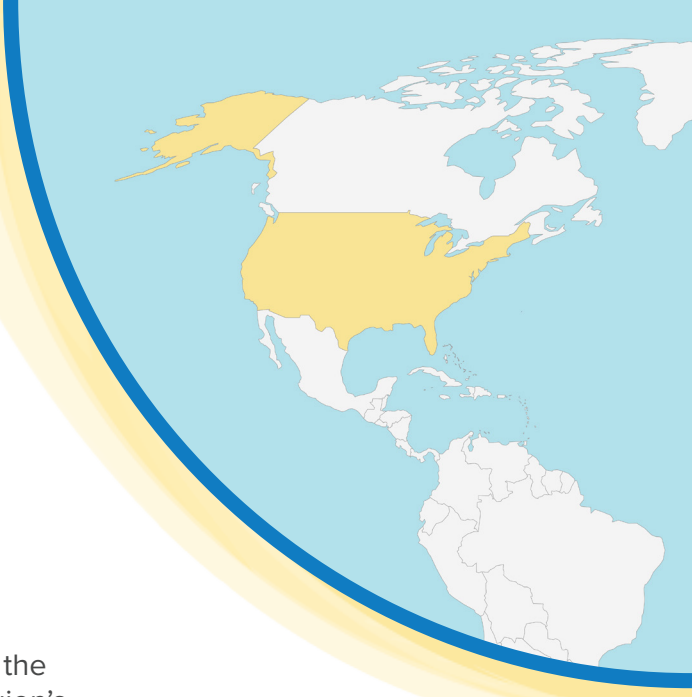
The United States of America



Two superpowers emerged from after World War II: the Soviet Union and the United States. For their part, the Soviet Union sought to encourage the spread of communism against the capitalist system of the West. A Cold War developed between the Soviet Union and the United States as each attempted to spread its ideology around the world.

Prior to World War II, the United States had a very low profile in the Middle East, with a few trade agreements. After the war, the region's strategic, political, and economic importance rose rapidly, in large part because of its oil resources. As the Cold War simmered, oil was vital to domestic economies and it was important to maintain strong militaries. Not only was access to Middle Eastern oil a necessity, the Arab countries provided many strategic locations for military bases that could be used in a future conflict with the Soviet Union.

When President Dwight D. Eisenhower came into office in 1953, he and Secretary of State John Foster Dulles pursued a neutral policy–"friendly impartiality"–towards Israel and its Arab neighbors should conflict arise. By not appearing to take sides, the U.S. hoped to prevent the Soviet Union from gaining influence in the Arab world based on anti-Israel sentiment. The United States also supported the formation of a NATO-like defense body in the Middle East to counter the Soviet Union. This agreement between Great Britain, Pakistan, Iran, Turkey, and Iraq was known as the Baghdad Pact, which was formed in 1955. Egypt was offered admission, but President Gamal Abdel Nasser refused to join and was very critical of the pact.

When President Nasser came to power in the early 1950s, the United States was open to working with him. For example, the United States offered financial assistance to build the Aswan Dam, a project very important to President Nasser. However, Nasser's 1955 agreement with communist Czechoslovakia to purchase weapons and his recognition of Communist China caused the United States to rethink its relationship. The United States feared Egypt would turn toward the Soviet Union and this would allow communist influence in the region to spread. In July 1956, the United States and Great Britain withdrew funding that they had promised Egypt for the Aswan Dam.

When President Nasser nationalized the Suez Canal, by placing it under the government's control, the United States was caught off guard. It was critical of the Egyptian action but opposed any type of military action by France and Britain to resolve the crisis. The United States worried that attacking Egypt could open the door for a greater Soviet role in the region. The United States sought a diplomatic solution via a three-party conference with itself, France, and Great Britain, followed by two multi-nation conferences in London but no resolution emerged.

Questions to Consider:

- Why is it important for the United States to limit the influence of the Soviet Union in the Middle East?

- How did Egypt fit into the rest of United States policy in the Middle East?
- How will the United States balance avoiding a war with advancing its interests in the region?

U.S. Department of States' Position:

- Ensure the Soviet Union does not have any influence in this crisis.
- Maintain alliances with Britain and France; question the reasons and purpose for a military intervention as a solution.
- Keep access to Middle East oil.
- Maintain the alliance with Israel.

What can the U.S. Department of State negotiate with?

Remember that you don't have to offer these right away in a negotiation.

- Help Egypt pay for the Aswan Dam.
- Allow Egypt to nationalize the canal as long as U.S. ships still have access.
- Pressure France, Great Britain, and Israel to support a U.S. position in exchange for continued U.S. military and political support.