THE ERA OF THE COLD WAR, 1989
AND ALL THAT

I. Purpose and overview of lecture

A. In general to take a look at the “big picture” from the end of the war to 1989
B. To provide a broad perspective on the relationship of WW II and the Cold War
   1. To examine the origins and initial stages of the Cold War
   2. Might it have been avoided through better statesmanship? Or were the “structures of reality” so fixed that politicians had little leeway?
   3. Was an opportunity for peace and cooperation lost in the immediate post-war period?
C. To finish up remarks made last time about the long-range meaning of the Holocaust
D. To make a few remarks about the meaning of 1989

II. Overview of World War II

A. The goal here is obviously not to narrate the complicated history of WW II, or even to present a balanced picture of it
B. It is rather to consider the meaning of WW II in terms of the origins of the Cold War, and of the Zeitgeist of the second half of the century
   1. To a large degree the issues of the Cold War were already set in WW II, as were the unresolved, perhaps unresolvable problems of the following decades
C. The opening stages of war in Soviet Russia: Russia's changing fortunes
   1. Between 1939 and 1948, less than a decade, Russia experienced the most shattering defeats and heady victories
   2. Similarly, the image of Russia in the West underwent the most remarkable of swings, from negative to positive and back to negative
   3. Russia’s initial defeats in 1941
      a) Hitler, frustrated in his efforts to bring down Great
Britain, after sensational victories in 1940 on the Continent, turned to the east

b) Again, this seemed to return to the themes of *Mein Kampf*, his long-standing "intentions": To gain Lebensraum, to conquer the Slavs, to destroy communism, to eliminate the Jews

c) And his initial victories in the summer of 1941 were even more remarkable than they had been in the battle with Poland in 1939

d) By autumn he had overrun most of European Russia, destroyed most of the Russian air force and captured millions of Russian soldiers

4. Yet, while these victories seemed decisive, the Red Army was not destroyed

5. Winter set in before final victories could be accomplished—but nearly everyone thought of it as only a matter of time

D. Beginnings of the "Grand Alliance": G.B., U.S., USSR

1. These were, obviously, strange allies

2. In fact, they came together in early 1942 because Nazi Germany had declared war on them all, after the Japanese had attacked the United States in December 1941

   a) Clearly, they needed each other desperately, but they didn’t really like one another—and had previously spit hatred at each other

3. There was much rhetoric about our "gallant allies," but in fact deep suspicions remained from the beginning to the end of the rest of the war

4. Perhaps the greatest source of suspicion revolved around the issue of opening a second front against the Nazis

   a) Stalin called for it continually, and was promised continually that it was coming soon

   b) But it was postponed repeatedly—confirming Stalin’s suspicions that the British and Americans wanted him to fight the Nazis to the last Soviet soldier, as it were

E. War on the eastern front

1. There is little question that the war raged on the eastern
front with an intensity and duration that had no real counterpart in western Europe at any time

2. In truth, the Nazis and the Soviets were destroying one another in the fierce battles of 1942 and 1943
   a) Churchill was, especially later, perfectly candid about this process
   b) In his characteristically graphic language, he wrote that it was the "Red Army that tore the guts out of the Nazi war machine"
   c) And although the Red Army was ultimately the formal victor, in many regards Soviet Russia suffered as much or even more than Nazi Germany

3. Most of the fighting was on Soviet territory, and Soviet citizens suffered a horrible toll
   a) In the end, something like 20 million Soviet citizens, military and civilian, perished
   b) That is a figure that exceeds not only the deaths of all Germans, and all her allies, but indeed all of the other deaths in the war combined (including the Japanese civilians who died in Hiroshima and Nagasaki)
   c) Thus, it is true in a sense that the Americans and British "picked up the pieces" in this war

4. The Russians believed that they, not their allies, had won the war

5. More important, they believed they had paid an incomparably greater price than had the Americans, British, or French
   a) At the same time, the war demonstrated a quite remarkable strength of the Red Army, surprising many in the west

6. For many years, especially in the popular American mind, the victories of the Red Army were attributed primarily to the Russian winter, the great distances involved—a reprise of the Napoleonic defeat

