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The 1940s, a decade of total war, saw the emergence of a new weapon of mass destruction—the atomic bomb—that would profoundly shape the future. Amid all the complex crosscurrents of the 1940s, and its moments of high achievement and human promise, the central theme of the decade must, sadly, be war and the sweeping social, political, and technological changes that follow in its wake.

Although World War II ended in 1945, having killed some 17 million soldiers and even more civilians, the peace that followed was uneasy at best, for the world now faced the war's grim aftermath. Not only was the planet now threatened by nuclear weapons but also the Western democracies now faced a new global struggle against a new foe: the Cold War confrontation with the Soviet Union.

The seeds of World War II had been sown in the punitive peace that followed World War I, when victorious England and France imposed harsh terms on the vanquished Germans. In the ensuing economic and social chaos, dictatorial regimes arose. In Italy, Benito Mussolini gained power in 1922. In Germany, Adolf Hitler's nationalistic and rabidly anti-Semitic National Socialist (Nazi) Party assumed control in 1933. Rebuilding the German Wehrmacht, or war machine, Hitler solidified his dictatorship, expanding into surrounding regions, and persecuting Jews and dissidents at home. Meanwhile, in Japan, a military...
regime intent on gaining access to raw materials and markets grew increasingly warlike, invading Manchuria in 1931 and China in 1937. Germany, Italy, and Japan formed a military axis, and in 1939 Hitler invaded Poland. World War II had begun.

Initially, isolationist sentiment prevailed in the United States. Convinced that bankers and industrialists had inveigled America into World War I, many Americans had sworn “never again.” But with Japan’s surprise attack on the U.S. base at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii on December 7, 1941, killing 2,400 U.S. servicemen, isolationist sentiment evaporated. America was at war, and the nation rallied around President Franklin D. Roosevelt.

Total war meant civilian mobilization as well as military. On the American home front, Depression-era unemployment was soon a thing of the past as war plants operated around the clock. The media and the government built support for the war effort. Norman Rockwell produced a memorable series of paintings illustrating the “Four Freedoms” that President Roosevelt and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill had proclaimed as the Allies’ war aims. The redoubtable singer Kate Smith and other entertainers raised millions in war-bond drives. Bing Crosby’s 1942 hit song “White Christmas” expressed a nation’s longing for peace.

Some war propaganda had an ugly tinge. Racist cartoons portrayed the Japanese as vermin or subhuman brutes. On the West Coast, authorities rounded up 110,000 Japanese-Americans and imprisoned them in remote internment camps. Meanwhile, African-American servicemen and industrial workers endured racial prejudice in many forms. In 1941, facing a protest march on Washington, President Roosevelt issued an executive order barring racial discrimination in war plants; enforcement proved lax, however. Amid heightened racial tensions, conflict erupted in Detroit and other cities. A 1943 Los Angeles riot targeted young Hispanic men. An American Dilemma, a 1944 study of U.S. race relations by Swedish economist Gunnar Myrdal, noted the irony of America’s fighting racism abroad while tolerating it at home.

As Japan swiftly occupied much of Southeast Asia, the Philippines, and Pacific island groups, Allied war planners initially focused on Europe. The German Army in North Africa surrendered in May 1943, and in July, Allied forces landed in Sicily. Italy surrendered in October, but German troops in Italy fought on. On June 6, 1944, D day, a vast Allied armada under U.S. Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower swarmed across the English Channel at Normandy. While Allied troops, including Gen. George S. Patton’s Third Army, drove across France, Allied bombers battered Berlin, Hamburg, Dresden, and other German cities. Meanwhile, Russia’s army, having repelled Hitler’s invasion at horrific cost, including a five-month Nazi siege of Stalingrad, pushed across Eastern
Europe, driving toward Germany. On April 30, 1945, as the Russians closed in, Hitler committed suicide in his underground bunker in Berlin. A week later, on May 7, Germany surrendered. In the U.S., celebrations of V-E (Victory in Europe) Day were muted, however. President Roosevelt had died on April 12 of a cerebral hemorrhage, and a grieving nation watched uneasily as Vice President Harry S. Truman moved into the White House.

Full attention now turned to the Pacific war, an arena of naval battles and island-hopping campaigns. Three years earlier, in May 1942, the Battle of Coral Sea had checked Japan’s move toward Australia, and the Battle of Midway the following month had produced a morale-boosting U.S. victory. In October 1944 the Battle of Leyte Gulf set the stage for the recapture of the Philippines. Slowly G.I.s leapfrogged from one island chain to another—the Solomons, the Marshalls, the Marianas—fighting battles that would resonate in the annals of U.S. military history: Guadalcanal, Tarawa, Iwo Jima, Okinawa. A photograph of G.I.s raising the flag at Iwo Jima produced one of the war’s most memorable images.

