

# Dr. Strangelove or: A Satirical Commentary on the Cold War

By Drew Burge

Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* was released January 29, 1964. It was a turbulent time in American history. John F. Kennedy's assassination had occurred only two months prior,[1] and just a year before that, in October of 1962, the Cuban Missile Crisis had brought the United States and the Soviet Union to the brink of nuclear war.[2] This Crisis was part of a broader confrontation between these two superpowers known as the Cold War when the people of the United States of America were being whipped regularly into a frenzy of anti-communist paranoia through the use of propaganda. Times were tense for the American public in the years leading up to *Dr. Strangelove's* release. In response, Stanley Kubrick directed, produced, and wrote *Dr. Strangelove* to illuminate through the use of satire the fears, realities, and anxieties of being alive during the Cold War from a Western perspective.

Stanley Kubrick's satire of the political situation contemporary to the release of the film is evident early on. In the movie, the character of General Ripper is in charge at the Burpelson Air Force Base where it housed a fleet of B-52 bombers equipped with nuclear bombs. Ripper orders his second in command, Captain Mandrake, to send all his B-52s currently in the air on a mission to Russia. During their conversation, however, Mandrake realizes that General Ripper is acting without orders from the Pentagon. Mandrake then tries to stop Ripper, but the General locks both of them inside his office. It is at this point that Ripper's lunacy becomes apparent; Ripper explains to Mandrake that he believes the Soviets have been contaminating American water supplies through fluoridation to pollute the American peoples' "precious bodily fluids." [3] In response, Ripper has ordered his fleet of B-52s to drop their nuclear bombs on Russia in a pre-emptive strike. By the end of the movie, General Ripper's actions have triggered a world-ending, nuclear, war.

Considering this, as well as the state of international affairs during and leading up to the mid-1960's, it is clear that Kubrick's General Ripper is a commentary on how effortlessly one unhinged individual could cause the end of the world. Kubrick saw the ridiculousness of a situation in which one person can decide to go to nuclear war because he saw that that was a decision that could destroy the entire planet. General Ripper demonstrates ridiculousness in his unstable

and unjustifiably, paranoid, impulsive, decision to attack Russia on nonsensical pretenses. Stanley Kubrick had initially intended for the film to be a serious drama. His explanation for changing his approach to the film and its characters was that “nuclear war was too outrageous, too fantastic to be treated in any conventional manner,” and that he could only see it as “some kind of hideous joke.”[4] *Dr. Strangelove* was meant to illuminate through the use of satire the state of political affairs during the Cold War.

In a subsequent scene that takes place in the Pentagon’s War Room, President, Merkin Muffley, his highest-ranking military officers, and intelligence personnel gathered. General Turgidson briefs President Muffley as to the actions that General Ripper took, and explains at this point to both the President and the audience that General Ripper has set in motion an attack plan known as “Plan R.”, According to General Turgidson, this is an action that allows a pre-determined high-ranking military officer to launch a nuclear strike. However, Turgidson explains how this plan’s enactment should only happen if Soviet missiles have already taken out this officer’s superiors. It is at this point that a Russian ambassador present in the room speaks up, and informs President Muffley of the presence of a Soviet “Doomsday Device” with a computer controlled detonation mechanism that will automatically destroy the world in the event of a nuclear strike on Russia.

In this scene, Kubrick is directly referencing an actual policy that the United States and Soviet governments held during this period known as Mutually Assured Destruction. The plan formed once it was clear that both the Soviets and the Americans had enough nuclear weapons to destroy each other, therefore creating a situation in which in the event of a nuclear strike, neither nation had the upper hand over the other. Both governments, therefore, resolved to, if attacked with nuclear weapons, counter with an attack of their own strong enough to ensure the total annihilation of the aggressor nation.[5] Also referred to as mutual deterrence, this created a stalemate where there was no incentive for one side to attack the other. For most of the people watching the film first released in 1964, the War Room scene discussed the Doomsday device perhaps would have made them think a little bit harder about their nation’s policies towards the Cold War. It would have illuminated to viewers through the use of satire that in the event of a nuclear war there would be no winners, and likely made viewers question the arms buildup that was occurring during this time.

The next scene takes place back at Burpelson Air Force Base. After General Ripper kills himself to prevent anyone from being able to extract the cancellation code for the mission from him, Captain Mandrake can find it

written on the underside of Ripper's desk. He relays the code to the Pentagon, and all of the B-52s are called off from their mission, except one of the B-52s communications systems has been destroyed by a missile, so they continue with their mission. Kubrick is showing here how potentially dangerous it could be to have all of these failsafe, pre-determined, and pre-programmed courses of action that would take place almost automatically in the event of a nuclear. In this instance, it becomes apparent how in a situation like that, something as simple as one airplane's severed communications can lead to the end of the world. Kubrick was illustrating that despite the movie having an over the top feel to it, it, depicts a hypothetical but entirely plausible chain of events that can lead to nuclear holocaust and the destruction of the planet. In Kubrick's film up to this point, all it has taken to bring the world to the brink of extinction is one rogue general and one destroyed communications device. While Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove* is undoubtedly a comedy, scenes like this would have seriously illuminated the flaws of Cold War policies such as Mutually Assured Destruction.

