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# **DR. STRANGELOVE (1964): NIGHTMARE COMEDY AND THE IDEOLOGY OF LIBERAL CONSENSUS**

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*DR. STRANGELOVE OR: HOW I LEARNED TO STOP WORRYING AND LOVE THE BOMB* (Stanley Kubrick, 1964) is one of the most fascinating and important American films of the 1960s. As a sensitive artistic response to its age, the film presents a moral protest of revulsion against the dominant cultural paradigm in America—what Geoffrey Hodgson has termed the Ideology of Liberal Consensus.<sup>1</sup> Appearing at roughly the same time as other works critical of the dominant paradigm—*Catch 22* is a good literary example of the stance—*Dr. Strangelove* presented an adversary view of society which was to become much more widely shared among some Americans in the late 1960s. This essay will examine the Ideology of Liberal Consensus, demonstrate how *Dr. Strangelove* serves as a response to it (especially to its approach to nuclear strategy and weapons), and look at how American culture responded to its radical reassessment of the American nuclear policy in the early 1960s.

The American consensus to which *Dr. Strangelove* responds was rooted in the late 1930s and in the war years. When Americans in the late 1930s began to feel more threatened by the rise of foreign totalitarianism than by the economic insecurities fostered by the stock market crash, a previously fragmented American culture began to unify. A common sys-

<sup>1</sup> *America in Our Time* (New York: Doubleday, 1976), 67. Besides Hodgson's book, the following have aided my understanding of the American consensus, its roots in the late 1930s, and American Cold War nuclear policies: Richard Pells, *Radical Visions and American Dreams* (New York: Harper, 1973); Robert Skotheim, *Totalitarianism and American Social Thought* (New York: Holt Rinehart, 1971); Lawrence S. Wittner, *Cold War America* (New York: Praeger, 1974); and Norman Moss, *Men Who Play God: The Story of the H-Bomb and How the World Came to Live With It* (New York: Harper, 1968).

tem of belief began to form, a paradigm solidified during World War II, when American effort was directed toward defeating the Axis powers. Fueled by the success of the war effort and the economic prosperity fostered by the war, this paradigm continued to dominate American social and political life through the early 1960s.

The 1950s are commonly remembered as an age of conformity typified by the man in the gray flannel suit, the move to suburbia, and the blandness of the Eisenhower administration. There were, of course, currents running counter to the American consensus in the 1950s—C. Wright Mills challenging the power elite and the era's "crackpot realism"; James Dean smouldering with sensitive, quiet rebellion; the Beats rejecting the propriety and complacency of the era—yet most people remained happy with America and its possibilities. Much more than a passing mood or a vague reaction to events, this paradigm—the Ideology of Liberal Consensus—took on an intellectual coherence of its own. According to Geoffrey Hodgson, the ideology contained two cornerstone assumptions: that the structure of American society was basically sound, and that Communism was a clear danger to the survival of the United States and its allies. From these two beliefs evolved a widely accepted view of America. That view argued its position in roughly this fashion: the American economic system has developed, softening the inequities and brutalities of an earlier capitalism, becoming more democratic, and offering abundance to a wider portion of the population than ever before. The key to both democracy and abundance is production and technological advance; economic growth provides the opportunity to meet social needs, to defuse class conflict, and to bring blue-collar workers into the middle class. Social problems are thus less explosive and can be solved rationally. It is necessary only to locate each problem, design a program to attack it, and provide the experts and technological know-how necessary to solve the problem.

The only threat to this domestic harmony, the argument continued, is the specter of Communism. The "Free World," led by the United States, must brace itself for a long struggle against Communism and willingly support a strong defense system, for power is the only language that the Communists can understand. If America accepts this responsibility to fight Communism, while also proclaiming the virtues of American economic, social, and political democracy to the rest of the world, the country will remain strong and sound. Hodgson sums up the paradigm well when he writes: "Confident to the verge of complacency about the perfectability of American society, anxious to the point of paranoia about the threat of Communism—those were the two faces of the consensus mood."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Hodgson, 75–76.

These two assumptions guided our national leadership as it attempted to forge social policy in an era of nuclear weapons. After the Soviet Union announced in the fall of 1949 that it had successfully exploded an atomic bomb, President Truman on January 31, 1950 ordered the Atomic Energy Commission to go ahead with the development of a hydrogen bomb. By late 1952 the United States had detonated its first hydrogen bomb, 700 times more powerful than the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima. Less than a year later, on August 8, 1953, the Soviets announced that they, too, had a hydrogen bomb. The arms race was on.

About the time that Sputnik was successfully launched in 1957—leading to national fears about the quality of American science and education—some American intellectuals began to refine a new area of inquiry: nuclear strategy. Recognizing that nuclear weapons were a reality, the nuclear strategists felt it important to think systematically about their role in our defense policy. Henry Kissinger's *Nuclear War and Foreign Policy* (1957), one of the first such books, argued that the use of tactical nuclear weapons must be considered by decision makers. More widely known was the work of Herman Kahn, whose *On Thermonuclear War* (1960) and *Thinking About the Unthinkable* (1962) presented his speculations on nuclear war and strategy, most of which stemmed from his work for the RAND Corporation during the 1950s. Kahn was willing to indulge in any speculation about nuclear war, including such topics as the estimated genetic consequences of worldwide doses of radioactive fallout, the desirable characteristics of a deterrent (it should be frightening, inexorable, persuasive, cheap, non-accident prone, and controllable), and the large likelihood of vomiting in postwar fallout shelters.<sup>3</sup>

