

Jean Stein
Ben Sonnenberg

Strangelove Outtake: Notes from the War Room

Author(s): Terry Southern

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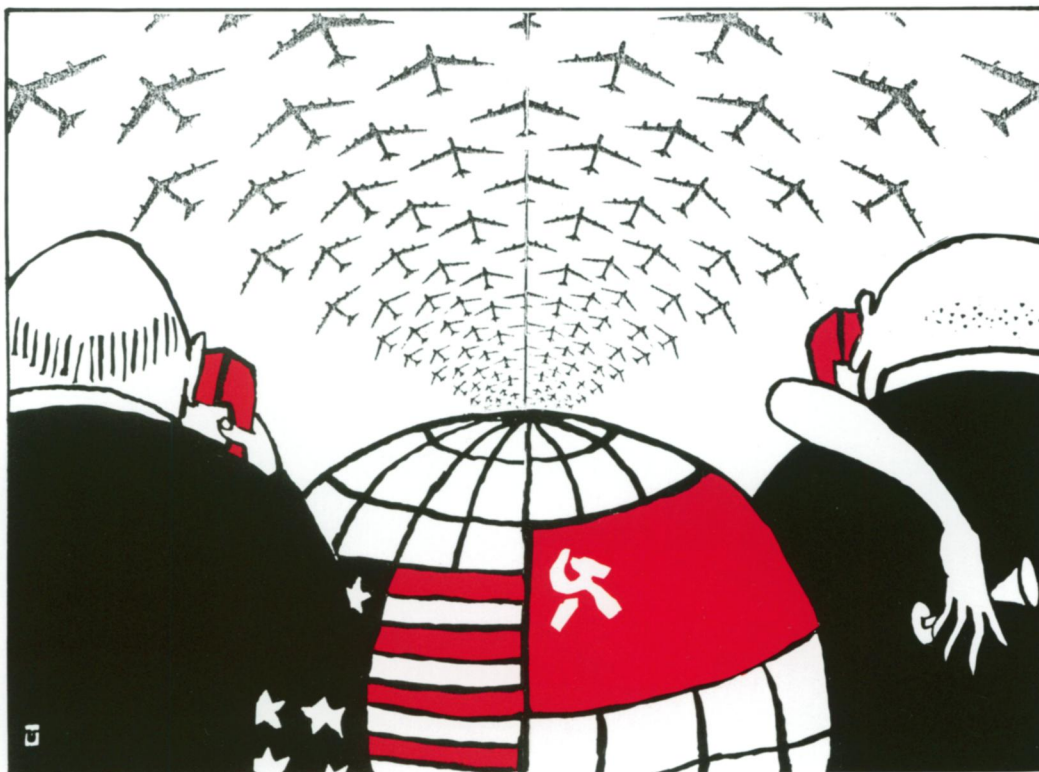
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Grand Street



Columbia Pictures Presents
Peter Sellers • George C. Scott
 in Stanley Kubrick's

Dr. Strangelove

Or: How I Learned To Stop Worrying And Love The Bomb

also starring
 Sterling Hayden • Keenan Wynn • Slim Pickens and introducing Tracy Reed Screenplay by Stanley Kubrick, Peter George & Terry Southern
and Max Fordham Adapted by
 Stanley Kubrick
 Based on the book "Red Alert" by Peter George • Produced and Directed by Stanley Kubrick

Strangelove Outtake: Notes from the War Room

1962. It was a death-gray afternoon in early December and the first snow of the New England winter had just begun. Outside my window, between the house and the banks of the frozen stream, great silver butterfly flakes floated and fluttered in the failing light. Beyond the stream, past where the evening mist had begun to rise, it was possible, with a scintilla of imagination, to make out the solemnly moving figures in the Bradbury story about the Book People; in short, a magical moment—suddenly undone by the ringing of a telephone somewhere in the house, and then, closer at hand, my wife's voice in a curious singsong:

"It's big Stan Kubrick on the line from Old Smoke."

