50 Years Later “Dr. Strangelove” Remains a Must-See Film and Humorous Reminder of Our Civilization’s Fragility

By Jeffrey W. Mason

Fifty years ago on January 30th, “Dr. Strangelove: Or How I Learned to Stop Worrying And Love the Bomb,” a seminal political-military satire and dark comedic film premiered. Based on Peter George’s novel Red Alert, the film gave us some of the most outrageously humorous and simultaneously satirical dialog in the history of the silver screen. For example, Peter Sellers as the President of the United States, “Gentleman, you cannot fight in here. This is the War Room.” Director/producer Stanley Kubrick produced a masterpiece that not only entertained viewers but turned out to be incredibly predictive about U.S.-Soviet Cold War nuclear policies, strategies, and outcomes.

The U.S. Air Force refused to cooperate with Kubrick and his production company because they felt that the premise of an accidental nuclear war being launched by a U.S. general wasn’t credible. In fact, on December 9, 1950, General Douglas MacArthur requested authorization to use atomic bombs against 26 targets in China after the People’s Liberation Army entered the Korean War. The Soviet Union had tested their first A-bomb the year before, so it is certainly possible that MacArthur’s use of such weapons could have triggered a nuclear conflict. In terms of nuclear accidents or “broken arrows” as the U.S. military refers to such events, there have been dozens of incidents including a January 17, 1966 Air Force crash involving nuclear warheads that contaminated thousands of acres in Palomares, Spain (although thankfully fail-safe switches on the damaged atomic bombs prevented any nuclear explosions). A computer generated false alert (one of countless false warnings over the years), on November 9, 1979 almost triggered nuclear Armageddon when President Jimmy Carter’s National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski was informed at 3 a.m. that 2,200 Soviet missiles were within minutes of impacting on the U.S. mainland. It turned out to be a training exercise loaded inadvertently into SAC’s early warning computer system.

Actor George C. Scott played a Strategic Air Command (SAC) general named Buck Turgidson not unlike real life Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Thomas Moorer. In 1969, Moorer proposed salvaging the war by targeting North Vietnam with two nuclear bombs – a proposal allegedly lobbied for by President Nixon’s Secretary of State Dr. Henry Kissinger. After it is discovered that Sterling Hayden’s character, General Jack D. Ripper has on his own authority (a credible possibility until coded
locks were installed on most U.S. nuclear weapons later in the 1960s and on submarine-launched nuclear missiles in the late 1990s\(^1\), ordered an all-out nuclear attack on Russia by his squadrons of B-52 bombers (an aircraft the United States still relies on after sixty years of deployment), General Turgidson pleads with Peter Sellers’ character President Merkin Muffley to consider, “…if on the other hand, we were to immediately launch an all-out and coordinated (nuclear) attack on all their airfields and missile bases, we’d stand a damn good chance of catching them with their pants down...I’m not saying we wouldn’t get our hair mussed, but I do say no more than 10-20 million (Americans) killed, tops, depending on the breaks." Ironically nuclear war advocates Colin Gray and Keith Payne literally quoted Turgidson’s casualty figures verbatim when in 1980 they advised then presidential candidate Ronald Reagan that America could fight and win such a war against the Soviet Union.\(^2\)

But Peter Sellers, who incredibly played three roles in the film, excelled as the title character Dr. Strangelove, an amalgam of NASA’s Werner von Braun, who built Nazi V-2 rockets by turning his back when SS soldiers worked thousands of Jewish conscripts to death and was part of Operation Paperclip, a group of German scientists amnestied by the United States (and the Soviet Union handpicked its own Nazi brainpower) after the war to help build Cold War weapons, Edward Teller, who worked on the hydrogen bomb, helped found Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, was an Atoms for Peace enthusiast and advocated for the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI- the “Star Wars” missile shield), and Herman Kahn, who worked at RAND, then founded the Hudson Institute, and wrote the seminal “thinking about the unthinkable” book *On Thermonuclear War*, published in 1960.

