

## CHAPTER 4

### THE AFTER-LIFE OF THE FILM

In the last twenty years, Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove or: How I learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964) has been used as a reference for students of the cold war and critics of U.S. foreign and nuclear policies. Historians have referred to the film as a symbolic and significant commentary on the arms race, and, as such, it has emerged as an important icon in the culture of the cold war. The meaning of the film for journalists and the public has changed over time. During the Reagan administration, authors referred to contemporary figures as "Dr. Strangeloves," suggesting they were inclined to wage nuclear war. Journalists also referred to the motion picture when identifying an era or a possible scenario in which the threat of nuclear war was high. During the presidency of George W. Bush, the film was invoked once again to suggest that a president wished to wage nuclear war without any consideration of the dangers such action posed to the world. Most recently, critics of Bush's policy toward Iraq have invoked *Dr. Strangelove* to question the wisdom of the president's policies. This new Dr. Strangelove loved war in general, conventional and nuclear. No other film has left a political legacy like *Dr. Strangelove*. Kubrick's comedy has become a part of everyday discourse about American foreign policy and nuclear strategies.

Historians have utilized *Dr. Strangelove* in a variety of ways. The first essays on the film by Charles Maland and Lawrence Suid, both scholars of film studies, attempted to explain Kubrick's message and the significance of the film in 1964. *Dr. Strangelove* has since been incorporated into historical studies of the cold war and US foreign policy.

Historians have also incorporated the film into their studies of the culture of the cold war. Furthermore, the growing practice of employing films in the classroom has included the use of *Dr. Strangelove* in many high school and university courses.

In *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History* (1997), John Lewis Gaddis, an eminent historian of U.S. foreign policy and the cold war utilized *Dr. Strangelove* as a metaphor for Soviet and U.S. nuclear strategies. Gaddis argued that politicians were forced to appear tough and willing to use nuclear weapons even though such a posture could lead to the destruction of civilization. He commented that “the play upon which Stanley Kubrick based his film had been running for quite some time.”<sup>1</sup> Governments continued to develop more destructive weapons, not for their military uses but rather their psychological impact on the enemy. Gaddis labeled this policy “Strangelovian,” which he defined as the faith that weapons of mass destruction could serve a purpose beyond their military uses.<sup>2</sup> According to Gaddis, *Dr. Strangelove* exemplified the madness of the nuclear policies employed by the Soviet Union and the United States.

Cultural historians have analyzed the film to explain its significance in the discourse on the cold war. Stephen Whitfield devoted a small portion of his work, *The Culture of the Cold War* (1996), to the motion picture, placing it amidst what he perceived as a period of thawing in cold war tensions. The film challenged American views of the war on communism. Whitfield argued that the production of *Dr. Strangelove* marked the end of government control over cultural expressions of the cold war. Without

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<sup>1</sup> John Lewis Gaddis, *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 258.

<sup>2</sup> Gaddis, *We Now Know*, 231.

government support, which had been given to most war films produced during and after World War II, Kubrick constructed a realistic, biting story about nuclear war.<sup>3</sup>

In a more detailed analysis, Margot Henriksen has argued that *Dr. Strangelove* marked a turning point in the culture of dissent against U.S. nuclear policies. In *Dr. Strangelove's America: Society and Culture in the Atomic Age* (1997), Henriksen maintained that two distinct cultures were created by the development of the atom bomb, the culture of conformity and the culture of dissent. According to Henriksen, the culture of dissent challenged American dependence upon nuclear weapons, highlighting the disorder the bomb created and warning of the destruction it represented. She traced the culture of dissent following the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, which, prior to the release of *Dr. Strangelove*, often took indirect forms, illustrating doomed state of the world. Cultural expressions of dissent were hindered by the investigations of the House Committee on Un-American Activities and rampant patriotism. *Dr. Strangelove* and Kurt Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle* (1963) were emblematic of the new openness of the culture of dissent following the Berlin crisis in 1961 and the Cuban missile crisis. These crises led some Americans to question the handling of the war on communism. Kubrick publicly destroyed the myth that America's security was protected by the government, military, and nuclear strategies.<sup>4</sup> Henriksen utilized the film as a benchmark in the short history of dissent against the bomb and as a label suggesting the film's impact on subsequent cultural expressions in the 1960s. After 1964, the United States became what Henriksen

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<sup>3</sup> Stephen J. Whitfield, *The Culture of the Cold War* (Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University, 1996), 218-225.