I had once jokingly referred to Kubrick, whom I had never met but greatly admired, as "big Stan Kubrick" because I liked the ring and lilt of it. "Get big Stan Kubrick on the line in Old Smoke," I had said, "I'm ready with my incisive critique of *Killer's Kiss*." And my wife, not one to be bested, had taken it up.

"Big Stan Kubrick," she repeated, "on the line from Old Smoke."

"Don't fool around," I said. I knew I would soon be on the hump with Mr. Snow Shovel and I was in no mood for her brand of tomfoolery.

"I'm not fooling around," she said. "It's him all right, or at least his assistant."

I won't attempt to reconstruct the conversation; suffice to say he told me he was going to make a film about "our failure to understand the dangers of nuclear war." He said that he had thought of the story as a "straightforward melodrama" until this morning, when he "woke up and realized that nuclear war was too outrageous, too fantastic to be treated in any conventional manner." He said he could only see it now as "some kind of hideous joke." He told me that he had read a book of mine which contained, as he put it, "certain indications" that I might be able to help him with the script.

I later learned the curious genesis of all this: during the '50s I was friends with the English writer Jonathan Miller. I knew him for quite a while before I discovered that he was a doctor—of the sort who could write you a prescription for something like Seconal—at which point I beseeched him to become my personal physician and perhaps suggest something for my chronic insomnia. To encourage his acceptance, I gave him a copy of my recently published novel, *The Magic Christian*, which had been favorably reviewed in the *Observer* by the great English novelist Henry Green. Miller was impressed, at least enough to recommend it to his friend Peter Sellers. Peter liked it to the improbable degree that he went straight to the publisher and bought a hundred copies to give to his friends. One such friend, as luck would have it, was Stanley Kubrick.

At Shepperton Studios in London, Kubrick had set up his "Command Post" in a snug office that overlooked two wintering lilac bushes and, poetically enough, the nest of an English nightingale. Next to his big desk, and flush against it, stood an elegant wrought-iron stand that resembled a pedestal, and on top of the stand, at desk level, was one of the earliest, perhaps the very first, of the computerized "chess-opponents," which they had just begun to produce in West Germany and Switzerland. It was a sturdy, workmanlike model, black with brushed-metal lettering across the front:

GRAND MASTER LEVEL

"I have perfected my endgame," Kubrick said, "to such a degree that I can now elude the stratagems of this so-called opponent," he gave a curt nod toward the computer, "until the proverbial cows come home. . . . Would that I could apply my newly

acquired skill," he went on, "vis-à-vis a certain Mo Rothman at Columbia Pix."

Mo Rothman, I was to learn, was the person Columbia Pictures had designated executive producer on the film, which meant that he was the bridge, the connection, the *interpreter*, between the otherwise incomprehensible artist and the various moneybags incarnate who were financing the film. As to whether or not the "streetwise" Mo Rothman was a good choice for this particular project, I believe the jury is still out. Once, when Kubrick was out of the office, Rothman insisted on giving me the following message:

"Just tell Stanley," he said in a tone of clamor and angst, "that New York does *not* see anything *funny* about the end of the world!" And then added, not so much as an afterthought as a simple Pavlovian habit he'd acquired, "as we know it."

I realized he had no idea whom he was talking to, so I took a flyer. "Never mind New York," I said with a goofy inflection, "What about Gollywood?"

This got a rise out of him like a shot of crystal meth.

"*Gollywood?*" he said loudly. "Who the hell *is* this?"

The Corporate, that is to say, studio reasoning about this production affords an insight as to why so many such projects are doomed, creatively speaking, from the get-go. It was their considered judgment that the success of the film *Lolita* resulted solely from the gimmick of Peter Sellers playing several roles.

