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Author(s): Paul S. Boyer

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By Paul S. Boyer

LOOKING BACK: “Dr. Strangelove” at 40: The Continuing Relevance Of a Cold War Cultural Icon



We stand at a strange and disorienting moment in our 60-year encounter with nuclear weapons, with all of its strategic, political, cultural, and moral dimensions. The dust from the Cold War had barely settled when Americans were newly shaken by other alarming nuclear prospects, most especially the post-9/11 fear that terrorists may get their hands on the ultimate weapon.

Still, as fewer Americans remember the atomic bombs falling on Hiroshima and Nagasaki and as the stark fears of the Cold War era diminish, nostalgia for the Atomic Age is on the upswing. “Atomic ‘Bomb’ Rings,” originally offered to kids in 1947 for \$0.15 and a Kix Cereal box top, now fetch \$50 or \$60 on eBay. The December issue of *Preservation* magazine features an intrepid Kansas couple who have converted a decommissioned Atlas missile silo into an underground residence, thereby combining “brilliant adaptive use with survivalist chic.” Another such silo-to-homestead conversion in New York’s Saranac Lake region is priced at \$2.1 million. Tapping into an emerging vogue for atomic tourism, a travel agency advertises a week of scuba diving off Bikini Atoll to explore the ships sunk in the 1946 atomic

tests. The Web site Conelrad.com offers an array of atomic-age songs, films, and declassified documents.

Amid the nostalgia, however, nuclear dangers and conundrums, from proliferation and terrorism to radioactive-waste disposal, show no sign of diminishing. The issues have evolved, of course, and nuclear bombs and warheads are now often rhetorically subsumed into the broader weapons of mass destruction category, but if the dangers have mutated, they have hardly disappeared. Indeed, in some ways we have more reason for worry today. Although Americans were ultimately unsure if the Soviet leaders would actually be willing to “drop the bomb” during the Cold War, after September 11 few doubt that terrorists such as al Qaeda would carry out a nuclear attack if they obtained the

necessary technology. Additionally, the Soviet Union, hostile though it was, at least had a stable government and command structure, in contrast to the volatile and unpredictable regimes that currently worry us, such as Iran and North Korea.

So, we experience conflicted emotions, torn between the temptation to relegate the bomb to the past and the recognition that a host of nuclear-related issues, no less dangerous than those of earlier times, still confront us. It is as though one had toured Gettysburg battlefield in July 1863 and browsed gift-shop souvenirs while the fighting still raged.

One’s reaction to the 40th anniversary of Stanley Kubrick’s black comedy “Dr. Strangelove,” that most celebrated of Atomic Age cultural products, mirrors the mixed emotions described above. On one hand, the film evokes an increasingly remote historical moment. On the other, the larger issues it raises remain distressingly contemporary.

The movie’s origins lie in the late 1950s and early 1960s. The superpowers’ nuclear arms race was in full swing; Pentagon generals and think-tank strategists were formulating ever more rococo variations on deterrence theory; and ordinary citizens were terrified by civil defense alerts, deadly fallout from nuclear tests, and the possibility of global thermonuclear war. Stanley

Paul S. Boyer is a professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and author of *By the Bomb’s Early Light: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age* (Knopf Publishing Group, 1985) and *Fallout: A Historian Reflects on America’s Half-Century Encounter With Nuclear Weapons* (Ohio State University Press, 1998).

Kramer's 1959 film *"On the Beach,"* Walter Miller's 1959 novel *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, Tom Lehrer's nuclear-themed satirical songs such as "We will All Go Together When We Go" (1958), and a torrent of science-fiction mutant movies such as *"The Incredible Shrinking Man"* (1957) were products of this same era.

The 1961 Berlin crisis and the 1962 Cuban missile crisis, when the world trembled on the brink of nuclear war, provided the film's immediate background. (We now know that the risk of all-out nuclear war during the Cuban missile crisis was even greater than U.S. officials realized at the time. At a 1992 conference in Havana with Russian, U.S., and Cuban leaders active in 1962, a Soviet general revealed that Moscow had already deployed 162 tactical and strategic nuclear warheads in Cuba before President John F. Kennedy imposed a quarantine and that the top Russian general in Cuba, Issa Pliyev, had been given the authority to use tactical nuclear weapons in the event of a U.S. attack. (See *ACT*, November 2002.)

In this pervid atmosphere, Kubrick immersed himself in the arcane literature of nuclear strategy. With *"Lolita,"* *"Spartacus,"* and the anti-war classic *"Paths of Glory"* (1957) already behind him—and *"2001: A Space Odyssey"* still to come—Kubrick conceived *"Dr. Strangelove."* He originally planned a straight dramatic treatment of *Two Hours to Doom* (1958) by Peter Bryant, the pseudonym of Peter George, a Welsh-born former Royal Air Force lieutenant active in the United Kingdom's Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. (The U.S. edition of the book was called *Red Alert*.) In George's novel, a deranged U.S. Air Force general in Texas orders a wing of Strategic Air Command (SAC) B-52 bombers to attack Russian targets with H-bombs, unaware that Russia possesses a pre-programmed system of massive retaliation, a "doomsday machine." By sheer luck, all the planes are shot down before reaching their targets, narrowly averting atomic holocaust.

In a brilliant move, however, Kubrick, in collaboration with writer Terry Southern, decided to treat the topic as black comedy and to change the ending. In *Two Hours to Doom*, humankind is spared and the shaken U.S. president vows to pursue the search for peace. Kubrick, by contrast, grimly followed the ultimate logic of the situation to its horrifying conclusion. Another 1964 film, *"Fail-Safe,"* based on a best-selling

1962 novel by Harvey Wheeler and Eugene Burdick, became the "serious" nuclear war film originally planned by Kubrick. Although directed by Sidney Lumet and starring Henry Fonda, *"Fail-Safe"* did not capture the public imagination. Instead, it was Kubrick's zany version of Armageddon that became a classic.

