

# The Loss of Early Video Recordings: The Nixon-Khrushchev Kitchen Debates

*By Jim Lindner*

From the invention of the first practical videotape recorder by Ampex Corporation in 1956<sup>1</sup> until approximately 1979, virtually all broadcast television was recorded on a format known as Quadplex or Quad. Of the tens of thousands of recordings that were made during that period of time, very few remain, some historical recordings like the famous Nixon-Khrushchev Kitchen Debate videotape recorded on July 25, 1959.<sup>2</sup>

Although one could generally categorize the loss of Quad recordings as "system obsolescence" the real reasons for the loss of so much information over such a long period of time lie much deeper. From a 1998 perspective, the total loss of hundreds of millions of dollars worth of "visual assets" seemed inconceivable. From a business perspective alone, how could such a huge inventory of product, that could be marketed for many years and create a significant cash flow be permanently lost? Indeed, how could so much culturally and historically important material be gone? Even from a microscopic perspective, one must wonder how a single major historical and media event (both in its own time and from the historical perspective)<sup>3</sup> such as the Nixon-Khrushchev Kitchen debate has come to exist only in a few very damaged pieces.

There are many reasons for the loss of the vast majority of television broadcasts originally recorded on Quad. While some of the reasons are particular to an early implementation of a technology destined to become ubiquitous, most of the reasons relate to the economics of a new technology and its operation in a business environment. As such, many of the reasons for the loss are as valid today as they were in the dawn of television video recording from the 1950s to the 1970s.

Operational economics is one of the key reasons for the loss of the programs recorded on Quad videotape. Videotape recorders were expensive, costing over \$75,000 when they were introduced in 1956.<sup>4</sup> In order to justify the high cost, a major selling point initially made was that the tape could easily be erased and reused. Since the same could not be said for film, videotape represented significant cost savings. Also, videotape allowed television networks to "shift time" by replaying news and other shows at later times in other time zones, when there would be larger audiences.<sup>5</sup> This largely eliminated the huge cost and processing time required by film to accomplish the same task. One early tenet in videotape operations then, was to re-use the product, which meant the program content was cannibalized for all time. If these same programs had been recorded on film, this could not have technically occurred.

In one case, a "Video Tape Use Record"<sup>6</sup> clearly shows that 13 programs were recorded over, with only the final recording surviving. This translates to a loss of 7.5 hours of programming on one tape alone. In effect, the immediate economic argument was more persuasive than was a strategy for retention. From a management standpoint, the blame clearly lies in an inability to recognize program content as a future economic and cultural asset to be weighed against the cost of physical media. In hindsight, the idea that this programming content could be an important economic and cultural asset had not occurred to management. Indeed, when one's business is to produce 24 hours of programming a day, the huge task at hand is to create a vast quantity of new material; what happened yesterday or even ten minutes ago is no longer relevant, so why save it? The obvious economic impact of the new technology obscured the need for an appraisal policy to protect the asset value of the content. In effect, the carrier was perceived to be more valuable than the information recorded on it.

While the economics associated with early videotape recordings contributed to their loss, the rapid progress in technology, as well as the size and maintenance cost of the earlier technology, led to a rapid scrapping of any of the remaining recordings and the equipment used to play them. Quad machines are large by any standards. Even later model machines were four or more feet long, two-and-a-half feet wide, five feet tall, and weighed more than 1000 pounds<sup>7</sup>. These same machines required constant and expensive maintenance by skilled and highly paid personnel; they were very difficult to transport, and often unreliable. While many other formats had been introduced in the years following the invention of the Quad, they did not have the image quality required by the broadcasters. When a new broadcast-quality videotape technology that was smaller, cheaper, easier to maintain, and that required less skilled personnel appeared on the scene in 1977,<sup>8</sup> the broadcasters ran to it. The new format, called 1-inch Type C, used videotape that was a fraction of the size and weight of the huge 2-inch reels of tape used in Quad machines. The reduction of shipping costs alone from the 25-pound reels of Quad tape to the 5-pound reels of 1-inch was economically significant, as was the dramatic reduction in the need for storage space. A format that has lasted for 20 years became obsolete virtually overnight, with the equipment going to the junkyard and the tapes being either discarded for lack of playback equipment, or stored in the least expensive and often the worst possible environmental conditions. In the hurry to get rid of these huge old tapes, many that had survived were then lost or misplaced when put into questionable storage conditions.

