

**History Teacher's Review of Peter Carlson's *K Blows Top: A Cold War Comedic Interlude, Starring Nikita Khrushchev, America's Most Unlikely Tourist***

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Teaching American History: A More Perfect Union  
Seminar Year 3

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Book Review

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September 14, 2011

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As a teacher in 2011, facing budget cuts, increasing class sizes, the prospect of evaluations being tied to test scores and state gov't removing collective bargaining rights it is easy to get overwhelmed, disgruntled and terrified to make even the smallest deviation from the text and the test. In such a hostile climate it takes courage to add a book like Peter Carlson's *K Blows Top* to the curriculum. Such a courageous teacher would have to justify the time and money it would involve. "How can you spend 2 weeks on a topic that is barely mentioned in the history text books? (See attachment.) Where are you going to find the funds to buy the books? This book isn't written by a historian." With a little bit of creative thinking I think using this book could cost the school district nothing and provide an incredible canvas of anecdotal material to add color to the black and white of the Cold War.

The full title of the book is *K Blows Top: A Cold War Comic Interlude, Starring Nikita Khrushchev, America's Most Unlikely Tourist*. Carlson's book is focused around the Soviet Premier's 13 day visit to the United States in September 1959. As a career journalist he explains how he became interested (obsessed) with the topic in the Prologue, and in the First Section sets the stage with Nixon's trip to the USSR a few months prior.

The book isn't organized by Chapter but by "trips": Nixon's trip in the summer of '59, Khrushchev's trip to the US in the fall of '59 and his subsequent return to the UN in NYC in 1960. Each section is divided up, not by chapters but by "headlines". Carlson was initially enthralled by the media coverage of Khrushchev's 13 day trip as he perused the *Time* archives during a stint at *People* in 1986 (the title of the book being inspired by the New York Post Headline: DENIED TOUR OF DISNEYLAND, K BLOWS TOP). (Carlson, 2009, p. xi) In addition to giving us a picture the Premier, Carlson skillfully uses the people that Khrushchev meets along his journey to give us a snapshot of the entire decade (50s).

The story itself is incredible--a "holy shit story" as described by Carlson. (p. 47) In modern parlance for today's Harry Potter generation, you might imagine a roly poly Voldemort with a sense of humor and a bad temper touring around the US. Just as Eisenhower couldn't quite control what Khrushchev would take away from his extremely well planned excursions we may not be able to predict what will particularly strike our students but it is certain that something will. Carlson describes three example of this. Eisenhower was very interested in showing off the DC Metro area to Khrushchev via helicopter. Khrushchev was reluctant until he realized that the President would be accompanying him. He was paranoid that there might be an untimely accident. Khrushchev didn't much care for the scenery but he was determined to get himself a helicopter. (p. 81) Later in his trip he visited IBM where President Thomas J. Watson Jr. demonstrated their RAMAC computer. Khrushchev however, was much more impressed with the self-serve cafeteria and again was determined to get one in Moscow. (p. 194)

Khrushchev himself made sure that he got a chance to visit DC's Union Station. What did he want to see? Coin operated lockers.

As teachers we are accustomed to students not always doing what is expected of them. Not only could Eisenhower not control Khrushchev's impressions but he seemed to have even less control over the Americans with whom he visited. A fact that certainly caused him some grief in managing Khrushchev's temper in order to make some diplomatic headway, but absolutely baffled Khrushchev himself. Coming from such a totalitarian state he couldn't comprehend such blasphemy and initially assumed that such negative outbursts were staged. Examples of such insubordination described in the book were the cold welcome and hostile speech of Mayor Norris Paulson of Los Angeles and the American Dentist Association's refusal to relinquish the Waldorf Astoria for Khrushchev's luncheon.(p.148 & 169, 110)