Deep in the bowels of the War Room, Dr. Strangelove responded to the Russian ambassador’s fearful notification that even if only one of the U.S. nuclear bombs struck Russia, the result would be the triggering of a doomsday machine. Sellers’ character admonished the ambassador, “But the whole point of a doomsday machine is lost if you keep it a secret. Why didn’t you tell the world, aye?” Coincidentally again, truth followed fiction according to David Hoffman’s Pulitzer Prize-winning 2009 work *The Dead Hand*, as in November 1984, the Soviets did indeed construct a partially automated retaliatory nuclear strike system called Perimetr and tested it. Stranger still, Colonel Valery Yarynich of the Soviet Union’s Strategic Rocket Forces pointed out to his superiors that it was irrational and inconsistent with deterrence theory for them to go out of their way to hide Perimetr’s existence from U.S. leaders. This occurred during the height of the Cold War when the United States possessed

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\(^1\) These coded locks are known as permissive action links (PALs). For a relatively recent presentation about the history and workings of PALs, see Steven M. Bellovin, “Permissive Action Links, Nuclear Weapons, and the History of Public Key Cryptography,” Department of Computer Science, Columbia University, October 21, 2005, [http://www.stanford.edu/class/ee380/Abstracts/060315-slides-bellovin.pdf](http://www.stanford.edu/class/ee380/Abstracts/060315-slides-bellovin.pdf)

11,000 strategic nuclear warheads to the Soviet’s 9,900. In total, including tactical and intermediate-range bombs, the United States led 20,924 to 19,774 warheads.

When General Turgidson expressed skepticism that the Russians had the brains to build such a doomsday machine, Dr. Strangelove strongly disagreed, noting that such a system was entirely feasible. “The technology required is even within the means of the smallest nuclear power. It requires only the will to do so....It is remarkably simple to [build]. When you merely wish to bury bombs, there’s no limit to the size. After that they are connected to a gigantic complex of computers.” This echoed the real life February 1955 radio broadcast of German Nobel Laureate Otto Hahn, who first split the uranium atom in the late 1930s. Hahn warned that the detonation of as few as ten cobalt bombs, each the size of a naval vessel, would cause all mankind to perish. In the early 1980s, astronomer Carl Sagan and other scientists\(^3\) examined and subsequently built-on analyses of the last few decades via the TTAPS study. They concluded that as few as 100-200 nuclear warheads exploding within the span of a few hours could credibly trigger a nuclear winter, plunging temperatures dramatically in the northern hemisphere as tremendous nuclear firestorms block the sun’s rays, leading to wholesale starvation, exposure, and the radiation-borne deaths of billions of people worldwide.\(^4\)

Dr. Strangelove was originally scheduled for its first screening on Friday, November 22, 1963. The assassination of President Kennedy earlier that day caused the producers to delay the film’s release date by several weeks. Time was needed to not only heal the nation’s gaping wound but to edit the film to remove some objectionable material relating to the murder of the president. Coincidental references by the hydrogen bomb-riding Slim Pickens character Major T.J. “King” Kong that the survival kits carried by each bomber crewman could help provide them a pretty good time in Dallas was redubbed to “Vegas.” A concluding sequence of a free-for-all pie fight in the War Room was edited out for stylistic reasons and also removed George C. Scott’s objectionable dialogue that, “Our commander-in-chief has been struck down in the prime of his life.” Not so coincidentally, perhaps, JFK’s murder and Nikita Khrushchev’s Politburo ouster in 1964 (the year of the film’s actual release), ended a post-Cuban Missile Crisis-Almost Armageddon (October 1962) apotheosis by both leaders to prevent another nuclear crisis. They cooperated in an earnest effort to prevent another visit to the brink of extinction by working to end the Cold War and reverse the nuclear arms race in favor of

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peaceful coexistence. The results of their labors cannot be underestimated—the Hot Line Agreement and the Limited Test Ban Treaty.

Today in 2014, “Dr. Strangelove,” along with other antiwar films like “Fail Safe,” “The Sum of All Fears,” “On the Beach,” “War Games,” and “Olympus Has Fallen,” remind us that all of humanity must acknowledge that nuclear war is not a blast from the past or an obsolete fear from a remote period in history. It is a real-life current and future threat to our global civilization—indeed to our species’ continued existence on this planet.

