

THIS IS A TRADITIONAL ASSIGNMENT. PRINT AND COMPLETE IN INK.

Name: _____ Class Period: _____

Leader of the Free World 1945-1975

Purpose:

This Crossroads Essay is an optional enrichment activity providing additional insight into the era. Students who complete this activity before they take the corresponding reading quiz will earn up to 10 additional points. All students should READ the article. For those completing the activity... *Read directions carefully.*

Directions:

As you read the article, *annotate* in the space provided along the right margin. *Use INK.*

Annotate by:

- Highlighting** the main ideas/arguments,
- identifying & explaining major themes** (BAGPIPE)
- identifying & explaining historical context**
- defining terms** you may not know.
(if it's bold... define it!)

- | | |
|----------|--|
| M | igration and Settlement |
| A | merica in the World |
| G | eography and the Environment |
| P | olitics and Power |
| I | dentify; American and National |
| E | conomy; Work, Exchange, and Technology |
| S | ociety and Culture |

I. General Observations on Substance and Methodology

This essay covers three decades -- from the development of the atomic bomb and the Allied victory in the Second World War, which catapulted the United States to a position of world leadership, to the collapse of South Vietnam, which cast grave doubt on the effectiveness and self-confidence of the United States as "leader of the free world." It also examines how, in the 1940s and 1950s, American society became a model of material and moral success for the rest of the world, only to confront, in the 1960s and 1970s, grave challenges to the bases of that success. Throughout this period, for the first time in American history (other than when the nation was actually at war with a foreign power or powers), world affairs had direct, day-to-day impact on American politics, economic affairs, culture, and society. What factors helped bring about this vital change?

- the development of nuclear weapons -- perhaps the single best example in modern times of the shaping of history by technology.
- the polarization of world politics between "the free world" and "the Communist world" -- a development whose significance was heightened when both blocs developed and acquired nuclear weapons.
- the breakup of the old European colonial empires, and the resulting competition between the superpowers for the new nations' support -- a development complicated in turn by the rise of the non-aligned nations as a separate bloc (the "Third World").
- the development of foreign aid and defense expenditures as major components of government spending, and the consequent growth of those sectors of the economy bound up with foreign aid and defense spending -- developments that both increased the need for significant tax revenues from the individual American taxpayer and helped to make foreign and defense policy major and ever-present issues of direct concern to the electorate.
- the changing relationship between foreign affairs and domestic politics -- for example, in the 1950s, the perceived link between the Cold War as the focus of American foreign policy and threats (real or alleged) of domestic subversion designed to weaken the nation's posture abroad; in the 1960s, the links, both real and perceived, between the Vietnam Conflict and racial and student unrest; in the 1970s, the links between the Middle East crisis and the domestic energy crisis.
- the dramatic growth in power and status of the American Presidency -- driven both by the invention of nuclear and thermonuclear weapons and by Presidents' recognition that they can seem to achieve more by concentrating on foreign policy rather than on domestic policy -- on the old view that "politics stops at the water's edge."
- the linkages between issues of rights, equality, and democracy around the world and issues of rights, equality, and democracy at home (e.g., the civil rights, women's rights, and gay rights movements).
- the "shrinking" of the world by new technologies of transportation, communications, and war (e.g., jet aircraft, missiles, satellites, electronic mass media, and nuclear and thermonuclear weapons) -- thus profoundly altering the previous effects of geography, economics, and cultural diversity on both America and the world.

II. The Short-Lived "American Century," 1945-1963

The shape of the world after the conquest and reconstruction of the **Axis powers** left the United States, the only great Allied power not devastated by war, as the "leader of the free world" -- a phrase that truly came into use with the rupture of the **Grand Alliance** and the division of the world between the United States and its allies and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and its allies. American leadership of the "free world," confirmed by the nation's allies and (by implication) by its foremost adversary, the U.S.S.R., heightened the significance of any changes, for better or worse, in American life. If the nation abjured its former tolerance of racial segregation and race prejudice, for example, these decisions sent powerful messages to the great majority of the world's population living in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. If the nation's economy faltered, as it began to do in the late 1960s and continued to do throughout the 1970s that, too, sent shockwaves through the global economy.

