

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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DR STRANGELOVE (1964)

Stanley Kubrick

OVERVIEW *Dr Strangelove, or How I Stopped Worrying and Learned to Love the Bomb* is a satire aimed at the politicians and military men at the height of the Cold War. Released just a few years after the near-disaster of the Cuban missile crisis, it is informed by years of research by the director, who was advised by major figures in the world of military planning. Although the story was influenced by a novel written by Terry Southern (who also contributed to the screenplay), it is loosely based on another novel (*Red Alert*) by Peter George, who co-wrote the screenplay with Kubrick. Originally intended as a thriller, the director soon realised the comic potential in the dizzying paradoxes of Cold War thinking. Yet, despite the satirical bite, the film still does have a dramatic tension of a crime thriller with a clock ticking down to a sensational climax. The first test screening was delayed because it had been scheduled for the very day of the Kennedy assassination in 1963. The film did well at the box office, despite fears that its 'anti-American' tone would put off audiences. It later won a string of critical awards and is often cited as one of the top American films of all time.

SYNOPSIS Gen. Ripper takes a unilateral and unauthorised decision to launch a Plan R, which is nuclear attack on the Soviet Union, and he seals off his air base. A fleet of airborne bombers implement Plan R. As the bombers hurtle toward their targets, and all-out nuclear war is imminent, the President confers with his military chiefs and scientists in the War Room. The situation is dire, with no apparent method of recalling the bombers. The President speaks to the Soviet Premier on the telephone and gives him the coordinates of the bombers. Some of the bombers are shot down and others turn back, but one is beyond contact and flying beneath the radar. Then, the President is told that the Russians have a Doomsday Machine, which will automatically launch nuclear missiles if the rogue bomber strikes. All human, animal and plant life will perish. The nuclear bomb is dropped, activating the Doomsday Machine. Dr Strangelove unveils a plan to survive the nuclear fallout by hiding deep in underground bunkers. The film ends with an ominous mushroom cloud rising from the earth.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Ripper	Gen. Ripper is the commanding officer of an air force base.
Mandrake	Mandrake is a British exchange officer at Ripper's air base.
Turgidson	General Turgidson is the head of the US Air Force.
President	He is the President of the United States.
Dr Strangelove	Dr Strangelove is an advisor to the President.
Major Kong	Major Kong is the commanding officer of a plane carrying nuclear bombs.

STORY

Doomsday machine A voiceover informs us that Western intelligence believe that the Soviet Union is developing a Doomsday Machine on a remote island in the Arctic. Then, from the perspective of a reconnaissance plane above the clouds, we see this remote location, with mountain peaks sticking up through heavy fog.

Gen. Ripper Ripper calls Capt. Mandrake (British Air Force) and tells him that the Russians have launched an attack and he must seal off the base. Mandrake is ordered to implement Plan R and to confiscate all radios, to prevent them from being used by saboteurs.

Major Kong Plan R is communicated to the fleet of US planes, armed with nuclear bombs, which fly around the globe on constant alert. Major Kong, the commander of one of those bombers, receives the message (while perusing a *Playboy* magazine), but at first he refuses to believe it. He double checks the electronic code sent by Ripper and has it confirmed from base. With a heavy heart, but believing that the 'Russkies' must have already attacked America, Kong puts on his cowboy hat and prepares to attack.

Gen. Turgidson Turgidson, the top man in the air force, gets a phone call explaining that Plan R has been activated and that all communication with Ripper's base has been cut off. Turgidson says

goodbye to his secretary (in a bikini) and heads off to the War Room in the Pentagon.

Preparations Ripper uses an internal loud speaker system to warn the men defending his air base against a ground attack by the enemy. 'Trust no one,' he instructs his men, 'no matter what his uniform or rank. Anyone who comes within 200 yards of the perimeter is to be shot.' Aboard the bomber, Kong orders his men to reset their communications systems and to head toward various targets with their geographic coordinates.

