary countries adhere to the capitalist framework and cooperate with the United States, thereby aligning their economic policies and political orientations with U.S. interests.

However, when confronted with the Soviet Union, the U.S. made numerous onerous demands that led to the Soviet Union's refusal to participate and the banning of its satellite states from the program. To resist the Marshall Plan and the creation of NATO, the Soviet Union created the Warsaw Pact, although it was far less effective than the Marshall Plan in terms of economic recovery. The Marshall Plan was a key element of the U.S. policy of strategic containment, while the Soviet Union's refusal effectively cemented the split between the East and West blocs in Europe, and with both the U.S. and the Soviet Union in play, the Cold War was further exacerbated, and the move led to the U.S. and the Soviet Union heading towards their respective hegemonic epochs, with the U.S. fostering global integration and the image of the world's lighthouse dimming even further.

During the Cold War, the influence of American anti-communism was not only broadly reflected in intensifying the war sentiment but also more specifically manifested in alliances with dictators. Under the guise of anti-communism, the United States supported authoritarian leaders, contrary to the ideals of freedom and democracy that it professed. One of the most notable examples is the Shah regime in Iran. In 1953, the CIA of the United States and British intelligence jointly launched Operation Ajax, which overthrew the democratically elected Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh and strengthened the power of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi [15]. The Shah's regime was widely regarded as dictatorial, brutally suppressing political dissent. The United States supported the Shah's regime because it was considered a key ally in preventing Soviet expansion and protecting the oil resources of the Middle East [16].

In summary, starting from the partial reason for the United States using atomic bombs on two Japanese cities, the U.S. was not a world leader but rather aimed at hegemony, with its anti-Soviet and anti-communist stance becoming increasingly apparent.

By proposing and implementing the Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan, the United States clarified its policy of containing communism, utilizing its economic and military advantages to shape global politics, leading to an increasing division between the U.S. and Soviet camps. Its aggressive anti-communist stance and the lengths it would go to maintain this position ended the impression of "benevolent actions" and the image of a world leader, clearly marking the symbol of hegemony.

4. Ideological transition during the Cold War

Under the guise of anti-communism, the ideological landscape within the United States underwent significant changes during the Cold War, changes that further elucidated the conduct of the U.S.

During World War II, Franklin D. Roosevelt's method of handling international relations was characterized by his "Good Neighbor" policy, which emphasized cooperation, non-interference, and the promotion of mutual trade. Roosevelt's tenure focused on maintaining global peace and cooperation through diplomacy and economic support, marking an era where the U.S. acted as a global leader. However, as World War II neared its end, the U.S., having abandoned isolationism and emerged victorious, was plunged into the post-war scramble for supremacy. Upon taking office, Harry S. Truman, Roosevelt's more hawkish successor, adopted a confrontational stance towards the Soviet Union, ending the wartime alliance.

The ideological foundation of U.S. Cold War policy was established by George F. Kennan's "Long Telegram" in 1946. Kennan, a diplomat at the U.S. Embassy in Moscow, articulated the view that the Soviet Union was inherently expansionist and its influence needed to be contained. This telegram laid the intellectual groundwork for the containment policy, emphasizing the ideological divide between Western capitalism and Eastern communism. The Truman Doctrine, articulated in 1947, proposed that the U.S. would provide political, military, and economic assistance to all democratic nations under threat from external or internal authoritarian forces, laying the true groundwork for the containment policy and officially beginning the era of "anti-Soviet" actions.

Dwight D. Eisenhower, Truman's successor, took an even more aggressive stance during his presidency with the concept of "brinkmanship," the practice of pushing dangerous events to the brink of disaster to achieve the most advantageous outcome. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, under Eisenhower, advocated for this approach, suggesting that by demonstrating a willingness to use nuclear weapons, the U.S. could deter Soviet action. This policy marked the escalation of the Cold War, heightening the risk of nuclear annihilation and placing the world in peril under the specter of confrontation between the two superpowers.

Domestically, the Cold War era was defined by McCarthyism, a period of intense anti-communist sentiment stirred by Senator Joseph McCarthy. This movement led to widespread fear and suspicion, with many Americans accused of being communists or communist sympathizers, often without substantive evidence. Even the creator of the atomic bomb, Oppenheimer, was persecuted by McCarthyism. McCarthyism stifled different political views within American society, fostering an atmosphere of rigidity and suspicion, and keeping the society on high alert with substantial resources allocated to defense and intelligence. Internationally, driven by a desire to contain communism and maintain its dominant position, the U.S. engaged in numerous interventions and conflicts, such as the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and the Cuban Missile Crisis.

5. Conclusion and reflection

Regarding the definition of American geopolitics, there is a widespread view in academia that the United States is a world leader, with World War II marking the first cycle of world leadership. However, this cycle was interrupted by the Cold War, after which the United States embarked on a second cycle of world leadership. Alternatively, some believe that the United States is a hegemon, engaging in neocolonial aggression through its military, economic, and neoliberal ideological means.

Nevertheless, this paper combines the views of both concepts and points out that although the United States is a hegemonic power today, it did not achieve it overnight; it went through a process of transformation from a world leader, and this process of corruption was the Cold War.

Compared to the direct bloodshed and death of World War II, the cruelty of the Cold War was manifested in the cutthroat machinations of states and the resultant devastation to idealism. The Soviet Union disintegrated during the Cold War, and the American Dream deteriorated, with each of the two superpowers losing the most important part of themselves forever in the frenzied flame of war.

After World War II, the anticipated peace did not materialize. With the rise of the Soviet Union, America's fear of the USSR deepened, leading to increasingly strong anti-Soviet sentiments both domestically and internationally. Ultimately, in a cycle of action and reaction where the U.S. alternated between being proactive and reactive, it ended up recklessly confronting the Soviet Union and eventually lost its lighthouse image. These actions solidified the ideological Iron Curtain, making it an impenetrable barrier.

Even after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, its impacts on American society and its networks persist. In the spring of 2004, a series of photographs appeared in global media, shattering the U.S.'s portrayal of its occupation of Iraq as a humanitarian mission aimed at promoting human rights. The photos taken by American soldiers at Iraq's Abu Ghraib prison, showing prisoners subjected to extreme humiliation and suffering before interrogation, are a manifestation of the Cold War's suspicion, deterrence, warfare, containment, and a series of ruthless actions and ideological shifts.

History is fluid and constantly influences the present and the future. The ideological degeneration and fundamental changes in the policies of the United States during the Cold War deserve to be a wake-up call for all countries and citizens, where the changes in the country were artificially caused by the active and the passive ones who had no choice but to do so because of the changing times.

Disclosure statement

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