7. But more informed balanced accounts came to recognize several other factors that were also very important
   a) The Russian armies were equipped with some superior weapons, and bold, imaginative leadership
b) The Germans, too, could not at first believe this, but the truth of it became ever more obvious

8. Again, it was often said that the key was the quality of the Russian soldier, the desperate, savage way that he fought

a) That was certainly no fiction, but at the same time Russia’s war industries were providing the Russian soldier with first-rate equipment—certainly far more than was the case in WW I

b) In the most fundamental sense, Russia won the war to an important decree because it had become a nation that was able to wage modern warfare

c) That was a fact of enormous long-range significance

F. Battle of Stalingrad, Autumn 1942

1. This battle came to symbolize a great deal

a) There were in fact other, almost equally destructive and decisive battles in the war, but this one came to be the enduring symbol of Russia’s surprising tenacity

2. It also came to be seen as symbolic of the victory of communism over nazism

a) Thus, it symbolized the larger victory of the Five Year Plans, Collectivization, Stalinism, and much else for many in the rest of the world

b) Even in Western Europe, among non-communists, many were inclined to conclude that it was Soviet communism that finally had the strength to defeat Nazi barbarism

c) The western capitalist powers, on the other hand, had mostly caved in, or barely held on, incapable of destroying nazism

3. Thus, the international prestige of the Soviet Union grew—and continued to grow through the immediate following years

a) Many joined the communist parties in the West, many saw communism as the voice of the future, truly the savior of western civilization

III. The development of the Cold War
A. How did it happen that the United States and the Soviet Union, flushed with victory over their common Nazi enemy, were at each other's throats within a few years?

B. And might the Cold War have been avoided or at least mitigated?

C. In some quite specific ways, the Cold War can be traced to the contradictions and miscommunications at the war-time conference at Yalta:
   1. The refusal of Russians to allow "free elections" in eastern Europe (while making noises as if they might) because they knew that free elections would return anti-Russian, anti-communist regimes
      a) They thus manipulated events in eastern Europe following the war to assure that communists took over
   2. That awakened fears that they sought to take over the rest of Europe, and the world, as their ideology had long declared
      a) It also outraged Poles, Hungarians, etc. in the United States—who tended to vote for the Democratic Party, putting pressure on politicians to oppose Russian tyranny

D. In a much broader way, however, the Cold War must be seen as a kind of return to normal relations between the US and USSR
   1. It is sometimes forgotten that suspicion and even bitter antipathy had been the rule since 1917, and that the partnership of 1942-45 the exception
   2. Americans and Russians were quite different people, with substantially different historical experiences and mentalities, since at least the 18th century
      a) America was the land of plenty, secure from invasion, optimistic and naive, democratic and capitalist
      b) Russia was a land of backwardness and poverty, repeated national tragedies, invaded constantly and inclined to paranoia, autocratic and distrustful of capitalism, even under the tsars
   3. Because of such fundamental differences of national character, communication was difficult, even under ideal
conditions

a) And even with different leaders, it is hard to imagine a radically different relationship after WW II

E. Bipolarity: Another fundamental or "structural" factor, further making understanding difficult, was the development of "bipolarity" following WW II

1. Russia and the United States were the only two great powers, and competition of some sort was highly likely if not inevitable

F. Soon the United States was describing Stalinist Russia as another kind of expansionist, totalitarian regime, basically similar to Nazi Germany

1. And the "lessons" to be learned from the 1930s must be applied:
   a) Appeasement would not work; totalitarians recognize only power, compromise is not only impossible but extremely dangerous

G. Thus, in retrospect there is an aura of inevitability about the Cold War

1. Even here, the question of personality is interestingly posed: Stalin and Truman

2. What if there had been a Gorbachev at the head of the USSR and an FDR who had lived longer?
   a) Could they have avoided the extremes of Cold War confrontation? (what a final exam question!)

IV. Long-range issues of the Cold War

A. The years of the Cold War were formed by American character but also helped to form it

1. That is, American moralism, the tendency to see things in moral absolutes—American virtue and the evils of communism—helped escalate the Cold War

2. But the Cold War also helped form American character, particularly in defining "American" as "anti-Communist" (and "anti-socialist," though less strongly)

B. The Vietnam War in this regard was an American Tragedy in the fullest sense

1. We were finally forced to recognize our fallibility, the terrible complexity of the world outside our borders, the
possibility that communists could actually be truly popular and not wholly evil, etc.

