

When Did America Stop Caring About the Bomb?

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Introduction

The bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki proved to the world that man could bring forth the wrath of God, illustrated in Biblical quotations of “fire and brimstone” being hailed upon the heathens of Sodom and Gomorrah. Yet, as humanity was overcome by the fear of utter destruction foretold in Psalms thousands of years prior, so too would modern humanity marvel at the nuclear age with emotions of fear, excitement, and awe.

Following the end of the Second World War, art offered an outlet for people to process the complex feeling of fear and fascination stirred up by the bomb. From 1945 until 1965, authors from around the world began creating media that encapsulated the fear and hope brought on by the nuclear age (Jacobs 2021). Popular culture acted as a vessel for the promotion of public opinion surrounding nuclear conflict and annihilation. Likewise, the proliferation of fictional stories in turn educated the masses on the futility of nuclear conflict, the paradoxical nature of deterrence, and strategies of their leaders. The spread of knowledge would affect how people viewed nuclear policy, influencing the politics of the masses as well as their calls for disarmament and non-proliferation (Jacobs 2012).

In Easter of 1958, the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, or CND, introduced their symbol, a circle with three lines in the middle that would become known in popular culture as the “peace sign.” The popularization of this symbol serves to exemplify the significance of nuclear disarmament and the spread of knowledge, fear, and uncertainty of the nuclear threat. (“History of the CND” 2022).

The goal of this essay is to examine the relationship between popular culture, public opinion, and policy implementation corresponding to nuclear conflict and disarmament from 1945 to the present day. As this essay will illustrate, there is a large amount of literature involving movies and media between 1940-1990. However, synthesized questions and refined

arguments surrounding the relationship between these subjects remain obscure and arbitrary.

Therefore, this essay focuses on the answers to five follow-up questions widely seen as significant but seldom addressed directly:

1. How much did the presence of popular culture centered around nuclear conflict throughout the 20th and into the 21st century reflect public interest in nuclear Armageddon and disarmament?
2. How significant is public opinion on promoting nuclear disarmament?
3. When did the West stop caring about nuclear disarmament?
4. How much did the representation of nuclear conflict in media explain our current disinterest in nuclear disarmament?
5. How does popular culture affect how we view nuclear conflict and disarmament today?

Hypothesis:

Fictional instances depicted in popular culture outlets such as art, literature, and films, influenced public opinion throughout the 20th century, consequently influencing the directions of policies concerning disarmament and nuclear non-proliferation. Furthermore, this paper uses eras of either heightened or lessened salience in public opinion over nuclear armed conflict, comparing the popularization of nuclear Armageddon in popular culture with policy implementation concerning nuclear peace, telling the story about the rise and fall of nuclear thought from the public viewpoint. The analysis of various publications brought together by theory will provide a synthesized understanding.

The history of the Western Disarmament Movement will provide support for this story, and its background and context will serve to structure the story's descent into theory. Following that foundation, the cultural context will breathe life into the story, providing the setting, thematic elements, actors, anecdotally attaching perceptions of atomic culture throughout the Cold War like muscles on bones, strengthening the argument along the foundation. As muscles allow our story to run, the nerves, veins, and arteries are pathways connecting our foundation and

our strength together to allow for movement and connection. A theoretical basis on the effect of public opinion and policy making serves as the bridge to put our story into full motion. Finally, the methodologic analysis will be our “Fait accompli” as if to provide a full understanding of the questions asked above.

The History of the Western Disarmament Movement

While the existing literature regarding the history of the Western Disarmament Movement is extensive, it does not detail its popular culture significance nor the implementation of policy. The literature focuses upon the organization’s reactions to momentous incidents in the Cold War such as the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Vietnam War, the placement of Cruise and Pershing Missiles in the UK and Europe, the Civil Defense Era, and the Thatcher and Reagan years, as well as many strides toward disarmament today.

Much of the literature follows the reaction of European groups against nuclear conflict but does not include as much on American organizations. The Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy or SANE was one of the earliest attempts at this, beginning in 1957 with calls for representatives from international liberal movements to meet in New York. The meeting was attended by 27 people including representatives from the world of business, science, labor, literature, and the church. The focus of the meeting was securing an international nuclear test ban treaty. SANE was involved in putting pressure on the US right after the USSR announced its unilateral test ban (“History of the CND”).

