

CHAPTER ONE

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## CONTAINMENT AT HOME: COLD WAR, WARM HEARTH

I think that this attitude toward women is universal. What we want is to make easier the life of our housewives.

—VICE PRESIDENT RICHARD M. NIXON, 1959

IN 1959, the year the atomic-age newlyweds spent their honeymoon in a fallout shelter, when the baby boom and the cold war were both at their peak, Vice President Richard M. Nixon traveled to the Soviet Union to engage in what would become one of the most noted verbal sparring matches of the century. In a lengthy and often heated debate with Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev at the opening of the American National Exhibition in Moscow, Nixon extolled the virtues of the American way of life, while his opponent promoted the communist system. What was remarkable about this exchange was its focus. The two leaders did not discuss missiles, bombs, or even modes of government. Rather, they argued over the relative merits of American and Soviet washing machines, televisions, and electric ranges—in what came to be known as the “kitchen debate” (see Figure 3).

The “kitchen debate” was one of the major skirmishes in the cold war, which was at its core an ideological struggle fought on a cultural battleground. For Nixon, American superiority rested on the ideal of the suburban home, complete with modern appliances and distinct gender roles for family members. He



FIGURE 3 Vice President Richard Nixon and Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev spar verbally at the American Exhibition in Moscow in 1959. Here they engage in the “kitchen debate” as they fight the cold war over the commodity gap rather than the missile gap. (*Wide World Photo.*)

proclaimed that the “model” home, with a male breadwinner and a full-time female homemaker, adorned with a wide array of consumer goods, represented the essence of American freedom:

To us, diversity, the right to choose, . . . is the most important thing. We don’t have one decision made at the top by one government official. . . . We have many different manufacturers and many different kinds of washing machines so that the housewives have a choice. . . . Would it not be better to compete in the relative merits of washing machines than in the strength of rockets?<sup>1</sup>

Nixon’s focus on household appliances was not accidental. After all, arguments over the strength of rockets would only point out the vulnerability of the United States in the event of a nuclear war between the superpowers; debates over consumer goods would provide a reassuring vision of the good life available

in the atomic age. So Nixon insisted that American superiority in the cold war rested not on weapons, but on the secure, abundant family life of modern suburban homes. In these structures, adored and worshipped by their inhabitants, women would achieve their glory and men would display their success. Consumerism was not an end in itself; it was the means for achieving individuality, leisure, and upward mobility.

The American National Exhibition was a showcase of American consumer goods and leisure-time equipment. But the main attraction, which the two leaders toured, was the full-scale “model” six-room ranch-style house. This model home, filled with labor-saving devices and presumably available to Americans of all classes, was tangible proof, Nixon believed, of the superiority of free enterprise over communism.

In the model kitchen in the model home, Nixon and Khrushchev revealed some basic assumptions of their two systems. Nixon called attention to a built-in panel-controlled washing machine. “In America,” he said, “these [washing machines] are designed to make things easier for our women.” Khrushchev countered Nixon’s boast of comfortable American housewives with pride in productive Soviet female workers: In his country they did not have that “capitalist attitude toward women.” Nixon clearly did not understand that the communist system had no use for full-time housewives, for he replied, “I think that this attitude toward women is universal. What we want is to make easier the life of our housewives.” Nixon’s knockout punch in his verbal bout with the Soviet premier was his articulation of the American postwar domestic dream: successful breadwinners supporting attractive homemakers in affluent suburban homes.

Although the two leaders did not agree on the proper social roles for women, they clearly shared a common view that female sexuality was a central part of the good life that both systems claimed to espouse. Noting that Nixon admired the young women modeling American bathing suits and sports clothes, the Soviet leader said with a wink, “You are for the girls, too.” Later in the day, when the two leaders faltered over a toast in which Khrushchev proposed to drink to the removal of foreign bases and Nixon would drink only to the more general hope of “peace,” Khrushchev smoothed over the impending confrontation by gesturing to a nearby waitress and suggesting, “Let’s drink to the ladies.” Relieved, Nixon chimed in, “We can all drink to the ladies.”

