

Contention In The Kitchen

When Khrushchev and Nixon Faced Off in the Cold War's Greatest Debate

In an exchange that fired the world's imagination, Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev and US Vice President Richard Nixon used the setting of a model American kitchen at the US Trade and Cultural Fair in Moscow to duel in a verbal fencing match on the virtues of capitalism and communism. Entirely spontaneous, it was likely the most frank debate ever between the leaders of the world's two most powerful "isms." Read about the men and attitudes that clashed in the famous "Kitchen Debate."



“There must be a free exchange of ideas. After all, you don’t know everything.”

“If I don’t know everything, you don’t know anything about communism—except fear of it.”

In hindsight, when then-Vice President Richard Nixon landed in Moscow on July 23, 1959, he ought to have known to be prepared. Although the purpose of his visit was ostensibly to host an innocuous exhibition of American life as part of a cultural exchange with the Soviet Union, no one was fooled. This was a superb opportunity to prove to the Soviets that America’s way of life really was better. Nixon knew it, Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev knew it, the Americans knew it and the Russian people knew it too.

As a politician whose rise directly correlated with his anti-communist stance, Nixon was geared up for a fight. And since he was going to spend time alongside the belligerent Soviet leader who was already known for his brashness (three years earlier Khrushchev had brusquely proclaimed to a startled group of Western ambassadors, “We will bury you!”), it was a pretty good bet that the two would get into a tangle. Perhaps the only question was whether it would be contained within a formal conference room or whether it would spill out in the open.

The press arrived innocently enough, with microphones primed and pens poised at the ready, waiting to record the pearls of wisdom as they began to flow. Neither Khrushchev nor Nixon let them down. Virtually from the moment the two met, the sparks began flying.

Khrushchev bullied his American visitor, goading him to respond in kind. Despite his comparative reserve, Nixon succeeded in stating his case eloquently—though Khrushchev repeatedly hijacked the conversations and refused to accede to a word he uttered. But Nixon’s quiet dignity made the point nonetheless.

Khrushchev later admitted that he came away with a measure of respect for that staunch defender of democracy and the American way of life.

“Cultural Exchange”

In spite of Stalin’s death early in 1953 and the subsequent Soviet efforts toward de-Stalinization, the Cold War only intensified. Russia successfully tested a hydrogen bomb and failed to reciprocate Eisenhower’s overtures intended to steer nuclear materials to peaceful uses. The Soviet Union sought to expand its influence by expanding its missile force and imposing communism on more countries. It had already conquered Eastern Europe and allied itself with China.



Nixon and Khrushchev in the kitchen.



Nixon and Khrushchev at the American National Exhibition in Moscow, July 1959.



Vice President Nixon visiting the Soviet exhibition.

Korea and Vietnam were already struggling with Communism and the front had even stretched to Latin America.

The US fought these efforts aggressively. When Eisenhower took office in 1952, he continued Truman’s policy of “containment.” The difference was that he relied increasingly on the threat of nuclear weapons to achieve the intended deterrent effect. Under Eisenhower, the United States actively pursued a massive buildup of its nuclear arsenal, even though it had long achieved numerical superiority over the Soviet Union. By 1962, US nuclear warheads outnumbered the Soviets by eight to one. Eisenhower even began secretly placing nuclear missiles in Turkey, just a 16 minute flight from Moscow. (Khrushchev was likewise developing plans to place nuclear missiles in Cuba in the near future.)

In the Soviet Union, Khrushchev was extremely uneasy about losing the nuclear race. He had Soviet scientists ramp up their efforts and he looked for every opportunity to surpass the Americans in other areas. This developed into an underground intelligence war between the CIA and KGB. It also resulted in the Space Race, which was loosely related to the military: Not only could the rocket science used in launching satellites be used for missile development, but mastery in space could provide a new platform for launching nuclear weapons.

Despite the mounting competition



President Eisenhower and Vice President Nixon with Saudi King Saud in Washington in 1957.

leading to a nuclear doomsday, Khrushchev inaugurated an easing of policies that permitted increased contact with the outside world for the first time. Large numbers of visitors were welcomed to the Soviet Union, where Russians could meet foreigners for the first time in decades.

It was in this atmosphere of relative openness that the trade fairs were conceived in 1958. On January 27, 1958, the United States and the Soviet Union signed an agreement promising each other to facilitate a greater flow of information and ideas between their respective countries. To promote this end the two governments agreed to schedule trade