Though the professed intent of the nuclear strategists was to encourage a rational approach to foreign policy in a nuclear age, the mass media seemed intent on making the public believe that thermonuclear war might be acceptable, even tolerable. A few examples illustrate that some mass magazines believed that nuclear war would not really be that bad. *U.S. News and World Report* carried a cover article, "If Bombs Do Fall," which told readers that plans were underway to allow people to write checks on their bank accounts even if the bank were destroyed by nuclear attack. The same issue contained a side story about how well survivors of the Japanese bombings were doing. *Life* magazine placed a man in a reddish fallout costume on its cover along with the headline, "How You Can Survive Fallout. 97 out of 100 Can Be Saved." Besides advising that the best cure for radiation sickness "is to take hot tea or a solution of baking soda," *Life* ran an advertisement for a fully-stocked, prefabricated fallout shelter for only \$700. The accompanying picture showed a happy

<sup>3</sup> *On Thermonuclear War*, 2nd ed. (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1961), 45–54, 86, 148.

family of five living comfortably in their shelter. I. F. Stone suggested in response to this kind of writing that the media seemed determined to convince the American public that thermonuclear warfare was “almost as safe as ivory soap is pure.” While all this was going on, a RAND corporation study released in August 1961 estimated that a 3000 megaton attack on American cities would kill 80 percent of the population.<sup>4</sup>

This paradoxical, bizarre treatment of the nuclear threat can be explained in part as an attempt by journalists to relieve anxiety during a time when the Cold War was intensifying. A number of events from 1960 to 1963 encouraged this freeze in the Cold War. Gary Powers, piloting a U-2 surveillance plane, was shot down over the Soviet Union in May 1960. In 1961, the Bay of Pigs fiasco occurred in May, President Kennedy announced a national fallout shelter campaign on television in July, and in August, the Berlin Wall was erected and the Soviet Union announced that they were resuming atmospheric testing of nuclear weapons. Worst of all, the Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962 carried the world to the brink of nuclear war, thrusting the dangers of nuclear confrontation to the forefront of the public imagination. Though the crisis seemed to be resolved in favor of the United States, for several days nuclear war seemed imminent.

One result of this intensification was to erode the confidence of some Americans in the wisdom of American nuclear policy. Though there had been a small tradition of dissent regarding American nuclear policy in the 1950s—led by people like J. Robert Oppenheimer, Linus Pauling, Bertrand Russell, and C. Wright Mills, and groups like SANE (the National Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy)—these people were clearly a minority, prophets crying in the wilderness. But Edmund Wilson’s warning in 1963 that our spending on nuclear weapons may be one of mankind’s final acts, and H. Stuart Hughes’ impassioned challenge to deterrence strategy and his support of disarmament in the same year, were both symptomatic of a growing dissatisfaction of some Americans with the federal government’s nuclear policy.<sup>5</sup> Judged from another perspective, outside the assumptions of the Ideology of Liberal Consensus, the threat posed by the Soviet Union did not at all warrant the use of nuclear weapons. In the same vein, the realities of America itself—as the defenders of the Civil Rights movement were pointing out—did not live up to the rhetoric about the harmonious American democracy so prevalent in

<sup>4</sup> See *U.S. News and World Report*, 5 (Sept. 25, 1961), 51–55; *Life*, 51 (Sept. 15, 1961), 95–108; I. F. Stone, *The Haunted Fifties* (New York: Vintage, 1969), 314–17.

<sup>5</sup> See Wilson’s *The Cold War and the Income Tax* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, 1963), and H. Stuart Hughes, *An Approach to Peace* (New York: Atheneum, 1962), especially “The Strategy of Deterrence,” 52–67.

the 1950s. By 1962 and 1963, when *Dr. Strangelove* was being planned and produced, the Ideology of Liberal Consensus seemed increasingly vulnerable. In fact, it is not unfair to say that an adversary culture opposed to the hypocrisies and inconsistencies of the dominant paradigm was beginning to form.

Stanley Kubrick, director of *Dr. Strangelove*, played a part in extending that adversary culture. Born in 1928 to a middle-class Bronx family, Kubrick was from an early age interested in chess and photography. It is not hard to move from his fascination with chess, with the analytical abilities it requires and sharpens, to the fascination with technology and the difficulties men have in controlling it which Kubrick displays in *Dr. Strangelove* and *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Photography became a pastime when Kubrick received a camera at age thirteen, and a profession when *Look* magazine hired him at age eighteen as a still photographer. From there Kubrick became interested in filmmaking and made a short documentary on middleweight boxer Walter Cartier called *Day of the Fight* (1950). He followed this with a second documentary for RKO, *Flying Padre* (1951), after which he made his first feature film, *Fear and Desire* (1953). From then on Kubrick was immersed in making feature films.<sup>6</sup>

In his mature work Kubrick has returned constantly to one of the gravest dilemmas of modern industrial society: the gap between man's scientific and technological skill and his social, political, and moral ineptitude. In Kubrick's world view, modern man has made scientific and technological advances inconceivable to previous generations but lacks the wisdom either to perceive how the new gadgetry might be used in constructive ways or, more fundamentally, to ask whether the "advance" might not cause more harm than good. Kubrick first faced this problem squarely in *Dr. Strangelove*.

Kubrick's films before 1963 do hint at interests which he was to develop more fully in *Dr. Strangelove*. *The Killing* shows a group of men working toward a common purpose under intense pressure and severe time limitations. *Paths of Glory*—one of a handful of classic anti-war films in the American cinema—vents its anger at the stupidity of military leaders,

<sup>6</sup> Biographical information on Kubrick is available in Alexander Walker's *Stanley Kubrick Directs*, rev. ed. (New York: Harcourt, 1972), probably the best book on Kubrick's work. Since *2001*, the literature on Kubrick's films has proliferated. Jerome Agel's anthology, *The Making of 2001* (New York: Signet, 1970) started the list of books on Kubrick's work. Other volume-length studies are Daniel Devries, *The Films of Stanley Kubrick* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973); Norman Kagan, *The Cinema of Stanley Kubrick* (New York: Grove, 1972); and Gene Phillips, *Stanley Kubrick: A Film Odyssey* (New York: Popular Library, 1975), which includes a discussion of *Barry Lyndon*. A thoughtful essay defining Kubrick's artistic vision is Hans Feldmann's "Kubrick and His Discontents," *Film Quarterly*, 30 (Fall 1976), 12–19.

their callous disregard for other human lives, and their own lust for power. Released in 1957 in the midst of the Cold War, *Paths* was a courageous film made slightly more palatable for audiences because of its setting and situation: World War One and the evils of French military leaders.

