

Khrushchev's Mark on the U.S.

By Stephen S. Rosenfeld

KHRUSHCHEV made his mark on Russia but he made his mark on the United States too, and you can argue that working against the terror and cultural drag in his own country was not so hard — because he had the power—and not so important for us as working against the more elusive elements of the American political style.

Consider that when Khrushchev took over the Kremlin after Stalin's death the essence of the American style in the world was an assumption of a right—felt by some as a duty—to bestow the blessings of freedom and order and the free enterprise system practically everywhere, even behind the Iron Curtain. So widely recognized and disputed is this assumption now that it does not require detailing.

What is not so widely recognized is this. We could conduct a lavish interventionist policy not so much because of our "arrogance" but because of our power. We were in fact far and away the most powerful nation by all the classical indices of industry and armaments. It was our power that made the world safe, or ripe, for our arrogance. Dimly as we may have perceived it, we could act on the virtual certainty that no miscue or excess abroad would affect the invulnerability of our national territory—a certainty unprecedented in world history and one which in the nuclear age no country can again enjoy. In those innocent days we knew that

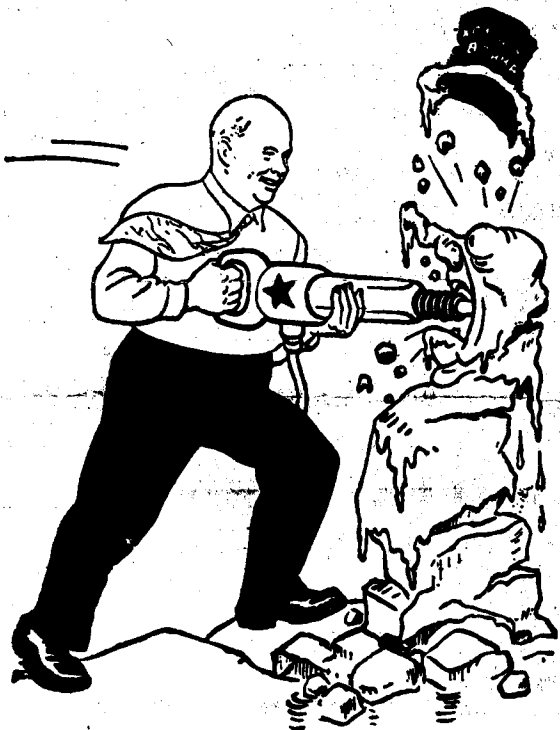
the only Americans who might die in the quest for world freedom and order would do so far from home.

DOING what any Kremlin occupant would have done, Khrushchev built up Soviet might to the point which not only put his country on the road to strategic "parity" but created the first threat modern Americans had known to the physical security of their homeland. Stalin personally had been a more menacing figure but the resources available to him had not let him pose that kind of real challenge to the global reach and inner self-esteem of Americans.

Khrushchev, then, had to "teach" Americans the hardest of lessons to learn: that we were not No. 1, not invulnerable, not immune to the consequences of our acts in the way to which we had become accustomed since World War II; and that we would have to adjust our policies accordingly.

Looking at much of Khrushchev's record, one must say he was a poor teacher. By loose and tough talk and his weakness for rash gestures, he made more difficult a task of American policy adjustment that would have been terribly vexing under the best of circumstances. By a simplistic focus on the global pretensions of Communist doctrine and Soviet power, he validated for already anxious Americans their instinctive fear that the Kremlin challenge was total, universal, unavoidable, apocalyptic.

In this hyper-fearful state, Americans



Pravda, in a rare political cartoon published Jan. 1, 1960, pictured Khrushchev chipping away at an ice figure labeled on its hat "Cold War."

Return to the

could easily believe, for instance, that there was a "missile gap," that civilian priorities had to be deferred for the duration of a dangerous and indefinite siege, and that a firm stand in Vietnam was essential to prevent the unraveling of the whole American-woven fabric of postwar "stability."

BUT Khrushchev—he once said, "I've probably been talking too much again"—had more than a big mouth. In three positive

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and so far enduring ways, he changed the United States' view of the world and of its own place in it.

For all his official bluster and bloodiness, he came across to many Americans as a genuine person, someone they could relate to. His tantrums proved it, his folk language, his baggy pants, his homey wife Nina Petrovna, his authentic incoherence at the peak of the Cuban missile crisis. To say that for us he humanized Soviet Communism stretches the point; he personalized it and "deideologized" it. Overall, his personality conveyed a tacit message of accommodation, and in the McLuhan age no one can ignore how much such messages feed directly into the political equa-

tion.

Then, Khrushchev made fundamental improvements in the quality of Soviet life, undoing the terror, beginning to satisfy consumer wants and expanding contacts with the West. Surely with good reason, Americans have traditionally felt safest dealing with just and open societies. Soviet power has seemed so threatening to us precisely because it has been at the service

of values we do not share. As Khrushchev moved Soviet society away from Stalinism, he widened the prospects of understanding with the United States.

FINALLY, in the world's supreme nuclear confrontation over the Cuban missiles in 1962, Khrushchev demonstrated that he could distinguish between the mere pride and political advantage of one nation, and the welfare of all humanity. You can say that he provoked the immediate crisis so it was up to him to back off to resolve it but it remains the case that he made a choice politically more costly and morally more ennobling than the choice which faced John Kennedy. Kennedy, after all, possessed immense strategic superiority and he was dealing from his strength in an area of minimal interest in itself to the Soviet Union.

Some Americans crowed over Khrushchev's decision to pull out the missiles but my abiding sense is that most of us recognized its immense significance and concluded from it that the world could be made safe for democracy and for socialism at the same time. This perception that our rivalry with the Kremlin is demanding but finite and manageable, that there is room for both of us, has lasted through Vietnam and Czechoslovakia and through Johnson, Nixon and Brezhnev, and surely it is the most valuable legacy Americans received from Nikita Khrushchev.