Thus the United States had to play a pivotal role in deciding, or helping to decide, or shaping the great foreign-policy and geopolitical issues of the postwar era.

America's role as "leader of the free world" - whether self-assumed or by default -- was a driving force behind the nation's foreign and defense policies:

for example, Harry Truman's decisions to provide aid to war-torn Western Europe, to organize **NATO**, to carry out the **Berlin Airlift**, to recognize **Israel**, and to lead the **United Nations** effort for in the **Korean Conflict**;

Dwight Eisenhower's decisions to provide low-key support for **South Vietnam**, to oppose the Israeli-British-French war against Egypt, to send American forces to stabilize Lebanon, and to organize **SEATO**;

and John F. Kennedy's decisions to go ahead with the **Bay of Pigs** operation against Castro's Cuba, to organize the **Alliance for Progress** and the **Peace Corps**, to initiate the "space race," to confront the U.S.S.R. in the **Cuban missile crisis**, and to move American support for South Vietnam from low-gear to high-gear.

The emergence of the United States as the leader of the free world also had its effects on the day-to-day lives of ordinary Americans. At the beginning of this period, the United States experienced a postwar boom of economic growth and a rise in the standard of living that was remarkable by any measure. This boom seemed to promise an era of prosperity without end; equally significant, it was an instrumental factor in the success of the United States in presenting itself as a model for the world of a just polity, a prosperous economic system, and a free and democratic society. That Americans saw their nation as a beacon to all other nations is a theme of American history dating back to the first English settlements in North America. But when in the late 1940s Henry Luce, the founder of *Time-Life*, hailed the decades after 1945 as the "American Century," he seemed to be speaking the exact, literal truth.

Simultaneous with the rise of a strong American industrial economy came the flowering of American science and technology. Although most Americans deemed the single greatest scientific and technological achievements of the era to be the development of nuclear weapons and the American space program, the widespread growth of electronic communications (telephones, radio, and television) and cheap and easy transportation (automobiles and airplanes) truly made America a united nation, an integrated national economy, and a technological model for the rest of the world. It was these inventions, and not nuclear weapons, that captured the imagination and the envy of the world. Further, these developments brought the world into American homes, via radio and television, with a directness and immediacy beyond anything the American people had yet experienced or (except for far-seeing science-fiction writers) imagined. As a result, world events had an ever-greater impact on Americans' lives and thinking, and American events took place not just on a national but a world stage, transforming the world's image of the "leader of the free world" with ever-increasing swiftness and significance.

The combination of economic growth and prosperity with scientific and technological progress created an era of American life that established the myths and standards by which generations of Americans came to evaluate their own lives. The model household, in the eyes of most Americans, was the "nuclear family" -- mother (homemaker) and father (breadwinner) and two children, with a house in the suburbs, two cars, and several happy pets.

The idealized locale of this idealized family, the suburbs, was another significant new development in American life. Not urban because of its quasi-rural setting and character, not rural because of its close ties to urban centers, suburbia became the "crabgrass frontier" (a term suggested by the historian Kenneth Jackson) or the "new golden land" (a term adapted from Eastern European immigrants' ecstatic phrase for America) -- the perfect place for Americans to make homes for themselves and raise families. Suburbia was made possible by the postwar economic boom, which provided employment for millions of Americans, who thus could afford their own homes, and by the technological revolution, which made transportation and communication quick, safe, and easily affordable. This "new golden land" soon found its way into the nation's mass media, specifically entertainment media such as films and **television**. **Suburbia** supplanted urban settings in popular movies and television programs, and the audiences who made the American entertainment industry one of the most important components of the burgeoning American economy also made suburban settings, modes of life, and values the measures of American material success and moral stature.

