1. What were the inherent conflicts between the two competing systems of Western capitalism and democracy and Soviet communism?

The conflicts were ideological, political and economic.

In a modern liberal democracy, power is vested in the people who can elect or reject candidates for political office. Whereas, the totalitarian government requires subservience to the State. Winston Churchill once said, “Democracy is the worst kind of government, except all the rest.” There is much truth to this. Because our Democratic form of government is predicated upon the vote, the fear of Soviet Communism became a potent political issue throughout the Cold War. After the Truman administration “lost” China to communism in 1949, every Cold War President—from Truman through Reagan—were held hostage to the fear of “losing” another nation to the same fate. This political captivity fostered the communist witch hunts of the 1950s and contributed in large part to America’s involvement in Vietnam.

Capitalism is based on a market economy, whereas Communism is based on a command economy, “from each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs.”

The United States maintained an isolationist foreign policy until World War I, when it became clear to President Woodrow Wilson that transplanting our democratic ideals abroad would be vital to our security at home. In the post-World War II period this became even more pronounced with initiatives like the Marshall Plan, NATO. By contrast, in the tenants of Communism, there is a neo-religious belief in the inexorable forces of history—the inevitability that Capitalism was inherently evil and would self-destruct. To fanatical Communists, the State is the God—and any measure undertaken to preserve and profit the State can be philosophically sanctioned.

2. Why did the United States and Great Britain ally themselves with the Soviet Union in World War II?

The marriage of communists and capitalist was one of necessity and desperation, consummated solely to defeat fascism. Churchill deemed it a “deal with the devil.” If history had taken a different turn, the United States could have aligned with Hitler against Stalin. This unlikely alliance was forced when Hitler reneged on the Molotov-Rippendorp Pact—the non-aggression agreement signed by Germany and the Soviet Union—by invading the U.S.S.R.

3. How were the post-World War II boundaries in Europe established?

“Everyone imposes his own system as far as his army can reach.” Joseph Stalin. This quote provides much of the answer. At the close of World War II, the Soviet Red Army occupied much of Eastern Europe—all the countries it had “liberated” from German occupation. The armies of the United States and Great Britain, which had invaded Germany through France and the Low Countries, occupied most of Western Europe. The exception was defeated Germany which was divided into occupation zones, controlled by the U.S.S.R., the United States, Great Britain and France.

4. Who were the members of the Grand Alliance? Why were the decisions they made at Yalta and Potsdam so important to the future of Europe and the international community?

The Grand Alliance was comprised of the United States, the Soviet Union and Great Britain. The decisions made at Yalta and Potsdam determined the national boundaries of post-war Europe, the fate of defeated Germany.
5. Who was responsible for the Russian Revolution? What were their motivations? How did Russia change after the revolution?

There were actually two revolutions in 1917: In February, there was a popular uprising in St. Petersburg which resulted in the Czar ceding power to a provisional government. The October Revolution—the Bolshevik Revolution—Vladimir Lenin seized power in a coup d'état. According to the program following the October Revolution, Lenin and his comrades set about creating the communist Soviet Socialist state. Business was privatized, agriculture was collectivized, and property was seized. A police state was established in order to "protect" the revolution from "enemies of the state."

6. What role did the United States and Great Britain play in the Russian Civil War? How did their actions affect the relationship between the Bolsheviks and the West?

During the Russian Civil War, Western nations supported factions fighting against the Bolsheviks. This convinced the Soviet leaders that the West would stop at nothing to destroy them.

7. Based on the video, how did President Harry Truman feel about the Soviet Union?

During the Potsdam conference, President Truman wrote in his diary that the Soviet Union was, “…police government—plain and simple. A few top hands just take clubs, pistols and concentration camps and rule the people on the lower level.”

8. What effect did the development of the atomic bomb have on the early Cold War?

Following World War II, the Soviet Red Army was the largest and most powerful in all of history. The United States, because of its nuclear monopoly at the time, did not see the need to maintain a significant land-based army. They felt “the bomb” would be an adequate deterrent to Soviet aggression in Europe.

9. Communism was an answer to the exploitation and excesses of the industrial revolution. How did President Woodrow Wilson’s “liberal democracy” address these issues?

Wilson’s liberal democracy was enunciated in his Fourteen Points address. Wilson had not been content to justify American entry into the war for what it was-an effort to restore the European balance of power. Instead, he too imposed an ideological framework by proclaiming as war aims self-determination, open markets, and collective security.

10. Why did Stalin insist on the Soviet Sphere of Influence in Eastern Europe?

Stalin said the sphere of influence would serve as a buffer against foreign invasion and was non-negotiable. Consider this: Stalin’s country had suffered almost inconceivable loss of life during World War II. Germany had invaded through Poland. Stalin was determined that this would not happen again.