The Cold War

The Cold War (1947–1991) was a period of political and military tension between the capitalist United States and its NATO allies, predominantly in Western Europe, and the communist Soviet Union and its Warsaw Pact allies, mainly in Eastern Europe.

(1) The Americans’ rivalry with the Russians, with whom they had been allies in World War II, led to competitive space exploration, intense espionage, and wars in several regions of the world. (2) Whenever it looked as though world war would break out, however, this was prevented by the knowledge that (3) each side had nuclear weapons with which they could completely destroy the other.
President John F. Kennedy’s inaugural speech, 1961

‘We observe today not a victory of party, but a celebration of freedom – symbolizing an end, as well as a beginning – signifying renewal, as well as change. For I have sworn before you the same solemn oath our forebears prescribed nearly a century and three-quarters ago.

‘The world is very different now. For man holds in his mortal hands the power to abolish all forms of human poverty and all forms of human life. And yet the same revolutionary beliefs for which our forebears fought are still at issue around the globe. Let the word go forth from this time and place, to friend and foe alike, that the torch has been passed to a new generation of Americans. Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe, to assure the survival and the success of liberty.
‘This much we pledge – and more. To those old allies whose cultural and spiritual origins we share, we pledge the loyalty of faithful friends.

‘To those people in the huts and villages of half the globe struggling to break the bonds of mass misery, we pledge our best efforts to help them help themselves, for whatever period is required. If a free society cannot help the many who are poor, it cannot save the few who are rich.

‘Finally, to those nations who would make themselves our adversary, we offer not a pledge but a request: that both sides begin anew the quest for peace, before the dark powers of destruction unleashed by science engulf all humanity in planned or accidental self-destruction.

‘We dare not tempt them with weakness. For only when our arms are sufficient beyond doubt can we be certain beyond doubt that they will never be employed. But neither can two great and powerful groups of nations take comfort from our present course – both sides overburdened by the cost of modern weapons, both rightly alarmed by the steady spread of the deadly atom, yet both racing to alter that uncertain balance of terror that stays the hand of mankind’s final war.

‘So let us begin anew – remembering on both sides that civility is not a sign of weakness, and sincerity is always subject to proof. Let us never negotiate out of fear, but let us never fear to negotiate. Let both sides explore what problems unite us instead of belaboring those problems which divide us. Let both sides seek to invoke the wonders of science instead of its terrors. Together let us explore the stars, conquer the deserts, eradicate disease, tap the ocean depths, and encourage the arts and commerce. And let both sides join in creating a new endeavor – not a new balance of power, but a new world of law – where the strong are just, and the weak secure, and the peace preserved.
‘Since this country was founded, each generation of Americans has been summoned to give testimony to its national loyalty. Now the trumpet summons us again – not as a call to bear arms, though arms we need; not as a call to battle, though embattled we are; but a call to bear the burden of a long twilight struggle, year in and year out, against the common enemies of man: tyranny, poverty, disease, and war itself.

‘(5) The energy, the faith, the devotion which we bring to this endeavor will light our country and all who serve it. And the glow from that fire can truly light the world.

‘And so, my fellow Americans, ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country. My fellow citizens of the world, ask not what America will do for you, but what, together, we can do for the freedom of man.’