In retrospect, American material success was short-lived and both it and American moral stature came under vigorous attack and prolonged siege. Even during the brief "American Century," popular culture did not just present images of a peaceful, contented, exemplary suburbia. Novels such as Grace Metalious's *Peyton Place*, muckraking journalistic exposes such as Vance Packard's *The Hidden Persuaders* and *The Status Seekers*, and films such as *Rebel Without a Cause* shattered the conventional images of suburbia. These successful works "revealed" to public view a brittle, hypocritical suburban life whose placid surface concealed mindless conformity, self-destructive hedonism, bitter hostility between parents and children and between husbands and wives, marital infidelity, and desperate unhappiness. Writers who focused on the lives of American women demonstrated that the majority of women whom society consigned to conventional roles of wife and mother were increasingly stultified by and discontented with these roles -- only to find that the larger society dismissed such feelings as "neurotic." Although largely ignored or trivialized at the time by the mass media, the discontents of suburbia presaged a societal and cultural upheaval that soon overtook American life as a whole.

III. The "American Century" Self-Destructs, 1963-1975

The periodization adopted in this essay assigns the Presidency of John F. Kennedy (1961-1963) to the sub-period tracing the rise of the "American Century" -- thus making the Kennedy era the coda to the 1950s. Conventional accounts treat the Kennedy era as the opening act of the 1960s, an understandable approach for a variety of reasons -- including the case made by Kennedy himself that the 1960 election marked a decisive break with the Eisenhower era, and the inauguration of new government programs (such as the Peace Corps, the Alliance for Progress, and the space program), designed to move the nation decisively into a position to command the future -- albeit based on the values and goals of the present and the immediate past.

But the Fifties, Sixties, and Seventies defy ordinary chronology; they do not match up with the conventional boundaries of decades. It can be argued just as persuasively that the Kennedy Presidency was the last act of the 1950s and that its sudden, violent end gave birth to the tumultuous Sixties, just as it can be argued that Richard Nixon's Presidency was the last act of the 1960s and its sudden, catastrophic end introduced the confused, drifting Seventies.

The Kennedy Presidency was the last during which the majority of the American people felt safe believing what their government told them. It was the last during which the social forces unleashed by the **Civil Rights Movement** sought to work within the "system stem," and, indeed, the last during which the "system" was not a word of opprobrium or reproach. It was the last during which the Cold War was an ever-persuasive justification for American foreign policies, and the last during which American Presidents could wield war powers without the hostile scrutiny of Congress and the electorate. Finally, and ironically, it was the last not to feel the corrosive effects of public reaction to the **Vietnam Conflict** -- in part because it was the first to carry out a massive increase in American commitment of resources and personnel to the cause of South Vietnam.

The assassination of John F. Kennedy changed all that. The first assassination of a President in over sixty years, it shattered the American people's faith in their government, in the honesty of their elected and appointed officials, and in the health of their society. If Kennedy had been murdered by a crazed lone gunman, then something was horribly wrong with a society that could produce someone who could commit such a crime. If Kennedy had been the victim of a conspiracy, then the entire system of law, order, and justice was horribly awry -- a threat to the nation rather than its principal instrument for protecting vital national interests.

The period immediately following the assassination -- the Administration of President Lyndon B. Johnson (1963-1969) -- was dominated by the Vietnam Conflict. In the words of Tom Wicker of *The New York Times*, Johnson (his hero and role model was Franklin D. Roosevelt) had wanted to become the greatest domestic President of the twentieth century, but instead "found an ugly little war that destroyed him." But it was not only the mercurial Johnson whose grandiose hopes for America were shattered by Vietnam. Millions of ordinary Americans began to challenge a war that, however honorable its stated goals might be, increasingly was fought in a manner that was both repulsive (at times horrifying) and dismayingly ineffective. Also, Americans (especially in the African-American community) came increasingly to question a war that exacted disproportionate burdens on the poor and absorbed ever-more resources that could have been committed to solving the problems of the inner city and the rural poor. And, finally, Americans (including those who supported as well as those who opposed the war) began to see growing evidence that their government was lying to them about the costs, goals, and ultimate success of the war.