It is not totally surprising, then, that Kubrick should make a film about military and civilian leaders trying to cope with accidental nuclear war. Actually, Kubrick had developed an interest in the Cold War and nuclear strategy as a concerned citizen in the late 1950s, even before he thought of doing a film on the subject. In an essay on *Dr. Strangelove* published in mid-1963, a half year before the release of the film, Kubrick wrote: "I was very interested in what was going to happen, and started reading a lot of books about four years ago. I have a library of about 70 or 80 books written by various technical people on the subject and I began to subscribe to the military magazines, the Air Force magazine, and to follow the U.S. naval proceedings."<sup>7</sup> One of the magazines he subscribed to was the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientist*, which regularly published articles by atomic scientists (Oppenheimer, Edward Teller, and Leo Szilard) and nuclear strategists (Kahn, Bernard Brodie, and Thomas Schelling). The more he read on the subject, the more he became engrossed in the complexities of nuclear strategy and the enormity of the nuclear threat:

I was struck by the paradoxes of every variation of the problem from one extreme to the other—from the paradoxes of unilateral disarmament to the first strike. And it seemed to me that, aside from the fact that I was terribly interested myself, it was very important to deal with this problem dramatically because it's the only social problem where there's absolutely no chance for people to learn anything from experience. So it seemed to me that this was eminently a problem, a topic to be dealt with dramatically.<sup>8</sup>

As his readings continued, Kubrick began to feel "a great desire to do something about the nuclear nightmare." From this desire came a decision to make a film on the subject. In preparation, he talked with both Thomas Schelling and Herman Kahn, gradually coming to believe that a psychotic general could engage in what Kahn termed "unauthorized behavior" and send bombers to Russia.<sup>9</sup>

Kubrick found the literary work upon which his film was based almost by accident. When he requested some relevant readings from the Institute of Strategic Studies, the head of the Institute, Alastair Buchan, suggested

<sup>7</sup> "How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Cinema," *Films and Filming*, 9 (June 1963), 12.

<sup>8</sup> Kubrick, 12.

<sup>9</sup> See Lawrence Suid, *Guts and Glory: Great American War Movies* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1978), 194; and Kahn, 467.

Peter George's *Red Alert*, a serious suspense thriller about an accidental nuclear attack. The book contained such an interesting premise concerning accidental nuclear war that even a nuclear strategist like Schelling could write of it that "the sheer ingenuity of the scheme . . . exceeds in thoughtfulness any fiction available on how war might start." Kubrick, likewise impressed with the involving story and convincing premise, purchased rights to the novel.<sup>10</sup>

However, when author and screenwriter started to construct the screenplay, they began to run into problems, which Kubrick describes in an interview with Joseph Gelmis:

I started work on the screenplay with every intention of making the film a serious treatment of the problem of accidental nuclear war. As I kept trying to imagine the way in which things would really happen, ideas kept coming to me which I would discard because they were so ludicrous. I kept saying to myself: "I can't do this. People will laugh." But after a month or so I began to realize that all the things I was throwing out were the things which were most truthful.<sup>11</sup>

By trying to make the film a serious drama, Kubrick was accepting the framework of the dominant paradigm, accepting Cold War premises and creating the gripping story within these premises. This was the approach of *Red Alert* as well as of *Fail Safe*, a popular film of late 1964 adapted from the Burdick and Wheeler novel. But after studying closely the assumptions of the Cold War and the nuclear impasse, Kubrick was moving outside the dominant paradigm. Kubrick's fumbling attempts to construct a screenplay provide an example of what Gene Wise, expanding on Thomas Kuhn, has called a "paradigm revolution" in the making: a dramatic moment when accepted understandings of the world no longer make sense and new ones are needed.<sup>12</sup>

Kubrick describes in an interview how he resolved his difficulties with the screenplay: "It occurred to me I was approaching the project in the wrong way. The only way to tell the story was as a black comedy, or better, a nightmare comedy, where the things you laugh at most are really

<sup>10</sup> "Meteors, Mischief, and War," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientist*, 16 (Sept. 1960), 293. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, the possibility of accidental nuclear war was widely discussed and considered plausible. Joel Larus, in his *Nuclear Weapons Safety and the Common Defense* (Columbus: Ohio State Univ. Press, 1967), 34, lists ten representative essays and books published between 1958 and 1962 which consider the problem. See also Peter George, *Red Alert* (New York: Ace, 1958).

<sup>11</sup> *The Film Director as Superstar* (New York: Doubleday, 1970), 309.

