

Resource:

The Kitchen Debate

Document Text

24 July 1959

Vice President Richard Nixon and Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev
U.S. Embassy, Moscow, Soviet Union

[Both men enter kitchen in the American exhibit.]

Nixon: I want to show you this kitchen. It is like those of our houses in California.

[Nixon points to dishwasher.] Khrushchev: We have such things.

Nixon: This is our newest model. This is the kind which is built in thousands of units for direct installations in the houses. In America, we like to make life easier for women. . . .

Khrushchev: Your capitalistic attitude toward women does not occur under Communism.

Nixon: I think that this attitude towards women is universal. What we want to do, is make life more easy for our housewives. . . .

Nixon: This house can be bought for \$14,000, and most American [veterans from World War II] can buy a home in the bracket of \$10,000 to \$15,000. Let me give you an example that you can appreciate. Our steel workers as you know, are now on strike. But any steel worker could buy this house. They earn \$3 an hour. This house costs about \$100 a month to buy on a contract running 25 to 30 years.

Khrushchev: We have steel workers and peasants who can afford to spend \$14,000 for a house. Your American houses are built to last only 20 years so builders could sell new houses at the end. We build firmly. We build for our children and grandchildren.

Nixon: American houses last for more than 20 years, but, even so, after 20 years, many Americans want a new house or a new kitchen. Their kitchen is obsolete by that time. . . . The American system is designed to take advantage of new inventions and new techniques.

Khrushchev: This theory does not hold water. Some things never get out of date—houses, for instance, and furniture, furnishings—perhaps—but not houses. I have read much about America and American houses, and I do not think that this exhibit and what you say is strictly accurate.

...

Khrushchev: In Russia, all you have to do to get a house is to be born in the Soviet Union. You are entitled to housing. . . . In America, if you don't have a dollar you have a right to choose between sleeping in a house or on the pavement. Yet you say we are the slave to Communism.

...

Nixon: This exhibit was not designed to astound but to interest. Diversity, the right to choose, the fact that we have 1,000 builders building 1,000 different houses is the most important thing. We don't have one decision made at the top by one government official. This is the difference.

Khrushchev: On politics, we will never agree with you . . .

Nixon: You can learn from us, and we can learn from you. There must be a free exchange. Let the people choose the kind of house, the kind of soup, the kind of ideas that they want.

“The Kitchen Debate, transcript”, American National Exhibition at Sokolniki Park.

Moscow, July 24, 1959. Central Intelligence Agency Library.

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24 July 1959
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Premier Nikita Khrushchev
U.S. Embassy, Moscow, Soviet Union

Summary

This is a conversation between Vice President Richard Nixon and Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev. It took place at the U.S. Embassy in Moscow, Soviet Union.

[Both men enter kitchen in the American exhibit.]

Both men walk into a room decorated like an American kitchen.

Nixon: I want to show you this kitchen. It is like those of our houses in California.

Vice President Nixon says he wants to show Premier Khrushchev this kitchen. It is designed to look like a kitchen in California.

*[Nixon points to dishwasher.]
Khrushchev: We have such things.*

Vice President Nixon points out a dishwasher. Premier Khrushchev says they have those in the Soviet Union.

Nixon: This is our newest model. This is the kind which is built in thousands of units for direct installations in the houses. In America, we like to make life easier for women. . . .

Vice President Nixon says that dishwashers make life easier for women in America.

Khrushchev: Your capitalistic attitude toward women does not occur under Communism.

Premier Khrushchev says Communists in the Soviet Union view women differently.

Nixon: I think that this attitude towards women is universal. What we want to do, is make life more easy for our housewives. . . .

Vice President Nixon says that everyone shares this view of women. Americans want to make life easier for women.

Nixon: This house can be bought for \$14,000, and most American [veterans from World War II] can buy a home in the bracket of \$10,000 to \$15,000. Let me give you an example that you can appreciate. Our steel workers as you know, are now on strike. But any steel worker could buy this house. They earn \$3 an hour. This house costs about \$100 a month to buy on a contract running 25 to 30 years.

Vice President Nixon explains that the model home they are viewing could be bought by the average steelworker in America. It will cost a family between \$10,000 and \$15,000 and they will pay this amount over 25 or 30 years.

Khrushchev: We have steel workers and peasants who can afford to spend \$14,000 for a house. Your American houses are built to last only 20 years so builders could sell new houses at the end. We build firmly. We build for our children and grandchildren.

Nixon: American houses last for more than 20 years, but, even so, after 20 years, many Americans want a new house or a new kitchen. Their kitchen is obsolete by that time. . . . The American system is designed to take advantage of new inventions and new techniques.

Khrushchev: This theory does not hold water. Some things never get out of date—houses, for instance, and furniture, furnishings—perhaps—but not houses. I have read much about America and American houses, and I do not think that this exhibit and what you say is strictly accurate.

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Khrushchev: In Russia, all you have to do to get a house is to be born in the Soviet Union. You are entitled to housing. . . . In America, if you don't have a dollar you have a right to choose between sleeping in a house or on the pavement. Yet you say we are the slave to Communism.

...

Premier Khrushchev says that the Soviet Union also has steelworkers, but they want to live in their houses longer than 20 years. Houses in the Soviet Union are well built.