As with *"Casablanca,"* *"The Wizard of Oz,"* and other cinema classics, the plot, characters, and even specific dialogue have entered the pop-culture pantheon: the demented General Jack D. Ripper (Sterling Hayden), commander of a SAC unit at Burpleson Air Force Base, obsessing about his "precious bodily fluids"; the gung-ho Pentagon general, Buck Turgidson (George C. Scott), optimistically describing the outcome of a nuclear exchange with the Soviets: "Mr. President, I'm not saying we

wouldn't get our hair mussed, but I do say no more than 10 to 20 million killed, tops;" and the three characters brilliantly played by Peter Sellers: Group Captain Lionel Mandrake, the well-bred British air attaché who gradually realizes that General Ripper is totally bonkers; the mild-mannered President Merkin Muffley ("Gentlemen, you can't fight in here. This is the War Room"); and the eponymous Dr. Strangelove, the wheelchair-bound ex-Nazi, now a top nuclear strategist.

As in a fun-house mirror, *"Dr. Strangelove"* offers a caricatured but recognizable introduction to the strategic thinking of the day. The plot revolves around a central dilemma of deterrence theory: how can one nuclear power convince another that an attack would inevitably trigger a devastating counterattack? In addressing this dilemma,

**"Mr. President, I'm not saying we wouldn't get our hair mussed. But I do say... no more than 10 to 20 million killed, tops."
—General Buck Turgidson in
*Dr. Strangelove***



Dr. Strangelove (played by Peter Sellers) is an enduring and all-too-real symbol of influential Cold War and post-Cold War nuclear weapons strategists.

Columbia TriStar Home Entertainment

war-gaming strategists had devised various scenarios. In one, lower-ranked officers could launch the counterattack even if the central command structure were destroyed. In another, a doomsday machine would trigger an overwhelming computerized missile retaliation at the touch of a switch. In "Dr. Strangelove," the United States has adopted the first strategy, the Soviet Union the second. The delusional General Ripper

U.S. nuclear strategy, insists that, under a SAC command protocol called Chrome Dome, in place from 1961 to 1968, the "Dr. Strangelove" scenario was, in fact, possible.

In this and in other respects, "Dr. Strangelove" obviously addressed the nuclear realities of the early 1960s. The issue of deterrence in its classic form, which involved two superpowers carefully calibrating a delicate "balance of terror,"

arsenal, restricts international inspection of that arsenal, and researches new nuclear weapons systems, it desperately seeks to prevent further nuclear proliferation, works to deny terrorists' access to nuclear materials, and insists that other nations open their nuclear programs to inspection, heedless of the example that the United States itself is setting.

Extra-governmental think tanks remain

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orders a nuclear attack on Russia by the SAC planes under his command; one plane gets through and drops its bomb despite desperate countermeasures by U.S. and Soviet officials, triggering the doomsday machine, which unleashes a world-destroying holocaust as the film ends.

While exposing the dangers and dilemmas of deterrence theory, Kubrick also satirized contemporary military figures and strategists, probably including Henry Kissinger, the author of *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy* (1957); physicist Edward Teller, the "father" of the H-bomb; the ex-Nazi space scientist Wernher Von Braun; and the bombastic, cigar-chomping SAC commander Curtis LeMay, who in 1957 had told a government commission assessing U.S. nuclear policy that, if a Soviet attack ever seemed likely, he planned to "knock the shit out of them before they got off the ground." Reminded that U.S. policy rejected preemptive war, LeMay had retorted, "No, it's not national policy, but it's my policy." Much of the strategic thinking that Kubrick critiques, and even some of the dialogue in "Dr. Strangelove," came from the work of Herman Kahn of the RAND Corp., an Air Force-funded California think tank. Kubrick read Kahn's work carefully, especially his influential *On Thermonuclear War* (1960). General Turgidson's upbeat assessment of the outcome of an all-out nuclear exchange directly paraphrases Kahn's analysis.

Was a nuclear attack order by a regional commander actually possible in 1964, as it apparently was in Cuba in 1962? The Air Force insisted that it was not, and Kubrick dutifully included such a disclaimer in the film. Fred Kaplan, however, author of *The Wizards of Armageddon* (1983), a history of

no longer preoccupies us. Nevertheless, in broad contours the film remains timely today. Even with post-Cold War cuts, the Bush administration projects a U.S. nuclear arsenal of some 6,000 warheads in 2012, a total that would have horrified the Manhattan Project scientists of 1945. Further, the administration is actively researching new earth-penetrating nuclear weapons intended not as deterrents against nuclear attack, but for actual tactical use in combat, the strategy proposed by Henry Kissinger in *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy* in 1957. Moreover, although Washington maintains a massive nuclear

influential in policy formation, just as RAND loomed large in Kubrick's day. Armchair strategists embedded in a network of foundations and institutes, often with ideological agendas, defense industry ties, and a revolving-door relationship with the Pentagon, continue to play a shadowy but important role in setting the nation's nuclear policies.

In short, nuclear dangers still stalk our world, just as they did Kubrick's world 40 years ago. So long as they do, "Dr. Strangelove," sadly, will remain not only a fascinating Cold War cultural artifact but also a cautionary warning for the present. **ACT**



**"Well boys, I reckon this is it: nuclear combat, toe-to-toe with the Russkies."
—Slim Pickens as Major T.J. "King" Kong**

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