"What we are dealing with," said Kubrick at our first real talk about the situation, "is film by fiat, film by frenzy." What infuriated him most was that the "brains" of the production company could evaluate the entire film—commercially, aesthetically, morally, whatever—in terms of the tour de force performance of one actor. I was amazed that he handled it as well as he did. "I have come to realize," he explained, "that such crass and grotesque stipulations are the *sine qua non* of the motion-picture business." And it was in this spirit that he accepted the studio's condition that this film, as yet untitled, "would star Peter Sellers in at least four major roles."

It was thus understandable that Kubrick should practically freak when a telegram from Peter arrived one morning:

Dear Stanley:

I am so very sorry to tell you that I am having serious difficulty with the various roles. Now hear this: there is no way, repeat, no way, I can play the Texas pilot, 'Major King Kong.' I have a complete block against that accent. Letter from Okin [his agent] follows. Please forgive.

Peter S.

For a few days Kubrick had been in the throes of a Herculean effort to give up cigarettes and had forbidden smoking anywhere in the building. Now he immediately summoned his personal secretary and assistant to bring him a pack pronto.

That evening he persuaded me, since I had been raised in Texas, to make a tape of Kong's dialogue, much of which he had already written (his announcement of the bomb targets and his solemn reading of the Survival Kit Contents, etc.). In the days that followed, as scenes in the plane were written I recorded them on tape so that they would be ready for Sellers, if and when he arrived. Kubrick had been on the phone pleading with him ever since receiving the telegram. When he finally did show up, he had with him the latest state-of-the-art portable tape recorder, specially designed for learning languages. Its ultrasensitive earphones were so oversized they resembled some kind of eccentric hat or space headgear. From the office we would see Sellers pacing between the lilac bushes, script in hand, his face tiny and obscured beneath his earphones. Kubrick found it a disturbing image. "Is he kidding?" he said. "That's exactly the sort of thing that would bring some Brit heat down for weirdness." I laughed, but he wasn't joking. He phoned the production manager, Victor Linden, right away.

"Listen, Victor," I heard him say, "you'd better check out Pete and those earphones. He may be *stressing*. . . Well, I think he ought to cool it with the earphones. Yeah, it looks like he's trying to ridicule the BBC or something, know what I'm saying? All we need is to get shut down for a crazy stunt like that. Jesus Christ."

Victor Linden was the quintessential thirty-five-year-old English gentleman of the Eton-Oxford persuasion, the sort more likely to join the Foreign Office than the film industry; and, in fact, on more than one occasion I overheard him saying, "With some of us, dear boy, the wogs begin at Calais."

As production manager, it was his job to arrange for, among other things, accommodations for members of the company, including a certain yours truly. "I've found some digs for you," he said, "in Knightsbridge, not far from Stanley's place. I'm afraid they may not be up to Beverly Hills standards, but I think you'll find them quite pleasant. . . . The main thing, of course, is that you'll be close to Stanley, because of his writing plan."

Stanley's "writing plan" proved to be a dandy. At five A.M., the car would arrive, a large black Bentley, with a back seat the size of a small train compartment—two fold-out desk tops, perfect over-the-left-shoulder lighting, controlled temperature, dark gray windows. In short, an ideal no-exit writing situation. The drive from London to Shepperton took an hour more or less, depending on the traffic and the density of the unfailing fog. During this trip we would write and rewrite, usually the pages to be filmed that day.

It was at a time when the Cold War was at its most intense. As part of the American defense strategy, bombing missions were flown daily toward targets deep inside the Soviet Union, each B-52 carrying a nuclear bomb more powerful than those used on Hiroshima and Nagasaki combined. Bombers were instructed to continue their missions unless they received the recall code at their "fail-safe" points.

In my Knightsbridge rooms, I carefully read *Red Alert*, a book written by an ex-RAF intelligence officer named Peter George that had prompted Stanley's original interest. Perhaps the best thing about the book was the fact that the national security regulations in England, concerning what could and could not be published, were extremely lax by American standards. George had been able to reveal details concerning the "fail-safe" aspect of nuclear deterrence (for example, the so-called black box and the CRM Discriminator)—revelations that, in the spy-crazy U.S.A. of the Cold War era, would have been downright treasonous. Thus the entire complicated technology of nuclear deterrence in *Dr. Strangelove* was based on a bedrock of authenticity that gave the film what must have been its greatest strength: credibility.