<sup>12</sup> Wise discusses the paradigm revolution occurring in America from the late Thirties to the Fifties in his *American Historical Explanations* (Homewood, Ill.: Dorsey Press, 1973), 129–32, 233–95.



the heart of the paradoxical postures that make a nuclear war possible.”<sup>13</sup> After deciding to use nightmare comedy in approaching his subject, Kubrick hired Terry Southern to help with the screenplay. This decision connects Kubrick to the black humor novelists of the early 1960s. Writers like Southern, Joseph Heller (*Catch 22*), Kurt Vonnegut (*Mother Night*), and Thomas Pynchon (*V* and *The Crying of Lot 49*) shared with Kubrick the assumption of a culture gone mad, and responded to it with a similar mixture of horror and humor. Morris Dickstein’s comment that “black humor is pitched at the breaking point where moral anguish explodes into a mixture of comedy and terror, where things are so bad you might as well laugh,” describes quite accurately the way Kubrick came to feel about the arms race and nuclear strategy.<sup>14</sup>

The premise and plot of the film are, paradoxically, quite realistic and suspenseful, which in part accounts for why the nightmare comedy succeeds. At the opening of the film a narrator tells us that the Russians have built a Doomsday device which will automatically detonate if a nuclear weapon is dropped on the Soviet Union, destroying all human life on the planet—a case of deterrence strategy carried to the absurd. A paranoid anti-Communist Air Force general, unaware of the Russian’s ultimate weapon, orders a fleet of airborne SAC B-52s to their Russian targets. The President of the United States finds out, but soon learns that the jets cannot be recalled because only the general knows the recall code. Moving quickly into action, the President discusses the problem with his advisors, calls the Russian Premier, and assists the Russians in their attempts to shoot down the B-52s. Finally, all the planes are recalled but one, which drops its bombs on a secondary target, setting off the Russian retaliatory Doomsday device. *Dr. Strangelove* concludes in apocalypse.

After the narrator’s initial mention of a Doomsday device, Kubrick subtly begins his nightmare comedy by suggesting that man’s warlike tendencies and his sexual urges stem from similar aggressive instincts. He does this by showing an airborne B-52 coupling with a refueling plane in mid-air, while the sound track plays a popular love song, “Try a Little Tenderness.” The connection between sexual and military aggression continues throughout the film, as when an otherwise nude beauty in a *Playboy* centerfold has her buttocks covered with a copy of *Foreign Affairs*, but it is most evident in the names given the characters by the screenwriters. Jack D. Ripper, the deranged SAC general, recalls the sex murderer who terrorized London during the late 1880s. The name of Army strategist Buck Turgidson is also suggestive: his first name is slang

<sup>13</sup> Gelmis, 309.

<sup>14</sup> *Gates of Eden: American Culture in the Sixties* (New York: Basic Books, 1977), 92–127.

for a virile male and his last name suggests both bombast and an adjective meaning “swollen.” Major King Kong, pilot of the B-52, reminds viewers of the simple-minded beast who fell in love with a beautiful blonde. Group Captain Lionel Mandrake’s last name is also the word for a plant reputedly known for inducing conception in women, while both names of President Merkin Muffley allude to female genitals. Appropriately, Ripper and Turgidson are hawks, while Muffley is a dove. Other names—Dr. Strangelove, the Soviet Ambassador De Sadesky, and Premier Dmitri Kissov—carry similar associations. These sexual allusions permeate the film, providing one level of the film’s nightmare comedy.<sup>15</sup>

More important than these sexual allusions, however, is *Dr. Strangelove*’s frontal assault on the Ideology of Liberal Consensus. Above all else, *Dr. Strangelove* uses nightmare comedy to satirize four dimensions of the Cold War consensus: anti-Communist paranoia; the culture’s inability to realize the enormity of nuclear war; various nuclear strategies; and the blind faith modern man places in technological progress.

The critique of American anti-Communist paranoia is presented primarily through General Ripper, played by Sterling Hayden (see Figure 1). Kubrick portrays Ripper as an obsessed member of the radical right.<sup>16</sup> Convinced that the Communist conspiracy has not only infiltrated our country but also, through fluoridation, contaminated our water, Ripper decides to take action by sending the B-52s to bomb Russia. Cutting off all communication to the outside world, he then orders his men to fight anyone attempting to capture the base.

The most grimly ominous character in the film, Ripper dominates its action in the first half, and Kubrick underlines this action stylistically, often shooting Ripper from a low camera angle. But Ripper’s words also characterize his paranoia. Kubrick once agreed that whereas *2001* develops its focus visually, *Dr. Strangelove* does so much more through its dialogue. Early in the film, Ripper reveals his fears to Mandrake (Peter Sellers, in one of his three roles):

Mandrake, have you ever seen a Communist drink a glass of water? Vodka, that’s what they drink, isn’t it? Never water—on no account will a Commie

<sup>15</sup> The sexual allusions of *Dr. Strangelove* are developed more fully and systematically in Agel, 136–37, and Anthony F. Macklin, “Sex and *Dr. Strangelove*,” *Film Comment*, 3 (Summer, 1965), 55–57.

<sup>16</sup> The portrayal was probably influenced by the activities of such radical right groups as the John Birch Society and the Christian Anti-Communist Crusade, active in the late 1950s and into the 1960s. Birch leader Robert Welch sounds much like Ripper in his comment that President Eisenhower is “a dedicated, conscious agent of the Communist conspiracy” (Wittner, p. 231).



Figure 1. Anti-Communist Paranoia: Colonel Ripper (Sterling Hayden) ponders the dangers of fluoridation. (Courtesy of Cinemabilia.)

ever drink water, and not without good reason . . . Mandrake, water is the source of all life: seven-tenths of this earth's surface is water. Why, do you realize that 70 percent of you is water? And as human beings, you and I need fresh, pure water to replenish our precious bodily fluids. . . . Have you never wondered why I drink only distilled water or rain water and only pure grain alcohol? . . . Have you ever heard of a thing called fluoridation? Do you realize that fluoridation is the most monstrously conceived and dangerous Communist plot we've ever had to face?<sup>17</sup>

Later Ripper mentions that fluoridation began in 1946, the same year as the postwar international Communist conspiracy. By portraying this paranoid officer willing to obliterate the world because of fluoridation, Kubrick lays bare the irrational American fear of Communism as one source of the cultural malaise of the early 1960s.

The second object of attack through satire—the failure to realize how nuclear weapons have changed the nature of war—is carried out primarily on one of General Ripper's B-52s. The pilot of the plane, Major King Kong (Slim Pickens), gives evidence of outmoded notions about war in his pep talk to the crew after they have received the “go” code:

<sup>17</sup> Dialogue has been transcribed from the film (Distributor: Swank).