Air base Back at the air base, Capt. Mandrake suggests to Ripper that the Pentagon is merely testing their readiness and that no Soviet attack has been identified. He believes that the bombers should be recalled. Ripper pulls rank, locks Mandrake in his office and gives him a lecture about how the Soviets have contaminated all 'our precious bodily fluids'.

War Room At an emergency meeting of the joint chiefs of staff, chaired by the President, Turgidson explains that the nuclear clock is ticking. US airborne nuclear bombers have been ordered to attack their targets inside the Soviet Union. Using an enormous illuminated map, he shows the positions of the bombers, adding that they should reach their targets in less than half an hour. When the President points out that only he has the authority to launch a nuclear strike, Turgidson explains that Plan R enables a lower ranking commander to initiate a retaliatory action after an attack by the Russians if the normal chain of command had been compromised.

Communications problem The President wants to know why Turgidson hasn't recalled the planes and is told that, as part of Plan R, after the planes receive the 'go message', their communications systems are disabled in order to prevent the enemy sending fake messages to them. The bombers will only receive a message if it is preceded by the correct three-letter code, but it will take two days to go through all permutations to find that code. In addition, no communication with Ripper is possible because he has sealed off his base.

Difficult decisions With no other option, the President orders the army to storm Ripper's base, arrest him and find the code. Turgidson points out that any such attempt will be repulsed by base security and recommends that the US unleash a total attack on the Soviet Union to prevent them from responding to Plan R. Such a pre-emptive strike, he says, would destroy 90% of their nuclear capability. The President reminds Turgidson that American policy is never to strike first. Turgidson says they have only fifteen minutes to decide between 'two post-war environments. 20 million killed or 150 million killed.' The President says he will never endorse mass murder and brings the Russian ambassador into the War Room in order to contact the Russian Premier Kissov.

Kong's bomber Inside his plane, Kong's men check their post-attack survival kits, which include vitamins, a mini-Russian dictionary, a few roubles and nine packs of chewing gum. They are well-prepared for an emergency.

Air base attack As ordered by the President, the army approaches Ripper's base. The security forces at the base think it is a Soviet force well-disguised to look like the US army. As ordered by Ripper, the defenders fire on the invaders, prompting a full-scale battle.

Doomsday The President informs the Russian Premier that a 'little mistake' has resulted in an imminent nuclear attack on his country. He offers to give him the flight paths of his planes so that he can destroy them. After a farcical exchange, the Premier speaks to the ambassador, who tells the President about the Doomsday machine. It is supposed to be a deterrent that will explode if the Soviet Union is attacked (by Kong's bomber).

Mad Ripper Back at the air base, a clearly deranged Ripper informs Mandrake that the world's water has been contaminated by the Communists. As he speaks, his office is sprayed with bullets from the invading US army. Turning off the lights, he pulls a machine gun from his golf bag, sets it up on his desk and begins to fire on the invaders.

Dr Strangelove The President calls on Dr Strangelove, a scientist attending the meeting in the War Room. Strangelove points out that the Doomsday Machine, the so-called deterrent, is not effective because it has been kept secret. It would only work if everyone knew about it.

Air base As the base comes under attack, Mandrake begs Ripper to give him the secret code that will enable him to recall the bombers. But Ripper expands on his contamination theory, revealing that

he discovered his own bodily fluids had been impaired after attempting to have sexual intercourse. Ripper accepts that the invaders will soon capture and torture him. To avoid that end, he kills himself.

Bomber Kong's bomber is being tracked by a missile and takes evasive action, but the missile closes in and hits the plane. With little fuel and the communications system destroyed, commander Kong directs the plane to attack another target.

Air base Scrabbling around in desperation, Mandrake finds the secret code imprinted on Ripper's desk blotter but he is arrested by the leader of the soldiers who have stormed the base. Mandrake convinces him to allow him to call the President and give him the code.