By early summer 1945, as U.S. B-29s regularly bombed Japanese cities, unleashing firestorms that killed many thousands, Japan was on its knees. Although some Japanese military leaders insisted on carrying on, Emperor Hirohito made clear that the war must end. Peace feelers went out from Tokyo by way of Moscow. Then on August 6, 1945, a U.S. warplane, the Enola Gay, dropped a new weapon, the atomic bomb, on Hiroshima. The city was pulverized. Scores of thousands of men, women, and children perished instantaneously. Thousands more died later of radiation poisoning. On August 9 a second atomic bomb was dropped on Nagasaki, and five days later, on August 14, Japan surrendered. The atomic bomb had forestalled a U.S. invasion of Japan, President Truman claimed, and amply repaid Japan for Pearl Harbor and for wartime atrocities.

Wild celebrations marked Japan’s surrender, but the euphoria faded as Americans learned more about the atomic bomb and its potential. First proposed to FDR in 1939 by Albert Einstein and other physicists, the bomb had been built by a secret wartime undertaking, the Manhattan Project, operating at several locations, including Los Alamos, New Mexico. When President Truman, in Germany for a conference with America’s wartime allies, learned of a successful atomic-bomb test in New Mexico in July 1945, he toughened his bargaining with Soviet leader Joseph Stalin. Although some Manhattan Project scientists urged an initial demonstration shot, Truman authorized the bomb’s immediate military use. Historians, and the American people, would long debate whether the President’s sole objective in bombing Japan was to force that country’s surrender, or whether he also intended to intimidate Russia.

The early postwar era brought a wave of fear over the atomic future. Radio commentator H. V. Kaltenborn called the bomb a “Frankenstein monster.” Life magazine published “The Thirty-Six Hour War,” a scenario of atomic conflict illustrated with drawings of New York City in ruin. Religious writers linked the bomb to the fiery destruction of Earth foretold in the Bible. As the bomb gripped the popular imagination, bartenders mixed “atomic” cocktails, and General Mills offered kids an “Atomic Bomb” ring for 50 cents and a Kix cereal boxtop. A 1946 U.S. atomic test at Bikini Atoll in the Pacific inspired the skimpy swimsuit called a bikini.
To allay atomic fears, Washington proposed civil-defense plans and promoted atomic energy as a source of limitless power as well as of medical wonders and futuristic atomic cars, ships, and airplanes. David E. Lilienthal, head of the Atomic Energy Commission, tirelessly portrayed the bright Utopia that lay ahead as scientists harnessed the power of the atom.

The atomic bomb was not the war's only technological legacy. Jet engines, a wartime invention, would soon transform civilian air travel. Mainframe computers, whose development was spurred by wartime antiaircraft and ballistics research, became commercially available to governments and big corporations in the late 1940s. The V-1 and V-2 rockets, developed by Nazi scientists to carry bombs to England, laid the groundwork for both nuclear missiles and for space exploration. On the other hand, the war slowed the growth of television, which had actually made its public debut at the 1939 New York World's Fair. But with the 1946 advent of popular variety shows such as Ed Sullivan's Toast of the Town and Arthur Godfrey's Talent Scouts, and of the first TV soap opera, Faraway Hills, the television era began.

Many looked to the United Nations, launched at a 1945 conference in San Francisco, to control atomic energy and assure world peace, but that hope faded as the United States and the Soviet Union, once wartime allies, became bitter adversaries divided by their ideology, their economic and political systems, and their global aspirations. In February 1946 Stalin, announcing a rearmament plan, predicted a mortal struggle with the capitalist bloc, led by the United States. A month later, speaking in Missouri, Winston Churchill foresaw a grim conflict pitting the Christian West against atheistic communism, centered in Moscow. From the Baltic to the Adriatic, declared Churchill, an Iron Curtain now divided Europe. In March 1947 President Truman, raising the specter of global communist domination, persuaded Congress to vote millions in economic aid to help Greece and Turkey resist Soviet-backed communist insurgencies. In June of that year, as Moscow's grip on Eastern Europe tightened and as western European Communist Parties gained strength, the United States announced a program of economic aid, the Marshall Plan, to promote European recovery and check communism's advances.

The divided city of Berlin, deep in the Soviet occupation zone, became the focus of conflict in June 1948 when the Soviets, seeking to prevent the emergence of a separate West German government, blockaded land access to the city. For nearly a year, until the Soviets lifted the blockade in May 1949, U.S. airplanes supplied all of West Berlin's needs. That same year, the United States and its European allies created a military alliance, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO); the Russians responded with the Warsaw Pact.

Cold War alarms reverberated at home. In the late 1940s, the House Un-American Activities Committee investigated atomic scientists, civil-rights activists, and Hollywood writers in a quest for Communists. In 1947, responding to growing pressure, the Truman administration launched a loyalty program to ferret out subversives in government. The climate of paranoia increased in 1948 when ex-Communist Whittaker Chambers accused Alger Hiss, a State Department diplomat in the 1930s, of having been a Soviet spy. These developments helped spawn the Red Scare that swept the nation in the early 1950s, whipped up by Senator Joseph R. McCarthy.