

Fiche ressource proposée par le cercle d'étude DNL-Histoire-Géographie  
Académie de Montpellier

## SECTION EUROPÉENNE ET DE LANGUES ORIENTALES (SELO) PROGRAMME INTERACADEMIQUE D'HISTOIRE – GÉOGRAPHIE APPLICABLE À LA RENTRÉE 2021

### THE UNITED-STATES AND INTERNATIONAL CRISES

Le sujet s'inscrit dans le programme d'histoire de Terminale : **Thème 2** – La multiplication des acteurs internationaux (de 1945 aux années 1970) - **H2** – Une nouvelle donne géopolitique : bipolarisation et émergence du tiers-monde et **Thème 4** – Le monde, l'Europe et la France depuis les années 1990 : entre coopérations et conflits - **H1** – Nouveaux rapports de puissance et enjeux mondiaux

Ce chapitre s'inscrit dans un temps long et repose sur deux axes à étudier qui reprennent deux crises principales que traversent les États-Unis durant la période post Seconde guerre mondiale. Il s'agit de revenir tout d'abord sur la guerre du Vietnam, une crise représentative des dynamiques de puissance dans la guerre froide. Ensuite, la crise du 11 septembre 2001 permet d'aborder cette fois les évolutions de la puissance américaine dans un monde post Guerre froide. On traitera donc de ces deux crises tout en les comparant afin de dégager les évolutions de la puissance américaine et de son modèle.

This topic could begin with two documents that draw parallels between the Vietnam War and the September 11 attacks, to get students thinking about these documents and the notion of crisis. The introduction to this topic could then present the context of the Cold War in the United States, with particular reference to the Korean War and the Cuban missile crisis. It is also possible to look briefly at the situation in Asia, which explains the need for American intervention in Vietnam.

A possible key-question might be:

**"How do the international crises involving the United States from the Cold War to September 11, 2001, reflect the evolution of the American power in the world?"**

#### Connaissances fondamentales attendues (voir programme)

- 1) Concepts:** *Superpowers; Civil rights movement; Preemptive war; Axis of evil; War on terror; hyper-power*
- 2) Actors:** *Vietnamese entanglement; Protest movements (anti-war, black, student); Islamic fundamentalists*
- 3) Key-points:** *The peak of the Cold war; Vietnam war; Civil rights Act (1964); Détente; Turning point for the American Foreign Policy; War against Afghanistan and Iraq*

We can suggest the following plan (this is only a suggestion, not an obligation. This plan should be adapted and modified according to pedagogical needs and objectives).

### I - A model challenged during the Cold War.

- **The United States of America, a superpower.**

The term “superpower” was first used to describe nations with greater than great power status as early as 1944, but only gained its specific meaning with regard to the United States and to a lesser extent, the Soviet Union after World War II. In 1944, William T. R. Fox, an American foreign policy professor, elaborated on the concept in the book *The Superpowers: The United States, Britain and the Soviet Union — Their Responsibility for Peace* which spoke of the global reach of a super-empowered nation. Fox used the word superpower to identify a new category of power able to occupy the highest status in a world in which—as the war then raging demonstrated—states could challenge and fight each other on a global scale.

- **The Vietnam War and its geopolitical consequences.**

→ *How did the Vietnam war affect the USA?*

After the defeat of the French in the Indochina War and the signing of the Geneva Treaty, Vietnam found itself divided: in the North, a Socialist Republic led by Ho Chi Minh; and in the South, a capitalist Republic led by Ngo Dinh Diem. Civil war broke out between the two Vietnams. Fearing a "contamination" of communism after the expansion of Eastern Europe and into China (the domino theory), the United States feared a spread of communism into South Vietnam and the rest of Asia. After the Gulf of Tonkin incident in August 1964, the United States had an excuse to intervene in Vietnam. It was a war that lasted ten years, deadly and costly for the United States. In 1975, the North Vietnamese launched a major offensive and over-ran a series of South Vietnamese strongholds. In May 1975 communist forces took Saigon. In 1976 the two halves of Vietnam were united in a single Socialist Republic.

- **A model challenged by the Americans themselves.**

The Vietnam War had far-reaching consequences for a country experiencing unprecedented social unrest. In fact, the Vietnam conflict was the first to receive such extensive media coverage, leading to a major protest movement in the country between pro-war and anti-war groups. Some Americans also opposed the draft, the conscription of American men into the U.S. Army, which lasted from 1954 to 1975. At the same time, the Civil Rights Movement was growing and intensifying in the United States, fueled in part by protests against the war in Vietnam. The entire American model was being challenged, both externally and internally.