Recall At the last moment, all the bombers are recalled or destroyed by the Russians, with the exception of Kong's plane, whose communications have been damaged. In the War Room, Turgidson leads everyone in a prayer. When it is discovered that Kong's plane is heading toward a missile base, the President tells the Premier to destroy the plane in order to stop the Domsday Machine from exploding.

Explosion When his crew can't open up the doors to the bombing bay, Kong himself climbs down, repairs the wiring and sits on the bomb. When the bay doors open, the bomb drops with Kong straddling it like a rodeo rider. The bomb explodes and a mushroom cloud rises.

War room Knowing that the Domsday Machine has exploded, Dr Strangelove calculates that people could live in underground bunkers for a hundred years, with power to grow food supplied by nuclear reactors. Several hundred thousand people, selected by computers to avoid sexual deviation and prioritise necessary skills, could live in such bunkers. Still seized by Cold War paranoia, Turgidson suspects that the Soviets might take over their bunkers.

End The final shot shows the rising mushroom cloud while Vera Lynn sings 'We'll Meet Again,' an unlikely prospect given the mass destruction of the planet.

THEMES

War The overriding theme of the film is war, specifically the paranoia, flawed logic and absurdity of nuclear war planning. The terror that gripped the world at the time is personified by Ripper, whose is paranoid about the Communist plot to contaminate his (and everyone else's) bodily fluids. Turgidson appears mentally in control, but his fear of the enemy pushes him to suspect and then fight with the Russian ambassador. Turgidson also opposes Dr Strangelove's post-war plan to use mineshafts as shelters to regenerate the human population. Turgidson believes that plan is vulnerable to Russian sabotage and (parodying the 'missile gap' obsession during the Cold War) argues that we cannot allow 'a mineshaft gap'.

The absurdity of nuclear war planning is summed up in the concept of 'mutual assured destruction' with the conveniently satirical acronym of MAD. As explained in the film (as in real life), the MAD doctrine is based on the idea that no one would start a nuclear war if they knew that they wouldn't survive. The flawed logic of MAD is illustrated by the secret Domsday Machine (again, something imagined by scientists at the time). It was built by the Russians to act as a safeguard against human error or a breakdown in communications or chain of command. But, as Dr Strangelove explains, it would work only if it were *not* kept secret. Another flaw in Plan R is that it calls for Ripper to cut off all communications with his base, thus making it impossible to countermand his order to attack. This necessitates an attack on the base, which results in Ripper's death and means that the secret code (to recall the bombers) is lost. And when Kong's communications are damaged, his bomber cannot be recalled. These flaws built into the MAD policy convinced Kubrick to make a comedy rather than a thriller.

While the film exposes these problems, its method of attack is more satire than argument. We can start with the title, 'Dr Strangelove, Or How I Stopped Worrying and Learned to Love the Bomb.' Loving a nuclear bomb would be a very strange love, indeed, and the film is far from feel-good therapy about nuclear war. Much of the film's satire is delivered verbally. When Turgidson assaults the Russian ambassador, the President protests: 'You can't fight in here, this is the War Room.' And, when the army moves in to storm Ripper's air base, the camera shows a large sign proclaiming 'Peace is our Profession.' Then we have the names, such as Col. Bat Guano and Gen. Jack D. Ripper. Other instances of satire are visual. A good example is the exaggerated scale of the War

Room, which looks more like a conference hall than a consultation space. Another example is the goings on in Kong's rogue bomber. When first ordered to execute Plan R, Kong is reading *Playboy* while members of his crew are playing cards. The reliance on codes and machines is also exaggerated with whirling dials, magic numbers and repetition of military technical jargon (Wing Plan Attack, CM 114 Discriminators and so on). Perhaps the crowning element of satire is the character of Dr Strangelove, an ex-Nazi nuclear scientist who advises the President in the War Room. He is the caricature of the mad scientist, complete with black gloves and wheelchair. The good doctor struggles to suppress his 'Heil Hitler' salute, signally the ruthless nature of the military planning that dominates the film. The film concludes with a version of 'We'll Meet Again' (the 1939 British song that inspired hope during the war), but, of course, after the Doomsday Machine has exploded, no one will meet anyone.