The shooting schedule, which had been devised by Victor Linden and of course Kubrick—who scarcely let as much as a trouser pleat go unsupervised—called for the series of

scenes that take place inside a B-52 bomber to be filmed first. Peter Sellers had mastered the tricky Texas twang without untoward incident, and then had completed the first day's shooting of Major Kong's lines in admirable fashion. Kubrick was delighted. The following morning, however, we were met at the door by Victor Linden.

"Bad luck," he said, with a touch of grim relish, "Sellers has taken a *fall*. Last night, in front of that Indian restaurant in King's Road. You know the one, Stanley, the posh one you detested. Well, he slipped getting out of the car. Rather nasty I'm afraid. Sprain of ankle, perhaps a hairline fracture." The injury was not as serious as everyone had feared it might be. Sellers arrived at the studio shortly after lunch, and worked beautifully through a couple of scenes. Everything seemed fine until we broke for tea and Kubrick remarked in the most offhand manner, "Ace [the co-pilot] is sitting taller than Peter."

Almost immediately, he announced that we would do a run-through of another scene (much further along in the shooting schedule), which required Major Kong to move from the cockpit to the bomb-bay area via two eight-foot ladders. Sellers negotiated the first, but coming down the second, at about the fourth rung from the bottom, one of his legs abruptly buckled, and he tumbled and sprawled, in obvious pain, on the unforgiving bomb-bay floor.

It was Victor Linden who again brought the bad news, the next day, after Sellers had undergone a physical exam in Harley Street. "The completion-bond people," he announced gravely, "know about Peter's injury and the physical demands of the Major Kong role. They say they'll pull out if he plays the part." Once that grim reality had sunk in, Kubrick's response was an extraordinary tribute to Sellers as an actor: "We can't replace him with another *actor*, we've got to get an authentic character from life, someone whose acting career is secondary—a real-life cowboy." Kubrick, however, had not visited the United States in about fifteen years, and was not familiar with the secondary actors of the day. He asked for my opinion and I immediately suggested big Dan ("Hoss Cartwright") Blocker. He hadn't heard of Blocker, or even—so eccentrically isolated had he become—of the TV show *Bonanza*.

"How *big* a man is he?" Stanley asked.

"Bigger than John Wayne," I said.

We looked up his picture in a copy of *The Players' Guide* and Stanley decided to go with him without further query. He made arrangements for a script to be delivered to Blocker that afternoon, but a cabled response from Blocker's agent arrived in quick order: "Thanks a lot, but the material is too pinko for Dan. Or anyone else we know for that matter. Regards, Leibman, CMA."

As I recall, this was the first hint that this sort of political interpretation of our work-in-progress might exist. Stanley seemed genuinely surprised and disappointed. Linden, however, was quite resilient. "Pinko. . ." he said with a sniff. "Unless I'm quite mistaken, an English talent agency would have used the word 'subversive.'"

Years earlier, while Kubrick was directing the western called *One-Eyed Jacks* (his place was taken by Marlon "Bud" Brando, the producer and star of the film, following an ambiguous contretemps), he'd noticed the authentic qualities of the most natural thesp to come out of the west, an actor with the homey sobriquet of Slim Pickens.

Slim Pickens, born Louis Bert Lindley in Texas in 1919, was an unschooled cowhand who traveled the rodeo circuit from El Paso to Montana, sometimes competing in events, other times performing the dangerous work of rodeo clown—distracting the bulls long enough for injured cowboys to be removed from the arena. At one point, a friend persuaded him to accept work as a stunt rider in westerns. During an open call for *One-Eyed Jacks*, Brando noticed him and cast him in the role of the uncouth deputy sheriff. Except for the occasional stunt work on location, Slim had never been anywhere off the small-town western rodeo circuit, much less outside the U.S. When his agent told him about this remarkable job in England, he asked what he should wear on his trip there. His agent told him to wear whatever he would if he were "going into town to buy a sack of feed"—which meant his Justin boots and wide-brimmed Stetson.