<sup>4</sup> Margot Henriksen, *Dr. Strangelove's America: Society and Culture in the Atomic Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), xx, xxiii, xxvi.

called “Dr. Strangelove’s America” in which criticism of nuclear policies and their effects on the public were criticized and debated without fear of reprove.<sup>5</sup>

*Dr. Strangelove* has also been used as an educational tool by history professors and teachers. A variety of essays and monographs have been published advocating the use of films in the classroom, most notably *Image as Artifact: The Historical Analysis of Film and Television* edited by John E. O’Connor.<sup>6</sup> The summer 2002 issue of the *Magazine of History*, published by the Organization of American Historians, featured essays instructing teachers how to utilize films in the classroom. One article proposed that *Dr. Strangelove* could provide students with a better understanding of the cold war and the arms race.<sup>7</sup> By guiding students through Kubrick’s satire, instructors have been able to expose students to a memorable criticism of US nuclear policies and images that have been associated with specific US military officials and strategists.

While historians have analyzed the film in conjunction with events surrounding the film’s release, journalists have referred to *Dr. Strangelove* when discussing contemporary events and figures. Beginning in the Reagan era, journalists referred to *Dr. Strangelove* to suggest that government leaders wished to wage nuclear war. In 1981, *Washington Monthly* editor Jonathan Alter published an article entitled “Reagan’s Dr. Strangelove.” The article made no other mention of the film after the title. Alter referred to the film to make a comment about his subject, Richard Pipes, President Ronald

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<sup>5</sup> Henriksen, *Dr. Strangelove’s America*, 309, 369.

<sup>6</sup> John E. O’Connor, ed., *Image as Artifact: The Historical Analysis of Film and Television* (Malabar, Florida: R.E. Krieger Publishing Company 1990).

<sup>7</sup> J. Vincent Lowery, “*Dr. Strangelove*: Or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Teach the Film in the Classroom,” *OAH Magazine of History* (summer 2002): 32-36.

Reagan's senior advisor on Soviet and Eastern European affairs.<sup>8</sup> After nearly a decade of détente, the Reagan administration sought to "roll back" Soviet influence around the world. Reagan operated on the assumption that the relaxation of tensions between the Soviet Union and the United States had allowed the Soviets to extend their sphere of influence and gain qualitative and quantitative nuclear superiority. He chose to rearm the US and increase the size of the nation's conventional forces in order to force the Soviets to negotiate political and military treaties that reduced the Soviets' international influence.<sup>9</sup> Alter labeled Pipes a "superhawk" whose advice favored this build-up and an armed conflict. He said Pipes lacked evidence pertaining to Soviet conduct. Alter referred to the film in order to suggest that Pipes could create a situation similar to the scenario depicted in *Dr. Strangelove*.<sup>10</sup>

Journalists have referred to *Dr. Strangelove* when discussing nuclear strategies to convey the possibility of a nuclear apocalypse created by those strategies. Bruce Van Voorst's July 1990 article entitled "America's Doomsday Machine", featured in *Time* magazine, suggested that the "spirit of Dr. Strangelove" outlived the cold war. Van Voorst revealed that the American Single Integrated Operational Plan (SIOP), the list of nuclear targets inside the Soviet Union allowed the United States to destroy the Soviet Union despite President Bush's claims about his "peaceful" intentions. The article invoked *Dr. Strangelove* to suggest that President George Bush and the United States employed an out-dated and dangerous nuclear strategy. According to Van Voorst, the

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<sup>8</sup> Jonathan Alter, "Reagan's Dr. Strangelove," *Washington Monthly* (June 1981).

<sup>9</sup> John Lewis Gaddis, *The United States and the End of the Cold War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 122-125.