Many themes can be addressed through this book: Papa Razzi, Pop culture, diplomacy, McCarthyism, Cold War, even industrialization and genetic modification of foods. In addition to coin operated lockers, Khrushchev requested to visit his friend Roswell Garst's farm in Coon Rapids, Iowa. Garst was a pioneer in industrialization of corn production and subsequently flipped out when the media mob trampled his crops. (pp. 211-219) In order to give a peak into 50's pop culture Carlson informs us that before his visit most of Khrushchev's info about American culture came from a couple of books set in 1906 and 1935. On page 59 he describes some of the changes since 1935. He also quotes from Bob Considine's article "What Mr. K Won't See." (p. 64) He describes in detail Khrushchev's visit to Hollywood (pp. 149-164) and tells the story of Dorothy

Killgallen as a result of her article about Mrs. Khrushchev's terrible sense of style. (p. 102) Growing up in the 80's I feel like I have a personal connection to Cold War yet I grew up as the Cold War was winding down. I was actually amazed at how unfamiliar these people and stories were. As I read I would ask my mom, who was 17 in 1959 if she remembered these people and events. Predictably she mostly remembered the banging of the shoe incident from Khrushchev's UN delegation in 1960. However, she definitely remembered Khrushchev as being an incredible character.

Carlson shows that the politics of the time were as volatile as Khrushchev's temper. Carlson discusses how both Khrushchev and the US tried to use the rules of diplomacy to their advantage and how certain statesmen were gifted politicians and yet may not have been adept at the art of diplomacy. He describes Eisenhower and Cabot Lodge as skilled diplomats but Khrushchev and Nixon as similarly inept. It is clear that Khrushchev developed a great regard for Eisenhower and absolute disdain for Nixon. Why isn't this trip in the text books? With the benefit of hindsight it is obviously because of the U2 spy plane incident and the resulting breakdown of Paris summit a few short months after he left. Was all of the goodwill so hard fought for by Eisenhower and "tour guide" Henry Cabot Lodge Jr. all for naught? It is clear from Carlson's book that Khrushchev's 13 day visit to the US not only made an indelible impression on those who witnessed it as my mom did, but I believe it had a profound effect on the decisions that he made after. We're just not exactly sure how. Did it enable him to back down during the Cuban Missile Crisis? Conversely, had he not come and developed such a regard for Eisenhower would he have been so terribly offended by the U2 incident? It seems we will never know the answer to these questions but our students can certainly

benefit, be entertained and get a clearer picture of what 50's America was like. Our students are children of the War on Terror. They don't know what it was like to be able to negotiate with the enemy. To have the leader of the opposition have the power to destroy but clearly not the desire to do so because he has an obligation to *his* country to protect *them*. While the fear of nuclear annihilation may have been a constant during the Cold War our students face a less rational and more random constant threat.

How can we use this in our classrooms? I think this book would be a great book for summer reading, highly suitable for honors level students, and an easy read for advanced level students. It would work for the summer before US History or Post World War II. At Quincy High that would be the summers before junior or senior years. I've also included a vocabulary list from the book at the end of this paper. Teacher or student centered research/powerpoints could be assigned/created to add some faces and background research to the iconic 20<sup>th</sup> century figures described in the book. Finally, HBO has bought the rights to the book and is in the early production phase of a miniseries. It is being produced by Tom Hanks and Paul Giamatti will be playing Khrushchev.

## Works Cited

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## **K Blows Top Vocabulary**

feted

miscegenation

sagacious

sartorial dissent

obfuscation

medacity

raffishly

vociferously

comity

bucolic

loutish

punditry

prognostication

credulity

ubiquitous

zaftig

intransigence

panjandrums

potentates

nonsequitor

excoriated

mealymouthed

pedant

nostrum

Khrushchev's visit as cover by High School Text Books:

*American Anthem:* no mention

*American Voices:*

To try to improve relations, Eisenhower invited Khrushchev to visit the United States in late 1959. The visit went well, and the two leaders agreed to hold a summit in Paris in 1960. (p. 718)

*American Vision:*

The president met with Khrushchev in the United States in 1959. The two leaders agreed to hold a summit in Paris in May 1960 designed to resolve the situation in Berlin and make progress towards nuclear arms limitation. (p. 802)