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Judging the Kitchen Debate

Among the most graphic displays of late 1950s “peaceful coexistence” were reciprocal exhibitions placed by the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. Designed to inform the general public of the cultural and scientific accomplishments of the opposing world power, these exhibits featured displays ranging from hardware to houseware.

During a July 1959 tour of the U.S.S.R. and Poland, Vice-President Richard M. Nixon opened the U.S. exhibit at Moscow’s Sokolniki Park. As Nixon escorted Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev through the U.S. exhibit, the Vice-President and the Premier fell into lively discussion in the kitchen of a model American house. Celebrated by both nations as an important Cold War confrontation and victory—and often cited by Richard Nixon during his 1960 presidential campaign—the famed “kitchen debate” is recalled by both participants in their published memoirs.

READING I From *Krushchev Remembers*

As I walked through the arts section the American journalists kept pumping me with questions. They knew perfectly well how I felt about this kind of art, and they were baiting me. I told them, “How would this sculptor’s mother feel to see how he depicts a woman? He must be abnormal in some way, a pervert. . . . No man who loves life and nature, who loves women, could depict a female this way!”

Maybe some people like this sort of art. Every society passes through a stage in its development when all sorts of strange ideas are born: some are progressive, others are regressive, but some are just plain perverse.

With Nixon accompanying me, I moved on to a display supposedly showing a typical American kitchen. I began to inspect some of the appliances. There were some interesting things, but there were also a number of things which seemed purely for show and of no use. Once I commented on this I had swallowed the hook and was caught in a lengthy conversation with Nixon which newsmen would refer to for years to come as characterizing Soviet-American relations. The conversation began like this: I picked up an automatic device for squeezing lemon juice for tea and said, “What a silly thing for your people to exhibit in the Soviet Union, Mr. Nixon! All you need for tea is a couple of drops of lemon juice. I think it would take a housewife longer to use this gadget than it would for her to do what our housewives do: slice a piece of lemon, drop it into a glass of tea, then squeeze a few drops out with a spoon. That’s the way we always did it when I was a child, and I don’t think this appliance of yours is an improvement in any way. It’s not really a time-saver or a labor-saver at all. In fact, you can squeeze a lemon faster by hand. This kind of nonsense is an insult to our intelligence.”

Well, Nixon disagreed, and he tried to bring me around to his way of thinking, arguing in that very exuberant way of his. I responded in kind. I have my own way of being exuberant in a political dispute. The debate began to flare up and went on and on. The newsmen pressed around us with their tape recorders going and their microphones shoved in our faces. After a while I put a direct question to him: “Mr. Nixon, you’ve brought all this wonderful equipment here to show us, but have you really put it into widespread, practical use? Do American housewives have it in their kitchens?” To be fair to him, Nixon answered honestly that what they were showing us hadn’t come onto the market. At that point people burst out laughing. I said, “Hah! So you are showing off to us a lot of stuff which you haven’t even introduced in your own country! You didn’t think we’d figure that out; you thought you’d get us to ooh and ah over this junk you’ve brought here!”

by John W. Larner

Of course, what we were really debating was not a question of kitchen appliances but a question of two opposing systems: capitalism and socialism. The Americans wanted to impress Russians with a lot of fancy gadgets. They were sure that Russians wouldn't know the difference if the exhibit included some things which most American housewives have never laid eyes on. To a certain extent the organizers of the exhibit may have been right about this. They wanted the Russians to think, "So this is the sort of equipment they have in capitalist countries! Why don't we have such things under socialism?" That was the idea, anyway, unrealistic as it may have been. As for Nixon, he was behaving as a representative of the world's largest capitalist country. I'm not saying that America doesn't have great riches, as well as technological skills and inventiveness. Of course it consisted mostly of a bunch of photographs, some household products you won't find in any household, and some pieces of sculpture which were good for nothing but laughing and spitting at.

READING 2

From Richard Nixon's *Six Crises*

The conversation began innocently enough. We discussed the relative merits of washing machines. Then I decided that this was as good a place as any to answer the charges that had been made in the Soviet press, that only "the rich" in the United States could afford such a house as this.

I made a point that this was a typical house in the United States, costing \$14,000, which could be paid over twenty-five or thirty years. Most U.S. veterans of World War II have bought houses like this, in the \$10,000 to \$15,000 range, I told him, adding that most any steel worker could buy one.

