

A method to my
deterrence:
perspectives on
disaster from kubrick,
ellsberg, and w...



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“ Though this be madness, yet there is method in’t,” is inherently Shakespearean in nature, and translates to the well known contemporary idiom “ There’s a method to my madness.”(2. 2. 223). While the structure of nuclear diplomacy ventures far beyond the times of Hamlet, the doctrine behind “ madness,” is still very much contained across individuals in control of such armament. The day-old question of “ how much power is too much for one man?,” is one that enters the minds of countless historiographers when assessing leaders in positions of nuclear power. This question, one that divides the mortal from the immortal, looms on minds of strategists of all different schools of historiographical thought. It’s what links the minds of Stanley Kubrick, Daniel Ellsberg, and Albert Wohlstetter together. Despite the fact that each of the aforementioned architects of creative thought are separated in the essence of their respective fields, they’re all entrenched in the same life-staking intellectual dilemma of nuclear warfare within the mid 20th century. The questioning of nuclear deterrence is itself one that puts a user in an indomitable position, yet it’s also one that each Kubrick, Ellsberg, and Wohlstetter are willing to explore when establishing the lines of their creative visions. The production and development of Wohlstetter’s article “ The Delicate Balance of Terror, Ellsberg’s memoir “ The Doomsday Machine,” and Kubrick’s Dr. Strangelove, all serve as creative proxies to iterate the same real world message: nuclear deterrence is a strategic imperative that must be closely safeguarded to prevent an instance of global armageddon. The late-goings of 1958 saw the emergence of Albert Wohlstetter as a figure of stressed importance when it came to policies on nuclear deterrence. Wohlstetter seeks to disestablish the notion that deterrence across Soviet

and U. S. powers is automatic, stating “ Deterrence, however, is not automatic.”(2). The widespread belief across several popularized strategists at the time pointed towards the mindset that the sheer presence of nuclear weapons, both within the Soviet Union and the U. S., was enough to prevent an all out war from occurring. Instead of adhering to this automatized point of inquiry, Wohlstetter mentions that an “ urgent and continuing effort,” is necessary for deterrence, especially considering how many “ vastly underestimated the complexity of the Western problem of retaliation.”(3). The presence of a deterrent force, specifically within a country as technologically and economically sound as the U. S., is inevitable. The ability to effectively and appropriately use said force in a period of war is what Wohlstetter establishes as an unthought of add-on to the argument surrounding deterrence. Furthermore, Wohlstetter reinforces his issue of misperceiving the delicacy of the situation by highlighting the “ successive obstacles to be hurdled,” such as the necessity of a deterrence system “(b) to survive enemy attacks, (c) to make and communicate the decision to retaliate, (d) to reach enemy territory with fuel enough to complete their mission,”(5). All these points go into a formulated understanding that the situation of nuclear deterrence is one of great complexity. Through Wohlstetter’s ability to write both honestly and transparently upon the existence of deterrence systems has emerged a fellow generation of post-Revisionist thinkers that are willing to make analysis where it was once prohibited.

Daniel Ellsberg’s “ The Doomsday Machine” explores the concept of weighing risk with reality through the breakdown of the true consequences

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of nuclear deterrence or the lack thereof. Ellsberg poses the need for more sophisticated and controlled measures of nuclear risk reduction, citing the ineffectiveness of a “ first strike force,” and instead reveling in the comfort of deferred response (13). Ellsberg additionally believes that the existing tactics in play by the U. S. military consisted of a policy of “ launch on warning (LOW),” which assumes inherently that a nuclear attack is on the horizon and must be at the “ heart of our strategic alert” (13). A blatant call for the guaranteed protection of nuclear armament in the U. S. is consistently stressed by Ellsberg throughout and goes to be indicative of the lack of security regarding a U. S. based nuclear decision. Moreover, Ellsberg is unafraid of calling into play the motives of more recent political candidates, citing Donald Trump’s foreign policy understanding of nuclear weapons of “ If we have them why can’t we use them?,” as one that is inadequately represented on a national scale (13). Instead of legitimately adhering to this belief, Ellsberg makes it a point to emphasize how, “ U. S. presidents have used our nuclear weapons dozens of times in “ crises””(13). The point of understanding of Ellsberg is limited to the reality of nuclear armament becoming an abolished idea. While he recognizes that this limitation is in place, a general pursuit of nuclear abolition is also in place throughout. A view that is the antithesis of accepting flat out nuclear inevitably is one that Ellsberg seeks to embrace throughout the text. It creates room for discussion into what was previously unthinkable, similar to Wohlstetter, and establishes an opportunity for a new generation of thinkers to take on a sophisticated and presumed end-all method of nuclear deliberation.

