

The Domino Theory

Definition	The Domino Theory was the Cold War belief that if one country fell to communism, neighboring countries would follow like a row of dominoes.
Origins	Popularised by President Dwight D. Eisenhower in 1954 in reference to Southeast Asia (especially Vietnam).
Function	Used to justify US intervention globally — not only militarily, but also politically, economically, and psychologically.
Psychological Dimension	Containment was not just about stopping tanks or missiles, but also about stopping the spread of ideology (communism as an infectious idea).

Psychological Warfare and the Domino Theory

Domino Theory assumed communism spread through influence, persuasion, and indoctrination — not just conquest.

This meant controlling minds became as important as controlling territory.

If communism could “infect” populations, then the US had to develop ways to:	Resist enemy propaganda.
	Break the will of communist agents.

Psychological Warfare and the Domino Theory (cont)

Potentially reprogram or counter-brainwash individuals.

MKULTRA's Relevance to the Domino Theory

Fear of Communist Brainwashing: US POWs in the Korean War sometimes confessed to war crimes or adopted pro-communist positions.

Seen in the West as proof of Chinese and Soviet “mind control.”

If individuals could be “turned,” entire societies could fall — the Domino Theory at a psychological scale.

MKULTRA as Containment: While the Domino Theory drove military interventions (Korea, Vietnam), MKULTRA was the covert scientific counterpart, aiming to defend against ideological contagion.

If communism could spread psychologically, then the US needed to harden the mind or develop ways to undo enemy influence.

MKULTRA as a Tool of Domino Logic

Preventing Dominoes from Falling: By developing interrogation and reprogramming methods, CIA hoped to prevent communist infiltration from destabilizing allied nations.

Example: Identifying and breaking “double agents” or reconditioning defectors.

Offensive Potential: Some MKULTRA concepts aimed not just at defense but at turning the dominoes back.

Ideas like using LSD or psychological disruption on enemy populations/leaders aligned with the logic of stopping communism before it spread.

Vietnam and Psychological War: Domino Theory was the rationale for US involvement in Vietnam.

At the same time, MKULTRA research on torture, sensory deprivation, and psychological stress fed into interrogation and counterinsurgency tactics (e.g., CIA's Phoenix Program in Vietnam).



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Domino Theory, MKULTRA, and Cold War Paranoia

Both rested on fear of uncontrollable spread: Domino Theory: Communism spreads geographically and ideologically.

MKULTRA: Brainwashing spreads individually and socially.

Both fostered a zero-sum mentality: If the US didn't act, the Soviets/Chinese would gain decisive advantage.

Both justified extraordinary measures: Domino Theory justified wars in Korea, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia.

MKULTRA justified secret experiments on civilians, prisoners, and patients.

Historical Consequences

Domino Theory proved flawed: While Vietnam fell in 1975, other Southeast Asian nations did not uniformly follow.

MKULTRA proved unreliable: No consistent "mind control" methods were found.

Shared Legacy: Both demonstrate how Cold War fears amplified into policies that were: Strategically questionable, Ethically troubling & Driven more by paranoia than by evidence.

Key Takeaways

Domino Theory and MKULTRA were both products of Cold War containment logic.

Domino Theory focused on political/military containment; MKULTRA focused on psychological containment.

Both were rooted in the belief that communism was not just a military force but a mental and cultural contagion.

Both show how Cold War paranoia blurred the line between legitimate defense and extreme experimentation.



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