American journalists who were present, however, viewed the appearance and situation of Soviet women as anything but feminine. An article in *U.S. News and World Report*, noted for its anticommunism and cold war militance, suggested that Soviet women, as workers and political activists, desexualized themselves. It

described Moscow as “a city of women—hard-working women who show few of the physical charms of women in the West. Most Moscow women seem unconcerned about their looks. . . . Young couples stroll together in the parks after dark, but you see many more young women [stride] along the streets purposefully, as though marching to a Communist Party meeting.”<sup>2</sup> The implied contrast was clear. American women, unlike their “purposeful” and unfeminine Russian counterparts, did not have to be “hard working,” thanks to the wonders of American household appliances. Nor did they busy themselves with the affairs of men, such as politics. Rather, they cultivated their looks and their physical charms, to become sexually attractive housewives and consumers under the American capitalist system.

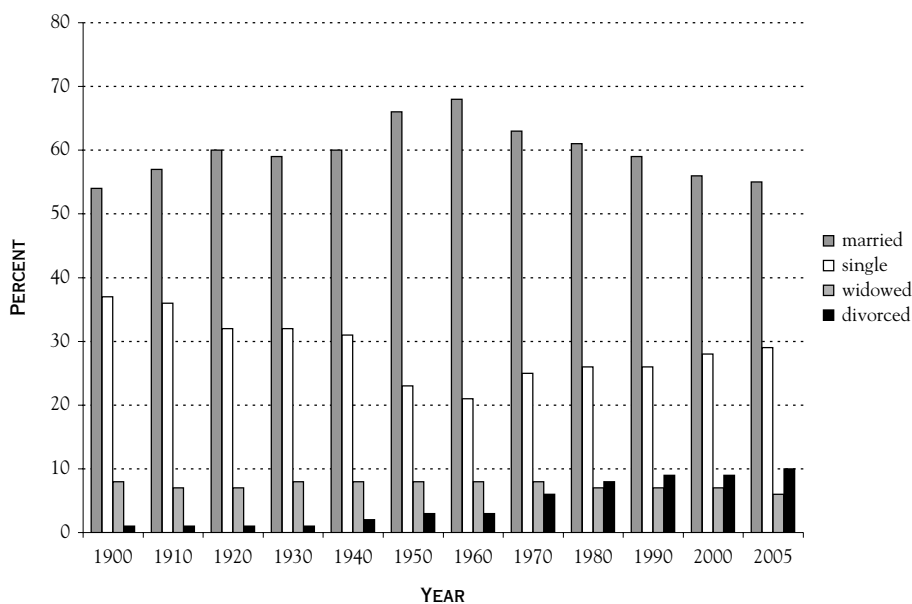
Of course, in reality, both American and Soviet women worked outside as well as inside the home; and in both countries women had primary responsibilities for housekeeping chores. But these realities did nothing to mitigate the power of gender ideologies in both countries. Assumptions about Soviet women workers versus sexually attractive American housewives were widespread. More than a decade before Nixon’s trip to Moscow, for example, Eric Johnston, president of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, wrote contemptuously of the claim that Soviet women were emancipated because they held jobs. He argued, “Russian women, like women in all undeveloped countries, have always done the . . . hardest work.” He labeled as “simply Communist propaganda” the claim that Soviet women were “emancipated from housework” and noted sarcastically that they were “permitted the glory of drudgery in industry” in the Soviet Union. Like Nixon, he pointed to the home, where breadwinners supported their housewives, as the place where American freedom was most apparent.<sup>3</sup> The implication, of course, was that self-supporting women were in some way un-American. Accordingly, anticommunist crusaders viewed women who did not conform to the domestic ideal with suspicion.