President Nixon says that American houses can last more than 20 years. But Americans always want better houses and better kitchens. After 20 years, a kitchen needs to be improved. Americans always want the best and newest inventions.

Premier Khrushchev disagrees with this way of life. He thinks houses never get too old. He believes Americans move a lot because the houses are not built well enough.

Premier Khrushchev explains that every person born in the Soviet Union is eligible to receive a home. In America, people must earn money or be homeless.

Nixon: This exhibit was not designed to astound but to interest. Diversity, the right to choose, the fact that we have 1,000 builders building 1,000 different houses is the most important thing. We don't have one decision made at the top by one government official. This is the difference.

Khrushchev: On politics, we will never agree with you . . .

Nixon: You can learn from us, and we can learn from you. There must be a free exchange. Let the people choose the kind of house, the kind of soup, the kind of ideas that they want.

Vice President Nixon says that the model home is designed to interest people. He believes that Americans have the right to choose what their home should look and feel like. The American government does not tell people how to live their lives. The Soviet Union's government does.

Premier Khrushchev says he and Vice President Nixon will never agree on which form of government is better.

Vice President Nixon says they can learn from each other. He believes that people should be allowed to choose what kind of house they live in, what they eat, and what they believe. That is freedom.

“The Kitchen Debate, transcript”, American National Exhibition at Sokolniki Park. Moscow, July 24, 1959. Central Intelligence Agency Library.

Background

The Cold War began when World War II ended. Both the United States and the Soviet Union wanted to lead the world into a new era of peace. Americans believed that upholding democracy and freedom was the only way to achieve order and stability. Soviets believed communism was the answer. In 1947, President Harry S. Truman made a speech that came to be known as the Truman Doctrine. In this speech, he explained that America had a responsibility to defend and promote democracy across the globe. This belief informed American foreign policy for decades and put the United States in direct conflict with the Soviet Union.

The idea that America was the world's perfect nation informed more than just political beliefs. It also defined the ideals of daily life in America. In 1959, the U.S. government organized an exhibition at the U.S. embassy in Moscow. The exhibition's goal was to teach Soviet visitors about the United States. But the exhibition did not focus on military or political strengths. Instead, it focused on the "typical" American home, which, in this vision, was led by a white breadwinning husband and a devoted housewife. The exhibition argued that the American home was the epitome of freedom. Americans had the right to spend their hard-earned money on their perfect homes. Such economic opportunity proved that Americans had a level of freedom that communists would never enjoy.

About the Document

Vice President Richard Nixon visited the embassy exhibition. He toured it with Soviet Union Premier Nikita Khrushchev. While viewing a model American kitchen, the two men began an unplanned debate. This became known as the "kitchen debate." Nixon used American appreciation for housewives as his opening argument. He explained that giving women the opportunity to live in a comfortable home was an example of American superiority. In this way, the American kitchen—and a woman's role in it—became a weapon in the Cold War.

Vocabulary

- **Cold War:** A state of hostility between two nations that does not include open warfare. The most famous cold war was between the United States and the Soviet Union from 1945 to 1990.
- **communism:** A political system in which all goods and items of value are collectively owned and distributed to citizens equally.

- **democracy:** A form of government in which the people hold the power and use elections and other forms of collective action to influence policy.
- **embassy:** The official offices of a nation within a foreign country.
- **exhibition:** A public display of items focused on a particular topic.
- **foreign policy:** A government's approach to working with other countries.
- **ideal:** A level of perfection that is often unrealistic or unattainable.
- **premier:** The head of the government in the Soviet Union.
- **Soviet Union:** A nation that existed from 1922 to 1991. Officially known as the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR).
- **Truman Doctrine:** A belief that the United States should support countries threatened by Communism to protect global freedom. Inspired by a 1947 speech by President Harry Truman.

Discussion Questions

- Why do you think the United States government chose to focus the exhibition on the American home?
- Why do you think Nixon chose to engage Khrushchev in an informal debate in the exhibition's kitchen? What was his overarching point?
- Nixon refers to women and housewives as if they are the same thing. What does this say about his view of women and their ideal role in America?
- What do you think about Nixon's argument? What about Khrushchev's argument?
- Why do you think this debate is important to women's history? What does it tell you about the challenges and expectations women might have faced during the Cold War?

Suggested Activities

- Use this lesson to introduce students to the Cold War. Ask them to analyze the debate and outline what they learn about democracy and capitalism versus communism from this text.
- Expand students' understanding of American consumerism by connecting this resource to the film of a **suburban shopping mall and the advertisements for electrical appliances**.
- Trace Richard Nixon's views of and interactions with American women throughout this unit by linking this resource to the life story of **Helen Douglas** and **Barbara Jordan's speech on his impeachment**.
- Compare the ideal home presented in the U.S. exhibition to the realities of living conditions in the 1950s through the **photographs of Glasgow Village and the Pruitt-Igoe housing project**.
- Consider the limitations of personal choice and personal freedom—particularly for women—in baby boomer families by combining this resource with **the resource exploring the development of the first birth control pill**.

Themes

AMERICA IN THE WORLD; AMERICAN CULTURE; DOMESTICITY AND FAMILY