



Name _____ Class _____ Date _____



AMERICAN HISTORY POLITICAL CARTOONS

Brinkmanship

From *Herblock's Special for Today*
(Simon & Schuster, 1958)



UNDERSTANDING POLITICAL CARTOONS

Study the political cartoon, and then answer the questions that follow.

1. What does “the brink” refer to?

2. What does Dulles’s Superman outfit suggest?

3. What does the caption suggest about the cartoonist’s view of massive retaliation?

ACTIVITY

Although anti-Communist sentiment in the 1950s was high, the threat of massive retaliation was met with criticism by many people who feared the outcome of any nuclear conflict. Imagine two commuters on a morning train who have both seen this cartoon. Write a brief discussion between the two people, one of whom agrees with Dulles’s policy of massive retaliation and one of whom does not.

Discussion Guide

During Eisenhower's campaign for the presidency in 1952, he fervently attacked Truman's foreign policy, particularly with respect to the conflict in Korea. Eisenhower claimed Truman's policy was costly and ineffective in its attempt to hold the line against communist aggression.

Once in office, Eisenhower appointed John Foster Dulles to the position of secretary of state. A fervid and moralistic crusader against communism, Dulles advocated a policy of massive retaliation against the Soviet Union and possible Soviet aggression. By massive retaliation, Dulles meant that the United States would strike directly with nuclear weapons at the Soviet Union no matter where within the Soviet sphere of influence conflict might arise.

Dulles defended his policy of massive retaliation by arguing that it would, in the end, save the taxpayers money. In other words, instead of dragging the United States into costly and limiting wars, the United States would punish the Soviet Union with a damaging nuclear attack. This was in accordance with Eisenhower's "New Look" program for the U.S. armed forces, which entailed cutting back on troops and equipment that were designed to fight a more conventional war and instead relying on air power and nuclear weapons. Dulles supported this argument, stating that nuclear weapons provided "more bang for the buck."

In 1956 Dulles wrote that those who were scared to go to the brink were lost. Critics referred to Dulles's policy of never backing down from a crisis—even if it meant pushing the nation to the brink of war—as "brinkmanship." The policy of brinkmanship indeed frightened some Americans, many of whom believed that Dulles's willingness to go to the brink of total war was morally irresponsible.

Answers

UNDERSTANDING POLITICAL CARTOONS

1. the very edge of war, the initiation of war
2. Dulles's conviction that stopping communism was America's moral obligation; the moral or military superiority of the United States
3. that massive retaliation, because it involved nuclear weapons, could not truly be limited

Activity

Dialogues should include arguments for and against massive retaliation and brinkmanship.