"He's in the office with Victor," Stanley said, "and I don't think they can understand each other. Victor said he arrived in costume. Go and see if he's all right. Ask him if his hotel is okay and all that." When I reached the production office, I saw Victor first, his face

furrowed in consternation as he perched in the center of his big Eames wingbat. Then I saw Slim Pickens, who was every inch and ounce the size of the Duke, leaning one elbow to the wall, staring out the window.

"This place," I heard him drawl, "would make one helluva good horse pasture . . . if there's any water."

"Oh, I believe there's water, all right," Victor was absurdly assuring him when he saw me. "Ah, there you are, dear boy," he said. "This is Mr. Slim Pickens. This is Terry Southern." We shook hands, Slim grinning crazily.

"Howdy," he drawled, as gracious as if I were a heroine in an old western. "Mighty proud to know yuh." I went straight to our little makeshift bar, where I had stashed a quart of Wild Turkey specifically for the occasion, which I was ballpark certain would meet his requirements.

"Do you reckon it's too early for a drink, Slim?" I asked. He guffawed, then shook his head and crinkled his nose, as he always did when about to put someone on. "Wal, you know ah think it was jest this mornin' that ah was tryin' to figure out if and when ah ever think it was too early fer a drink, an' damned if ah didn't come up bone dry! Hee-hee-hee!" He cackled his falsetto laugh. "Why hell yes, I'll have a drink with you. Be glad to."

"How about you, Victor?" I asked. His reply was a small explosion of coughs and "hrumphs."

"Actually, it is a bit early for me in point of fact," he spluttered. "I've got all those bloody meetings. . . ." I poured a couple and handed one to Slim.

"Stanley wanted me to find out if you got settled in at your hotel, Slim, and if everything is all right." Slim had this unusual habit of sometimes prefacing his reply to a question with a small grimace and a wipe of his mouth against the back of his hand, a gesture of modesty or self-deprecation somehow. "Wal," he said, "it's like this ole friend of mine from Oklahoma says: Jest gimme a pair of loose-fittin' shoes, some tight pussy, and a warm place to shit, an' ah'll be all right."

We were occupying three of the big sound stages at Sheperton: one of them for the War Room set, another for the B-52 bomber set and a third that accommodated

two smaller sets, General Ripper's office, including its corridor with Coke machine and telephone booth ("If you try any perversion in there, I'll blow your head off"), and the General Turgidson motel-room set. The B-52 set, where we were shooting at the time, consisted of an actual B-52 bomber, or at least its nose and forward fuselage, suspended about fifteen feet above the floor of the stage. They were between takes when I climbed into the cockpit area where they were doing "character shots": individual close-ups of the co-pilot scrutinizing a *Penthouse* centerfold, the navigator practicing his card tricks, the radar operator wistfully reading a letter from home. Short snippets of action meant to establish the crew as legendary boy-next-door types. Conspicuously absent from the line-up was the bombardier and single black member of the crew, James Earl Jones, or Jimmy, as everyone called him. A classic thespian of high purpose, Jones was about as cultured and scholarly as it is possible for an actor to be, with a voice and presence that were invariably compared to Paul Robeson's.

Kubrick came over to where I was standing, but he remained absorbed in what he called "this obligatory *Our Town* character crap that always seems to come off like a parody of *All Quiet on the Western Front*," a movie that took an outlandish amount of time to focus on the individual behavioral quirks of every man in the regiment. "The only rationale for doing it now," Kubrick said, "is that you're making fun of that historic and corny technique of character delineation." Just as he started to go back to the camera, I saw that his eye was caught by something off the set. "Look at that," he said, "Slim and Jimmy are on a collision course."

