

"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

In 1964, there was a movie called "Dr. Strangelove." It quickly became a huge hit. The movie shows what might have happened to the world had a nuclear war broken out during the Cold War. The film seemed to really understand peoples' fears and anxieties at the time. As a result, it is considered to be one of the best films of all time.

"Dr. Strangelove" was the first movie to criticize the nuclear bomb. Scientists first developed nuclear bombs during World War II. They are able to harness a huge amount of energy. This makes nuclear bombs especially destructive. A single nuclear bomb is powerful enough to destroy an entire city. The explosion, as well as radiation poisoning released by it, could kill thousands of people.

During the Cold War, the United States and the Soviet Union raced to develop more powerful nuclear weapons. The two countries had been united during World War II. However, the Soviet Union had a Communist government. Under Soviet communism, the government owned everything and people had few rights. The next 40 or so years were known as the

"Cold War," because the United States and the Soviet Union fought for influence over the world. Each wanted to be more powerful than the other. People worried about a possible nuclear war.

"Dr. Strangelove" was successful because it seemed to capture this fear. It showed what might happen if nuclear war broke out.

Not-so-secret anymore

In 2006, writer Michael Dobbs asked for the declassification of many Cold War documents. Many government documents are classified. This means that they cannot be seen by the public for security reasons. Sometimes, these documents can be declassified, which frees information that was once secret. Dobbs hoped to use these documents in a book he was writing about the Cold War. In October 2014, about 2,200 documents were released. With Dobbs' help, an organization called the National Security Archive in Washington, D.C., has been working on them ever since.



Historians working with the documents said that cities in the Soviet bloc were high on a list for nuclear attack. The bloc included communist countries that joined the Soviet Union in an agreement known as the Warsaw Pact.

The once-secret documents showed that bombs were to be used against targets in the Soviet Union, China and Eastern Europe. The report also found that plans to target people in cities, not just military targets, was against the usual rules of warfare.

Atomic Weapons Study shows a horrific outcome

One of the documents was especially shocking. It is called the Atomic Weapons Requirements Study for 1959, but would get the nickname "Stranger than Strangelove." That is because it shows just how disastrous a nuclear war would have been. It might have been worse than anyone could have imaged.

The "Stranger than Strangelove" document is an 800-page study by the Strategic Air Command, or SAC. During the Cold War, the SAC was the special unit of the U.S. Air Force. SAC pilots would have been the ones to drop nuclear bombs if war had broken out. Their study provides the most detailed list of nuclear targets ever made public.

Dr. William Burr studies nuclear history. He has been working for the National Security Archive since the 1980s.

No other document like the SAC study has been available for any other part of the Cold War. Much of the information is still kept secret. SAC gave the numbers and types of nuclear weapons required to destroy each target. Information about the weapons is blocked from the report, though. It does not show how many weapons SAC thought would be needed to destroy the targets. Historians have determined that the SAC was quickly increasing its weapons supply, from more than 2,400 in 1955 to more than 12,000 in 1959. It would reach 22,229 in 1961.

"It's disturbing, for sure"

The SAC developed a plan to destroy targets in the Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact countries. Targets included large cities like Beijing, China, and Moscow, Russia.

"It's disturbing, for sure, to see the population centers targeted," Burr wrote. He added that attacks on civilians, or people who are not in the military, went against the rules of Air Force leaders.



SAC listed more than 1,200 cities in the Soviet bloc, from Estonia to China. They were named in order of how important they were to destroy. Moscow and Leningrad, both cities in Russia, were the top two.

The study also shows that SAC wanted a 60-megaton weapon. It considered the bomb to be important to prevent attacks. The SAC wanted to use it in case of a Soviet attack. Burr points out that just one megaton would be 70 times the power of the bomb that destroyed Hiroshima, Japan, in World War II.

It has long been known that many targets would have been hit by more than one nuclear attack. This led to the term “overkill.” What the study shows is that the overkill would have been greater than imagined.

General's failure was lucky for the world

Today, it might seem hard to imagine the fear people had during the Cold War. At the time, SAC kept huge bomber planes in the air 24 hours a day. The planes symbolized the fear of a nuclear attack.

This approach was mainly the idea of one man. General Curtis LeMay was the head of SAC from 1948 to 1957. In the movie "Dr. Strangelove," one of the main characters is based on General LeMay. Before LeMay took over, SAC had 49,589 people with just 713 World War II planes. By 1955, this had grown to 200,000 people and 3,068 planes, mostly jet bombers.



It has been said that LeMay ran his own plan in the 1950s. He was trying to push the Soviet Union into nuclear battle. Fortunately, it was one of his few failures.

The results of such a nuclear attack would have been beyond imagination. One guess is that it would have killed 520 million people in the Soviet Union and its allied countries.

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

Quiz

- 1 Which selection from the introduction [paragraphs 1-4] explains how "Dr. Strangelove" affected people?
 - (A) In 1964, there was a movie called "Dr. Strangelove." It quickly became a huge hit.
 - (B) The movie shows what might have happened to the world had a nuclear war broken out during the Cold War.
 - (C) "Dr. Strangelove" was the first movie to criticize the nuclear bomb. Scientists first developed nuclear bombs during World War II.
 - (D) "Dr. Strangelove" was successful because it seemed to capture this fear. It showed what might happen if nuclear war broke out.

- 2 Based on information in the article, which of these statements is TRUE?
 - (A) General LeMay was against nuclear attacks.
 - (B) The U.S. had a plan to possibly bomb many major cities.
 - (C) The U.S. and the Soviet Union were never allies.
 - (D) People had no reason to worry about nuclear attacks during the Cold War.

- 3 According to the article, what would have happened if General LeMay had carried out his attacks?
 - (A) It would have caused communism to spread more.
 - (B) It would have killed millions of people around the world.
 - (C) "Dr. Strangelove" would never have been filmed.
 - (D) It would have destroyed secret documents.

- 4 What is the relationship between the Cold War papers that were recently declassified and the movie "Dr. Strangelove"?
 - (A) The declassified papers reveal how the movie "Dr. Strangelove" was closer to reality than previously thought.
 - (B) They both serve as a record of General LeMay's plans to attack major cities around the world.
 - (C) The movie "Dr. Strangelove" gave General LeMay an idea for how to attack enemy countries during the Cold War.
 - (D) They both show the careful thought and planning that went into preventing nuclear war.

Answer Key

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