The literature provides examples of arms control and the disarmament movement as found in Lawrence S. Wittner’s “Confronting the Bomb” that argues the strength and popularity of arms control and disarmament has ebbed and flowed over time. Wittner saw correlations between the movement’s peaks and more government action in arms control. Wittner cites three

major upsurges in the 20th century; the first in the 1940s after the bomb was used in Japan, and the second being the 1950s and early 1960s with concerns over atmospheric tests, The third and most powerful resurgence was seen in the late 1970s and early 1980s during the collapse of détente, during which Reagan's build up and bellicose rhetoric and the deployment of intermediate range missiles and neutron warheads in Europe heightened fear of nuclear conflict. Consequently, these epochs of upsurge directly correlate with eras of nuclear armed conflict in popular culture (Wittner 2009, 23-137).

History of Atomic Culture and Policymaking in America

As stated by Chris Gorski, nuclear weapons captivated imaginations worldwide and art provided a way for people to process the complex emotions this power stirred up. Gorski provides early examples of the world's strange fascination with nuclear weapons and conflict. From "atomic fireballs" to "the bikini," named after the 1946 test explosion in the Bikini Atoll (Gorski 2020, line 5).

Robert Jacobs is a noteworthy scholar in atomic popular culture, writing on the concept of radiation as a trope for many 1940s-1960s era films. These depictions come along with newly founded fears of an odorless, tasteless, and invisible killing machine. Fears were founded by the detonation at Castle Bravo in the Bikini Atoll and the ensuing fallout's effect on Japanese fishermen. As radiation as a literary trope seeped its way into the mainstream, so too did critiques of the Cold War as examples of Cold War equivalency, seen in the *Day the World Stood Still* or *Spy vs. Spy*, illustrations that removed ideology from what was now seen as a futile conflict that would bring the apocalypse. Cold War propaganda was indirectly shown to the masses and influenced the public's political knowledge (Jacobs 2012).

It was not until 1964 with the release of two significantly terrifying and awe-inspiring films did the concept of atomic media culture make its way into the governmental interest. The two movies released in 1964 were *Dr. Strangelove or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* and *Fail Safe*. Both *Fail Safe* and *Dr. Strangelove* provoked feelings of fear and anxiety as the audience watched at the edge of their seats to see what would happen next. The difference was audiences watching *Dr. Strangelove* found themselves chuckling at the sheer over-the-top dark humor presented to them. On the other hand, audiences watching *Fail Safe* would feel despair and anxiety for groups of people and characters they have and will never meet. While both movies had a significant impact on popular culture and media, *Fail Safe* would ultimately be considered a “flop” while *Dr. Strangelove* is considered a masterpiece of modern filmmaking and political commentary (“Films Deconstructed, 2022”).

Fail Safe considers the possible terrors of technology’s mistakes, leading to the accidental use of nuclear weapons and the deaths of millions of Americans and Russians. Yet its premise is unrealistic and hard to believe. Moreover, the film does not make a constructive argument against accidental nuclear war outside humanity’s inability to control its rapid advancement. For these reasons, the film made little impact on the public outside of many comparing the film to its more successful counterpart, *Dr. Strangelove*. The parallels to each film are very uncanny yet, as will be explained, *Dr. Strangelove* makes certain political jabs and portrayals that not only convince the public of the issues around nuclear war but make their way up to the executive branch (“Films Deconstructed, 2022”).

Dr. Strangelove was released prior to *Failsafe* on January 29, 1964, causing a good deal of controversy within the American public, Hollywood, and the US government. The plot of *Dr. Strangelove* suggests that the threat of inadvertent nuclear war caused by a mentally deranged

American general ordering an attack on the Soviet Union without Presidential authority, causing the deaths of millions, was possible. The release of the film accelerated public discussions about the possibility of nuclear war and of nuclear policies of the US. The reactions of critics to the movie varied in their contempt and support for the movie's realism and outcomes. Many reviewers refuted Kubrick's warning about the dangers of US nuclear strategy and inadvertent nuclear war. Critics such as Henry Hart called *Dr. Strangelove* a farce constructed for the benefit of liberals and pacifists (Lowery 2009, 42).

