© APR 2026 | IRE Journals | Volume 9 Issue 10 | ISSN: 2456-8880
DOI: https://doi.org/10.64388/IREV9I10-1716762

A Realist's Nightmare: Enduring Warnings of Dr. Strangelove

ROSHINI MEHTA
Amity University, Noida.

Abstract- ***Stanley Kubrick's Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb (1964) operates as far more than political satire. Examined through the theoretical lenses of classical realism, the security dilemma, and mutually assured destruction (MAD), it reveals itself as a systematic critique of the assumptions underpinning nuclear deterrence. This article argues that the film functions as a 'realist nightmare' a world in which rational deterrence logic is fatally undermined by human irrationality, bureaucratic dysfunction, and the paradoxes of automated destruction. Six decades later, the structural dynamics Kubrick dramatised nuclear rivalry, great-power competition, and technological escalation remain disturbingly contemporary.***

I. INTRODUCTION

Stanley Kubrick's Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb (1964) is widely celebrated as one of the great works of political satire. Yet beneath its black comedy lies something more rigorous: a precise and unflinching interrogation of the strategic doctrines governing global politics during the nuclear age. For scholars of International Relations, the film functions as a cinematic case study, one that exposes the fragility of nuclear deterrence, the irrationality embedded within systems designed to appear rational, and the catastrophic consequences that arise when technological power intersects with human fallibility.

To understand the film's argument, one must first understand the strategic environment it inhabited. By the early 1960s, the United States and the Soviet Union each possessed thermonuclear arsenals of civilisation-ending destructive capacity. The development of hydrogen bombs hundreds of times more powerful than those used at Hiroshima and Nagasaki gave rise to the doctrine of Mutually Assured Destruction. MAD rested on a deceptively simple logic: neither superpower would initiate a nuclear strike because doing so would guarantee its own destruction through retaliation. Both sides maintained second-strike capability, theoretically ensuring that stability emerged from the certainty of mutual catastrophe. This stability, however, rested on a cluster of assumptions that leaders would behave rationally, that command-and-control systems would function flawlessly, that communication between adversaries would prevent miscalculation, and that military structures would remain under strict civilian control. Kubrick's film systematically dismantles each of these assumptions.

The film was released two years after the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962, the closest the world came to nuclear war. As Daniel Ellsberg later documented in his analysis of nuclear war planning, sheer luck played a significant role in preventing catastrophe during that confrontation.[1] Kubrick had read extensively in nuclear strategy and consulted experts on military planning before making the film. Many of the strategic concepts depicted airborne nuclear bombers, decentralised launch protocols, and automated retaliation systems were drawn directly from real military doctrine. The result was a satire that exaggerated reality by only the narrowest of margins. The narrative structure of the film is deceptively simple but analytically precise. A single irrational decision triggers a chain of events that escalates beyond any human capacity to reverse. Brigadier General Jack D. Ripper, convinced that communist forces are contaminating American drinking water, orders a nuclear strike on the Soviet Union using a legitimate military protocol 'Plan R' — designed for use if the American command structure has been destroyed. His abuse of this protocol sets off a crisis no one in authority can stop. The coded communications designed to protect the bombers from enemy interference also prevent their recall. The system built to guarantee deterrence now

guarantees catastrophe. Meanwhile, the Soviet ambassador reveals that the USSR has deployed a Doomsday Machine, an automated system that will trigger total nuclear annihilation if the Soviet Union is struck. Dr. Strangelove immediately identifies the fatal flaw: deterrence requires that a threat be known. The Soviets had not yet announced the device. The ultimate deterrent, kept secret, offers no deterrence at all.

Kubrick does not portray his characters as complex psychological individuals. They are archetypes each embodying a distinct tendency within Cold War strategic culture, and each exposing a different failure mode of the rational-actor model that classical realism presupposes. General Ripper represents the most direct challenge to realist assumptions about state behaviour. Classical realism, as developed by Kenneth Waltz and John Mearsheimer, assumes that leaders evaluate threats logically and pursue strategies that enhance national survival.[2] Ripper violates this assumption entirely. His decision to initiate nuclear war rests not on strategic calculation but on paranoid conspiracy theory, a satirical exaggeration of the anti-communist hysteria that genuinely characterised segments of American political culture during the McCarthyite period. If a single unstable commander can trigger a nuclear exchange, the entire deterrence architecture becomes dangerously contingent on individual psychology.