Figure 2. Failure of Liberalism: President Muffley (Peter Sellers)—the well-intentioned but ineffectual Stevensonian liberal. (Courtesy of Cinemabilia.)

Now look boys—I ain't much of a hand at makin' speeches. . . . I got a fair idea of the personal emotions that some of you fellas may be thinkin'. Heck, I reckon you wouldn't even be human bein's if you didn't have some pretty strong feelin's about nuclear combat. But I want you to remember one thing. The folks back home is a-countin' on you and, by golly, we ain't about to let 'em down. I'll tell you something else: if this thing turns out to be half as important as I figger it just might be, I'd say you're all in line for some important promotions and personal citations when this thing's over with. And that goes for *every last one* of you, regardless of yer race, color, or yer creed.

Such a pep talk might be appropriate for a World War II film—in fact, most films about that war contained some such scene—but Kong's blindness to what he is being asked to do is almost complete. The fact that Kong wears a cowboy hat while making the speech, connecting him to the frontier heritage, and that “When Johnny Comes Marching Home”—a patriotic American war tune—plays on the soundtrack in the background, reinforces the conception of Kong as a dangerous anachronism.

To drive this point home, Kubrick has Kong go through the contents of a survival kit. It includes, among other items, a pistol, nine packs of chewing gum, several pairs of nylon stockings, a miniature combination Bible and Russian phrase book, and, of course, an issue of prophylactics.

Besides parodying what every soldier shot down over enemy territory might need, the scene reasserts that Kong is fighting another war at another time, never having realized that if his bomber goes down after dropping its atomic load, the crew will not have to worry much about survival, to say nothing of survival kits. Kubrick, perhaps responding to the media articles which made light of the nuclear threat, attacks the shortsightedness of those who think nuclear war may not actually be that bad.

National strategies also come under attack. Here the satire is particularly pointed; the various strategic positions taken by characters in the War Room correspond quite closely to positions taken by military and civilian strategists.

General Turgidson (George C. Scott) is a "hardliner." His position is even more severe than that of John Foster Dulles, who announced the policy of "massive retaliation" in 1954.<sup>18</sup> Turgidson secretly favors a first-strike policy—he would like to see the U.S. obliterate the Russians offensively. After learning that the planes have been accidentally sent to their Russian targets, Turgidson urges the President to intensify the attack with even more planes:

T: It is necessary now to make a choice, to choose between two admittedly regrettable but nevertheless distinguishable postwar environments.<sup>19</sup> One, where you got twenty million people killed and the other where you got 150 million people killed.

M: (Shocked) You're talking about mass murder, general, not war.

T: I'm not saying we wouldn't get our hair mussed. But I do say no more than ten to twenty million killed, tops—depending on the breaks.

M: (Angrily) I will not go down in history as the greatest mass murderer since Adolph Hitler.

T: Perhaps it might be better, Mr. President, if you were more concerned with the American people than with your image in the history books.

Scott delivers these lines with zestful enthusiasm, and his animated features suggest that he can hardly wait for the annihilation to begin. In rhetoric distressingly similar to the arguments occurring occasionally in the journals, Turgidson advises "total commitment," sacrificing a "few lives" for what he believes would be a more secure and satisfactory "post-war environment."

<sup>18</sup> Moss, 106–11.

<sup>19</sup> Here Kubrick borrows language and ideas from Herman Kahn. Table 3 on p. 20 of *On Thermonuclear War* is headed "Tragic But Distinguishable Postwar States," and it estimates the time for "Economic Recuperation" if anywhere from two million to 160 million Americans are killed in a thermonuclear exchange.

President Muffley's position is the most reasonable of any in the War Room. He is neither a fanatic nor a warmonger. Unfortunately, he's also nearly totally ineffectual as he tries to implement his goal: attempting to avoid catastrophe at all costs through communication with the Soviets. Peter Sellers plays this role with a bald wig, in part to differentiate himself visually from his other two roles, in part to remind audiences of Adlai Stevenson, the quintessential liberal of the 1950s, twice-unsuccesful candidate for the Presidency (see Figure 2).<sup>20</sup> When Muffley negotiates with Premier Kissov over the hot line to Moscow, he appears ridiculous. After Kissov says Muffley should call the People's Central Air Defense Headquarters at Omsk, Muffley asks, "Listen, do you happen to have the phone number on you, Dmitri? . . . What? . . . I see, just ask for Omsk information." Muffley argues with Kissov about who is sorrier about the mistake, insisting that he can be just as sorry as Dmitri. Such small talk amidst the enormity of the crisis is ludicrous. By appearing both ridiculous and ineffectual, Muffley furthers Kubrick's nightmare comedy. For if the person who has the most rational strategy (and who also happens to be the commander in chief) is unable to control nuclear weapons and his military advisors, citizens really have something to worry about.

Although Dr. Strangelove does not speak until the last third of the film, the creators seem to have taken a great deal of care in creating Strangelove as a composite of a number of pundits in the new "science" of nuclear strategy. As a physicist involved in weapons research and development, he invites comparisons to Edward Teller. Not only was Teller involved in the creation of the atomic bomb, but he was also a strong anti-Communist who pushed hard for the development of the much more powerful hydrogen bomb in 1949 and 1950.<sup>21</sup> In his background, accent, and some of his dialogue, Strangelove suggests Henry Kissinger. Like Kissinger, Strangelove came from Germany in the 1930s and still speaks with a German accent. With his wavy dark hair and sunglasses, he also bears a physical resemblance to Kissinger. Even his definition of deterrence—"the art of producing in the mind of the enemy the fear to attack you"—sounds remarkably like the definition Kissinger offered in his *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy* (1957).<sup>22</sup> Finally, Herman Kahn

<sup>20</sup> When Stevenson suggested a test ban on nuclear weapons during the 1956 presidential election, Vice-President Nixon blasted the suggestion as "catastrophic nonsense" (Moss, p. 155).