But Vietnam was not the sole agony of the American people in this period. After apparently hopeful beginnings, spurred both by victories in the courts and the enactment of powerful new **Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts**, the quest for racial equality seemed to falter. At the same time, increasingly militant leaders within the African-American community began to call for more direct action to secure rights and equality; some even began to advocate violence against what they deemed a repressive, racist society. The conflict of values and tactics within the African-American community and the "long, hot summers" it touched off in urban ghettos throughout the nation alarmed the white majority, whose fear curdled into resentment and anger as the rhetoric of violence grew ever-more threatening.

The year 1968 is often remembered as the year America came apart. This pivotal year witnessed a confluence of independent yet related phenomena:

- (i) the culmination of years of racial unrest,
- (ii) the peak of student protests against what they deemed to be an unjust society at home and an unjust war abroad, and
- (iii) the reaction of many white Americans against what they saw as a sweeping challenge to cherished values and social stability.

In the critical year 1968, as the atmosphere of threats, distrust, and violence poisoned the nation's politics and public life, the two leaders who might have been able to make a difference died at the hands of assassins. On 4 April 1968, the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was slain in Memphis, Tennessee, where he had gone to lend his support to striking garbage-workers. Two months later, Senator Robert F. Kennedy was murdered just as he won the California primary for the Democratic presidential nomination. Controversial and polarizing in life, both men, as **martyrs**, became the focus of nearly universal mourning. The blows their murders dealt to the national psyche were catastrophic, and were only exacerbated by the urban violence that accompanied both major parties' political conventions that August.

The election, in a dispiriting and quarrelsome contest, of Republican Richard Nixon seemed to some to mark an end to the 1960s - in large part because Nixon, as Eisenhower's Vice President, presented himself as a return to the "traditional" values and politics of the 1950s. (Walter Lippmann, the veteran political commentator, declared that he would vote for Nixon because the future seemed likely to require a politics of repression, and Nixon was the most suitable candidate to preside over repression.) Yet Nixon's Presidency turned out to be almost a fitting coda to the fractious, divisive, and frenetic Sixties. The President who pledged to end the Vietnam Conflict (much as Eisenhower had won his election by pledging an end to the Korean Conflict) expanded the war to include air operations of questionable legality in Laos and Cambodia. The President who pledged "to bring us together" was so concerned about domestic subversion that he used federal intelligence agencies to spy on and harass critics of his policies. And the President who pledged a "law and order" administration was, finally, driven from office because of his and his aides' flagrant violations of the Constitution and federal law.

If any single event confirmed the American people's growing belief that they could not trust their government, it was the Watergate scandal of 1972-1974 that began as a comic opera and ended in tragedy and crisis. Watergate dramatized the risks of the postwar Presidency in ways that the American people could not escape. In the wake of Franklin D. Roosevelt, and of the vesting of the power to use nuclear and thermonuclear weapons within the discretion of the President, the American people tended to defer to presidential power, to presidential claims of expansive and inherent executive authority, and to presidential judgments as to what foreign and defense ("national security") policies would best serve the national interest. The Watergate crisis showed how a President could camouflage massive and flagrant illegality behind the label of national security, and how difficult it was to mount a successful challenge to such claims.

Nixon's dramatic and highly public fall from power stunned the nation as no event had since the assassination of John F. Kennedy. The image of the disgraced President -- the first in American history to resign his office -- became a symbol of the period. Within eight months, however, another event definitively ended this period of American history.