Many critics took the silliness in the film to be facetious, making its message equally as "unrealistic" and "banal." Film critic Bosley Crowther famously called the film, "the most shattering sick joke I've ever come across" ("Screen: *Dr. Strangelove*," 24, as cited in Lowery 2009, 50), believing that the negative portrayals of governmental served no constructive purpose. There were critics that reviewed the film in a positive light, regarding its message as "a serious joke to display the dangers of the bomb to audiences", encouraging readers and much of the public to see the film and be educated on the dangers of a nuclear future. Political scientists of the time often regarded the film as unrealistic or impossible based on current public understandings of failsafe mechanisms such as PALs that were introduced during the Kennedy administration. Moreover, Alastair Buchan believed that the film did not properly depict inadvertent nuclear war because people did not understand the precautions the US and other nuclear powers took to prevent inadvertent disasters. The logic of many was that no threat existed, therefore nuclear strategies were not flawed, completely dismissing the film's premise and Kubrick's warning (Lowery 2009, 50).

Yet, the film's warning caused massive public discourse. Lowery's thesis suggests that the public discourse turned the tide of the 1964 presidential election. As previously inferred, the

film communicated the threat of nuclear war to the public effectively. Likewise, journalists used the film to warn voters about the possibility of nuclear war following a Republican victory in the 1964 election (Lowery 2009, 53).

During the election, critics associated Republican nominee Barry Goldwater with the mad characters represented by Dr. Strangelove and Jack D. Ripper. During his career, Goldwater advocated a strong nuclear position and an ideological predisposition towards fighting Communism directly in war. Yet, the candidate never officially seemed to understand the ramifications of a nuclear war. Goldwater's possible nuclear posture concerned voters, as the Senator directly opposed the Limited Nuclear Test Ban Treaty because of Chinese and Soviet conventional superiority. The Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy (SANE), a nonpartisan organization, actively campaigned against Goldwater, fearing his hawkish stance on nuclear arms (Lowery 2009, 55). While many disagreed with Kubrick's argument, the film caused serious public discourse by associating a political candidate with features from the film's antagonists. While there is no evidence to say this strengthened the outcome of the election, Johnson's victory exemplifies popular culture's influence on the public's choice of candidate and policies. Yet, while Johnson's administration would see the creation of the Limited Test Ban Treaty and the Non-Proliferation treaty, it would also see a military buildup on both sides and the US's intervention in the Vietnam war. Therefore, it is unclear if public opinion was able to influence foreign policy.

The early 1960's was a time of great instability in the world of nuclear superpowers. Yet, after 1963, in the eyes of the public, nuclear tensions began to settle down. On the 5th of August 1963, the United States and the USSR signed the Limited Nuclear Test Ban Treaty. The treaty marked the beginning of a period referred to by historian Paul Boyer as "the Big Sleep." This

was an era when public concerns about nuclear war ebbed and faded. From the perspective of the American public, the test ban gave the appearance that world leaders were working towards eliminating nuclear conflict. Boyer makes several arguments for the American people's apathy during this period. Initially, news and media outlets began to give less attention to the bomb, and this gave Americans the impression that the bomb was an abstraction and nuclear war was far from a reliable possibility. Moreover, deterrence theory was supported by many as an effective method for reducing the viability of nuclear war. Yet, the most important issue that diverted attention from the bomb was the US's increasing involvement in the Vietnam War (Boyer 1995, 356-358 as cited by Lowery 2009, 1).

The current consensus of nuclear apathy continued into the 1970s as the war in Vietnam raged and the world's leaders negotiated arms limitation. There is little evidence of media in the 1970s covering the threat of the bomb. This can be attributed to superpower nuclear arms control treaties in the early 1970s, including the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (SALT I). However, the arms race continued and by 1974, the nuclear stockpiles of the United States and the Soviet Union had become impressively more powerful.

The end of the Vietnam war in 1975 provides an example of public opinion supplementing foreign policy decisions. Vietnam acted as a catalyst for public intervention in politics, as many saw the brutality of the Vietnam war and the failure of their leaders as an opportunity to question conventional wisdom. Furthermore, with the distraction of the war over, the "Era of the Big Sleep" had ended, and a strengthened public opinion again began questioning the validity of US nuclear strategy and the importance of the bomb itself ("Atomic Culture" 2017).

