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March 9, 2024



By W.J. Hennigan

Produced by Phoebe Lett

The national security writer W. J. Hennigan has spent many years ringing the alarm about the world's new nuclear era — the subject of *At The Brink*, a new series from New York Times Opinion — and the crisis on the horizon. For anyone whose interest was piqued by the origin story of nuclear weapons in “*Oppenheimer*,” Mr. Hennigan, who happens to be a movie buff, recommends three essential films that illuminate our new nuclear era.

An edited transcript of the above audio essay by Mr. Hennigan follows:

W.J. Hennigan: For many years, people haven't really spent a lot of time thinking about nuclear weapons, but that's changed — both because of the war in Ukraine as well as the popularity of the recent Christopher Nolan film “*Oppenheimer*.”

The idea that a biopic about a scientist and nuclear weapons would be so popular, the fact that it's won so many awards and has sparked such an interest, is really quite surprising.

For the past quarter-century, an entire generation has come of age without really having to worry about the bomb. This has not something that's been front of mind.

Nuclear weapons were the predominant national security concern for our country for a half-century, and that was reflected within culture and art. Throughout the Cold War, you could see the topic of nuclear weapons in movies, video games, television shows, cartoons, songs, comic books, board games. There were alcoholic drinks inspired by nuclear weapons.

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That kind of changed on a dime after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, but even though the concern and awareness over the nuclear peril faded, the danger hasn't gone away. We've entered a new nuclear era, but that's not being publicly discussed in the way that it has in the past.

I think that movies are the easiest and most accessible way to understand the horrors of nuclear war. So if you're interested in the history and science behind "Oppenheimer," I have three films that explore the new nuclear era that we're living through.

I understand that nuclear Armageddon is not something that everybody wants to dive into, but these three films do a really good job in an entertaining way of enlightening you about what's at stake while also informing you about the current threat that we face today.



Illustration by Akshita Chandra/The New York Times; Photograph by Universal Pictures/Alamy

My first recommendation is probably no surprise, but: "Dr. Strangelove" by Stanley Kubrick.

Clip from "Dr. Strangelove"

President Merkin Muffley: *Gentlemen! You can't fight in here! This is the war room!*

Hennigan: When you ask somebody in the nuclear weapons world about what their favorite films are, "Dr. Strangelove" is almost always the answer. It came out in 1964, which was two years after the Cuban missile crisis.

"Dr. Strangelove" is about a senior Air Force officer, Gen. Jack Ripper. He uses a loophole in emergency military orders to order a nuclear attack on the Soviet Union so that there will be a thermonuclear exchange and the United States will come on top.

Clip from "Dr. Strangelove"

Brig. Gen. Buck Turgidson: *... issued an order to the 34 B52s of his wing to, um, attack their targets inside Russia. [The room reacts.]*

Hennigan: He's obviously gone mad.

Clip from "Dr. Strangelove"

General Turgidson: *And although I, uh, hate to judge before all the facts are in, it's beginning to look like, uh, General Ripper exceeded his authority.*

Hennigan: He's locked himself into his office. His fear is a Soviet takeover of the world.

One of the things that "Dr. Strangelove" does really well is it highlights the absurdity of the arms race. At this time in 1964, there were no limits on nuclear stockpiles, so nations could have as many nuclear weapons as they wanted. And this was extremely costly. It cost billions of dollars to invest and maintain these weapons. And the more weapons that there are in the world, the harder it is to have control over them.

Clip from "Dr. Strangelove"

The Soviet ambassador, Alexei de Sadeski: *There were those of us who fought against it, but in the end, we could not keep up with the expense involved in the arms race, the space race and the peace race.*

Hennigan: It was less than 10 years later before we started introducing arms control measures that would start restricting the numbers of nuclear weapons and the things that you could do with them. And more than half a century later, we're approaching a world in less than two years where there will be no limitations on nuclear stockpiles here in the United States, or Russia, or anywhere else.

My second recommendation is "Fail Safe," directed by Sidney Lumet, from the same year, 1964. This is sort of the strait-laced version of "Dr. Strangelove." This film shows that even though these intricate, specially designed methods and systems, even if the foremost minds in our world are trying to ensure the fact that something bad can't happen — it shows human error is always looming overhead.

Clip from "Fail Safe"

Professor Groetschele: *Face facts, Mr. Foster. We're talking about war. I say every war, including thermonuclear war, must have a winner and a loser. Which would you rather be?*

Mr. Foster: *In a nuclear war, everyone loses.*

Hennigan: "Fail safe" is a military term of art that came up in the Cold War surrounding nuclear weapons because even if a nuclear weapon or a component failed, it would fail "safe." It would not fail in an inadvertent detonation.

Clip from "Fail Safe"

Brig. Gen. Warren A. Black: *We're setting up a war machine that acts faster than the ability of men to control it. We're putting men into situations that are getting too tough for men to handle.*

Professor Groetschele: *Then we must toughen the men.*

Hennigan: The film is told from the vantage point of a sitting U. S. president, who is played by Henry Fonda, and what he comes to understand through the course of the film is we've vested all these powers in the president, but there are a lot of systems that occur without his delegation of power.