Gender: masculinity A more specific theme of the film is the toxic mixture of masculine sexual prowess and the military. Again, Gen. Ripper is Exhibit A. His belief that his diminution of sexuality is the result of a plot to contaminate our 'bodily fluids' is not so bizarre as it might seem, given the Cold War paranoia about Russian espionage and the corrosive effect of foreign ideas on American patriotic virility. Ripper's ever-present long cigar is an obvious symbol of his exaggerated image of male sexual desire. Then there is Gen. 'Buck' Turgidson. When he is introduced, summoned on the telephone by the President, he is about to have sex with his secretary. But he reassures her that he'll be back before she can say 'blast off'. In the War Room, the virile Turgidson is pugnacious, exemplifying the image of a military man. Another powerful figure, the Soviet Premier, is also caught in flagrante when the President calls him on the telephone. Major Kong fantasises about the nude women he ogles in the *Playboy* magazine, and at the end, he is seen straddling a phallic-shaped bomb. Also near the end, in the War Room, when Dr Strangelove explains that the underground shafts would have a 10 to 1 ratio of women to men, the men (and they are all men) snigger with sexual expectation. Good satire imitates life, as is the case with this film. An expert whom Kubrick consulted while preparing the film told him that a group of air force officers responsible for the nuclear bombers was told 'you don't have a war plan, gentlemen. You have a wargasm.'

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Major Kong The major is a 'solid kind of guy,' a man his crew (and the rest of the country) can rely on. Loyal to the end, protective of his men, and wearing a Stenson hat, he cannot be faulted in his role as commander of the rogue bomber. Like every other man in the story (except Mandrake, the wimpy British office), Kong displays sexual desire, though it is only a brief glance at *Playboy* magazine.

Empathetic As the commander of the nuclear bomber headed for Russia, Major Kong is in the cockpit of the action. He might have panicked or shown indecision, but he does neither. As he carries out Plan R, his concern for his men is paramount. That empathy is vividly illustrated in the little speech he delivers to the crew. Speaking with an avuncular tone, he admits that he isn't 'very good at making speeches' but informs them that they are about to engage 'in nuclear combat, toe-to-toe with the Rooskies'. We hear the emotion choked in his voice, when he says, 'I got a fair idea the kind of personal emotions that some of you fellas may be thinking. Heck, I reckon you wouldn't even be human beings if you didn't have some pretty strong personal feelings about nuclear combat'. As he speaks to his men, we see their faces, lined with concern and fear. Kong reminds them that 'the folks back home are counting on them' and that they 'aren't about to let them down.' He ends his inspirational speech by hinting that the men will be in line for promotion when it's all over. Kong is the kind of commander anyone would want in such a dangerous situation.

Resourceful Another admirable aspect of the major's character, especially in the predicament shown in the film, is his DIY talent for fixing nuclear bombers while airborne. He uses his home engineering skills at the pivotal moment when his crew are about to drop a bomb. But, having been hit by a missile, the doors to the bay holding the bomb won't open. No problem. Kong climbs down into the bay, locates the electrical fault and uses his pliers to rectify the fault. It all seems implausible, a bit of exaggerated storytelling to make a point, but on second thought, why not? An air force commander like Kong would surely be able to tinker with his plane and carry out his mission.

General Ripper The clue to the general is his name (Jack D. Ripper), with its connotations of madness, male sex drive and malice. Ripper is a sick man, plagued by fears that his sexual prowess has been inhibited by a Russian plot to contaminate America's water supply. Although he looks the

part, the frightening reality is that he is in charge of an airborne fleet of nuclear bombers. He is forthright, tense and stern, as he steers the film toward its terrifying conclusion.