This change in consensus was immediately evident by 1979, when the decision was made to deploy US Cruise and Pershing missiles in Western Europe. The same was done by the USSR, deploying SS-20 missiles in Eastern Europe. Suddenly, the nuclear threat was front and center in the minds of the American people and talk of nuclear war was again commonplace (“History of the CND,” 2022).

A new era of nuclear anxiety was introduced by the election of US President Ronald Reagan and British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in 1980. Both seemed to have embarked on a full reversal of US public foreign policy with their respective anti-Communist crusades. The 1980s marks the beginning of what is known as “the second nuclear age,” where atomic culture returned in earnest alongside Cold War tensions. Under the Presidency of Ronald Reagan, films imagining nuclear war were once again produced. Several movies had collateral cultural impacts, yet the most significant was the 1983 made-for-television film *The Day After*.

The depiction of small Kansas towns being reduced to desolate landscapes, paired with the renewed relevance of nuclear war, caused many Americans to re-think the idea of disarmament. No longer did Americans believe nuclear war to be an abstraction limited by deterrence and mutually assured destruction. Americans agreed that avoiding that destruction was the best course of action. The movie *The Day After* increased nuclear awareness for the American people to a height reminiscent of the 1960s. Renewed opposition to the bomb was used by anti-nuclear campaigns as a steppingstone for the implementation of policy. This in turn influences real-time changes to public policy and foreign relations in the Reagan administration (Dawkins 2021, 2).

The movie *The Day After* was so infamous in the public sphere many schools suggested to parents restrict their children from viewing its devastating depictions of nuclear annihilation.

The looming nuclear war hung over the heads of many Americans who were even able to empathize with the Soviet people, who they agreed lived in the same fear. In the 1980s, many began to believe that the will toward violence was the real enemy, further fueling discontent in the nation's leaders and their foreign policy. For example, immediately after viewing the movie, American citizens wrote letters to President Reagan asking to negotiate with the USSR and bring an end to this extreme danger and anxiety. A letter was quoted saying, "Please Mr. President, give us tomorrow." Protests increased during this period with the movie generating support for antinuclear groups. (Dawkins 2021, 11)

Yet, to what degree did the public affect the foreign policy choices of the Reagan Administration? While many in the pro-armament camp constructed responses to *The Day After* to further their respective agendas, using the film as fodder for the importance of having a secure second strike and the implementation of more technological responses to attacks. Reagan too fashioned a very vague and uncertain response to the film. Stating, "[The movie] didn't say anything we didn't know and that is that nuclear war is horrible. And that's why we're doing what we're doing, so there won't be one" ("Viewers Shocked," 1983, 2, as cited by Dawkins 2021). Immediately after this response, the administration began desperately fashioning a propaganda campaign to comfort the American people. Yet Reagan understood the situation and knew his foreign policy goals ran directly against the movie and the fears of the American people. Thus, Reagan and his cabinet modified the US's nuclear policies with the movie in mind. On January 16, 1984, Reagan gave his first speech of the year making new claims to American nuclear policy. Reagan emphasized nuclear reduction and arms limitation rather than antagonizing the USSR and threatening nuclear attack. Yet, the switch in rhetoric was only to comfort the American people, and movements towards arms limitation would not be made until

3 years after the speech, when the US and USSR agreed to the INF Treaty in 1987 (Dawkins 2021, 16).

Theories on Public Opinion Influencing Policymaking

Does public opinion influence policymaking in the United States? For that matter, *how much* impact does public opinion have on public policy? Does public opinion increase the importance of an issue? Moreover, does public opinion set the agenda for salient topics in American politics? More specifically, how significant is public opinion in creating policy?

Paul Burstein, a scholar, and researcher, writes about the impact of public opinion on public policy creating a guide by which to tackle the important questions put forward above. Burstein sources much of his data from publications and amalgamizes their conclusions to create a collective assumption about the effects of public opinion on public policy. As it turns out, public opinion strongly influences policy most of the time, as well as, depending on the salience of an issue and its relationship to the public, strengthens its effect. Furthermore, according to Burstein, on average, interest groups, political entities, and economic elites hardly alter these connections and have little effect on agenda-setting. Burstein's framework for making conclusions is based off publications from other authors of similar studies. In effect, his conclusions are based on several detailed literature reviews. Likewise, the conclusion on this paper will follow a similar framework.