With such sentiments about gender and politics widely shared, Nixon’s visit was hailed as a major political triumph. Popular journals extolled his diplomatic skills in the face-to-face confrontation with Khrushchev. Many observers credit this trip with establishing Nixon’s political future. Clearly, Americans did not find the kitchen debate trivial. The appliance-laden ranch-style home epitomized the expansive, secure lifestyle that postwar Americans wanted. Within the protective walls of the modern home, worrisome developments like sexual liberalism, women’s emancipation, and affluence would lead not to decadence but to a wholesome family life. Sex would enhance marriage, emancipated women would professionalize homemaking, and affluence would put an end to material deprivation. Suburbia would serve as a bulwark against communism

and class conflict, for according to the widely shared belief articulated by Nixon, it offered a piece of the American dream for everyone. Although Nixon vastly exaggerated the availability of the suburban home, he described a type of domestic life that had become a reality for many white working-class and middle-class Americans—and a powerful aspiration for many others.

The momentum began to build toward this ideal long before it became widely available. Those who came of age during and after World War II were the most marrying generation on record: 96.4 percent of the women and 94.1 percent of the men (see Table 6). These aggregate statistics hide another significant fact: Americans behaved in striking conformity to each other during these years. In other words, not only did the average age at marriage drop, but almost everyone was married by his or her mid-twenties. And not only did the average family

**TABLE 6: MARITAL STATUS OF THE  
U.S. POPULATION, 1900–2005**



SOURCES U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1970*, Part 1 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1975), pp. 20–21; U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Current Population Reports*, Series PLO-514, March 1998 (Update), and earlier reports; U.S. Census Bureau, *Current Population Survey, March and Annual Social and Economic Supplements, 2005 and Earlier* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Census Bureau, September 21, 2006), Table MS-1, [www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/hh-fam.html#history](http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/hh-fam.html#history)).

size increase, but most couples had two to four children, born sooner after marriage and spaced closer together than in previous years.<sup>4</sup> At a time when the availability of contraceptive devices enabled couples to delay, space, and limit the arrival of offspring to suit their particular needs, this rising birthrate resulted from deliberate choices. Nixon could, therefore, speak with some conviction when he placed the home at the center of postwar ideals.

What gave rise to the widespread endorsement of this familial consensus in the cold war era? The depression of the 1930s and World War II laid the foundation for a commitment to a stable home life, but they also opened the way for a radical restructuring of the family. The yearning for family stability gained momentum after the war, but the potential for restructuring the family withered as the powerful ideology of domesticity was imprinted on everyday life. Ironically, traditional gender roles became a central feature of the “modern” middle-class home.

Since the 1960s, much attention has been paid to the plight of women in the 1950s. But at that time, critical observers of middle-class life considered homemakers to be emancipated and men to be oppressed. Much of the most insightful writing examined the dehumanizing situation that forced middle-class men, at least in their public roles, to be other-directed “organization men,” caught in a mass, impersonal white-collar world. The loss of autonomy was real. As large corporations grew, swallowing smaller enterprises, the number of self-employed men in small businesses shrank dramatically. David Riesman recognized that the corporate structure forced middle-class men into deadening, highly structured peer interactions; he argued that only in the intimate aspects of life could a man truly be free. Industrial laborers were even less likely to derive intrinsic satisfactions from their jobs. Thus, blue-collar and white-collar employees shared a sense of alienation and subordination in the postwar corporate workforce. At work as well as at home, class lines blurred for white men in the postwar era. Both Riesman and William Whyte saw the suburbs as extensions of the corporate world, with their emphasis on conformity. Yet they perceived that suburban homes and consumer goods offered material compensations for organized work life.<sup>5</sup>

In spite of the power of the homemaker ideal, increasing numbers of married women worked outside the home in the postwar years. But their job opportunities were limited, and their wages were low. Employed women held jobs that were even more menial and subordinate than those of their male peers. Surveys of full-time homemakers indicated that they appreciated their independence from supervision and control over their work; they had no desire to give up

their autonomy in the home for wage labor. Educated middle-class women, whose career opportunities were severely limited, hoped that the home would become not a confining place of drudgery, but a liberating arena of fulfillment through professionalized homemaking, meaningful child rearing, and satisfying sexuality.<sup>6</sup>

