For more than forty years, the nuclear reality penetrated every stratum of American life, including mass culture. This was especially true during three cycles of sharpened public anxiety about the hazards of the nuclear age: (1) the immediate postwar years; (2) the period from 1954 to 1963, when the dangers of radioactive fallout loomed large; and (3) the surge of nuclear fear and activism that erupted during President Ronald Reagan's first term. Stanley Kubrick's celebrated film Dr. Strangelove was a product of the second of these periods. When the Society of American Historians in 1994 planned a collection of essays on the way the movies have handled historical events, the opportunity arose for me to take a closer look at Kubrick's masterpiece. This chapter is adapted from my essay in the resulting volume, Past Imperfect: History according to the Movies (New York: Henry Holt, 1995).
This may seem like a scene from Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove,* but it really happened. During the October 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, the White House received a long, almost incoherent message from Nikita Khrushchev, prompting President John F. Kennedy's top decision makers to wonder whether the Soviet leader was drunk. To a greater extent than many might believe, *Dr. Strangelove* faithfully mirrors this historic epoch, in which the world's fate often seemed hostage to accident, miscalculation, and human fallibility.

Of course, *Dr. Strangelove* is not a historical movie in the conventional sense. The precise events it portrays never actually occurred. But this black comedy does have historical resonances. It captures a specific moment and offers a satiric but recognizable portrait of the era's strategic thinking and cultural climate. Its director, Stanley Kubrick, and his co-writers convey all too accurately the weird logic of deterrence theory, the paranoia of the Cold War, and the nuclear jitters of the early 1960s.

Atomic fear, having diminished somewhat from the immediate post-Hiroshima level, increased dramatically after 1954 as hydrogen-bomb tests in the Pacific spread deadly radioactive fallout across parts of North America. While activists demanded a test ban, novelists, magazine editors, science-fiction writers, and moviemakers publicized the threat. Neville Shute's *On the Beach* (1957), made into a bleak 1959 movie by Stanley Kramer, was one product of this apprehension.

Fear intensified during the early 1960s, as President John F. Kennedy, having charged in his 1960 campaign that America faced a "missile gap," approved a nuclear buildup to close it. After sparring with Khrushchev over Berlin in July 1961, Kennedy warned Americans of the dangers of nuclear war and called for an urgent program of fallout-shelter construction. Schoolchildren hid under desks during nuclear drills and, in an animated civil-defense film, learned from Bert the Turtle to "duck and cover." The Cuban Missile Crisis was only the most frightening of a long series of events that made the nuclear threat terrifyingly real. *Dr. Strangelove,* released in January 1964, grew out of this accumulation of nuclear alarms.

*Dr. Strangelove,* however, does more than just reflect the general nuclear anxiety of the time; it also offers insight into the strategic debates of the day. During the 1950s, U.S. policymakers developed deterrence
theory as the surest means of avoiding a nuclear war. The fear of massive retaliation, they argued, offered the most credible deterrent to nuclear attack. But how could such a retaliatory threat remain credible if an attacker could destroy the command-and-control centers responsible for launching the counterattack? This dilemma led to studies of automated response systems requiring no human intervention. In *On Thermo-nuclear War* (1960) and *Thinking about the Unthinkable* (1962), RAND Corporation strategist Herman Kahn coolly discussed (though ultimately rejected) such a strategy. This arcane debate fascinated Kubrick—in 1963, he wrote that he owned “70 or 80 books” on nuclear strategy—and in *Dr. Strangelove* he translated that fascination into black comedy.

*Dr. Strangelove* was actually one of two 1964 movies that explored the theme of accidental nuclear devastation. The other, *Fail-Safe*, was based on a best-selling 1962 novel by Harvey Wheeler and Eugene Burdick. While *Dr. Strangelove* presented nuclear holocaust as black comedy, *Fail-Safe* played the story straight. Although directed by Sidney Lumet and starring Henry Fonda as the president of the United States, *Fail-Safe* did not capture the public imagination. Instead, it was Kubrick’s sardonic version of Armageddon, not Lumet’s earnest treatment, that became a classic.

Kubrick, too, based his movie on a recently published novel of Cold War nuclear crisis, Peter George’s *Two Hours to Doom* (1958), issued in the United States as *Red Alert*. Up to a point, *Dr. Strangelove* closely follows the plot of George’s novel, in which a demented SAC commander orders the 843rd Bomber Wing to launch a nuclear attack on the Soviet Union, unaware that the Russians have deployed an automated retaliation system. But Kubrick made a crucial change in the ending: In *Two Hours to Doom*, the nuclear bomber crashes, and humankind is spared. In the novel’s final paragraph, the U.S. president, shaken by the close brush with disaster, pledges to devote the remainder of his term to the search for peace. Kubrick offered no such pat ending or heavy-handed didactic message. Faithful to his darkly comic vision, he grimly followed the ultimate logic of deterrence theory to its horrifying conclusion.

