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The era following the end of the Second World War saw a great increase in tensions between the interests of Soviet communism and those of American capitalism. The conflict that developed between the two nations became known as the Cold War because it did not involve direct military conflict. Despite the creation of the United Nations and efforts to promote world peace, the distrust between the two world powers continued to increase. Moreover, the Soviet Union's failure to fulfill its promise of allowing free elections in Soviet-occupied Eastern Europe had convinced Truman that the interests of the two nations were not compatible with each other. The United States wished to gain access to markets for American goods and to encourage democracy and free trade, whereas the Soviet Union sought to gain access to the same resources as well as to prevent Western incursions into its territory via the establishment of communism. In an effort to extend its rule, the Soviet Union established communist governments in Eastern Europe that became referred to as satellite nations. The subsequent division of Europe between the East and the West was referred to as the "iron curtain".

As a response to the expansion of Soviet rule, the United States established a containment policy that would prevent the continued spread of communism to other countries. The United States demonstrated this policy through its support of certain countries such as Greece and Turkey that were resisting communist expansion. In accordance with the Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan, the United States provided financial aid to "all European nations that needed it".

In June of 1948, Stalin blocked all routes to West Berlin in an attempt to take the rest of the city. As a response, the United States and Britain initiated the Berlin airlift. During the Berlin airlift, which lasted for nearly a year, planes brought food and other supplies to the people living in the region. Fearing continued Soviet expansion, the Western powers created the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. The establishment of NATO ensured that every nation in the alliance would provide military aid in the event of an attack by the Soviet Union.

China, under the rule of the nationalist Chiang Kai-shek, was experiencing several problems such as inefficiencies and abusive practices. These problems led the people to support the Communist leader Mao Zedong. Mao gained a good reputation via improving both the food production and the literacy rate of the people. As a consequence of the failing leadership of the nationalist government, the United States' "limited" support given to the Nationalist Government did not succeed in achieving containment in China. Chiang Kai-shek and the nationalists were pushed to Taiwan.

After the end of the Second World War, the Japanese troops in Korea surrendered, and Korea was then divided along the 38th parallel. This latitude marked the border between the two Koreas. North Korea, under Kim Il Sung, was Communist, whereas South Korea, under Syngman Rhee, was Democratic. On June 25, 1950, North Korea, supported by the Soviet Union, invaded South Korea without warning. The United Nations then intervened by sending thousands of troops to South Korea, commanded by General MacArthur.

The North Korean troops soon captured the majority of Korea, save for a small area around the city of Pusan in the south. MacArthur sent his troops to the western city of Inchon, which had been captured, and his troops attacked the North Korean troops from both Inchon and

Pusan. As they were being attacked from two directions, the North Korean troops were forced to retreat. The United Nations troops moved onward to the Yalu River, which marked the border between North Korea and China. However, China, out of concern that the American troops were too close to its border, decided to send its army to prevent the Americans from reaching it. China's troops drove the United Nations troops back to South Korea, and captured the South Korean capital, Seoul. The war then continued for two more years as a "stalemate", with both sides accruing very little advantage.

General MacArthur believed that the war should continue, and requested permission to attack China with nuclear weapons. President Truman, on the other hand, did not want to engage in a larger war with China. After repeated appeals made by MacArthur, Truman fired him because he wanted to quickly end the war. On July 1951, the Soviet Union and the United States began to discuss a truce. This truce resulted in a declaration of cease-fire at the 38th parallel, and the creation of a demilitarized zone between the North and the South.