V. The meaning of 1989; the future of western civilization

A. This gets us into predicting the future, “futurology”
   1. My own forays into this field have been a little embarrassing
      a) June 1968: “The Soviets will never invade Czechoslovakia”
      b) In mid-1980s: “The Communist Party is too well entrenched to allow for fundamental or rapid reform in the Soviet Union”

B. 1989 seems a most remarkable watershed; the next century may look back on it as more important than any of the others

C. It is remarkable that almost no one predicted the way that the Soviet empire would collapse
   1. If asked, even in 1988, if such a thing would happen in the next decade, I would have said “impossible!”
   2. The other remarkable thing is how little blood has been shed compared to nearly all other watersheds in European and world history

D. The end of bipolarity, the many implications
   1. There are ironically “beneficial” aspects of having an enemy that united the American nation
      a) That undoubtedly helped to reduce internal tensions of all sorts
         (1) The point was made comically in the film Canadian Bacon
   2. Comparable situations are in fact common: Perhaps most clearly in Israel
      a) It has been mostly its many enemies that have kept Israelis together; without enemies the Israelis might well drift to civil war
      b) U.S. hostility to Castro has also helped him in similar regards
   3. The era of one superpower: Can this last?
      a) Probably not, but on the other hand, it doesn’t
appear likely that another will rise very rapid, or that the United States will decline rapidly

b) For all its apparent troubles, it has many strengths and almost no real competitors as model

(1) This is in part because it is just about the only “successful” multicultural country in the world, especially among large countries

(2) And it may well be that a "multicultural" rather than a nationalist model is the model of the future

E. A new contender for our “needed” enemy: China?

1. The possibility of China playing the role that Russia did for around fifty years certainly looms as a possibility

a) Yet, revealingly, China and the other powers in Asia (Japan, Korea, the Philippines, etc.) all actually want the United States to remain a power in the area

b) They all agree that the U.S. is a stabilizing force, and all want to avoid a future bipolar confrontation

(1) Their mutual hostilities are by no means likely to be soon resolved—or at least much less so than is the case in Western Europe and the United States

c) And China has a great many problems to resolve before it could aspire to the kind of role that the United States now plays—its own political stability most of all

F. The twenty-first century, an Asian century?

1. There may be something to these concerns, in a larger, more diffuse sense, about a challenge to American world hegemony

2. That is, there are many powerful signs that leadership of the world—in a myriad of senses, not primarily military—may move to Asia in the twenty-first century

a) In the West, especially in the youngest generation, there are signs of a loss of the work ethic, of inadequate discipline, competitiveness, sense of
responsibility, even of belief in values of western civilization

b) In most Asian countries that ethic is still very strong—as are discipline, study, competitiveness, etc.

c) But, again, I am cautious about these kinds of prediction—I heard too many of a similar sort when I was in high school and college:

(1) The Russians were more disciplined, more educated, would "bury us" etc.

G. On dystopias and failed predictions

1. I am much impressed, indeed, with how little the dystopias of the earlier part of the century have come to pass, after a horrific first half century

2. Looking through the lectures I have given to Western Civ over the years, I came across an interesting one: “Within Spitting distance of 1984”

a) It brought back to my how distant 1984 once seemed to me, and further how the various dystopias of the 1950s seem so far off the mark now (including Huxley’s *Brave New World*)

b) When I was a student in a freshman Western Civ class, 1984 was as far off as 2030 is for you all

H. The future and its inevitable surprises

1. Perhaps the most confident prediction I can make about the year 2030 is that something will have happened by then that few if any of us expected

2. So many possible things of that sort can be conjured up:

a) A new depression, hitting the world economy

b) Disease, a plague (one like the Black Death – and of course AIDS may be that, especially for Africa)

c) Ecological catastrophes, and there are certainly a large number of possibilities there

d) A natural calamity—a huge meteorite, earthquakes, volcanoes, changes in the weather (new ice ages), final contact with the UFOs?

a) In pondering these brooding uncertainties, I would like to remind you that a brooding uncertainty faces
you all next Saturday