

Activity from [Contemporary History](#) and [Foreign Policy](#)  
Activity

# Discussion Activity: Cold War Containment

## Learning Objectives

Students will analyze Cold War-era primary source documents to assess the formation of U.S. Cold War strategy and evaluate the outcomes of that strategy. Use the [Primary Sources From the Cold War](#) Learning Journey to facilitate the discussion activity below.

## Length

1-2 class periods

## Instructional Plan

Public parks have long been important spaces for people to gather and converse. In the 1950s, as the Cold War shaped American society and policy, individuals from all walks of life surely discussed these developments from Central Park in New York City to Golden Gate Park in San Francisco. In that spirit, set up a public park discussion in class around U.S. Cold War strategy. Students will be assigned a role. Then, they will learn about the era by exploring a collection of readings. Finally, they will have a discussion about the issue in character.

## Part 1: Overview and Assign Roles

### Guiding Questions:

- What factors led the United States to define its interests globally after World War II?
- What are the potential risks and benefits of the United States' Cold War containment strategy?

Have students read the overview, which will outline the historical context shaping Americans' feelings towards the United States' policy of containment.

Assign students their roles. In the event there are more students than roles, more than one student can play the same role. They should still participate individually, they'll just share the same assigned perspective (e.g., there could be two veterans or three film directors).

### Roles:

Urban factory worker and union member  
Recent immigrant from Poland

Suburban schoolteacher  
Veteran of the Korean War  
Executive at a major automobile manufacturing company  
NAACP lawyer  
Hollywood director  
Midwestern farmer  
Beatnik poet

Consider adding unique details to each role, or ask your students to write a short profile to give their role additional background. For example:

*Francis Conway is a veteran of the Korean War living in suburban California. Francis was drafted in 1950, just out of high school. He was heavily involved in fighting for two years, before suffering an injury that left him with a permanent limp. Upon returning from Korea, Francis' GI Bill benefits made it possible for him to buy a suburban home in southern California. Recently, he began working for a major advertising agency. His salary provides a comfortable lifestyle for him, his wife, and their newborn child.*

## Part 2: Primary Source Gallery Walk

Put students into groups. Spread the documents around the room and assign each group to one or more documents. Students should read the document together and answer the following questions:

- Who is the author of the document? What do we know about them?
- When and where was the document produced?
- What insight does this document give about the guiding questions?
- How would my assigned role think about the information in this document?
- What questions does this document raise that you'd like answered?

Once students have examined their primary sources, have groups briefly share out one or two key insights from their documents. This ensures all students have exposure to all sources, not just the ones their group analyzed.

## Part 3: The Public Park Discussion

For homework, have students write a short position paper in the voice of their assigned role, reflecting their character's perspective. They should write persuasively, using evidence and reasoning, as if writing an opinion piece for a newspaper.

Have students make placards that indicate their role. At the start of the discussion, ask them to briefly introduce themselves in their role to set the scene. (Optionally, students could bring props.)

Conduct the public park discussion in class. Introduce the exercise with a brief scene-setter:

*On a warm evening in 1955, you head to your neighborhood's public park for some fresh air. You take a seat on a bench. Soon, you strike up a conversation with a group of strangers sitting near you. The discussion quickly turns to the Cold War, and the policies the United States government has adopted to contain Soviet influence in recent years. The Korean War is still fresh on everyone's mind. Last year, the United States tested its most powerful nuclear weapon yet. And reports have raised suspicions that the CIA helped overthrow governments in Iran and Guatemala in recent years. The members of your group have many different feelings about the form and scope of*

*containment, and what U.S. Cold War policy should look like going forward. Each of you has your own opinions, shaped by your own experiences and interests. Join the discussion and share what you make of the debate around the United States' policy of containment.*

Once students are ready to begin discussion, consider the following questions:

- What are the pros and cons of the U.S. policy of containment articulated in NSC-68? In what ways might this policy impact American citizens?
- Besides containment, what other approaches to Cold War strategy could the United States take?
- What should be the goals of U.S. Cold War strategy? Does accomplishing those goals justify the costs?

Whenever necessary, push students to provide evidence and reasoning for their comments.

*Consider recording the class or using a transcription app to help with giving feedback and assessment.*

Leave time at the end of the discussion for a debrief in which students can step outside their roles and reflect on what they learned. Optionally, consider also assigning students a short reflection paper in their own voice.

Consider the following questions:

- In the discussion, what seemed to be the most important points of agreement and disagreement?
- What made this a controversial policy? In other words, why did people disagree about it?
- Do you think the strategy outlined in NSC-68 was the right approach for the United States?