But has anyone studied the actual possibilities of a nuclear Armageddon? Aside from Dr. Strangelove’s analysis discussing a study on nuclear war made by “the Bland Corporation” (which is obviously a reference to the real-life Rand Corporation), the answer is a definitive “yes.” According to Ike Jeane’s 1996 book *Forecast and Solution: Grappling with the Nuclear*, the risks of large-scale nuclear war average about 1-2 percent per year, down from a high of 2-3 percent annually during the Cold War (1945-1991). But Dr. Martin Hellman of Stanford and other analysts believe that as more decades pass since the only recorded use of nuclear weapons in combat (Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945), the probability may increase to ten percent over the duration of this century.5

While President Barack Obama has called for the elimination of nuclear weapons, so too have past American leaders as diverse politically as Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, and Ralph Nader. Meanwhile thousands of nuclear warheads—90-plus percent in the hands of America and Russia—still exist in global arsenals. Both countries continue to spend tens of billions of dollars annually to update, improve, and modernize their nuclear forces. For example, U.S. submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs) have increased dramatically in accuracy from a 12 percent chance of destroying a hardened Russian missile silo to 90-98 percent effectiveness; thus giving these weapons a highly effective “kill” probability and putting pressure on Russia to launch its silo-based ballistic missiles on warning of attack. While U.S. missile “defenses” may soon include “Rods from God,” 20-30 foot long, two-foot wide tungsten cylinders fired from U.S. Air Force space-based assets, the Russians have also upgraded their aging Cold War arsenal by building dozens of new Topol-M ICBMs and Bulava SLBMs.

Substantial progress in reducing this Armageddon threat cannot be accomplished until decades-long objections by overly conservative members of Congress, the Russian Duma and both nations’ military leadership are lifted. Such multilateral, verifiable (new technologies make this relatively easy to achieve), measures include a global comprehensive nuclear test ban (laboratory sub-critical nuclear tests not excluded), and the standing down from heightened alert levels of not only Russian and

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5 Dr. Hellman is also the Adjunct Senior Fellow for Nuclear Risk Analysis at FAS; please see his website [http://nuclearrisk.org/](http://nuclearrisk.org/)
American strategic and tactical nuclear weapons but those of China, France, Britain, Israel, Pakistan and India. This would transition all sides’ dangerous nuclear weapons from the physical capability of being fired in 15 minutes or less to 72 hours or longer—don’t we at least deserve three days to think about it before we destroy the world? We also need an accelerated global zero nuclear reduction agreement as well as an essential, little-mentioned but critically important move that the mainstream corporate media has rarely granted its stamp of legitimacy. This would be a unanimous United Nations demand as voiced by leaders in America and Russia, for the phase-out of all nuclear power plants, research as well as production facilities (with the exception of a handful of super-guarded medical radioisotope manufacturing and storage facilities) in the next 10-15 years.

Eliminating not just existing stocks of nuclear weapons, but also all of the 400 global nuclear power facilities is the trump card in the deck of human long-term survival. There are numerous issues including: proliferation, nuclear accidents, the long-term sequestration of tremendous amounts of deadly nuclear wastes, the economic non-competitiveness of nuclear energy, and the realization that nuclear plants are not a viable, safe or reasonable solution to global warming especially in the long term (since plutonium-239 has a half-life of an amazing duration of more than 20,000 years)! Dr. Strangelove’s circular slide rule-assisted calculation requiring humanity to survive the war by remaining in deep underground mineshaft spaces for merely a century was ergo a definite miscalculation—sorry Herr Merkwurdichliebe.

Five decades later, the hauntingly humorous end title lyrics and music of “Dr. Strangelove,” accompanied by actual images of awesome Cold War-era nuclear tests, serves as a read-between-the-lines warning to the human race: “We’ll meet again, don’t know where, don’t know when, but I know we’ll meet again some sunny day.” Nuclear weapons and nuclear power – indistinguishable in terms of the deadly threat to our species – must be eliminated now before it is too late. A penultimate but overwhelmingy appropriate edit of George C. Scott’s last line in the film is especially relevant here. “We must not allow a nuclear Armageddon!”

Additional Sources


6 Dr. Strangelove’s original native German moniker as revealed by a presidential aide to General Turgidson in the War Room.


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