In April of 1975, the collapse of the South Vietnamese government revealed the hollowness of American policymakers' confident assurances about the wisdom and the effectiveness of American policy in Vietnam. Recalling Nixon's warnings that the fall of South Vietnam would reduce the United States to "a pitiful, helpless giant" on the world stage, Americans wondered what the future course of American foreign policy should be (leading to what future commentators would call "Vietnam syndrome"). Just as Nixon's departure by helicopter from the nation's capital marked the end of this period at home, so, too, the lift-off from the roof of the American embassy in Saigon of the last, refugee-laden American helicopter marked the end of this period abroad.

IV. Key Historiographical Controversies, 1945-1973

The great themes outlined above both shaped and were shaped by the key events of these three decades. The selective itemized survey that follows illustrates just how much history actually happened between 1945 and 1975, and suggests the lines of conflict that divide historians of this period.

A. The Origins of the Cold War: 1945-1954. The Cold War was both the focus of American foreign policy and a driving force shaping American public life at home. Thus, focus on the Cold War must address both the controversy over how the conflict between East and West originated, and the effects of that conflict at home:

- Historians who seek to interpret this period have espoused one of three views -
 - (1) Soviet aggression versus American containment ("old cold warriors");
 - (2) American imperial ambition for a "pax Americana" versus Soviet defensiveness ("revisionism"); and
 - (3) mutual misunderstanding of each other's motives ("post-revisionism").
- The emergence of the United States as the leader of the "free world" in the Cold War lent new urgency to a fear that had first developed in domestic politics during the New Deal -- a fear of "internal subversion." Although at first those who wanted to combat internal subversion paid equal attention to threats from the extreme right (Nazism, Fascism, the Ku Klux Klan) and the extreme left (Communism), in the 1940s and 1950s the campaign against subversion focused on Communism. Was the hunt for "subversives" and "Communist sympathizers" sound self-protection, politicians' cynical manipulation of the paranoia of ordinary Americans, or an amalgam of both?
- Politicians and historians formerly painted American life during the Cold War era as the golden age of America. Recent scholars have offered a far bleaker view of a fear-ridden period during which Americans attempted to recapture a "golden age" that never existed, worried about threats of Communist subversion, and engaged in the world's greatest spending spree.

B. The Civil Rights and "Warren Court" Revolutions, 1945-1969: During and after the Second World War, a group of talented and determined attorneys determined to launch an all-out attack, in the American courts, on segregation. These lawyers, organized by Charles Hamilton Houston of Howard Law School and led by Thurgood Marshall, ultimately scored a dramatic triumph in 1954, when the Supreme Court handed down its unanimous decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, striking down segregation in public schools as a violation of the Fourteenth Amendment's clause requiring equal protection of the laws.

Legal battles against segregation and discrimination were the favored tactic of the "old guard" leaders of the civil rights movement. But newer leaders such as the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., were dissatisfied by the slow pace of legal change and angered by the Southern white establishment's skill in throwing up legal roadblocks to the effectuation of *Brown* and its successor cases. They reshaped the quest for civil rights and African-American equality to number among its methods nonviolent civil disobedience, sit-ins, and freedom marches. In turn, King and his colleagues (such as Reverend Ralph Abernethy and John Lewis of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee) faced further challenges from a younger generation of leaders such as Malcolm X of the Black Muslims, Stokely Carmichael (now Kwame Ture), and Eldridge Cleaver of the **Black Panthers**, who had become impatient with nonviolence and sought either to confront the majority power structure directly or to pursue a separate black nationalist agenda. The growing militancy of younger leaders of the civil rights movement sparked growing white resistance to the goals of black equality. In addition, the Federal Bureau of Investigation and other federal agencies, suspicious of alleged links between the civil rights movement and Communism, carried out surreptitious and illegal campaigns of harassment, disinformation, and entrapment designed to subvert and disrupt agitation for civil rights.