<sup>10</sup> Jonathan Alter, "Reagan's Dr. Strangelove."

threat of nuclear war and the policy of nuclear annihilation still existed despite the collapse of communism in most parts of the world.<sup>11</sup>

Similar references to the film appeared in newspapers around the world as Russia and the United States negotiated an arms reduction agreement. These references suggested that an era of nuclear peril had subsided. Less than a year after Van Voorst's article appeared, the Pentagon proposed changes in U.S. nuclear strategy, including the removal of up to 2,000 targets in the Soviet Union and former Warsaw Pact countries. This plan accompanied proposals to reduce Russian and U.S. nuclear arsenals. The *Los Angeles Times* featured this story in an article entitled "Dr. Strangelove Takes a Break."<sup>12</sup> The newspaper referred to the US nuclear strategy as the creation of Strangelove, or rather men who believed in the policy of mutually assured destruction despite its threat to the peaceful coexistence of the Soviet Union and the United States. A year later, the *Los Angeles Times* referred to *Dr. Strangelove* again. The newspaper published an article entitled "Waving Goodby [sic] to Dr. Strangelove," in which it reported that Soviet leader Boris Yeltsin and President George Bush had reached an agreement that would reduce American and Soviet nuclear arsenals and alter the types of weapons in the remaining stockpiles in order to eliminate the possibility of a first strike.<sup>13</sup> The title of the article suggested that the superpowers had finally taken steps to eliminate the possibility of nuclear war Kubrick had envisioned.

Even when the threat of nuclear war appeared to have subsided, *The Times* [London] warned in October 1993 that the Soviets had developed an automated missile

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<sup>11</sup> Bruce Van Voorst, "America's Doomsday Machine," *Time*, 16 July 1990, 19.

<sup>12</sup> "Dr. Strangelove Takes a Break," *Los Angeles Times*, 22 April 1991, B4.

system. Wolfgang Munchau warned readers that the Soviets' automated system and its fallibility was reminiscent of Kubrick's doomsday machine.<sup>14</sup> His reference to the film suggested that the cold war had not necessarily ended with the fall of communism, and the world's fate might still be bleak as long as the United States and Russia constructed such deadly weapons. Munchau invoked to *Dr. Strangelove* to conjure up Kubrick's images of an accidental nuclear war in a world gone mad.

Without providing readers any details about the film, these articles referred to *Dr. Strangelove*, marking its meaning implicit in the nuclear lexicon. The authors assumed that readers were familiar with the film. They referenced the motion picture as if anyone interested in the arms race and nuclear strategy remembered and understood Kubrick's message.

President George W. Bush's decision to build a large-scale missile defense system in 2001 caused some Americans to recall the warnings implied in *Dr. Strangelove*. They drew comparisons between characters' actions and the current administration's nuclear policies. Abandoning the treaties signed with the Soviet Union, Bush announced his intention to protect the United States from foreign threats. President Reagan originally proposed that the United States develop a strategic defense system, in violation of the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty signed with the Soviet Union. Reagan claimed that the Soviets had violated the ABM Treaty and the United States lacked the necessary protection from a Soviet attack. Reagan was responsible for a massive increase in

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<sup>13</sup> "Waving Goodby [sic] to Dr. Strangelove" *Los Angeles Times*, 18 June 1992, B4.

<sup>14</sup> Wolfgang Munchau, "Russia Holds Strangelove Key to Global Obliteration," *The Times*, 9 October 1993, 12.

military spending and nuclear arms research and development.<sup>15</sup> Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger and scientific advisor Edward Teller, one of the objects of Kubrick's criticism in 1964, supported the plan wholeheartedly, believing that the nation depended on SDI in order to survive. Historian Walter LaFeber has suggested that Reagan ignored the advice of officials in the Pentagon and scientists who doubted that the system could work and warned that SDI would destabilize Soviet-American relations. A missile defense system would allow the US to attack the Soviet Union without fear of retaliation.<sup>16</sup> President George W. Bush resurrected this defense system in 2001 in order to protect the US from foreign and terrorist threats. Critics of Bush's missile defense proposals echoed the arguments made against Reagan's defense proposals.

Michael Byers, a professor of international law at Duke University, called Bush's decision the "Return of Dr. Strangelove" in the title of his article on Bush's missile defense plan. Byers contended that Bush's decision to abandon defense through mutual deterrence marked the rebirth of the arms race. The author claimed that the construction of a missile defense system would "thrust [the world] back into the 1960s: Dr. Strangelove, the Cuban missile crisis, and all."<sup>17</sup> Without referring to the details of the film, Byers communicated his belief that Bush would foster insecurity by constructing a defense system and could lead the world back to the brink of nuclear war that Stanley Kubrick exposed in 1964.

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<sup>15</sup> Walter LaFeber, *America, Russia, and the Cold War, 1945-1990* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1991), 302-304.

<sup>16</sup> LaFeber, 304-305; Hans-Henrik Holm, "Star Wars," *Journal of Peace Research* 23 (March 1986): 1-8; Michael Charlton, *From Deterrence to Defence: The Inside Story of Strategic Policy* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1987), 95, 97.