President Muffley represents the opposite extreme: rational leadership trapped within a dysfunctional system. Despite his diplomatic calm and genuine desire to prevent escalation, he remains powerless. His awkward telephone conversation with the Soviet premier apologetic, confused, almost farcical illustrates how communication between nuclear adversaries, a prerequisite of deterrence stability, can break down under conditions of extreme pressure. Even a perfectly rational leader cannot guarantee stability when the institutional architecture surrounding him fails. Robert Jervis's work on perception and misperception in international politics supports this insight empirically states frequently misinterpret signals during crises, and deterrence theory's assumption of clear, rationally interpreted communication does not survive contact with political reality.[3]

General Turgidson embodies the logic of offensive realism. When the accidental strike becomes apparent, his instinct is to exploit it to launch a full-scale nuclear attack before the Soviets can retaliate, arguing that the United States could still 'win' despite suffering millions of casualties. His chilling detachment reflects the technocratic mindset that Kubrick targets most directly: the transformation of nuclear war into an intellectual puzzle, stripped of its human consequences. Dr. Strangelove himself represents this logic taken to its endpoint. A former Nazi scientist now advising the American government, he greets the prospect of global apocalypse with enthusiasm, proposing a post-nuclear survival plan with a ten-to-one female-to-male breeding ratio as though managing a logistics problem. Strategic reasoning has become so abstract and technical that it has lost all connection to moral responsibility, what political theory would later describe as the banality of strategic evil.

Beyond its characters, the film offers a powerful illustration of the security dilemma, the central mechanism through which defensive military actions are perceived as threatening by rivals, prompting countermeasures that increase insecurity for all parties. The Doomsday Machine represents the ultimate expression of this dynamic. Constructed to guarantee retaliation and thereby deter any nuclear attack, it instead produces the opposite of security: once activated, it removes all possibility of controlling escalation. As scholars have noted, deterrence strategies that rely on extreme threats often become morally and politically destabilising.[4] The Doomsday Machine represents the logical conclusion of this process the pursuit of absolute security producing absolute vulnerability.

One of the film's most prescient dimensions is its critique of technological determinism. The B-52 bomber at the centre of the narrative illustrates the core paradox: the sophisticated communication systems designed to protect it from enemy interference also prevent recall once the attack begins. Technological safeguards intended to guarantee deterrence simultaneously undermine crisis management. Scott D. Sagan's research on the limits of safety within nuclear organisations supports this critique empirically, demonstrating that complex

institutions cannot maintain the level of reliability that safe nuclear management requires.[5] This dimension of the film speaks directly to contemporary debates. The increasing incorporation of artificial intelligence and autonomous systems into military decision-making raises questions Kubrick posed in 1964 with remarkable precision particularly around the compression of decision windows and the risk of conflicts accelerating beyond meaningful human control.

The film's contemporary relevance extends beyond technology. The structural dynamics it dramatises nuclear hierarchy, deterrence as geopolitical insurance, and the divergent fates of nuclear and non-nuclear states continue to define international politics. The contrasting trajectories of Iran, North Korea, and Venezuela offer a striking illustration. Iran, with an ambiguous nuclear status, remains exposed to military pressure and coercive intervention. North Korea, having crossed the nuclear threshold with an operational arsenal, has effectively immunised itself against regime-change operations. Venezuela, possessing no nuclear capability, has been subjected to sustained external pressure and intervention. This pattern reflects a central lesson of deterrence theory that Kubrick understood intuitively: nuclear weapons do not merely alter military balance they fundamentally reshape political vulnerability. States without credible deterrents cannot guarantee their sovereignty against technologically superior adversaries. Paul Bracken's analysis of the second nuclear age reinforces this point, demonstrating how the proliferation of nuclear capability beyond the original Cold War dyad has multiplied the strategic actors and interaction effects within the system.[6]

