Overview:

In this unit 11th grade AP U.S. History students will be explore the various social, economic, military, and political influences and outcomes that shaped American history from 1945-1975. (Part 2 of this unit concludes in 1989.) The students will examine how American involvement in the Cold War evolved and transformed over the course of this time period, and evaluate its relative successes and failures. They will also examine the changing role of the national government in the development of domestic policies and the transformation of the American economy. In addition, students will examine the efforts of various sub groups such as women and African-Americans in their attempts to achieve political, economic, and social gains as well as the different goals and viewpoints within each group. Relying heavily on primary documents, video, and sound recordings, the students will analyze evidence from a variety of perspectives. The students will then apply their knowledge of the key events and themes of the period in order recognize and evaluate relative changes over time as well as the impact of these changes on their own lives today.

Historical Background:

The American experience in the decades following the World War II is one of the most complex and controversial eras in our nation's history. Almost every facet of the period is the subject of intense debate in which scholars present new historical interpretations and even more questions to be answered. Who is responsible for the outbreak of the Cold War? To what extent were the 1950s an era of consensus and conformity? How successful was the Civil Rights movement? Many of the battle lines between conservatives and liberals today trace their origin to the 1960s. It was truly the best of times or the worst of times depending on your perspective. Regardless of one's viewpoint, however, there is no denying that the period was one of profound political, social, and economic change.

Almost as soon as World War II ended the United States found itself entangled in a somewhat subtler and more complex Cold War with the world's only other superpower—the Soviet Union. This ideological conflict was an overwhelming influence in the formulation of American foreign and domestic policies for the next 45 years and redefined the nation's historical role in the world community. American foreign policy that was founded upon George Washington's warning to “beware foreign entanglements” soon found itself rebuilding Europe through the Marshall Plan, defending it under NATO, and eventually struggling to contain communism on a worldwide scale.

Beginning with the Truman Doctrine and continuing through Détente the presidents during this era each developed their unique foreign policy for dealing with Soviet Union as well as crafted a domestic agenda that either tried to expand, or curb the reach of the New Deal. Each policy represented a change from its predecessor and was eventually replaced itself. While soldiers and statesmen battled the Red Menace overseas, the nation battled against itself on the home front during the Red Scare of the 1950s and the anti-war movement a decade later.
From the hammers of suburbia to the gavel of the Supreme Court the country underwent profound social change as well. The nation witnessed a post-war Baby Boom that eventually developed into a growing youth counter-culture. For the first time in American history children, teenagers, and young adults were a force to be recognized. A host of different groups and key leaders played a role in the struggle for African-American Civil Rights. From Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, and the Little Rock Nine to the countless unnamed faces who marched, boycotted and endured Southern racism, each had their own strategies, goals, and stories. Swept up in this wave, other seemingly marginalized voices sought to be heard as well. Women such as Betty Freidan questioned the traditional definition of female roles while Native and Mexican-Americans demanded greater recognition within the American social fabric. Each group left their indelible mark upon the American experience.

During this time period the nature of the American economy also underwent a transformation. While the country entered World War II on the heels of the Great Depression, it emerged as an economic colossus. Increased productivity and Cold War military spending combined to fuel an unprecedented boom. This in turn gave birth to a revived consumer culture and the creation of an increasingly service based economy.

By 1975, however, increasing overseas competition, rising government spending and an eventual oil embargo helped bring the economic boom to an end. During the same time the United States experienced defeat in the Vietnam War and witnessed the Watergate scandal which led to the resignation of a president. Many key Civil Rights leaders had been assassinated and the various social movements had seemingly run their course achieving a mixed record of great successes and missed opportunities. A resurgent rise of conservatism attempted to rein in the political excesses of the Great Society and the changing social climate of the seemingly decadent Sixties. In this time of great progress, or turmoil depending on one’s definition, it seemed that the pendulum of history had begun to change direction yet again. It is a convenient halfway point in the study of America during the Cold War.