To begin, Burstein posits the question, "How much impact does public opinion have on public policy?" Burstein cites Bryan Jones's (1994) argument that public opinion has inherent limitations in both the "cognitive capacities" of individuals and the "organizational capacities" of legislative apparatuses, signifying that public opinion only goes as far as the significance of issues rather than the creation of opinions based on a collection of beliefs. Furthermore, Jones

argues the public is not in charge of agenda setting, meaning the power to do so resides in governmental structures such as Congress and the Executive Branch. These conclusions simply imply the public does not drive the conversation, but rather is coerced into having opinions loosely based on salient topics. (Burstein 2003, 29-40)

Likewise, Burstein cites Zaller's (1992) argument, contending that many issues are so complex the public cannot possibly have a valid opinion nor contribution to discussion or policymaking. As Arnold (1990) posits, "issues...so complex, and the legislative process so arcane...most citizens are unable to ascertain whether their interests are being served." Therefore, in the context of Burstein's first conclusions, this paper can conclude without meaningful statistics, that public opinion does not affect policy making.

However, this is not the entire conclusion Burstein makes, nor can it be supported with data. Unlike prior explanations, Wlezien (1996, 81) substantiates quantitative evidence alongside methodological studies that "generally corroborates a link between public preferences and policy;" going further to posit, his evidence shows "substantial empirical relationships," between opinion and policy. S. Hays et. al. (1996, 56) further this point with an actual policy example. Stating, "environmental relegation is 'quite responsive' to public opinion." Additionally, Erikson et. al. (1993: 80) "gawk at the sheer 'awe-some' relationship opinion and policy share, without concluding a positive or negative relationship between them." Burstein then answers this open-ended question by compiling the conclusions of multiple studies, averaging the answers.

What this paper finds more significant to the study of public opinion and policy implementation, is the theory surrounding agenda setting and issue salience. As stated earlier, Zaller (1992) concludes the complexity of issues at the political level restrict public opinion to simple opinions rather than abstract conclusions. Yet Burstein makes a point to include salience

and agenda-setting in his study, believing that issue salience has long been a key element to understanding democratic responsiveness. Put simply, if citizens care about an issue they are likely to side with an elected official's actions on that issue and take it into account on Election Day (Arnold 1990: Ch. 6; Jones 1994; see also Lindaman and Haider-Markel 2002). So, as seen by the rhetoric of former President of the United States Donald Trump, this logic leads elected officials to respond to highly salient issues. But, the question remains, does public opinion affect agenda-setting and issue salience, or do elected officials?

As seen by Nancy Reagan's "just say no" to drugs campaign, it can be concluded that agenda-setting does not come from the public. However, this is not to say that the public has no sway in political topics. As stated by Burstein, "if responsiveness is high primarily when salience is high, then responsiveness will be high on only those few issues" (Burstein 2003, 30). Which is taken to say when congress and the public both agree on the salience of a subject and its responsiveness, then both sides converge.

From what is concluded by the various studies and averages collectively converted into quantitatively significant outcomes are as follows. Burstein concludes that there is more than a significant linkage between public opinion and public policy. Additionally, Burstein concludes that there is a positive relationship between public opinion and salience. Yet, Burstein provides no evidence to support public opinion can impact agenda setting nor issue salience. Based on these circumstances, Burstein generally concludes that: "public opinion affects policy three-quarters of the times its impact is gauged...As well as Salience does affect the impact of public opinion on policy." (Burstein 2003, 36)

Methodology

This paper will compare the two nuclear eras of heightened nuclear fear, the 1960s and 1980s, along with the eras of nuclear détente during the 1970s and the modern age, to understand the resemblances between popular culture and public opinion in influencing policies during these epochs. This methodology should provide parallels in policymaking as well as popular culture to find correlation. The object of this comparison is to look for changes in public opinion data to understand the direction agenda setting between these two eras.