II. CONCLUSION

Kubrick's Dr. Strangelove endures not because it is funny though it is but because it forces its audience to confront a set of intellectual contradictions that nuclear strategy has never fully resolved. The film's central argument is both simple and devastating: the logic of mutually assured destruction demands a system that is simultaneously perfectly reliable and permanently restrained. It requires actors to maintain absolute control over technologies capable of ending civilisation, while convincing adversaries that such control might be relinquished in retaliation. This paradox stability emerging from the credible threat of catastrophe lies at the heart of deterrence theory, and it is a paradox the film exposes with surgical clarity.

From a realist perspective, this does not invalidate deterrence. Kenneth Waltz's argument that nuclear weapons produce stability through the catastrophic costs they impose retains its structural force.[7] The leaders in the War Room know the consequences of nuclear war and attempt to prevent it. Yet Kubrick demonstrates with merciless precision that structural incentives alone cannot guarantee stability. Deterrence functions only because political leaders exercise judgment, institutions maintain discipline, and communication channels remain open even in moments of crisis. When General Ripper closes the channel and with it, all those assumptions the architecture collapses. Thomas Schelling's insight remains relevant here: deterrence operates through psychological expectations rather than mechanical certainty, and the Doomsday Machine fails precisely because it eliminates the psychological dimension entirely.

The enduring significance of the film lies in its ability to illuminate the human dimension of nuclear politics. Strategic doctrines appear rational when expressed through theoretical models and abstract language. Kubrick strips away that intellectual veneer to reveal the psychological fears, bureaucratic rivalries, and technological illusions that lie beneath. If the film offers a warning, it is not that deterrence is inherently impossible, but that it demands a level of prudence, institutional reliability, and communicative clarity that can never be fully guaranteed. The contemporary international system characterised by renewed great-power rivalry, expanding arsenals, and accelerating technological change makes this warning more urgent rather than less. Kubrick's bleak satire leaves us with a sobering and enduring insight: the survival of nuclear deterrence may depend less on the perfection of strategic systems than on the profoundly imperfect judgment of those who control them. In an anarchic world, Dr. Strangelove is not a historical comedy. It is a continuing warning.

REFERENCES

[1] Daniel Ellsberg, The Doomsday Machine: Confessions of a Nuclear War Planner (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017).

[2] John J. Mearsheimer, The Tragedy of Great Power Politics (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001); Kenneth Waltz, Theory of International Politics (Reading: Addison-Wesley, 1979).

[3] Robert Jervis, Perception and Misperception in International Politics (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976).

[4] Arms Control Association, Nuclear Deterrence and Stability (2004); Lawrence Freedman, The Evolution of Nuclear Strategy (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

[5] Scott D. Sagan, The Limits of Safety: Organizations, Accidents and Nuclear Weapons (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

[6] Paul Bracken, The Second Nuclear Age (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2012).

[7] Kenneth Waltz, 'Nuclear Myths and Political Realities,' American Political Science Review 84, no. 3 (1990): 731–745.

[8] Thomas C. Schelling, Arms and Influence (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966).

[9] Robert Jervis, The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989).

[10] Nina Tannenwald, The Nuclear Taboo: The United States and the Non-Use of Nuclear Weapons Since 1945 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

[11] Scott D. Sagan and Kenneth N. Waltz, The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: A Debate Renewed (New York: W.W. Norton, 2003).

[12] Graham Allison and Philip Zelikow, Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis (New York: Longman, 1999).

[13] Peter Kramer, Dr. Strangelove (London: BFI Publishing, 2014).

[14] Charles Maland, Dr. Strangelove (BFI Film Classics) (London: BFI Publishing, 2008).

[15] Marc Trachtenberg, History and Strategy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991).

[16] James Johnson, 'Artificial Intelligence and the Future of Nuclear Strategy,' Journal of Strategic Studies, 2020.

[17] Stanley Kubrick, Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb. Film. Columbia Pictures, 1964.