Purposeful Ripper's firm mind is well illustrated in his first scene, when he is convinced that the Russians are launching an attack. Chewing his cigar, his eyes narrowed, his face scowling, he speaks to Mandrake, his milk toast British underling. 'Now listen to me carefully,' he begins and then makes it crystal what is to be done. He speaks slowly, clearly, with pauses between each sentence. He explains that the base must be sealed off, all communications cut. He then speaks by loud speaker to his men, breaking down his instructions into a list, first, second, and so on. What we see is man of determination, intensely focused, clear about his objectives. Only at the end of the scene is there a hint that he may not be of sound mind. When the security alarms ring out around the base, the camera pulls back from his rugged face and we see a small man in a huge office. He puts his hand in his hands. Then he rises and slowly closes the blinds. He is in the dark.

Rigid Once his decisions have been made, Ripper is not one to be deflected off course. He displays this rigidity, which is one of the key factors in the entire debacle, in his next scene. Mandrake has come into his office to voice his doubts that the Russians have launched an attack (which, in hindsight, we know is correct). But Ripper dismisses this suggestion. Mandrake says he will issue a command to recall the bombers, salutes and goes to leave but finds that Ripper has locked the door. Watching the hapless Mandrake, Ripper continues to enjoy his cigar and tells him to relax. He, Ripper, is the only one who knows the three-letter recall code and he will not divulge it. To make himself clear, he picks up a file to reveal a gun on his desk. 'There's only one thing,' he tells Mandrake. 'Total commitment.' Ripper will not even consider deviating from a decision he has taken. It is unmanly.

Paranoid The darker side of Ripper's determination and rigidity is played out in his remaining scenes, which conclude with his suicide. We have a sense of his paranoia at the end of the scene just described when he tells Mandrake that he can 'no longer sit back and allow Communist infiltration to infect all of our precious bodily fluids.' This obsession with American purity infected by foreign agents is more fully articulated in a later scene. As the army advances on Ripper's base, he has a man-to-man chat with Mandrake and asks, 'Have you ever seen a Commie drink a glass of water?' Mandrake hasn't. 'Vodka,' Ripper says. 'That's what they drink.' He goes on to explain that he drinks only rain water or pure grain alcohol because the Russians have conceived a 'monstrous' plot to kill Americans through fluoridation. His lecture is cut short by a burst of machine-gun fire that shatters his office windows, echoing the madness that has seized his mind.

General 'Buck' Turgidson Again, the name is suggestive of the man's character: he is somewhat pompous in his boyish exuberance and verbosity. He is also more like an excitable teenager than a top military man in his excessive energy, gum chewing and over-the-top confidence that he knows what to do. On the more positive side, he is good-natured and easy-going. But not when it comes to trusting the enemy.

Genial Turgidson's Geniality is illustrated in the first scene, when he is told on the telephone that the Air Force has implemented Plan R. It's the middle of the night and he's with his bikini-clad secretary. Listening to this ominous news half naked, he slaps his bare stomach and issues instructions with his usual casual slang. 'Tell you what, old buddy. Give old Charlie a blast and, ah, bump everything up to red.' When his lover asks where he's going, again his voice has the nonchalance of someone going out to the supermarket. 'Oh, I don't know,' he says, 'I just thought I'd mosey on over to the War Room.' The general is too genial, too good-natured, to get upset over something as trivial as a nuclear war.

Confident Turgidson's major scene occurs once he gets to the War Room and is called on by the President to explain what has happened. Here, the general displays his innate confidence in the US Air Force, of which he is the chief. He dismisses the President's description of Ripper as 'psychotic', saying the recruitment policy of the air force can't be faulted for one 'little mistake.' Then, he lays out his plan to launch a pre-emptive strike on all Russian air fields and missile bases in order to prevent the enemy from attacking the US. If this is done, the general says, with a wink, 'We have a damn good chance of catching them with their pants down.' Brimming with confidence, he announces his coup de grace: the US 'would destroy 90% of their missiles and would suffer only modest and acceptable casualties.' Having finished, he grins with satisfaction, like the cat that got the cream. Given his boyish temperament, it is no wonder that he is supremely confident.