In the 1960s, the American public was fascinated by the power of nuclear weapons. This “atomic craze” subsided in 1964 after two popular movies were released, *Fail Safe* and *Dr. Strangelove*. *Fail Safe* expanded fears surrounding technological mistakes causing nuclear Armageddon, but ultimately caused minimal reactions from the public. On the other hand, *Dr. Strangelove* garnered massive popularity and controversy. While critics argued the realism behind the movie’s message, its popularity allowed for discourse in the American public. This discourse ultimately influenced the decisions of Americans during the 1964 election. Many Americans equated the Republican candidate Barry Goldwater to an anti-Communist ideologue like the movie’s main antagonists Jack D. Ripper and Dr. Strangelove, many going so far as to believe that Goldwater’s election would lead to the consequences that ensued in the movie. The results of the 1964 election were overwhelmingly against Goldwater with Johnson winning 61.4% of the popular vote. This outcome indicates a correlation between popular opposition to a candidate leading to the outcome of an election. However, there is no evidence that *Dr. Strangelove* contributed more than outside variables to the outcome of the 1964 election. Therefore, it cannot be concluded that public opinion has led to a political outcome in 1964. (Lowery 2009)

In the 1970s, several factors contributed to decreased public attention to the nuclear threat. Furthermore, the 1970s is seen as a period of negligible attention to the nuclear threat in popular culture outlets such as film. Additionally, several significant policies towards détente were made with little public intervention on their implementation. This concludes that during the 1970s, popular culture did not influence the American public towards disarmament and that these policies were exclusive to political actors.

In the 1980s, the elections of anti-communist leaders Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher lead to the idea of nuclear war returning to the public discourse. This coupled with popular movies of the decade such as *The Day After* persuading the public rhetoric of Ronald Reagan towards a more peaceful approach. However, this essay found no correlation between public opinion altering Reagan's actual nuclear stance, which remained against nuclear disarmament even after the 1987 INF treaty.

Theoretically, Paul Burstein's study of publications detailing the effect of public opinion on public policy concludes that $\frac{3}{4}$ of the time public opinion can influence the implementation of public policy. Yet, this study concludes that these effects are only surface level, meaning public opinion has little sway over significant foreign policy making. This is evident by Reagan's steadfast support of nuclear armament even after publicly announcing the US's stance on nuclear strategy would be more focused on disarmament and negotiation.

Ultimately, what this essay finds are that popular culture surrounding nuclear warfare does affect public opinion; yet public opinion is not strong enough to influence American foreign policy to a degree that supports policymaking in the direction of nuclear disarmament. American foreign policy choices remain in the hands of negotiating countries and the US government.

Conclusion and Outlook

After the detonations of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the American public was fascinated by the destructive power of nuclear weapons, a wonder captured in art and media during the Cold War. Prompted by the devastation many formed organizations to fight the expansion of nuclear weapons. While public support for disarmament allowed for multilateral actions such as removing Pershing and Cruise missiles from Western Europe, was it powerful enough to effect general policy choices? This essay asked five questions which will be answered as follows; first, the presence of popular culture centered around nuclear conflict does reflect the public interest in Armageddon and disarmament. However, this can be affected by outside forces, such as the détente era in which policy choices toward nuclear disarmament and the Vietnam war distracted the public from impending nuclear doom. Furthermore, public opinion is significant in promoting nuclear disarmament. This became apparent after the movie *Dr. Strangelove* influenced the public to support Johnson over Goldwater in the 1964 election, as well as the movie *The Day After*, changing then-US President Ronald Reagan's public rhetoric from armament to disarmament. From the perspective of the American and European public, the West stopped caring about nuclear weapons in the 1970s, because a series of politics and negotiating such as SALT I and the ABM treaty suggested to the people that policymakers were moving towards negotiation rather than mutually assured destruction.

So how can we explain our current neglect of nuclear disarmament? Like in the 1970s, the end of the Cold War distracted the American public from nuclear Armageddon. Media depictions of the Berlin Wall collapsing alongside the dissolution of the Soviet Union influenced the public into believing the nuclear threat was over. Furthermore, as this essay suggests, the fear and fascination with nuclear weapons will never actually disappear if nuclear weapons still exist. Today, with the Crisis in Ukraine, many are experiencing a resurgence in discussions

surrounding the impacts of nuclear war and the use of nuclear weapons. Based on this essay, we are likely to see more movies about nuclear war in our future.

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