

# "Stranger than Strangelove": How U.S. Planned for Nuclear War in the 1950s

By Paul Lashmar, The Conversation, adapted by Newsela staff on 05.17.17

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A U.S. nuclear bomb test in 1946 at Bikini Atoll in the Pacific Ocean. Photo from Wikimedia

A movie called "Dr. Strangelove" was once a huge hit. It came out a little over 50 years ago. The 1964 film shows what life was like during the Cold War.

The Cold War was not really a war with fighting. It was a time when the biggest countries in the world were bullying each other.

Many people were worried. A war using nuclear weapons seemed likely. "Dr. Strangelove" was the first movie that talked about the nuclear bomb. Scientists developed nuclear bombs during World War II. Nuclear bombs hold a huge amount of energy. They are super destructive. A single nuclear bomb could kill many thousands of people.

## Two countries were friends, then enemies

The United States and the Soviet Union worked together during World War II. The Soviet Union was a huge country in Europe and Asia. The Soviet Union had a Communist government. Under communism, the government owns everything. People have few rights. The two countries began competing for power. The next 40 years were called the "Cold War."

The United States and the Soviet Union each wanted to be the most powerful country. They built many nuclear bombs. People worried that there might be a nuclear war.

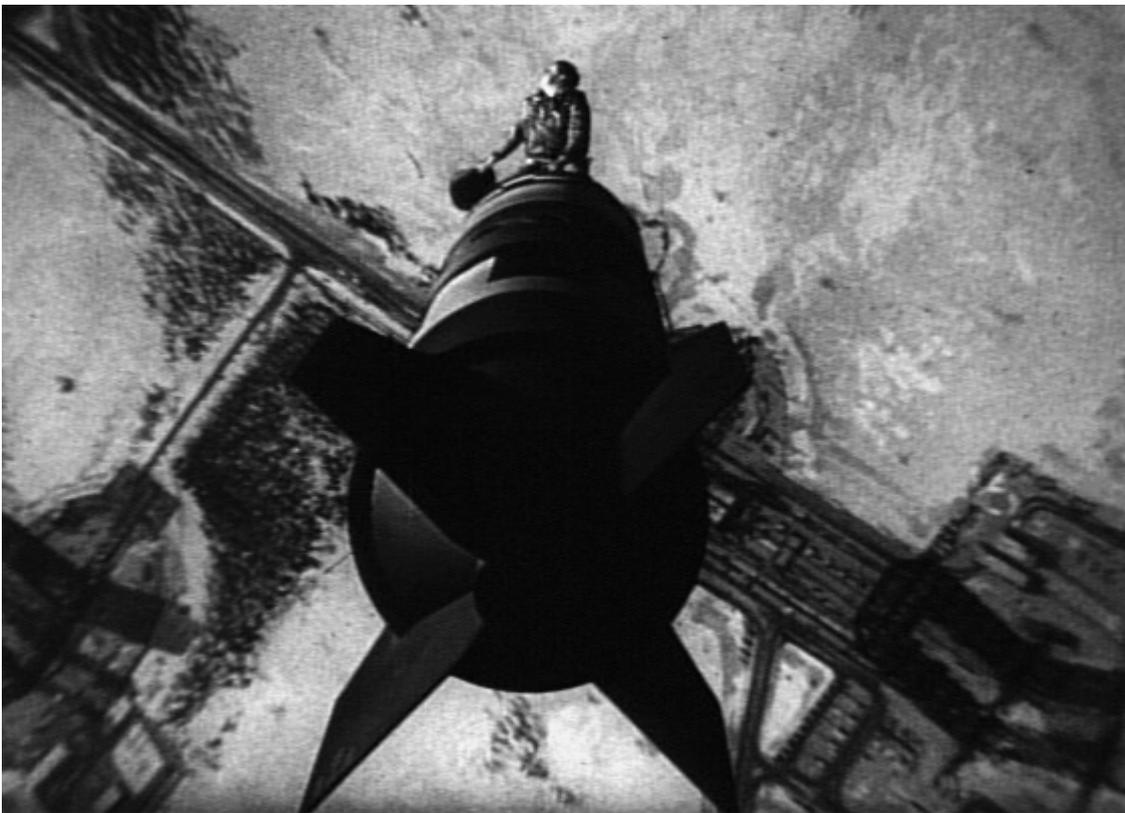
This fear was shown in the movie "Dr. Strangelove." It showed what might happen if a nuclear war started.