Kubrick portrays a nuclear holocaust arising from the intersection of contemporary nuclear strategy and human fallibility. The action begins as General Jack D. Ripper (Sterling Hayden), in charge of a Strategic Air
Command unit at Burpelson Air Force Base, launches an unauthorized nuclear attack on Russia. Under the provisions of Wing Attack Plan R, designed as a retaliatory safeguard should Washington be destroyed, only General Ripper has the code necessary to recall the planes. When President Merkin Muffley contacts an inebriated Soviet premier Kissov to warn him of the danger, we learn that the Soviets have built a “doomsday machine.” In the event of a U.S. attack, this huge bomb will automatically explode, creating a vast shroud of radioactive fallout that will encircle the earth and kill all life on the planet.

In a brilliant tour de force, the actor Peter Sellers plays a triumvirate of characters: the phlegmatic President Muffley, General Ripper's terrified British aide, Group Captain Lionel Mandrake, and the titular Dr. Strangelove, a former Nazi who changed his name from Unwertigliebe after the war. President Muffley often calls on Strangelove, as the Pentagon's top weapons guru, to explain the intricacies of nuclear strategy. In creating this horribly disabled but ever-smiling character, Kubrick combined parodic elements of Henry Kissinger, the physicist Edward Teller, and the former Nazi rocket scientist Wernher von Braun, each of whom played a central role in U.S. Cold War nuclear policy-making and scientific technology.

Long before he became President Richard Nixon's top foreign-policy adviser, Henry Kissinger had made a reputation for himself as a diplomatic historian and then as a nuclear strategist. His book *A World Restored* (1957) was a scholarly study of Viscount Castlereagh, the conservative statesman who reordered Europe after Napoleon, and it won him a professorship at Harvard. Turning from history to contemporary strategic issues in *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy* (1957), Kissinger urged the United States to deploy a variety of tactical nuclear weapons to provide additional deterrence in the face of the Soviet threat. In *The Necessity for Choice* (1961), picking up on John Kennedy's 1960 campaign theme, he warned darkly of a growing "missile gap" that invited Soviet expansionism and even nuclear blackmail of the United States.

Edward Teller, a Hungarian Jew who, like Kissinger, fled Europe after Hitler's rise to power, was a brilliant physicist who worked during the war on the Manhattan Project. While at Los Alamos, Teller became convinced of the feasibility of a far more powerful thermonuclear
weapon. At California’s Lawrence Livermore Laboratory, he oversaw the development and 1952 testing of the first hydrogen bomb. An avid Cold Warrior, he used his considerable influence to push for expansion of America’s nuclear arsenal, fiercely opposing the 1963 limited test ban treaty. He also promoted such visionary and controversial schemes to use atomic energy for peacetime purposes as the ill-fated marine engineering scheme, Project Chariot (see chapter 6). Teller—whose piercing, deep-set eyes and beetling eyebrows gave him something of the sinister appearance of a stage villain—epitomized the politicized scientists who helped drive the nuclear arms race forward. Antiwar critics recognized his power and in 1970 sardonically presented him with the Dr. Strangelove Award.

Wernher von Braun, blond, blue-eyed, and handsome, was a twenty-one-year-old member of the minor Prussian nobility when Adolf Hitler came to power in 1933. An early rocket enthusiast, the “boy wonder” von Braun became a key technician in the Nazi rocketry program at Peenemünde on the Baltic Sea. Joining the Nazi Party in 1940, he helped persuade Hitler to give the program top priority. In September 1944, the Peenemünde team launched the first V-2 rocket against London. At the war’s end, von Braun fled to Bavaria so he could surrender to the Americans rather than to the Russians. Late in 1945 he signed a contract with the U.S. Army. “The next time, I wanted to be on the winning side,” he later recalled. By 1950 he was stationed at the army’s Redstone Arsenal in Huntsville, Alabama, directing more than a hundred of the German scientists and engineers with whom he had worked in Hitler’s day. Von Braun’s political flexibility and technocratic approach to missile science inspired a parody by songwriter Tom Lehrer, in which von Braun, in a thick German accent, insists that his job is to launch the missiles, not to worry about where they land: “Dot’s not my department, says Wernher von Braun.”

Is Dr. Strangelove historically accurate? In some respects, yes. The information on the U.S. nuclear arsenal and the capability of B-52 bombers is factual. The billboard at Burpelson AFB that proclaims “Peace Is Our Profession” actually adorned some SAC bases. The rantings of General Buck Turgidson (George C. Scott) about “doomsday gaps” and “mine-shaft gaps” directly echo Kennedy’s 1960s “missile gap” rhetoric, and Turgidson’s description of U.S. casualties in a nuclear war
as “get[ting] our hair mussed” caught the lingo of such military men as former SAC commander General Curtis LeMay.

As the near-legendary head of the SAC during the 1950s, the cigar-chomping LeMay provided an easily recognizable archetype for both the grimly fanatical General Ripper and (especially) the bombastic and hyperactive General Turgidson. LeMay never met a bombing plan he didn’t like. In 1957 he told two members of the Gaither Commission, which had been formed to assess U.S. military policy, that if a Soviet attack ever seemed likely, he planned to “knock the shit out of them before they got off the ground.” Reminded that a preemptive first strike was not U.S. policy, LeMay retorted, “No, it’s not national policy, but it’s my policy.”