Clip from “Fail Safe”

Russian translator: *Mr. President, we have warned you again and again that this constant flying of armed aircraft over Soviet territory cannot –*

President: *This is a mistake, a serious mistake. I say it's a mistake!*

Hennigan: He's trying to rein back in a system. Once it turns on, it's almost impossible to stop. I don't think that a lot of people understand that nuclear weapons are essentially the president's weapons. There is no other aspect in the U. S. military that operates like the authority to launch nuclear weapons. Only the president has that authority, and he or she does not need to consult Congress or the courts or anyone else in making a decision to use nuclear weapons.

Clip from “Fail Safe”

President: *Yes, it's my decision, and I take full responsibility.*

Hennigan: While my first two recommendations show the perspective of the people in power and the decisions they make and how it holds over all of us, the third film I'm going to recommend came out in 1983 and was a TV film called “The Day After.” In my opinion, there is no other film that does a better job at depicting the unnatural horrors of a nuclear detonation than “The Day After.”

Let me just take a step back. You have to understand that this was in the zeitgeist. Ronald Reagan was president. He was calling the Soviet Union “the evil empire,” and the arms race was back on. There were negotiations about arms control, but the administration at the time was taking a very tough road when it came to the Soviet Union. There was a lot of warnings that were coming from the U.S.S.R. as well.

So, the filmmakers of “The Day After” took it a step further to say, if something went bad in Europe, what would that look like? And it's not told from New York City. It's not told from Los Angeles. It's told from rural Lawrence, Kan., which seemingly wouldn't be the first target for a incoming missile strike except for the fact that they host intercontinental ballistic missiles in the farm fields.

Clip from “The Day After”

Joe Huxley: *That's about 150 Minuteman missile silos spread halfway down the state of Missouri.*

Hennigan: That is still American policy today. Those missiles are in the Great Plains states to this day.

Clip from “The Day After”

Joe Huxley: *That's an awful lot of bull's-eyes.*

Hennigan: Nuclear war is not something that you can really wrap your mind around because of the unnatural horror that's involved in it. And “The Day After” puts it on in full display.

A narrative that the film does well is that it takes you from the vantage point of average people.

Clip from “The Day After”

News broadcast: — *press secretary David Townes reports that both sides are engaged in frank and earnest talks —*

Hennigan: Before the bombs drop, you're getting information in dribs and drabs. You're not seeing the whole chessboard. People are hearing things about potential conflict breaking out.

Clip from “The Day After”

Bruce Gallatin: *What’s going on?*

Student: *They say the Russians just invaded West Germany.*

Cynthia: *We’re not going to nuke the Russians to save the Germans. I mean, if you were talking oil in Saudi Arabia, then I’d be real worried.*

Hennigan: They’re not really sure what’s occurring, and then all of a sudden there’s a run on the grocery.

Clip from “The Day After”

Grocery store chaos: *Out of my way! The batteries!*

Hennigan: And for me, I can relate to that. I think a lot of Americans can relate to that coming out of the pandemic. You start seeing things in the news that are troubling. You don’t really fully understand what the whole picture is.

Clip from “The Day After”

Jim Dahlberg: *Don’t you know there’s pretty much a national emergency going on?*

Eve Dahlberg: *Well, it’s just going to have to go on without me because your daughter is getting married tomorrow, and I got 67 mouths to feed.*

Hennigan: But, then you’re like, wow, the whole world has suddenly changed.

It was deeply researched, and not only is it told from the ground level, but it also has the science to back it up of the dramatic effects of living in an irradiated world.

Clip from “The Day After”

Intake officer: *What’s your injury?*

Airman Billy McCoy: *I, uh, I can’t keep nothing in. Not even my own hair.*

Hennigan: “The Day After” was such an unprecedented exploration of nuclear conflict. It made TV history.

“ABC7 NY Eyewitness News”: *It was a movie like no other movie, and it had a profound impact ... We’ll hear from people who, like you, watched the ultimate disaster movie tonight on television.*

Hennigan: And it was so paradigm-shifting that the U.S. government took time on the station afterward to talk directly to the American public about what the risks of nuclear war are.

“ABC7 NY Eyewitness News”: *More than 700 people packed Riverside Church tonight to watch “The Day After.” Many said they came here because they were afraid to watch it alone. While the TV movie was being shown, the streets of New York were a lot less crowded than usual for a Sunday night.*

Hennigan: Not only did it have this cultural impact, but it also swayed policy. Ronald Reagan, famously, after watching “The Day After,” softened his stance and rhetoric surrounding nuclear weapons with the Soviet Union, and indeed, his administration had major breakthroughs in arms control and de-escalation efforts with the U.S.S.R. in the years afterward.

It’s hard to keep the American public’s attention when it comes to arcane subject matters like nuclear weapons, but films and art in general is the most accessible way for people to understand these very, very difficult subjects. They’re able to stir emotions in people, to provoke them to become more active in their futures. When you’re emotionally stirred and you’re activated to do something.

I don't think a lot of people are going to find history books and white papers accessible, but these films do a really good job conveying in a way that's both entertaining as well as being informative. So if you do want to know more, I would recommend watching "Dr. Strangelove," "Fail Safe," "The Day After" — and check out our ongoing series, *At the Brink*.

This episode of "The Opinions" was produced by Phoebe Lett. It was edited by Kaari Pitkin. Mixing by Sonia Herrero. Original music by Carole Sabouraud, Sonia Herrero and Isaac Jones. Fact-checking by Mary Marge Locker. Audience strategy by Kristina Samulewski and Shannon Busta.

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