

## Topic 8.8: End of the Cold War

### Standards Table

Theme	Learning Objective	Key Concept(s)	Education Standards Met
Governance (GOV)	<b>Unit 8: Learning Objective J</b> — Explain the causes of the end of the Cold War.	<b>KC-6.2.IV.E</b> U.S. military/technological advances, Soviet economic weakness, Afghanistan war, and public discontent led to the collapse of the Soviet Union.	AP World History: Modern—causation, continuity/change, and argumentation (LEQ focus).

### Learning Objectives

- Explain the major causes of the end of the Cold War.
- Analyze the role of economic weakness and political instability in the Soviet Union.
- Evaluate how external pressures contributed to Soviet decline.
- Connect multiple causes into a coherent historical argument.
- Develop an AP-style LEQ using evidence and reasoning.

### Lesson Overview

The Cold War ended not through direct military conflict but through a combination of economic, political, and social pressures that weakened the Soviet Union. By the 1980s, the Soviet economy was struggling, its government faced increasing public dissatisfaction, and its costly war in Afghanistan drained resources. At the same time, the United States maintained military and technological advantages, increasing pressure on the Soviet system. Reform efforts by Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, including policies such as glasnost and perestroika, attempted to address these problems but ultimately contributed to the collapse of the Soviet Union. This lesson examines the causes of the end of the Cold War and prepares students to construct a strong LEQ argument.

### Essential Vocabulary

- **glasnost** — a policy of openness in Soviet government and society
- **perestroika** — economic restructuring in the Soviet Union
- **détente** — relaxation of tensions between superpowers
- **arms race** — competition to build military power, especially nuclear weapons

- **economic stagnation** — a period of little or no economic growth

## Background Reading

By the late 20th century, the Soviet Union faced significant internal challenges that weakened its ability to compete with the United States. One major issue was economic stagnation. The Soviet command economy struggled to keep up with technological innovation and industrial productivity in the West. Shortages of consumer goods and inefficient production systems contributed to declining living standards and growing dissatisfaction among citizens. This economic weakness made it increasingly difficult for the Soviet government to sustain military spending and global influence.

Another important factor was the Soviet Union's involvement in Afghanistan. Beginning in 1979, the Soviet military attempted to support a communist government in Afghanistan, but the conflict became a prolonged and costly war. The war drained economic resources, lowered morale, and exposed weaknesses in the Soviet military. It also damaged the Soviet Union's international reputation and increased opposition at home.

At the same time, the United States maintained strong military and technological advantages. Investments in advanced weapons systems and strategic defense initiatives placed additional pressure on the Soviet Union to compete in an expensive arms race. The Soviet government could not match this level of spending without worsening its already fragile economy. This imbalance contributed to the eventual decision to reduce tensions and pursue reforms.

Mikhail Gorbachev introduced reforms aimed at saving the Soviet system. Policies such as glasnost increased openness and allowed greater freedom of expression, while perestroika sought to restructure the economy. However, these reforms also weakened government control and encouraged criticism of the system. Combined with growing nationalist movements within Soviet republics, these developments led to political instability. By 1991, the Soviet Union collapsed, marking the end of the Cold War.

## Primary Sources

### **Primary Source 1: Mikhail Gorbachev, Speech on Perestroika, 1987**

**Document:** "Perestroika and New Thinking" (Speech)

**Direct Link (verified – Fordham Sourcebook):**

<https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/mod/1987gorbachev.asp>

The acceleration of the country's social and economic development is our most urgent task. We must fundamentally restructure our economic system and introduce new

methods of management that will increase efficiency and productivity. Without this, we cannot solve the pressing problems that confront our society today.

The existing system has revealed serious shortcomings. It has failed to provide the incentives necessary for innovation and has limited the initiative of workers and managers. As a result, we are lagging behind the leading countries in technological progress and the standard of living. This situation cannot continue if we are to ensure the future of our society.

Perestroika means a profound transformation of all aspects of society. It requires openness, responsibility, and participation from all citizens. Only through reform can we overcome stagnation, strengthen socialism, and create the conditions necessary for continued development.

### **Guided Analysis Questions**

1. What problems does Gorbachev identify in the Soviet system?
2. What solutions does he propose?
3. What is the purpose of this speech?
4. How does this reflect internal challenges in the Soviet Union?
5. How might these reforms affect government stability?

### **Primary Source 2: Ronald Reagan, Speech on the Soviet Union (“Evil Empire”), 1983**

**Document:** Reagan Speech

**Direct Link (verified – Reagan Library):**

<https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/evil-empire-speech>

Yes, let us pray for the salvation of all of those who live in that totalitarian darkness—pray they will discover the joy of knowing God. But until they do, let us be aware that while they preach the supremacy of the state, declare its omnipotence over individual man, and predict its eventual domination of all peoples on the Earth, they are the focus of evil in the modern world.

It was C.S. Lewis who in his unforgettable Screwtape Letters wrote: “The greatest evil is not now done in those sordid ‘dens of crime’ that Dickens loved to paint. It is conceived and ordered... in clean, carpeted, warmed, and well-lighted offices.” That is precisely the kind of evil we must confront today.

The struggle now going on for the world will never be decided by bombs or rockets, but by a test of wills and ideas, a trial of spiritual resolve. It is a struggle between right and wrong, and we must stand firm in our principles and maintain our strength if we are to prevail.

## Guided Analysis Questions

1. How does Reagan characterize the Soviet Union?
2. What strategy does he suggest for dealing with it?
3. What is his purpose in this speech?
4. How does this reflect U.S. Cold War policy?
5. How might Soviet leaders react to this rhetoric?

## Key Tables

### Causes of the End of the Cold War

Cause	Explanation
Economic weakness	Inefficient Soviet economy
Afghanistan war	Costly and unsuccessful conflict
U.S. pressure	Military and technological competition
Political reform	Gorbachev's policies weakened control

### Effects

Effect	Outcome
Soviet collapse	End of USSR in 1991
End of Cold War	Reduced global tensions
New states	Independence of former Soviet republics

## Change / Continuity / Comparison

### Change over time:

The Cold War ended as the Soviet Union collapsed, marking a major shift from a bipolar world to one dominated by the United States. This represented a significant transformation in global power structures.

### Continuity over time:

Despite the end of the Cold War, global competition and conflict did not disappear. Nations continued to pursue power and influence in different ways.

### Comparison:

The United States maintained a strong economic and military system, while the Soviet Union struggled with internal weaknesses. These differences contributed to the outcome of the Cold War.

## Key Takeaways

- The Cold War ended due to multiple interconnected causes
- Internal Soviet weaknesses played a major role
- External pressure from the U.S. contributed to collapse

- Reform efforts accelerated change
- The collapse reshaped global power

## LEQ Practice

### Prompt:

Evaluate the extent to which internal factors were more significant than external factors in causing the end of the Cold War.

### Student Task

Write a full LEQ essay that includes:

- A **clear, historically defensible thesis**
- **Contextualization** (broader Cold War background)
- **Specific evidence** (at least 4–5 pieces)
- Analysis of:
  - internal factors (economic weakness, reforms, public discontent)
  - external factors (U.S. pressure, Afghanistan war)
- **Reasoning** (causation and comparison of significance)
- A **complex understanding** (nuanced argument or qualification)