The videotape that became known as The Nixon-Khrushchev Kitchen Debate was made at the color television technology display at the American Nation Exposition in Moscow. The 16 minute-10 second videotape interchange between Premier Nikita Khrushchev and Vice President Richard Nixon technically did not occur at the model American Home Kitchen. Several incidents that occurred over several days became known as the Kitchen Debate, even though they occurred virtually from the time Nixon arrived at the airport until he left.<sup>9</sup> The videotape of

the interchange made by an Ampex videotape recorder with RCA cameras was flown back to the U.S. by "Mr. Gundy, whose concern manufactures videotape equipment."<sup>10</sup> As noted in the New York Times "the videotape as it appeared on the networks was clear and certainly preserved the immediacy that is associated with live television. On each network telecast, Mr. Khrushchev's voice was heard and then lowered in volume as the English translation of each remark was read by announcers in the studios."<sup>11</sup> No one knows whatever happened to that original tape. A tape that would appear to be an original exists at the Library of Congress, given by Ampex to register copyright. Typically, however, companies send copies, not originals for that purpose. The Library of Congress version of the tape starts off with a model in front of the camera, which would tend to indicate that the images were test images made before Richard Nixon and Nikita Khrushchev arrived. This same recording, however, has very poor sound quality and it is virtually impossible to hear Nikita Khrushchev's voice at all, much less a change in volume. Another recording is held by a broadcaster in a corporate collection. This recording has excellent sound; however it is labeled as a "dub"<sup>12</sup>(copy) and the video is quite poor, which would be typical of a copy, considering that this is one of the first color recordings using the RCA electronic color system. This "dub" recording has several elements that differ from the tape at the Library of Congress. At the beginning of the tape, there is no model. Further, a test pattern that says RCA (who supplied the cameras) is clearly on the tape. Following the test pattern are introductions by Frank McGee, and two closings, also by Frank McGee, which are in black and white. Documentation with the tape clearly indicates that this tape was not edited, and yet Frank McGee appears (in black and white), the model does not appear, the discussion between Nixon and Nikita Khrushchev is in color, and the sound is excellent. How could Frank McGee, who was in New York, appear on a tape that was not edited? A unique restoration effort completed by the author in 1995 incorporated elements held by the Library of Congress, the UCLA Film and Television Archive, and a broadcasting company. Despite these efforts, no one knows if this restoration accurately represents what the original tape looked like, because neither the documentation nor the original is known to exist.

Although we will never know whatever happened to the original tape, the New York Times may have provided a clue. Part of the furor surrounding the tape was due to the demand that it be shown in the United States at the same time as the Soviet Union. According to Mr.Gundy, that could not be done because of "the need to adapt it to the different technical standards of Soviet television and the delay in the work of translation."<sup>13</sup>

This meant that the tape had to be transferred to the Soviet Television Standard (SECAM) by Ampex, which could have only been done at the company's headquarters in Redwood City, California. If this was the case, none of the copies held are accurate representations of the master recording, which by necessity would have been the one used to make the copy for the Soviet Union.

This would mean that the only known extant copies are edited, and we may never know what exactly the original recording did look like.

In the specific case of the Nixon-Khrushchev Kitchen Debate videotape, the record of a significant world event has been distorted and permanently lost by the obsolescence of the system used to record it, the instability of the media used to record it (which has severe shedding, causing image distortions and "dropouts"), the lack of proper documentation and labeling and the lack of a management and preservation strategy that included proper environmental conditions on the media. As a result, scholars and historians will never have an exact record of an historic interchange between two leaders in the Cold War and one of the first color television recordings ever made. In the larger case, thousands of hours of broadcasts that document world events and cultural history that were recorded in the 1960s and 1970s have been lost forever due to a series of poor or non-existent preservation strategies and failure of the media that was never designed to last forever.

#### End Notes

(1) Schneider, Arthur. *Electronic Post-Production and Videotape Editing*. Stoneham, Massachusetts: Butterworth Publishers, 1989, p.3.

(2) "US Television Network Tapes Moscow Debate," (1959, July 25). *The New York Times*, pg.3.

(3) *Announcing The Death of Richard Milhous Nixon By The President Of The United States of America, A Proclamation To The People Of The United States*, (1994, April 23), The White House: Office of the Press Secretary.

(4) Sterling, C.H. & Kittross, J.M., *Stay Tuned: A Concise History of American Broadcasting*. Belmont CA, Wadsworth, 1978, p.321

(5) Marlow, E. & Secunda, E. *Shifting Time and Space: The Story of Videotape*. New York, NY: Praeger, 1991, p.33.

(6) Private Collection

(7) Actual measurements, RCA Model TR-70B. Private Collection

(8) Schneider, Arthur. *Electronic Post-Production and Videotape Editing*. Stoneham, Massachusetts: Butterworth Publishers, 1989. p.11.

(9) Many articles (1959, July 24-27) *The New York Times*.

(10) *Khrushchev-Nixon Debate Aired On TV Here Over Soviet Protest*, (1959, July 26), *The New York Times*, p.2.

(11) Presentation Is Clear (1959, July 26), The New York Times, p.2.

(12) Attached Document, Private Collection.

(13) Khrushchev-Nixon Debate Aired On TV Here Over Soviet Protest,  
(1959, July 26), The New York Times, p.2.