

# The Ampex Contribution to U.S. Diplomatic History

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By Bill Slatkin

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While the Ampex videotape recorder is accepted as a revolutionary tool in television broadcasting, education, science, medicine and many other endeavors throughout the world, few people know about how the machine played a role in cracking the ice between the two super powers engaged in the Cold War. And it's time the secret is revealed about how Ampex employees risked their lives to make sure the world could learn about what happened.

The scene was the American National Exhibition in Moscow; the date was July 24, 1959. The U.S. representatives, headed by Vice President Richard Nixon, were there to show off some of their technologies. Apparently by chance, two key world leaders, Nixon and Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev, encountered one another in the kitchen area featured in the model home erected to demonstrate the state-of-the-art household appliances available to Americans. In what became known as the "Kitchen Debate," the Soviet leader took the opportunity to interrupt Nixon's descriptions of U.S. technical developments to tell the vice president about the accomplishments in his country. And he linked these technical marvels to what he described as the superior system of the Soviet government. Nixon graciously pointed out that each country had its own proud technical achievements and suggested that it would be best if each side could share its advances with the other. Khrushchev seemed determined to emphasize his idea that the American system of government didn't have the virtues of Communism. At times, the exchange seemed somewhat "heated" as each of the two officials disagreed with what the other had to say, and Khrushchev delivered some veiled threats. There also were touches of humor that brought chuckles from both sides.

To emphasize his point about American technological advances, Nixon singled out the videotape recorder, a remarkable machine that was recording, for instant review on color television, the very discussion they were having at that moment. And he suggested that the recording be broadcast to both American and Soviet audiences as a way of promoting cooperation and communication between the two countries.

As Ampex Video Manager Joe Roizen operated the video equipment during the debate, he recognized its importance as world news and he doubted that the Russian leader would agree with Nixon's idea. Roizen and a few colleagues felt it would be valuable to send home this visual record of the debate and share it with all of America. But they feared it would be confiscated by a suspicious Soviet customs agent. Volunteering to "sneak" the recording out of the country was the top ranking Ampex executive at the show. A company vice president, Phil Gundy, wrapped the tape reel in an old shirt and stuffed it into the bottom of his luggage.

Within a couple of days, people throughout the U.S. got to see the debate on TV. Gundy had notified President Eisenhower of what he was bringing home, and once the tape arrived in New York, it was copied, including the voice of a translator dubbed over Khrushchev's statements, and distributed to all American television networks.

As the exciting story was being told extensively by broadcast and print media in countries throughout the world, Roizen was preparing for his trip and hearing a knock on his door. He and two Ampex colleagues soon learned they were to be held under house arrest.

It seems that Soviet authorities wanted to see the tape and review its contents before deciding whether or not it could be broadcast. The tape was gone. The Americans were to be held indefinitely. And their captors weren't convinced when Roizen offered the explanation, in the best Russian he could muster, that Khrushchev had said it was okay for the tape to be sent to the U.S.

Roizen said that while waiting to learn their fate, he and colleagues, Ampex show manager Jack Miller and company engineer Bill Barnhart, each recorded on audio tape his last will and testament.

Some diplomatic maneuvering followed, with participation by Llewellyn Thompson, the U.S. ambassador to Russia. And when Russian officials had the chance to see what the American audience had viewed, it was decided that they liked what Khrushchev had to say to the rest of the world.

That fortunate turn of events led to the quick release of Roizen, Miller and Barnhart. They and their families were relieved about the outcome, particularly because an Ambassador Thompson, angry that they had interfered with diplomatic protocol, warned them earlier in this very brief, little-known hostage crisis: "Don't call us, we'll call you."