The character of Dr. Strangelove himself served as a commentary on some of the policies enacted and actions taken by the United States in the years leading up to the film's release. In the motion picture, he is a German ex-Nazi scientist who serves an advisory role in the War Room. During the movie, the character of Dr. Strangelove accidentally refers to the President as "Mein Führer" on multiple occasions, and also struggles to contain a compulsive urge to thrust one of his hands up and outward in a Nazi salute with increasing regularity towards the end of the film. A direct reference to Operation Paperclip which was a program run by the United States government after World War II that recruited top ex-Nazi scientists and brought them to the United States to work on things like the development of nuclear weapons.[6] Stanley Kubrick brought to light here the fact that many of the individuals who were responsible for outlining our nation's defense policies during this period were in fact characters such as Wernher von Braun. Bruan had been instrumental in developing the Nazi's V-2 rocket-powered ballistic missile which was the world's first long-range (by contemporary standards) missile with a range of almost 200 miles, and its use by the Germans terrorized the British during WWII.[7] By doing this, Kubrick was reminding the American public of the actions its government had taken in recent years. The effects of people like Wernher von Braun, were who employed by the United States government, only active and facilitated the state of international affairs at the time of the film's release in 1964 through the development of weapons technology.

Apart from its commentary on the Cold War and the implications of ex-Nazi involvement in U.S. nuclear policies at the time, there is a noticeable lack of

female characters in the film. In this way, the film was a product of its time; its predominant settings are a military base, the inside of a B-52 bomber, and the Pentagon's War Room, all places where women hardly were involved during this time in American history. However, there is one female character in the film. Miss Scott, the bikini-clad mistress of General Buck Turgidson, appears in one scene and is overtly sexualized. While this may be offensive to many, it is important to remember that Stanley Kubrick was making this film for satirical purposes. In the scene with Miss Scott and General Turgidson, Miss Scott complains that the General has spent too much time in the War Room and not enough time paying attention to her. This scene was not meant to sexualize Miss Scott just for sex appeal. It was intended to illuminate that the individuals with the responsibility of being in charge of America's nuclear program were not beyond reproach or void of human desires that could influence their decision-making capabilities. Kubrick was demonstrating to the American public that Turgidson is an imperfect being, just like everybody else. Nonetheless, the unfortunate reality of the film is that the only female character in it is blatantly sexualized.

*Dr. Strangelove* provides social commentary on the realities of being alive in the West during the Cold War. Even though Columbia Pictures heavily edited it before its release in 1964, the film attained immediate recognition from critics as well as audiences[8] and continues to be one of the most highly regarded films ever made.[9] Kubrick's film was one that the American public was ready. The manner in which he ridiculed such severe topics as the nuclear holocaust was as successful as it was well received. For these reasons, Stanley Kubrick achieved the political satire that he sought when he made his film, and successfully illuminated the dark realities of living through the Cold War from the perspective of the West.

## **Endnotes**

[1] Nero, Nick M. *JFK : Assassination Rehearsal*. New York: Algora Publishing, 2014.

[2] Schaff, Marta. *Cuban Missile Crisis*. 2009.

[3] *Dr. Strangelove Or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*. Directed by Stanley Kubrick. Produced by Victor Lyndon and Peter Sellers. Written by Terry Southern, Peter George, and Wally Veevers. Performed by Peter Sellers, George C. Scott.

[4] Southern, Terry. "Strangelove Outtake: Notes from the War Room." *Grand Street*, no.

[5] Kaplan, Edward. *To Kill Nations: American Strategy in the Air-Atomic Age and the Rise of Mutually Assured Destruction*. Ithaca: Cornell University, 2015.

[6] Jacobsen, Annie. *Operation Paperclip: The Secret Intelligence Program to Bring Nazi Scientists to America*. First ed. 2014.

[7] Griffiths, Hugh. "Radar Detection and Tracking of German V-2 Rocket Launches in WW2." *IEEE Aerospace and Electronic Systems Magazine* 28, no. 3 (March 2013).

[8] "The 37th Academy Awards | 1965." Oscars.org | Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. Accessed April 26, 2018.

[9] "Stanley Kubrick." Rotten Tomatoes. Accessed April 26, 2018.

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