The satirized nature of Kubrick's Dr. Strangelove similarly establishes several parallels into the real-world structure of nuclear play. The film communicates the subtle nature of deterrence and its encompassing policies, with Dr. Strangelove emphasizing how "Deterrence is the art of producing in the mind of the enemy" (55: 10). The presence of Mutually Assured Destruction in this scenario is further satirized as ineffective within the film, as Dr. Strangelove recounts that the "whole point of the doomsday machine," is lost "If you keep it a secret" (56: 30). The presence of this tactical ideology within the film, specifically as this one-to-one ratio of both opposing sides becoming engulfed in nuclear conflict, is one that Kubrick intentionally seeks to make known to the audience. The once-standing principle of deterrence is erased with the presence of MAD and is replaced with a whole series of potential nuclear mishaps, as those highlighted towards the end of the film. Kubrick additionally seeks to utilize the characters he implements as voices of the hyper-satirized. This is made evident through General Turgidson's view that through MAD, the U. S. "would therefore prevail, and suffer only modest and acceptable civilian casualties" (36: 00). The presence of MAD inhibits the possibility of thinking from the perspective as the "loser", and instead puts the implications of victory into the side practicing this tactic.

Kubrick's ability to create a staff of characters who are so behind in this belief system illustrates the need for real-world strategists to embrace truths when present. The ability to override the system of first usage is what makes several characters within Kubrick's story quite unique. Instead of pointing towards how the characters within the story are thrown together, Kubrick

sets the mood for an environment that is blind to the previous activity of deterrence policies. The characters act on rash and obscene points, often establishing perspectives that are the cause for diplomatic polarization. This in turn reflects the end-all nature surrounding MAD and the inability to embrace deterrence as a feasible solution. The only room for appropriate characterization of actual-U. S. figures comes with Kubrick's analysis of Cold War Paranoia as it relates to MAD. Similar to the presence of Mccarthyism, a wave of paranoia surrounds the indoctrinated characters of the film into believing that MAD is the only appropriate way out of global nuclear escalation. Through implementing characters that serve in place of the tropes of a nuclearized society, Kubrick has reinforced the message that deterrence is an issue of great severity with several convoluted moving parts.

The creative combination of Wohlstetter, Ellsberg, and Kubrick sums together to emphasize the need for deterrence and a conclusive system in which it's monitored. Wohlstetter's establishment of a multi-layered complex system for deterrence develops it strategically as being an absolute imperative that has often gone misinterpreted by civilian strategies of the Western world. The argument that interprets deterrence in this reactionary type of way that Wohlstetter defines is similar to what many Post-Revisionist academic historians have construed over the past several decades. It builds credibility to the establishment of deterrence as an understandable solution to nuclear de escalation when several historians are able to label what's considered belligerent and what isn't given context. Ellsberg's cutting narrative allows for greater expansion into the field of directly exposing the

faults of a U. S. backed MAD system to appropriately give way for analysis into the effectiveness of deterrence. Additionally defining deterrence within Kubrick's beloved film as more than a satirical piece of fiction allows for room regarding just how satirical the nuclear question really is. Although the current threat of impending nuclear armageddon is low, the strains of diplomacy have shown in the past to effectively act as a proxy into allowing room for egos to get in the way of it all.

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