Slim was ambling along the apron of the stage toward where Jimmy was sitting by the prop truck absorbed in his script. "Why don't you go down there," Kubrick went on, "and introduce them." It was not so much a question as a very pointed suggestion, perhaps even, it occurred to me, a direct order. I bounded down the scaffolding steps and across the floor of the stage, just in time to intercept Slim in full stride a few feet from where Jimmy was sitting.

"Hold on there, Slim," I said. "I want you to meet another member of the cast." Jimmy got to his feet. "James Earl Jones—Slim Pickens." They shook hands but both continued to look equally puzzled. They had obviously never heard of each other. Somehow

I knew the best route to some kind of rapprochement would be through Jones. "Slim has just finished working on a picture with Marlon Brando," I said.

"Oh well," he boomed, "that must have been very interesting indeed. . . . Yes, I should very much like to hear what it is like to work with the great Mr. Brando."

As if the question were a cue for a well-rehearsed bit of bumpkin business, Slim began to hem and haw, kicking at an imaginary rock on the floor. "Wal," he drawled, his head to one side, "you know ah worked with Bud Brando for right near a full year, an' durin' that time ah never seen him do one thing that wudn't *all man an' all white*."

When I asked Jimmy about it later, he laughed. His laugh, it must be said, is one of the all-time great laughs. "I was beginning to think," and there were tears in his eyes as he said it, "that I must have imagined it."

The quality of Jones's voice comes through most clearly as he delivers the last line of the *Strangelove* script before the bomb is released. The ultimate fail-safe device requires the manual operation of two final safety switches, to insure that the bomb will never be dropped by mistake. Major Kong's command over the intercom is brisk: "Release second safety!" Jones's response, although measured, is unhesitating. He reaches out and moves the lever. It is in his acknowledgement of the order, over the intercom, that he manages to imbue the words with the fatalism and pathos of the ages: "*Second safety* . . ."

Not long afterward, we began shooting the famous eleven-minute "lost pie fight," which was to come near the end of the movie. This footage began at a point in the War Room where the Russian ambassador is seen, for the second time, surreptitiously taking photographs of the Big Board, using six or seven tiny spy-cameras disguised as a wristwatch, a diamond ring, a cigarette lighter, and cufflinks. The head of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Air Force General Buck Turgidson (George C. Scott) catches him in flagrante and, as before, tackles him and throws him to the floor. They fight furiously until President Merkin Muffley intervenes:

"This is the War Room, gentlemen! How dare you fight in here!"

General Turgidson is unfazed. "We've got the Commie rat red-handed this time, Mr. President!"

The detachment of four military police, which earlier escorted the ambassador to the War Room, stands by as General Turgidson continues: "Mr. President, my experience in these matters of espionage has caused me to be more skeptical than your average Joe. I think these cameras," he indicates the array of ingenious devices, "may be dummy cameras, just to put us off. I say he's got the real McCoy concealed on his person. I would like to have your permission, Mr. President, to have him fully searched."

"All right," the president says, "permission granted."

General Turgidson addresses the military police: "Okay boys, you heard the president. I want you to search the ambassador thoroughly. And due to the tininess of his equipment do not overlook any of the seven bodily orifices." The camera focuses on the face of the ambassador as he listens and mentally calculates the orifices with an expression of great annoyance.

"Why you capitalist swine!" he roars, and reaches out of the frame to the huge three-tiered table that was wheeled in earlier. Then he turns back to General Turgidson, who now has a look of apprehension on his face as he ducks aside, managing to evade a custard pie that the ambassador is throwing at him. President Muffley has been standing directly behind the general, so that when he ducks, the president is hit directly in the face with the pie. He is so overwhelmed by the sheer indignity of being struck with a pie that he simply blacks out. General Turgidson catches him as he collapses.