"We too can find steelworkers and peasants who can pay \$14,000 cash for a flat," he retorted. Then he went into a harangue on how American capitalists build houses to last only twenty years and Soviets build for their children and grandchildren. He went on and on, obviously determined to deny the American know-how he saw so plainly in front of him:

You think the Russians will be dumbfounded by this exhibit. But the fact is that all newly built Russian houses will have this equipment. You need dollars in the United States to get this house, but here all you need is to be a citizen. If an American citizen does not have dollars he has the right to buy this house or sleep on the pavement at night. And you say we are slaves of Communism! . . .

I finally interrupted him. . . . "You do all the talking and you do not let anyone else talk. I want to make one point. We don't think this fair will assound the Russian people, but it will interest them just as yours interested us. To us, diversity, the right to choose, the fact that we have a thousand different builders, that's the spice of life. We don't want to have a decision made at the top by one government official saying that we will have one type of house. That's the difference. . . ."

"On political differences we will never agree," Khrushchev said, again cutting in on me. . . .

I tried again to point up our belief in freedom of choice, and I put in a plea for more exchanges between our two countries to bring about a better understanding. But Khrushchev did not want to debate me on my grounds. He changed the subject back to washing machines, arguing that it was better to have one model than many. I listened to his long harangue on washing machines, realizing full well that he was not switching arguments by chance or accident; he was trying to throw me off balance. . . .

At this he gave the appearance of turning angry and, jamming his thumb into my chest, he shouted: "Yes, that's the kind of competition we want, but your generals say we must compete in rockets. Your generals are so powerful they can destroy us. We can also show you something so that you will know the Russian spirit. We are strong, we can beat you." . . .

I pointed my finger at him and said: "To me, you are strong and we are strong. In some ways, you are stronger than we are. In others, we are

stronger. But to me it seems that in this day and age to argue who is the stronger completely misses the point. . . . No one should ever use his strength to put another in the position where he in effect has an ultimatum. For us to argue who is the stronger misses the point. If war comes we both lose." . . .

I pressed on: "I hope the Prime Minister understands all the implications of what I have just said. When you place either one of our powerful nations in such a position that it has no choice but to accept dictation or fight, then you are playing with the most destructive thing in the world. This is very important in the present world context," I went on before he could interrupt. "It is very dangerous. When we sit down at a conference table it cannot all be one way. One side cannot put an ultimatum to another. It is impossible."

Now we were going at it toe-to-toe. To some, it may have looked as though we had both lost our tempers. But exactly the opposite was true. I had full and complete control of my temper and was aware of it. I knew the value of keeping cool in a crisis, and what I said and how I said it was done with as much calm deliberation as I could muster in a running, impromptu debate with an expert. I never doubted, either, whether Khrushchev had lost control of his emotions. In situations before the kitchen debate and after it, according to my observations, Khrushchev never lost his temper—he uses it.

Now, using his temper, Khrushchev struck back. He accused me of issuing an ultimatum, he vehemently denied that the Soviet Union ever used dictation, and he warned me not to threaten him. "It sounds to me like a threat," he declared, poking his finger at me. "We, too, are giants. You want to threaten—we will answer threats with threats."

"That's not my point," I retorted. "We will never engage in threats."

"You wanted indirectly to threaten me," he shouted back. "But we have the means to threaten, too."

"Who wants to threaten?" I asked. . . .

"You raised the point," he went on. "We want peace and friendship with all nations, especially America."

I could sense now that he wanted to call an end to the argument. And I certainly did not want to take the responsibility for continuing it publicly. We both had had enough. I said, "We want peace too."

He answered, "Yes, I believe that." . . .

Then, returning to my responsibilities as his host, I put my hand on his shoulder and said with a smile, "I'm afraid I haven't been a good host." Khrushchev turned to the American guide in the model kitchen and said, "Thank the housewife for letting us use her kitchen for our argument."

ACTIVITIES

1. Define such key terms as: dumbfounded, harangue, ultimatum, implications, dictation, deliberation, vehemently, exuberant, capitalism, socialism, perverse.
2. Compare and contrast these two accounts of the same event. How can we explain the similarities and differences they present?
3. What are the strengths and weaknesses of political memoirs as historical sources? What questions should be raised to test the authenticity and reliability of these two accounts of the kitchen debate? What other sources could be used to probe and understand this Cold War event?
4. Looking at other passages from *Six Crises* and the two volumes of *Khrushchev Remembers*, how did each of the kitchen debaters size up his opponent before the event? After the event? What impact do you think these mutual human impressions had on the Cold War?
5. Make a time-line of Cold War events prior to and following the 1959 kitchen debate. Assess the importance of the debate in this sequence of Cold War incidents and trends.

LIST OF SOURCES

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