<sup>21</sup> Moss, 64–84, has a long profile on Teller. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, Teller was a strong opponent of test-ban treaties, and wrote articles in the popular press which deemphasized the threat of fallout.

<sup>22</sup> Kissinger, 96, defines deterrence as "the attempt to keep an opponent from adopting a certain course of action by posing risks which will to him seem out of proportion to any gains to be achieved." The definition is a little more elegant than Strangelove's, perhaps, but the thrust is the same.

plays a part in the Strangelove composite, primarily as related to the Doomsday device. Strangelove tells the President that he recently commissioned a study by the Bland corporation (Kahn worked for RAND) to examine the possibility of a Doomsday device. The study found the device technologically feasible; it would be hooked to a computer and programmed to detonate under certain prescribed circumstances. However, Strangelove found the machine impractical as a deterrent because it would go off even if an attack was accidental. All these details are similarly discussed in Kahn's *On Thermonuclear War*, with Kahn similarly concluding that though the device would contain most of the characteristics of a deterrent, it would not meet the final characteristics of being controllable.<sup>23</sup> As a mixture of Teller, Kissinger, Kahn, and probably a number of others (Werner Von Braun is another possibility), Strangelove becomes a significant symbol (see Figure 3). Essentially, he is the coldly speculating mind, not unlike one of Nathaniel Hawthorne's calculating and obsessed scientists. Like them, Strangelove is devoid of fellow feeling. He proves this near the end of the film: even after the American B-52 gets through to bomb its target, Strangelove has ideas. He offers a plan to take all military and political leaders (along with attractive women at a ratio of ten women to one man) into a mine shaft in an effort to survive the virulent radioactivity produced by the Doomsday device. Clearly, none of the strategic postures presented by Kubrick—Turgidson's militarism, Muffley's tender-minded rationality, or Strangelove's constant speculations—are able to control the inexorable march of nuclear holocaust.

Although *2001* is more famous for its exploration of technology, Kubrick shows a fascination with machines in *Dr. Strangelove*. Most prominent is the simulation of the B-52 cockpit, which Kubrick—after the Air Force denied him any assistance in making the film—had built from an unauthorized photograph he discovered in an aviation magazine.<sup>24</sup> Throughout the B-52 scenes, Kubrick keeps viewer interest by alternating close-ups of various panel controls with shots of crew members expertly carrying out their orders. Besides those in the B-52, many other machines—telephones, radios, the electronic wall chart in the War Room—play important parts in the film.

Kubrick develops his attitude toward technology in *Dr. Strangelove* by making use of both machines of destruction and machines of communica-

<sup>23</sup> Kahn reported in his RAND study of the Doomsday device that most people he talked to rejected the idea of constructing such a weapon. Some scientists and engineers, however, told him that it was a great idea. In a masterful understatement, Kahn wrote that he found this enthusiasm "disquieting" (p. 148).

<sup>24</sup> Kagan, 112.



**Figure 3.** Nuclear Strategist: Dr. Strangelove (Peter Sellers)—the calculating and obsessed strategist, devoid of any fellow feeling. (Courtesy of Movie Star News.)



tion; the problem in the film is that while people handle the machines of destruction with great alacrity, the more neutral machines of communication are either ineffectual or turned toward destructive purposes. Through a misuse of radio codes, Ripper sends the B-52s on their destructive mission; DeSadesky uses a camera to take pictures of the War Room, presumably for purposes of intelligence. When people try to use the neutral machines to prevent destruction, however, they prove to be ineffective. During President Muffley's call to Kissov, for example, social amenities and small talk hinder attempts to stop the B-52s, as does the slowness of the process. Likewise, when Mandrake tries to call the President after he has discovered the recall code, he cannot because he does not have a dime for the pay phone.

Though people can't use neutral machines effectively, they handle the machines of destruction with deadly efficiency. This includes not only the conventional weaponry at the Air Force base, where Army infantry and artillery attempt to take over the base, but also, more distressingly, the nuclear weapons. The whole crew of the B-52 expertly manipulate their machines, even after the explosion of an anti-aircraft missile damages the plane. Kong, to the dismay of the audience, shows great ingenuity in repairing damaged circuits in time to open the bomb doors over the target. Kubrick is not really suggesting that machines are dominating men. Rather, he seems to perceive a human death instinct. Arising from a nearsighted rationality, this death instinct leads man first to create machines, then to use them for destroying human life (see Figure 4). In questioning the "progress" inherent in technology, Kubrick was challenging a fundamental assumption of the dominant paradigm. This challenge to technology—both to the stress on technique in society and to the increasing importance of machines in modern life—was to become a dominant theme in the late 1960s, important in several works of social criticism during that era, including Theodore Roszak's *The Making of A Counter Culture* (1969), Lewis Mumford's *The Myth of the Machine: The Pentagon of Power* (1969), and Philip Slater's *The Pursuit of Loneliness* (1970).

The film's final scene underlines Kubrick's attack on the Ideology of Liberal Consensus. Mushroom clouds billow on the screen, filling the sky, exuding both an awesome power and a perverse beauty. Simultaneously, a light, sentimental love song from the late 1940s—Vera Lynn's "We'll Meet Again"—provides a contrasting aural message in an excellent use of film irony. Its opening lines are: "We'll meet again, don't know where, don't know when, but I know we'll meet again some sunny day." If we go on with the world view of the postwar era, Kubrick ironically suggests, we will never meet again, because there will be no one left on earth.



Figure 4. Technological Expertise, Political Ineptitude: In the War Room, leaders watch the progress of the B-52s on "the Big Board" and debate policy. (Courtesy of Cinemabilia.)