The civil rights movement's work in the courts touched off a wide-scale revolution in American constitutional theory and practice led by the Supreme Court under Chief Justice Earl Warren. Beginning with *Brown v. Board of Education* and reverberating throughout constitutional law, the Court extended the protection of the Constitution to racial, religious, and ethnic minorities; to those facing the power of the criminal justice system; and to voters who suffered discrimination via mal-apportionment or restrictions on access to the polls based on racial prejudice. In so doing, Warren and his colleagues made the activism of the Supreme Court, and the nature of judicial review, pivotal contested issues of American public life.

C. "A Bright and Shining Moment?" The Era of John F. Kennedy 1960-1963: After a decade of mourning, historians began to brawl over the appropriate interpretation of Kennedy's Presidency. Was John Fitzgerald Kennedy truly a great President or the first master media manipulator ("more Profile than Courage")? A rigid "cold warrior" or a bold, imaginative architect of foreign policy? An advocate of liberalism at home or a hesitant leader who had to catch up with his fellow citizens? A creative strategist of presidential power or the first "imperial President"? The challenge historians face is to strike balances between these pairs of rigid opposites, each element of which has considerable validity, neither element of which is indisputably correct.

D. Vietnam, 1954-1975: The Vietnam Conflict may well have been the most divisive foreign war in American history, and its goals and effects remain a focus for historical debate today. Was this war a selfless attempt by the free superpower to assure freedom to those struggling for it, or was it a quasi-imperialist aggression against Asian people struggling for self-determination, or something radically different from either, yet combining elements of both? Were the protests against the war merely selfish actions by comfortable students trying to avoid having to serve their country, passionate defenses of morality in foreign policy, or elements of both? What did the 1975 Communist (a combination of North Vietnamese and Viet Cong forces) triumph in Vietnam, and the Khmer Rouge Communist victory in Cambodia, portend -- not only for American foreign policy in Southeast Asia but for America's stature as leader of the free world?

E. The Great Society, 1964-1969: Although the Vietnam Conflict gutted Lyndon B. Johnson's Great Society programs, the war should not obscure these major domestic policy measures (for example, the **War on Poverty**, Head Start, Model Cities, Urban Renewal). Historians have also begun to quarrel over the proper understanding of the Great Society. The poles of the debate are familiar: Were these programs laudable efforts to grapple with fundamental domestic problems, programs that scored a large measure of success? Or were they well-intentioned but disastrously expensive boondoggles, over managed from Washington, D.C., with little concern for their local effects -- programs which caused at least as much damage to the nation as they did good?

F. Richard Nixon, 1948-1974 -- Healer, Cynic, or Both?: Until 1968, most Americans saw Richard Nixon as a political has-been, a dour pre-McCarthy hunter of Communists. In 1968, however, Nixon won the Presidency by presenting himself as a healer of divisions. He demonstrated that he had greater ability to reinvent himself than any other modern politician. More than any other figure between the death of Franklin D. Roosevelt and his own resignation in 1974, Nixon was the pivotal postwar President. The architect of **detente**, he also was the President who ordered secret bombing raids on Laos and Cambodia and then invaded Cambodia. The architect of the conservative Republican "southern strategy," he also was the President who created the **Environmental Protection Agency and signed the Clean Air, Clean Water, and Voting Rights Acts**. The man who painted himself as a friend of "law and order," he broke the law and was forced to leave office in disgrace.

G. Watergate and the Fall of Nixon, 1972-1974: Just as the Nixon Administration fell, analysts of the Watergate crisis began to debate the significance of what President Gerald Ford called "our long national nightmare." Some insisted that Watergate was the great secular "passion play" of the Constitution -- a towering constitutional drama in which the Constitution and the rule of law prevailed. Nixon's defenders, and later conservative scholars, charged that Watergate was the mask for a cynical campaign against a vulnerable President for doing nothing more than what his popular predecessors, JFK and FDR, had done (wiretapping of opponents, secret taping of Oval Office conversations, "dirty tricks" against political opponents) without anyone finding out about it at the time. Although inconclusive on its specific question, this debate has sparked valuable scholarship on the history of governmental abuses of power.