<sup>17</sup> Michael Byers, "The Return of Dr. Strangelove," *Independent on Sunday*, 6 May 2001, 21.



Letters to the editors addressed who deserved the moniker “Dr. Strangelove” for endangering world peace. In a letter to the editor of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, Christian Stolz made a similar observation, suggesting that “Strangelove’s disciples, led by Donald Rumsfeld, Dick Cheney, and George W. Bush” had falsely concluded that the US could survive a nuclear attack. Stolz worried that these men would lead the world into the scenario Kubrick suggested, “when somebody twitches with a nuclear trigger.”<sup>18</sup> Rather than referring to Bush as Dr. Strangelove, as some critics had after Bush announced his missile defense program, an editorial printed in the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* suggested that Bush’s missile defense plan protected America from “the real, maniacal Dr. Strangeloves.”<sup>19</sup> This editorial proposed that the men willing to destroy the world threatened US security. The debate about the soundness of US nuclear policies that surrounded the release of *Dr. Strangelove* was repeated in 2001, during which time journalists and the public argued about who had placed the world in jeopardy.

Daniel Sneider, national-foreign editor for the *San Jose Mercury News* warned that Bush’s missile plan would resurrect the arms race just as Reagan’s program had in the early 1980s. Sneider warned readers that Bush’s advisors sought to develop new types of nuclear weapons and renew testing of those weapons. Advisors at Los Alamos National Laboratory and Sandia National Laboratories called for the development of nuclear weapons to deter China and Russia from developing nuclear weapons and defend the US against the “Axis of Evil,” Iran, Iraq, and North Korea. Sneider warned that the

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<sup>18</sup>“Letters to the Editor,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 9 May 2001, B6.

<sup>19</sup> “America’s Defense,” *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, 17 May 2001, A14.

US planned to fight and win a nuclear war, pursuing the same strategy followed by Turgidson and Ripper to the apocalypse.<sup>20</sup>

President Bush's plans for an armed conflict with Iraq caused some critics to invoke *Dr. Strangelove* to warn the public of the possible ramifications of a nuclear strike against Iraq. In a letter to the editor of the *Los Angeles Times*, Ardis Dahl proposed that Dr. Strangelove was "alive and living in the White House." Dahl reacted negatively to Bush's willingness to consider using nuclear weapons in a preemptive strike against Iraq. Dahl invoked the film to question Bush's willingness to attack Iraq, marking the growing use of the film to include the criticism of warmongering.<sup>21</sup>

In January 2003, a play entitled "Dr. Strangelove goes to Iraq: The Madness of George Dubya" opened at the London theater Threatro Technis. British playwright Justin Butcher applied the premise of *Dr. Strangelove* to the proposed war on Iraq. In Butcher's reinterpretation, a crazed US Air Force commander launched a preemptive nuclear strike against Iraq, having determined that UN weapons inspectors were "pinko" and untrustworthy. Butcher borrowed much of Kubrick's story, including characters and dialogue.<sup>22</sup> The retelling of *Dr. Strangelove* as a contemporary crisis suggests that audiences had discovered universal applications for Kubrick's criticisms of US cold war policies. The film was simultaneously applied to American's expansion of the war on terrorism and US nuclear policies.

Since its release nearly forty years ago, *Dr. Strangelove* has become a part of the language of nuclear debate. The film has enjoyed renewed attention since the Reagan

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<sup>20</sup> Daniel Sneider, "Quiet moves toward new weapons, testing and strategy invoke new threats," *San Jose Mercury News*, 19 June 2001.

<sup>21</sup> "Dr. Strangelove Is Living in the White House," *Los Angeles Times*, 28 January 2003.

administration reinvigorated the cold war and the second Bush administration's return to Reagan-era nuclear policies and Bush's engagement in war on Iraq. Critics have invoked the film to illustrate what they perceive as deadly policy decisions, the same reason why Kubrick created *Dr. Strangelove*. As Butcher's production suggested, the death of the Soviet Union did not diminish the possibility of Kubrick's scenario and what critics have deemed flaws in US foreign policies.

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<sup>22</sup> Michael Billington, "Review: Theatre: Dr. Strangelove goes to Iraq: The Madness of George Dubya: Teatro Technis, London," *The Guardian*, 17 January 2003, 20.