Retaining the conflict between image and sound throughout the final credit sequence, Kubrick hopes to prod his viewers to reflect on all that they have seen.

Taken as a whole, *Dr. Strangelove* fundamentally challenges the Ideology of Liberal Consensus by attacking anti-Communist paranoia, American adherence to outmoded notions of heroism, various nuclear strategies, and faith in social salvation through technological expertise. The Cold War foreign policy so strongly supported by Americans in the late 1940s and 1950s rested on the belief that America was a fundamentally just society threatened only by the germs of "Godless" Communism. *Dr. Strangelove*, though it certainly does nothing to imply that the Soviet leaders are any wiser than their American counterparts, suggests that no nation-state has a monopoly on foolishness and that the backstage strategies of military and political leaders are simply exercises in paranoia. The nightmare comedy presented a disturbing and deeply wrought challenge to America in 1963 and 1964.

The film would not be so important were it not so *uncharacteristic* in the way it treated the Cold War. The House Un-American Activities Commit-

tee investigated Hollywood in two waves, once in 1947 (resulting in the infamous Hollywood Ten trials) and later in the early 1950s.<sup>25</sup> Hollywood responded not by fighting government interference—as it had in the mid-Thirties censorship controversies—but by cooperating, blacklisting people who were suspected of leftist affiliations in the Thirties and making a spate of films which overtly or covertly supported the dominant paradigm.

The paradigm was overtly supported by a good number of anti-Communist melodramas from the late 1940s and early 1950s, of which *My Son John* (1952) may be the most famous example. These films were most popular between 1948 and 1953; in 1952 alone, twelve of them were released. Films about World War II, portraying the Nazis or the Japanese as villains, tended also to divide the world into good (the Allies) and evil (the Axis powers) and thus to support the dominant paradigm. Here Kubrick's anti-war *Paths of Glory* (1957) was clearly an anomaly. Even science fiction films, like *The Thing* (1951) or *War of the Worlds* (1952), by using threats from outer space as a metaphor of the Communist threat, covertly supported this conventional way of looking at and understanding the world.<sup>26</sup> More directly related to *Dr. Strangelove* are a series of films through the 1950s and into the 1960s dealing with the bomb and especially with the Strategic Air Command.

*Dr. Strangelove* seems all the more amazing when one contrasts its iconoclasm and sharp satire with *Above and Beyond* (1952), *Strategic Air Command* (1957), *Bombers B-52* (1957), *A Gathering of Eagles* (1963), and *Fail Safe* (1964). The first of these films concerns the story of Paul Tibbetts, commander of the group which actually dropped the first atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Much of the story concerns Mrs. Tibbetts' gradual acceptance of her husband's secret yet important work. *Strategic Air Command* follows much the same vein. In it a major league baseball star and former World War II pilot, played by Jimmy Stewart, gives up the last years of his prime to return to active duty. Stewart's wife, at first upset at her husband's decision, realizes that it is necessary for the peace and well-being of the nation. Produced in the same year, *Bombers B-52* concerns a sergeant who resists the temptation to take a higher paying civilian job, and thus retains his wonderful existence as an enlisted man.

Both *A Gathering of Eagles* and *Fail Safe* were released about the time of *Dr. Strangelove*, yet their approaches to their subjects are light years

<sup>25</sup> On HUAC investigations of Hollywood, see Robert Sklar, *Movie-Made America* (New York: Random, 1975), 256–281; John Cogley, *Report on Blacklisting* (New York: Arno, 1972); and Eric Bentley, ed., *Thirty Years of Treason* (New York: Viking, 1971). The last book is primarily made up of transcriptions of testimony.

<sup>26</sup> On anti-Red films, see Andrew Dowdy, *The Films of the Fifties* (New York: William Morrow, 1973), 38.

from that of *Strangelove*. General Curtis LeMay, commander of SAC, took a personal concern in *A Gathering of Eagles*: he stressed the need to explain how many safeguards had been created to prevent accidental war. The film concerns a young colonel who takes over a SAC wing that has failed a surprise alert and gradually trains his men so they are ever ready to go to war if the necessity arises. LeMay was pleased with the film, judging it “the closest any of [the Air Force films] ever came to showing the true picture of what the military was all about.”<sup>27</sup>

*Fail Safe*, released less than a year after *Dr. Strangelove*, at first seemed quite similar to *Dr. Strangelove* in that in both films, nuclear weapons are detonated by accident. But *Fail Safe* does nothing to suggest, as *Strangelove* does, that national policy is ridiculous. Instead it portrays the President (Henry Fonda) as a responsible and competent man caught in a tragic, yet controllable circumstance. His decision—to obliterate New York City in exchange for the accidental destruction of Moscow—prevents the destruction of the world and is powerfully rendered without a touch of irony: in the final moments, we see freeze frames of people on New York streets just before the bomb explodes. Despite its powerful cinematic ending, the film is, as Julian Smith has suggested, “a morally and intellectually dangerous film because it simplifies and romanticizes the issues of national responsibility.”<sup>28</sup>

All these films present a common respect for national and military leaders. Though bad apples may show up occasionally, though accidents may cause some difficulties, each film ends with control being reestablished, the viewer reassured that the American way is the best course and that the military is doing the best job possible to shield us from the Communist menace. None hint, as does *Dr. Strangelove*, that we may need protection against ourselves.

A look at how reviewers and the public responded to *Dr. Strangelove* can give us some indication of how Kubrick's adversary views were accepted. Since a feature film most often must reinforce the cultural values and attitudes of its viewers if it expects to be popular, it is understandable that neither critics nor the public were swept away by the film. Though few critics of mass magazines or political journals panned the film, a number of them, thinking within the bounds of the dominant paradigm, came up with strange interpretations. The critic for the right-wing *National Review*, for example, suggested that *Dr. Strangelove's* theme was that all ideology should be abandoned. He went on to defend American

<sup>27</sup> Suid, 170. This discussion is indebted to Suid, 187–215, and Julian Smith, *Looking Away: Hollywood and Vietnam* (New York: Scribners, 1975), 178–203.