"Gentlemen," he intones, "The president has been struck down, in the prime of his life and his presidency. I say massive retaliation!" And he picks up another pie and hurls it at the ambassador. It misses and hits instead General Faceman, the Joint Chief representing the Army. Faceman is furious.

"You've gone too far this time, Buck!" he says, throwing a pie himself, which hits Admiral Pooper, the Naval Joint Chief who, of course, also retaliates. A monumental pie fight ensues.

Meanwhile, parallel to the pie-fight sequence, another sequence is occurring. At about the time that the first pie is thrown, Dr. Strangelove raises himself from his wheelchair. Then, looking rather wild-eyed, he shouts, "Mein Führer, I *can walk!*" He takes a

triumphant step forward and pitches flat on his face. He immediately tries to regain the wheelchair, snaking his way across the floor, which is so highly polished and slippery that the wheelchair scoots out of reach as soon as Strangelove touches it. We intercut between the pie fight and Strangelove's snakelike movements—reach and scoot, reach and scoot—which suggest a curious, macabre *pas de deux*. When the chair finally reaches the wall, it shoots sideways across the floor and comes to a stop ten feet away, hopelessly out of reach.

Strangelove, exhausted and dejected, pulls himself up so that he is sitting on the floor, his back against the wall at the far end of the War Room. He stares for a moment at the surreal activity occurring there, the pie fight appearing like a distant, blurry, white blizzard. The camera moves in on Strangelove as he gazes, expressionless now, at the distant fray. Then, unobserved by him, his right hand slowly rises, moves to the inner pocket of his jacket and, with considerable stealth, withdraws a German Luger pistol and moves the barrel toward his right temple. The hand holding the pistol is seized at the last minute by the free hand and both grapple for its control. The hand grasping the wrist prevails and is able to deflect the pistol's aim so that when it goes off with a tremendous roar, it misses the temple.

The explosion reverberates with such volume that the pie fight freezes. A tableau, of white and ghostly aspect: Strangelove stares for a moment before realizing that he has gained the upper hand. "Gentlemen," he calls out to them. "Enough of these childish games. Vee hab vork to do. Azzemble here pleeze!" For a moment, no one moves. Then a solitary figure breaks rank: It is General Turgidson, who walks across the room to the wheelchair and pushes it over to the stricken Strangelove.

"May I help you into your chair, Doctor?" he asks. He begins wheeling Strangelove across the War Room floor, which is now about half a foot deep in custard pie. They move slowly until they reach the president and the Russian ambassador who are sitting crosslegged, facing each other, building a sandcastle.

"What in Sam Hill—" mutters General Turgidson.

"Ach," says Strangelove. "I think their minds have snapped under the strain. Perhaps they will have to be *institutionalized*."



As they near the pie-covered formation of generals and admirals, General Turgidson announces gravely: "Well, boys, it looks like the future of this great land of ours is going to be in the hands of people like Dr. Strangelove here. So let's hear three for the good doctor!" And as he pushes off again, the eerie formation raise their voices in a thin, apparitionlike lamentation: "Hip, hip, hooray, hip, hip, hooray!" followed by Vera Lynn's rendition of "We'll Meet Again." The camera is up and back in a dramatic long shot as General Turgidson moves across the War Room floor in a metaphorical visual marriage of Mad Scientist and United States Military. The End.

This was a truly fantastic sequence. In the first place it was a strictly one-shot affair; there was neither time nor money to reshoot—which would have meant cleaning the hundred or so uniforms and buying a thousand more custard pies. The studio representatives, who were skeptical of the scene all along, had been excruciatingly clear about the matter: "We're talkin' one take. One take and you're outta here, even if you only got shit in the can!"

So it was with considerable trepidation that we screened the results that evening. It must be recalled that each branch of the military service—Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine—receives a separate budget that determines the welfare and the life-style of its top brass. The pie fight, at its most contentious and prolonged, was not between the Russian ambassador and the United States military but between the rival branches of the U.S. military, and it represented a bitter and unrelenting struggle for congressional appropriations. This continuing jealousy between service branches, which causes each one to exaggerate its needs, precludes any chance of reducing our absurdly high defense budget.