Luckily, that did not happen. If it had, millions of people could have died. Documents and papers from the time show it could have worse than anybody imagined.

### **A list of cities to be bombed**

Michael Dobbs is a writer. In 2006, he was writing a book about the Cold War. He asked the government to release secret Cold War papers. The government keeps some papers secret. They cannot be seen by the public for security reasons. Documents that were once secret can be declassified. This means they are no longer secret. Then, anyone can see them.

Dobbs hoped that Cold War papers would be declassified. In 2014, about 2,200 documents were released. There were thousands of pages to go through.



Historians studied the papers. They discovered a list of cities in the Soviet Union and other countries. The Soviet Union formed a pact with other communist countries. It was called the Warsaw Pact. The United States had plans to bomb cities in the Soviet Union and countries that teamed up with it.

## Nuclear war is shown in the movie and the study

One of the documents was a study. It was written by the Strategic Air Command, or SAC. The SAC was a special unit of the U.S. Air Force. SAC pilots would have flown the planes with nuclear bombs if war began. The study is 800 pages long. It is called the "Atomic Weapons Requirements Study for 1959." It was nicknamed "Stranger than Strangelove." The nickname fits because like the movie, the study tells what would happen in a nuclear war.

The study had a plan. It showed places for the United States to hit in the Soviet Union. There were also targets in countries that joined the Warsaw Pact. Many were large cities like Beijing, China, and Moscow, Russia. This surprised many historians.

Dr. William Burr is a historian. He studied papers from the Cold War for more than 30 years. The plans to hit big cities surprised him. These cities had many people living in them during the Cold War.

"It's disturbing, for sure, to see the population centers targeted," Burr wrote. He was also alarmed by plans to attack regular people. This went against usual military rules.

## The biggest bomb ever



SAC listed cities in order of how important they were to bomb. Moscow and Leningrad are both cities in Russia. They were the top two targets.

The study also shows that SAC wanted a huge bomb. Leaders thought the bomb could prevent attacks. It would be more powerful than any bomb ever used before. The SAC thought a very powerful bomb was needed for another reason, too: in case the Soviet Union attacked the United States.

## **People were afraid of war**

The Air Force kept bomber planes in the air 24 hours a day. This caused a lot of fear. People thought a war was coming.

General Curtis LeMay was in charge of SAC from 1948 to 1957. Many say he made the rules in the 1950s. The main character in "Dr. Strangelove" is based on General LeMay.



It is hard to know the fear people had during the Cold War. A nuclear attack would have been horrible. The biggest war ever might have started. One guess is that more than 500 million people would have died all over the world.

*Paul Lashmar teaches journalism at the University of Sussex in England. He wrote a book called "Spy Flights of the Cold War" (1996).*

Quiz

- 1 Which sentence from the introduction [paragraphs 1-3] explains why people were afraid during the Cold War?
- (A) The 1964 film shows what life was like during the Cold War.
  - (B) The Cold War was not really a war with fighting.
  - (C) Many people were worried.
  - (D) A war using nuclear weapons seemed likely.

- 2 Read the paragraph from the section "A list of cities to be bombed."

*Historians studied the papers. They discovered a list of cities in the Soviet Union and other countries. The Soviet Union formed a pact with other communist countries. It was called the Warsaw Pact. The United States had plans to bomb cities in the Soviet Union and countries that teamed up with it.*

What question is answered in this paragraph?

- (A) When was the secret list declassified so people could read it?
  - (B) Which countries supported the U.S. during the Cold War?
  - (C) What plans did the U.S. have to attack the Soviet Union?
  - (D) Why did some countries join the Warsaw Pact?
- 3 What is the MAIN reason why Michael Dobbs wrote his book?
- (A) He wanted to inform the public about World War II.
  - (B) He wanted the U.S. to become communist.
  - (C) He wanted secret Cold war documents to be seen.
  - (D) He wanted to share his story from fighting in the war.
- 4 How are the Cold War and the movie "Dr. Strangelove" related?
- (A) The movie showed how people were afraid of nuclear bombs during the Cold War.
  - (B) The movie revealed the secret plans to bomb major cities during the Cold War.
  - (C) The movie angered members of the Warsaw Pact during the Cold War.
  - (D) The movie shows what would have happened if major cities were bombed during the Cold War.



## Answer Key

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