### II - The United States of America and the end of the Cold War.

- **The end of the Cold War.**

In the 1960s and 1970s, the U.S. and the Soviet Union tried to improve their relationship. Their cooperative efforts and Gorbachev's modernization of the Soviet Union eventually led to the end of the Cold War. The period of Détente was marked by great cooperation and goodwill between the superpowers. However, Détente came to an end with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 and the rise to power of Ronald Reagan, who referred to the USSR as an "evil empire". Although relations deteriorated after Reagan came to power in the mid-1980s, USSR politicians realized that change was

needed. In 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev became the Soviet leader. He realized that the USSR could no longer compete with the U.S. in the arms race if the Soviet economy and communism were to survive. The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 marked the end of the Cold War, allowing Gorbachev and the new U.S. president, George Bush, to declare that the Cold War was over. The Soviet Union was dissolved in December 1991.

- **The United States of America, a hyperpower?**

After the end of the Cold War, the United States remains the only superpower that can be described as a hyperpower. This power is based on aspects such as political, economic, cultural and military power.

- **A new world based on multilateralism?**

Multilateralism is often defined in contrast to bilateralism and unilateralism. It refers to a form of cooperation among at least three states. It is based on fundamental principles such as consultation, inclusion and solidarity. After the end of the Cold War and until September 11, 2001, the world experienced a parenthesis based on multilateralism, emerging from a more bipolar world during the Cold War between the two main superpowers. The conflicts of this period, including the UN (e.g. the first Gulf War), will be discussed.

### **III - The turning point in American foreign policy.**

- **The 9/11 crisis.**

Four planes flying over the eastern USA are simultaneously taken over by small teams of hijackers. Two planes hit the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York. The first hit the North Tower, the second crashed into the South Tower. Shortly afterwards, the third plane destroyed the west side of the Pentagon, the gigantic U.S. military headquarters located just outside the nation's capital, Washington DC. The fourth plane crashed into a field in Pennsylvania after the passengers had fought back.

- **The immediate aftermath of the 9/11 crisis.**

Less than a month after the attacks, President George W Bush led an invasion of Afghanistan - supported by an international coalition - to eradicate al-Qaeda and hunt down Bin Laden. The alleged planner of the 9/11 attacks, Khalid Sheikh Mohammad, was arrested in Pakistan in 2003. He was held in US custody at Guantanamo Bay for years without going to trial, but he and two other plotters have now entered into plea agreements in exchange for avoiding the death penalty.

- **The end of multilateralism.**

→ *To what extent is September 2001 a turning point in the American foreign policy?*

The attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001 led to changes in U.S. foreign and security policy. President George W. Bush called this new approach the "war on terror". The events of September 11, 2001 were symptomatic of a broader crisis in the postwar multilateral order. The events of 9/11 and their aftermath, the intervention in Iraq, the treatment of so-called enemy combatants, and the extraterritorial reach of U.S. domestic law have crystallized deeper fissures in the political and social foundations of the multilateral system. The trend is increasingly toward a unilateral system in which the United States has the upper hand, free from international organizations such as the UN.

***Croisements possibles avec le programme de langue vivante :***

*Axe 1* : *Identités et échanges* (frontières entre les groupes sociaux à travers la ségrégation aux États-Unis).

*Axe 3* : *Art et pouvoir* (films de propagande, caricature, censure, Maccarthysme etc.)

*Axe 6* : *Innovations scientifiques et responsabilité* (conquête spatiale, course à l'armement)

*Axe 8* : *Territoire et mémoires* (mémoires de la guerre au Vietnam, du 11 septembre 2001).

## Bibliographie et sitographie non exhaustives

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### **Civil Rights Movement aux États-Unis :**

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<https://cle.ens-lyon.fr/anglais/civilisation/domaine-americain/problematiques-contemporaines/remembering-9-11-politics-of-memory>

### **Films à regarder :**

*Apocalypse Now* (1979) Film de Francis Ford Coppola  
*Full Metal Jacket* (1987) Film de Stanley Kubrick  
*Malcom X* (1992) Film de Spike Lee  
*Forrest Gump* (1994) Film de Robert Zemeckis  
*La 25<sup>e</sup> heure* (2002) Film de Spike Lee  
*La Couleur des sentiments* (2011) Film de Tate Taylor