The style and mood of the sequence should have reflected these grim circumstances. Kubrick's major goof was his failure to communicate that idea to the sixty or so pie-throwing admirals and generals, so that the prevailing atmosphere, as it came across on the film, might best be described as bacchanalian—with everyone gaily tossing pies, obviously in the highest of spirits. A disaster of, as Kubrick said, "Homeric proportions." Needless to say, the scene was cut.

It was about this time that word began to reach us, reflecting concern as to the nature of the film in production. Was it anti-American? or just anti-military? And the jackpot question, was it, in fact, anti-American to whatever extent it was anti-military? This “buzz along the rialto” was occasionally fleshed out by an actual Nosey Parker type dropping in from New York or Hollywood on behalf of Columbia Pictures. They usually traveled in pairs, presumably on the theory that sleaze is more palatable if spread somewhat thin.

“I feel like Elisha Cook in one of those early Warner films,” said Stanley. “You know, when you learn there’s a contract out on you, and all you can do is wait for the hit. They’re ruthless,” he went on, carried away by the film noir image, “absolutely ruthless.”

The early visits of those snoopers (with their little high-speed cameras and voice-activated recorders, which they would try to stash on the set and retrieve later) were harbingers of stressful things to come about nine months later, when the first prints of the film were being sporadically screened at the Gulf and Western Building in New York, and word came back to Old Smoke that the Columbia head honchos, Abe Schneider and Mo Rothman, were never in attendance.

I overheard Stanley on the phone to New York. “Listen, Mo,” he said, “don’t you think you ought to have a look at the film you’re making?” Afterward he told me: “Mo says they’ve been too busy with the new Carl Foreman film—the one with Bing Crosby singing ‘White Christmas’ while a soldier is being executed. He said, ‘It’s not so *zany* as yours, Stanley.’ Can you believe it? And that isn’t the worst. He also said, get this, he said, ‘The publicity department is having a hard time getting a handle on how to promote a comedy about the destruction of the planet.’”

It was the first time I had seen Kubrick utterly depressed, and during the ride back to London, he said, “I have the feeling distribution is totally fucked.” The next day, however, he was bouncing with optimism and a bold scheme. “I have learned,” he said, “that Mo Rothman is a highly serious *golfer*.” In a trice he was on the phone to Abercrombie & Fitch, Manhattan’s ultraswank sporting-goods emporium. Some fairly elaborate manipulations (plus an untold cash outlay) got him a “surprise gift” presentation of the store’s top-of-the-line electric golf cart, to be delivered to the

clubhouse of Rothman's Westchester Country Club.

It is a sad anticlimax to report the negative response on Rothman's part. "The son of a bitch refused to accept it!" Stanley exclaimed. "He said it would be 'bad form.'"

It soon became apparent that no one in the company wished to be associated with the film, as if they were pretending that it had somehow spontaneously come into existence. Kubrick was hoping. "It's like they think it was some kind of immaculate fucking conception," he exclaimed with the ultrarighteous indignation of someone caught in an unsuccessful bribery attempt. It was difficult to contain him. "'Bad form!'" he kept shouting, "Can you imagine *Mo Rothman* saying that? His secretary must have taught him that phrase!"

In the months that followed, the studio continued to distance itself from the film. Even when *Strangelove* received the infrequent good review, it dismissed the critic as a pinko nutcase and on at least one occasion the Columbia Pictures publicity department *defended* the company against the film by saying it was definitely not "anti-U.S. military," but "just a zany novelty flick which did not reflect the views of the corporation in any way." This party line persisted, I believe, until about five years ago, when the Library of Congress announced that the film had been selected as one of the fifty greatest American films of all time—in a ceremony at which I noted Rothman in prominent attendance. Who said satire was "something that closed Wednesday in Philadelphia"?