<sup>28</sup> Smith, 198.

ideology “with its roots thrust deep in Greek political thought,” closing curiously with a hope that Kubrick might make a film criticizing Stalinism. *Saturday Review*'s Hollis Alpert gave a generally favorable review, concluding with these comments: “No one thinks our ingeniously destructive world-destroying bombs are a laughing matter. Certainly director Kubrick doesn't. But on some fairly safe planet out of view, maybe this is the way they would view our predicament.” Alpert seems to miss Kubrick's point. No one accepting the dominant paradigm would see nuclear weapons as a laughing matter, but Kubrick, after studying the arms race, the Cold War, and the idea of deterrence carefully, realized the insanity of the situation and found that the only way he could possibly approach the material was through the satirical thrust of nightmare comedy. By having his audience laugh at the situation, he hoped not that they would realize its seriousness but rather that they would perceive its absurdity. Alpert, evidently, misunderstood the social rhetoric.<sup>29</sup>

Two observers who thought highly of the film were Stanley Kauffmann and Lewis Mumford. Writing for *The New Republic*, Kauffmann—a critic notoriously harsh on most American films—thought *Dr. Strangelove* the best American film in fifteen years. The film showed “how mankind, its reflexes scored in its nervous system and its mind entangled in orthodoxies, insisted on destroying itself.” This is a keen analysis: the entangling orthodoxies were those of the Liberal Consensus. Mumford's response to the film came in a letter to the *New York Times* defending the film, and he was as perceptive as anyone about the film's thrust when he wrote: “What the wacky characters in *Dr. Strangelove* are saying is precisely what needs to be said: this nightmare eventuality that we have concocted for our children is nothing but a crazy fantasy, by nature as horribly crippled and dehumanized as Dr. Strangelove himself. It is not this film that is sick: what is sick is our supposedly moral, democratic country which allowed this policy to be formulated and implemented without even the pretense of public debate.” In a particularly acute comment, Mumford went on to argue that the film represented “the first break in the catatonic cold war trance that has so long held our country in its rigid grip.”<sup>30</sup> It is no surprise that Mumford, who had been a perceptive cultural critic of America at least since *The Golden Day* (1926), would later offer one of the most articulate criticisms of America's worship of technology in *The Pentagon of Power* (1969), still one of the most sensitive and persuasive studies of America to emerge during the late 1960s.

Like the critical observations, the box-office figures on *Dr. Strangelove* suggest a mixed response. Though figures for film rentals are notoriously

<sup>29</sup> W. H. von Dreele, “Satirist With Astigmatism,” *National Review*, 16 (Mar. 10, 1964), 203–04; “What's in a Title?” *Saturday Review*, 47 (Jan. 25, 1964), 24.

<sup>30</sup> Kauffmann, *The World on Film* (New York: Harper, 1966), 14–15. Mumford's letter is quoted in Kauffmann's second review of the film, 19

rough, they seem to indicate that after doing a very strong business in New York and some other large cities, *Dr. Strangelove* slowed down and failed to live up to its early returns. It opened at the Victoria and the Baronet in New York, setting house records in the Baronet (an "art" theater) and providing the best business in years for the first week at the Victoria. Business remained strong at both theaters for at least nine weeks, yet when the final box-office tabulations were in for 1964, *Dr. Strangelove* ranked 14th, after such films as *The Carpet Baggers*, *It's a Mad . . . World*, *The Unsinkable Molly Brown*, *Charade*, *Good Neighbor Sam*, and *The Pink Panther*. Right above *Dr. Strangelove* in the 1964 box-office ratings was the Beatles/Richard Lester Production, *A Hard Day's Night*, which is at least symbolically significant. For what was beginning to happen in the film industry in the 1960s was that the audience for films was getting younger and more iconoclastic. Since *Dr. Strangelove* did very well in New York—the center for our cultural trendmakers—and not so well in smaller cities, the box-office figures seem to indicate that the adversary attitude toward dominant values expressed in films like *Dr. Strangelove* was still puzzling to many people in 1964. Nevertheless, this attitude was strangely attractive to those becoming disaffected with American society.<sup>31</sup>

*Dr. Strangelove* is a watershed film. By rejecting the Ideology of Liberal Consensus through the iconoclastic perspective of nightmare comedy, it established a stance which was to become widespread in American movies in the late 1960s. Its alternating tone of comedy and horror was to reappear in *Bonnie and Clyde* and *Little Big Man*. Its critical attitude toward dominant social values was to be expanded in *The Graduate*, *Easy Rider*, and *Five Easy Pieces*. Its disdain for military leaders and war found its way to *M\*A\*S\*H*. Its notion that technological change was not necessarily social progress appeared in such diverse films as *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*, and *A Clockwork Orange*. Its importance as a groundbreaking film in the history of American movies can hardly be overestimated.

Yet the film is also important in a broader cultural sense. Lionel Trilling once wrote that at its base, art is a criticism of life. *Dr. Strangelove*, in the way it attacks the "crackpot realism" of American culture in the 1950s and early 1960s, is as important a cultural document as the Port Huron Statement of 1962, Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech at the March on Washington in 1963, Herbert Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man* (1964), or Malcolm X's *Autobiography* (1965). Anyone seeking to understand the breakdown of the American consensus in the early and mid-1960s, and the new iconoclasm which was challenging it, can learn a good deal from the nightmare comedy of *Dr. Strangelove*.

<sup>31</sup> Box-office figures are from *Variety's* section on box-office grosses, 234 (Feb. 5, 12, 19, 26, Mar. 4, 11, 18, 25, and Apr. 1, 1964), and 237 (Jan. 6, 1965).