While the home seemed to offer the best hope for freedom, it also appeared to be a fragile institution, subject to forces beyond its control. Economic hardship had torn families asunder, and war had scattered men far from home and drawn women into the public world of work. The postwar years did little to alleviate fears that similar disruptions might occur again. In spite of widespread affluence, many believed that the reconversion to a peacetime economy would lead to another depression. Even peace was problematic, since international tensions were palpable. The explosion of the first atomic bombs over Hiroshima and Nagasaki marked not only the end of World War II but the beginning of the cold war. At any moment, the cold war could turn hot. The policy of containment abroad faced its first major challenge in 1949, with the Chinese revolution. In the same year, the USSR exploded its first atomic bomb. The nation was again jolted out of its sense of fragile security when the Korean War broke out in 1950. Many shared President Harry Truman's belief that World War III was at hand.<sup>7</sup>

Insightful analysts of the nuclear age have explored the psychic impact of the atomic bomb. Paul Boyer's study of the first five years after Hiroshima showed that American responses went through dramatic shifts. Initial reactions juxtaposed the thrill of atomic empowerment with the terror of annihilation. The atomic scientists were among the first to organize against the bomb, calling for international control of atomic energy, and others soon followed suit. By the end of the 1940s, however, opposition had given way to proclamations of faith in the bomb as the protector of American security.

Along with that faith came fear. In 1950, 61 percent of those polled thought that the United States should use the atom bomb if there was another world war, but 53 percent believed there was a good or fair chance that their community would be bombed in the next war, and nearly three-fourths assumed that American cities would be bombed. Most agreed that since Russia now had the bomb, the likelihood of another war increased. By 1956, nearly two-thirds of those polled believed that in the event of another war, the hydrogen bomb would be used against the United States.

As support grew for more and bigger bombs, arguments for international control waned, and the country prepared for the possibility of a nuclear war by instituting new civil defense strategies. Psychologists were strangely silent on

the issue of the fear of atomic weapons, and by the early fifties, the nation seemed to be apathetic. Boyer echoed Robert J. Lifton in suggesting that denial and silence may have reflected deep-seated horror rather than complacency. Indeed, in 1959, two out of three Americans listed the possibility of nuclear war as the nation's most urgent problem.<sup>8</sup>

Lifton argued that the atomic bomb forced people to question one of their most deeply held beliefs, that scientific discoveries would yield progress. Atomic energy presented a fundamental contradiction: Science had developed the potential for total technological mastery as well as for total technological devastation. Lifton attributed "nuclear numbing" to the powerful psychic hold that the fear of nuclear annihilation had on the nation's subconscious. He pointed to unrealistic but reassuring civil defense strategies as the efforts of governmental officials to tame or "domesticate" the fear.<sup>9</sup>

Americans were well poised to embrace domesticity in the midst of the terrors of the atomic age. A home filled with children would create a feeling of warmth and security against the cold forces of disruption and alienation. Children would also be a connection to the future and a means of replenishing a world depleted by war deaths. Although baby-boom parents were not likely to express conscious desires to repopulate the country, the devastation of hundreds of thousands of deaths could not have been far below the surface of the postwar consciousness. The view of childbearing as a duty was painfully true for Jewish parents, after six million of their kin were snuffed out in Europe. But they were not alone. As one Jewish woman recalled of her decision to bear four children, "After the Holocaust, we felt obligated to have lots of babies. But it was easy because everyone was doing it—non-Jews, too."<sup>10</sup>

In secure postwar homes with plenty of children, American women and men might be able to ward off their nightmares and live out their dreams. The family seemed to be the one place where people could control their destinies and perhaps even shape the future. Of course, nobody actually argued that stable family life could prevent nuclear annihilation. But the home represented a source of meaning and security in a world run amok. Marrying young and having lots of babies were ways for Americans to thumb their noses at doomsday predictions. Commenting on the trend toward young marriages, one observer noted, "Youngsters want to grasp what little security they can in a world gone frighteningly insecure. The youngsters feel they will cultivate the one security that's possible—their own gardens, their own . . . home and families."<sup>11</sup>

~~White working-class and middle-class women and men were not the only ones who hoped to embrace this vision of domesticity. Other groups of~~