In 1962, as a member of EXCOM, the top-level team that advised President Kennedy during the Cuban Missile Crisis, LeMay urged a preemptive air strike on missile sites in Cuba, to be followed by an invasion of the island. Retiring from the air force, he ran for vice president in 1968 on a ticket headed by the racist, demagogic governor of Alabama, George C. Wallace. Asked what he would do about the war in Vietnam, LeMay said he would “bomb North Vietnam back into the Stone Age.”

Yet the air force angrily challenged the movie’s basic premise—an attack order that could not be countermanded. Air force crews in such a situation, insisted the Pentagon, would attack only if they received explicit additional instructions confirming the original order. To forestall this official criticism, Kubrick included a notice at the beginning of the film that reads: “IT IS THE STATED POSITION OF THE U.S. AIR FORCE THAT THEIR SAFEGUARDS WOULD PREVENT THE OCCURRENCE OF SUCH EVENTS AS ARE DEPICTED IN THIS FILM.” (No doubt surmising that filmgoers’ thoughts would quickly turn to the likes of Kissinger, Teller, von Braun, and LeMay, Kubrick’s deadpan disclaimer continued: “FURTHERMORE IT SHOULD BE NOTED THAT NONE OF THE CHARACTERS PORTRAYED IN THIS FILM ARE MEANT TO REPRESENT ANY REAL PERSONS LIVING OR DEAD.”) But even if Dr. Strangelove misrepresented U.S. nuclear command policy for dramatic effect, it accurately captured deepening popular uneasiness about science and technology, as well as growing fears of an arms race escalating out of control. As nuclear stockpiles
mounted and intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) cut attack times from hours to minutes, the potential for catastrophe soared.

Though an expatriate living in England, Kubrick brilliantly limned U.S. Cold War paranoia. General Ripper, brooding in his claustrophobic office, is a walking embodiment of free-floating cultural fears. Linking his anti-Communist obsessions to his anxieties about the fluoridation of drinking water, Ripper concludes that only a preemptive strike can save America and assure the continued purity of its citizens' "precious bodily fluids." The scenes in which the world's fate hangs on the availability of a dime for a pay phone and President Muffley's ability to reach Omsk Information epitomize both the horror and the absurdity of the nuclear arms race.

Kubrick was also among the first to explore the macho nature of nuclear strategy, a topic much discussed later by psychiatrists and feminists. (See, for example, Helen Caldicott's *Missile Envy: The Arms Race and Nuclear War* [1984] and Carol Cohn's "Sex and Death in the Rational World of Defense Intellectuals" in the Summer 1987 issue of the feminist journal *Signs*.) The movie's title and most of the characters' names suggest a perverse eroticism, and beginning with the celebrated B-52 refueling sequence behind the opening credits (to the tune of "Try a Little Tenderness"), the movie is saturated with sex. General Ripper grips a phallic cigar while pondering his sexual problems. As the holocaust looms, the ever-resourceful Dr. Strangelove describes how the war room elite might survive in deep mine shafts, where it could replenish the human race by copulating nonstop with voluptuous women chosen for their sexual appeal. And in the movie's finale, the B-52 captain played by Slim Pickens mounts a hydrogen bomb as it plummets earthward, waving his cowboy hat in orgiastic ecstasy.

*Dr. Strangelove* went a long way toward demolishing the traditional war-movie genre. The attack on Burpelson AFB by army troops trying to capture General Ripper is filmed as a grainy newsreel (the entire movie is black-and-white) and staged as a hackneyed combat set piece. Aboard one of the B-52s winging toward Russia, muted drum rolls and the strains of "When Johnny Comes Marching Home Again" echo in the background as Slim Pickens inspires his crew with a cornball homily on
the importance of their mission. When the mushroom clouds erupt at last, Vera Lynn croons "We'll Meet Again"—a 1939 song indelibly associated with England’s heroic stand during World War II. All of this, of course, is weirdly out of place in the context of global annihilation. It is not only war, suggests Kubrick, but also war movies that will never be the same.

*Dr. Strangelove* appeared at a transitional moment in America’s nuclear history. Nuclear terror, eased by the limited 1963 test ban treaty, diminished still further during the later 1960s and 1970s as arms-control negotiations produced periodic agreements, and as other, temporarily more urgent issues intervened. But as fears revived in the early 1980s, pervasive nuclear anxiety once again produced a cultural fallout of novels, poetry, movies, rock songs, and (something new) television specials that often owed a considerable imaginative debt to Kubrick’s pioneering effort. A younger generation rediscovered *Dr. Strangelove* itself.

In the early 1990s, as the nuclear threat eased, the dangers the world had faced in earlier decades loomed even larger in retrospect. Reports of past nuclear accidents and miscalculations surfaced for the first time. Russian and U.S. participants in the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis gathered to compare notes on their brush with disaster. Simultaneously, revelations from within the former Soviet Union suggested that at one time the Soviets may, in fact, have deployed (or at least developed) an automated retaliatory system—the dreaded “doomsday machine” that is the ultimate deus ex machina of *Dr. Strangelove*. Stanley Kubrick, it now appears, may have cut closer to the truth than even he realized at the time.