**Period 8**

**1945 - 1980**

**OVERVIEW**

The United States entered the post-World War II era as the most powerful country in the world. Among the challenges the country faced were the spread and containment of communism, leadership in the global economy, and maintenance of security both at home and abroad. The containment of communism during these years led to a number of “brushfire” engagements in other parts of the world, including Korea and Vietnam. The United States entered into a period of Cold War, with periodic crises followed by years of quiet coexistence.

The end of colonialism at the close of World War II opened the way for nationalist movements in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, efforts complicated by the demands of the United States and the Soviet bloc that new countries choose sides in the Cold War. The United States also worked to ensure that friendly governments would emerge from newly created Latin American countries. Diplomatic relations with the Middle East were complicated by that region’s vast oil supplies and the U.S. economy’s dependence on that fuel source.

Fear of spreading communism played a significant role in domestic politics in the United States. While both political parties supported limiting communism’s influence, there were disagreements about how this should be accomplished. The war in Korea resulted in some domestic protest; however, the war in Vietnam led to national, often violent, antiwar protests. Other issues were the proliferation of nuclear weapons, the influence of the military in domestic politics, and the proper role of presidential power in making foreign and military policy.

The 1950s and 1960s saw a rejuvenated civil rights movement challenging Jim Crow and segregation in the courts and in the streets. Landmark decisions resulted in the desegregation of the military, the end of separate but equal with the *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* decision, and the sweeping Civil Rights Act of 1964. White segregationists continued to resist government attempts to end segregation, and civil rights activists themselves debated the best strategies to follow in the mid-1960s.

Calls for the end to segregation and Jim Crow led to calls for equal treatment from other minority groups, particularly women and gays and lesbians. Latinos, American Indians, and Asian Americans soon followed with demands of their own. Others spoke up for the poor, asking how a country known for its affluence could still have communities living in significant poverty.

President Lyndon Johnson’s liberal domestic program, the Great Society, attempted to address many of these issues. His programs were supported by the Supreme Court, yet opponents of his approach began to gather strength as well. A new conservative movement began to question Johnson’s vision of the scope of state and federal authority. Ironically his programs also came under fire from those on the far left who felt the government was not doing enough and who opposed America’s foreign involvement in what they felt were local nationalist struggles.

The decades following World War II were a time of great economic growth and prosperity. Parents of baby boomers flocked to the suburbs in the 1950s and 1960s, demanding better schools, better infrastructure, and more opportunity for the growing middle class. Others saw the nation moving into conformity and spoke out against what they saw as a homogeneous mass culture. Conservatives worried that traditional values would be lost as urban and suburban areas grew further apart.

The United States continued to be the destination of choice for immigrants from around the world, especially after President Johnson liberalized immigration laws in 1965. Others focused on the growing awareness of the need to curb environmental pollution and begin to work more effectively at conserving natural resources.

As this time period drew to a close, new issues began to take over national debate. The traditional nuclear family was less in evidence as more women worked outside the home and divorce and single-parent households became more acceptable. The youth counterculture movement of the 1960s led to the rejection of the values of earlier generations, ushering in a sexual revolution and a much more informal culture.

Conservatives and liberals debated these social changes as well as issues about the proper role of the federal government and ways to offer greater protection of individual rights.

**KEY TERMS**

Affirmative action Labor feminists

Black nationalism Law-and-order issues

Client regime Left-wing and Right-wing politics

Cold War liberalism Military Industrial Complex

Collective bargaining Moderate Republicanism

Collective security Mutual coexistence

Consumer republic New Left

Containment Paternalism

Counterculture Proxy wars

Cultural conservatism Restrictive covenants

Decolonization Reverse discrimination

Deindustrialization Right-to-work laws

Détente Rights liberalism

Domino theory Rust Belt

Economic feminism Service economy

Environmentalism Silent majority

Evangelical Protestantism Stagflation

Grassroots movements Third World

Identity-based movements Traditional values

Institutionalized racism

**GUIDED QUESTIONS**

1. What did the American middle class want in the years after World War II? Account for the expansion of the middle-class in postwar America.
2. Identify four tensions that the nation faced after World War II, and how those tensions were manifested.
3. Why were the media able to have such an important role in shaping American opposition to the war in Vietnam?
4. What rifts threatened the black civil rights movement in the 1960s, and to what degree were differences in goals, methods, and leadership resolved?
5. Why did the United States become a suburban nation? What were the characteristics of this demographic change, and how did government policy, technology, and economic forces contribute to it?
6. In what ways did American domestic policies reflect the tensions of the Cold War?
7. In what ways was NSC-68 a turning point in the Cold War?
8. In what ways was the Great Society a manifestation of the centuries-old debate over the proper role of government?
9. How did Richard Nixon’s policies on environmental issues contribute to his reputation as a transitional president?
10. To what extent was the hippie culture of the 1960s similar to the Beat Generation of the 1950s and the Lost Generation of the 1920s?