Suspicious Another element in his character is his suspicion of the Russians, a fear that differs from Ripper's paranoia only in degree. Turgidson's wary attitude toward the enemy comes out when the Russian ambassador is summoned to the War Room. Gathering up his papers and files, he objects to the presence of the ambassador because he 'will see everything'. When the ambassador reveals the existence of the Doomsday Machine, Turgidson calls it a lie, or in his word, 'a load of Commie crap'. His dander up, the general calls the Soviet Premier 'a degenerate atheist' and wrestles with the ambassador to relieve him of a tiny spy camera. In his wariness, Turgidson is simply an embodiment of the widespread (and not always misplaced) suspicion about the activities of Soviet diplomats during the Cold War. He would not be out of place in a John Le Carré novel.

President The President is a suitably dour man, all grey suit and controlled emotions. Looking small, with a bald head, he nevertheless manages to exude authority and (almost) maintains control of the unruly 'children in his classroom'. He is a diplomatic politician, alternating between a calm voice to reassure and a threatening one to ensure obedience.

Authoritative The bespectacled President commands authority, especially in his handling of the discussion in the War Room. With firmly set lips and eyes, he asks pointed questions of Turgidson and often puts him in his place with a curt remark. At one point, having lost patience with the general's somewhat breezy manner, he tells him that he is no longer interested in his 'opinions of what is possible and what is not'. He also brushes aside Turgidson's reservations about inviting the Soviet ambassador into the war room and stamps his authority on the situation by telling an astonished Turgidson that the primary purpose of that invitation is that the diplomat will see all the secrets of the nuclear plan, including the illuminated maps on the wall. The President has a firm grasp on this dangerous moment in world history.

Affable Despite his stern exterior, the President is diplomatic when he needs to be. We see this in the scene when he speaks to the Soviet Premier on the telephone. He addresses his counterpart as if he were an old friend, whom he is calling just to have a little chat. After the initial exchange of pleasantries, he smiles widely and says, 'Good. Good. It's good that you're fine and I'm fine.' Then, speaking as casually as if he is talking about the weather, he explains that Russia is about to be attacked by a nuclear bomb. In this scene, the President falls back on his calm, reassuring demeanour in order not to spook the Premier. Affability is a diplomatic asset.

Dr Strangelove We might assume that Dr Strangelove is the main character in a film bearing his name in the title. In fact, he appears in only two scenes. Still, his mad-scientist character perfectly sums up the political satire of the story. He has an evil brain, highly developed but contaminated by his Nazi past. He appears to be in control of events, but he is no more sane than Ripper.

Evil The innate evil in the doctor is that he is an ex-Nazi (like hundreds of German scientists who came to America during and after the war, helping to build the nuclear bomb and other defence systems). His hidden allegiance to the immoral policy of Hitler is signalled in a scene when he is explicating his post-attack plan to the President. Time and time again, he cannot prevent his arm, with its black glove, from giving the Nazi salute. Nor can he stop himself from addressing the President as 'Mein Fuhrer.' His pathological obsession with death is illustrated at the end when he grabs his own throat and nearly strangles himself.

Intelligent Dr Strangelove is also a highly intelligent scientist and skilled military planner. When it is obvious that Armageddon is inevitable, he lays out his plan for a series of underground bunkers, or mineshafts, in which he believes the human race (Americans, that is) can survive a nuclear attack and regenerate the world's population as well. He delivers this statement in clear terms, only pausing in order to calculate the precise duration of the threat from the nuclear material in the bombs.



(Dr Strangelove in the War Room)



(Turgidson in the War Room)



(left to right, Mandrake and Ripper at the air force base)