Truth Stranger Than 'Strangelove'

by Fred Kaplan

"Dr. Strangelove," Stanley Kubrick's 1964 film about nuclear-war plans run amok, is widely heralded as one of the greatest satires in American political or movie history. For its 40th anniversary, Film Forum is screening a new 35 millimeter print for one week, starting on Friday, and Columbia TriStar is releasing a two-disc special-edition DVD next month. One essential point should emerge from all the hoopla: "Strangelove" is far more than a satire. In its own loopy way, the movie is a remarkably fact-based and specific guide to some of the oddest, most secretive chapters of the Cold War.

As countless histories relate, Mr. Kubrick set out to make a serious film based on a grim novel, "Red Alert," by Peter George, a Royal Air Force officer. But the more research he did (reading more than 50 books, talking with a dozen experts), the more lunatic he found the whole subject, so he made a dark comedy instead. The result was wildly iconoclastic: released at the height of the cold war, not long after the Cuban missile crisis, before the escalation in Vietnam, "Dr. Strangelove" dared to suggest—with yucks!—that our top generals might be bonkers and that our well-designed system for preserving the peace was in fact a doomsday machine.

What few people knew, at the time and since, was just how accurate this film was. Its premise, plotline, some of the dialogue, even its wildest characters eerily resembled the policies, debates and military leaders of the day. The audience had almost no way of detecting these similiarities:Nearly everything about the bomb was shrouded in secrecy back then. There was no Freedom of Information Act and little investigative reporting on the subject. It was easy to laugh off "Dr. Strangelove" as a comic book.

But film's weird accuracy is evident in its very first scene, in which a deranged base commander, preposterously named Gen. Jack D. Ripper (played by Sterling Hayden), orders his wing of B-52 bombers—which are on routine airborne alert, circling a "fail-safe point" just outside the Soviet border—to attack their targets inside the U.S.S.R. with multimegaton bombs. Once the pilots receive the order, they can't be diverted unless they receive a coded recall message. And only General Ripper has the code.

The remarkable thing is, the fail-safe system that General Ripper exploits was the real, top-secret fail-safe system at the time. According to declassified Strategic Air Command histories, 12 B-52's—fully loaded with nuclear bombs—were kept on constant airborne alert. If they received a Go code, they went to war. This alert system, known as Chrome Dome, began in 1961. It ended in 1968, after a B-52 crashed in Greenland, spreading small amounts of radioactive fallout.

But until then, could some loony general have sent bombers to attack Russia without a presidential order? Yes.

In a scene in the "war room" (a room that didn't really exist, by the way), Air Force Gen. Buck Turgidson (played by George C. Scott) explains to an incredulous President Merkin Muffley (one of three roles played by Peter Sellers) that policies—approved by the president—allowed war powers to be transferred, in case the president was killed in a surprise nuclear attack on Washington.

Historical documents indicate that such procedures did exist, and that, though tightened later, they were startlingly loose at the time.

But were there generals who might really have taken such power in their own hands? It was no secret—it would have been obvious to many viewers in 1964—that General Ripper looked a lot like Curtis LeMay, the cigar-chomping, gruff-talking general who headed the Strategic Air Command through the 1950's and who served as the Pentagon's Air Force Chief of Staff in the early 60's.

In 1957 Robert Sprague, the director of a top-secret panel, warned General LeMay that the entire fleet of b-52 bombers was vulnerable to attack. General LeMay was unfazed. "If I see that the Russians are amassing their planes for an attack," he said, "I'm going to knock the [expletive] out of them before they take off the ground."

"But General LeMay," Mr. Sprague replied, "that's not national policy." "I don't care," General LeMay said. "It's my policy. That's what I'm going to do."

Mr. Kubrick probably was unaware of this exchange. (Mr. Sprague told me about it in 1981, when I interviewed him for a book on nuclear history.) But General LeMay's distrust of civilian authorities, including presidents, was well known among insiders, several of whom Mr. Kubrick interviewed.

The most popular guessing game about the movie is whether there a real-life counterpart to the character of Dr. Strangelove (another Sellers part), the wheelchaired ex-Nazi who directs the Pentagon's weapons research and proposes sheltering political leaders in well-stocked mineshafts, where they can survive the coming nuclear war and breed with beautiful women. Over the years, some have speculated that Strangelove was inspired by Edward Teller, Henry Kissinger or Werner Von Braun.

But the real model was almost certainly Herman Kahn, an eccentric, voluble nuclear strategist at the RAND Corporation, a prominent Air Force think tank. In 1960, Mr. Kahn published a 652-page tome called "On Thermonuclear War," which sold 30,000 copies in hardcover.

According to a special-feature documentary on the new DVD, Mr. Kubrick read "On Thermonuclear War" several times. But what the documentary doesn't note is that the final scenes of "Dr. Strangelove" come straight out of its pages.

Toward the end of the film, officials uncover General Ripper's code and call back the b-52's, but they notice that one bomber keeps flying toward its target. A b-52 is about to attack the Russians with a few H-bombs; General Turgidson recommends that we should "catch 'em with their pants down," and launch an all-out, disarming first-strike.

Such a strike would destroy 90 percent of the u.s.s.r.'s nuclear arsenal. "Mr. President," he exclaims, "I'm not saying we wouldn't get our hair mussed, but I do say no more than 10-20 million killed, tops!" If we don't go all-out, the general warns, the Soviets will fire back with all their nuclear weapons. The choice, he screams, is "between two admittedly regrettable but nevertheless distinguishable postwar environments—one where you get 20 million people killed and the other where you get 150 million people killed!" Mr. Kahn made precisely this point in his book, even producing a chart labeled, "Tragic but Distinguishable Postwar States."

When Dr. Strangelove talks of sheltering people in mineshafts, President Muffley asks him, "Wouldn't this nucleus of survivors be so grief-stricken and anguished that they'd, well, envy the dead?" Strangelove exclaims that, to the contrary, many would feel "a spirit of bold curiosity for the adventure ahead."

Mr. Kahn's book contains a long chapter on mineshafts. Its title: "Will the Survivors Envy the Dead?" One sentence reads: "We can imagine a renewed vigor among the population with a zealous, almost religious dedication to reconstruction."

In 1981, two years before he died, I asked Mr. Kahn what he thought of "Dr. Strangelove." Thinking I meant the character, he replied, with a straight face, "Strangelove wouldn't have lasted three weeks in the Pentagon. He was too creative."

Those in the know watched "Dr. Strangelove" amused, like everyone else, but also stunned. Daniel Ellsberg, who later leaked the Pentagon Papers, was a RAND analyst and a consultant at the Defense Department when he and a mid-level official took off work one afternoon in 1964 to see the film. Mr. Ellsberg recently recalled that as they left the theater, he turned to his colleague and said, "That was a documentary!"

Stranger than Strangelove Dan Ellsberg on the Nuclear Failsafe System. Peace and Freedom through non-violent action. WIN 1977-11-17. Â