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The Cold War Nuclear Arms Race

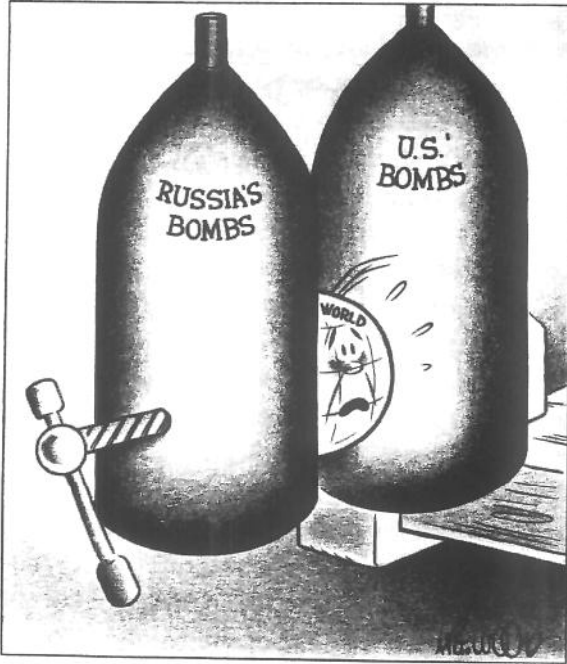
After World War II ended in 1945, two new superpowers—the United States and the Soviet Union—emerged. The United States led the democracies of the West against the Soviet Union, its, allies, and its satellite countries. Since the hostility between the Western democracies and the Eastern Communist states never erupted into a shooting, or hot, war, the conflict was called the *cold war*.

Soviet leaders were committed to spreading the Communist form of government. Both before and during the cold war era, the Soviet Union made inroads into Central Europe and even into Latin America. Several Asian and African countries adopted Communist regimes.

The United States and the Soviet Union fought each other's influence with propaganda, international conferences and military alliances, economic aid, and spying. Both built up powerful arsenals of both conventional and nuclear weapons. At first, the United States enjoyed an overwhelming advantage in weapons. It alone had the atomic bomb. By 1949, however, the Soviets also had the bomb. In the 1950s, both nations developed the even deadlier hydrogen bomb. Each side continued to improve on and increase its stockpile of nuclear weapons, until they were roughly equal in destructive power. This contest to build the most destructive weapons became known as the *arms race*.

People began to argue that the arms race made nuclear war unlikely. It ensured that neither side would benefit from attacking the other. If one side launched the first bomb, the other would instantly retaliate, and both would be destroyed. The phrase “mutually assured destruction” (MAD) summed up this argument. MAD expresses the irony that cooperation could spring from so deadly a source. The argument, however, proved accurate. In the 1960s, the United States and the Soviet Union began to hold arms-control conferences to keep the balance of nuclear power stable.

In spite of arms-control agreements between the two powers, many people still feared the dangerous radioactive fallout that resulted from nuclear testing. James Arthur Wood's 1950 cartoon expresses the pressure that ordinary people felt at being caught in the rivalry between the two superpowers.



The U.S.-Soviet nuclear arms race ©Corbis

Review Questions

1. Why was the confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union known as the cold war?
2. How did the cold war lead the U.S. and the Soviet Union into an arms race for nuclear superiority?
3. Why did some people feel that the nuclear arms race would actually prevent a nuclear catastrophe?
4. How did the cartoon by James Arthur Wood reflect the fears of many people who lived through the cold war?