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THE VIEW FROM THE NINETIES



**F**ast-forward a full decade. By the mid-1990s, the Cold War was fading into memory, and the “nuclear threat” had mutated from its classic form—a nightmarish, world-destroying holocaust—into a series of still-menacing but less cosmic regional dangers and technical issues.

But these developments, welcome as they were, did not mean that the historical realities addressed in this book had suddenly vanished. For one thing, nuclear menace in forms both fanciful and serious remained very much alive in the mass culture, from popular

fiction to movies, video games, and television programs. Further, Americans continued to wrestle with the meaning of the primal event that had started it all, the atomic destruction of two cities by the order of a U.S. president in August 1945. The fiftieth anniversary of the end of World War II, and of the nearly simultaneous Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings, raised this still contentious issue in a particularly urgent form, inviting reflections on America’s half-century effort to accommodate nuclear weapons into its strategic thinking, its ethics, and its culture.



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# NUCLEAR MENACE IN THE MASS CULTURE OF THE LATE COLD WAR ERA AND BEYOND

*Paul Boyer and Eric Idsvoog*

**D**espite the end of the Cold War, the waning of the nuclear arms race, and the disappearance of “global thermonuclear war” from pollsters’ lists of Americans’ greatest worries, U.S. mass culture of the late 1980s and the 1990s was saturated by nuclear themes. Images of nuclear menace continued to pervade the movies, video games, and mass-market fiction. This essay explores these continuities and reflects on what they tell us about American cultural anxieties as the nation moved into the uncharted terrain of the post–Cold War era.

This chapter is the product of a collaboration with Eric Idsvoog, an undergraduate at the University of Wisconsin–Madison who in the summer of 1996, funded by a professor/student research fellowship, investigated nuclear themes in the fiction and movies of the 1990s. This essay represents a shared process of research, discussion, analysis, and writing.

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ON AUGUST 8, 1945, Anne O’Hare McCormick, writing in the *New York Times*, insisted that the atomic bomb had caused “an explosion in men’s minds as shattering as the obliteration of Hiroshima.” Whatever the appropriateness of McCormick’s equation of mass death and mass

psychology, an upsurge of “atomic” jokes, “atomic” drinks, and “atomic” sales, not to mention the many businesses that quickly incorporated the potent new word into their names, seemed to confirm her claim. From the beginning, advertisers, marketers, and mass-culture producers found the atomic bomb a potent and versatile image.

Within weeks of Hiroshima, movie marquees heralded *The House on 92nd Street*, a spy thriller hastily revised to incorporate in its plot “Process 97, the secret ingredient of the atomic bomb.” By year’s end, radio stations were airing the Slim Gaillard Quartet’s “Atomic Cafe” and “When the Atomic Bomb Fell,” a country song celebrating victory over the “cruel Jap.”

The idea of nuclear weapons—and the terror they spawned—remained embedded in U.S. mass culture for the next forty years and beyond. This cultural output came in waves, however, paralleling cycles of activism and apathy. The fallout fears so pervasive from the mid-1950s to 1963, for example, produced a rich trove of cultural effluvia, including “mutant” movies featuring such radiation-spawned creatures as *The Beast from 2000 Fathoms* (1953), the giant ants of *Them!* (1954), *The Blob* (1958), and *The Incredible Shrinking Man* (1957). Nuclear anxiety often surfaced in the science-fiction television shows *The Outer Limits* and Rod Serling’s *Twilight Zone*, and radioactive mishaps spawned a new generation of comic-book superheroes, including Spider-Man, the Fantastic Four, and the Incredible Hulk. As we have seen, this wave of atomic fear also gave rise to films adapted from nuclear-war novels, including *On the Beach* and *Dr. Strangelove*.

Similarly, the upsurge of nuclear fear and activism in the early Reagan years resonated in a variety of cultural forms, from poetry, novels, and science fiction to rock music, movies, and novels. The movies *War Games*, in which a high school hacker taps into the Pentagon’s supercomputer and nearly triggers World War III, and *Testament*, which chronicles a California family’s final days as radiation from a nuclear attack on San Francisco creeps northward, both debuted in 1983. In the 1983 made-for-TV movie *Special Bulletin*, terrorists threaten to destroy Charleston, South Carolina, with a nuclear weapon. The terrorist theme soon loomed large in post-Cold War mass culture.

*The Day After* (1984), a heavily publicized ABC-TV special, por-

trayed the effects of a Soviet nuclear attack on a Kansas town. With attention shifting from the nuclear-freeze campaign to President Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative, *The Day After* missed the crest of the early-eighties' wave of nuclear fear and activism. Nevertheless, it unsettled many Americans—including children forbidden to watch it because of a parental-advisory message warning of its frightening content.

Nuclear jitters aided sales of at least three novels of the early 1980s: William Prochnau's *Trinity's Child* (1983), Frederick Forsyth's *Fourth Protocol* (1984), and Tom Clancy's best-selling *Hunt for Red October* (1984). In *Trinity's Child*, an unidentified nuclear missile explodes over a Russian city. The Soviets retaliate with a limited nuclear attack on the United States, forcing on American officials the agonizing choice of backing down or launching a full-scale nuclear counterattack that could jeopardize human survival.

In *The Fourth Protocol*, the British intelligence service narrowly forestalls a Soviet plot to detonate a nuclear device near a U.S. base in England and then pin the blame on the United States. The aim is to turn European public opinion against the United States, break up the NATO alliance, and open the way for a Soviet takeover of western Europe.

*The Hunt for Red October*, the first of Clancy's popular "Jack Ryan" novels of espionage, high-level intrigue, and military derring-do, told of a rogue Soviet submarine captain, Marko Ramius, who realizes that his sub has been selected to launch a nuclear first strike against the United States. As he desperately tries to defect to the West, the KGB falsely warns Washington that Ramius himself is the threat. As both Soviet and U.S. vessels close in, and as a nuclear showdown seems inevitable, only the CIA analyst Ryan grasps the truth, and by amazing heroics prevents World War III.

Even the novels and films in which nuclear themes seem incidental, or hover in the background, demonstrate the unease of these years. In Stephen King's 1979 thriller *The Dead Zone*, the clairvoyant protagonist attempts to assassinate the man he realizes will someday plunge the world into nuclear war. One of the many subplots of the 1983 James Bond film *Octopussy* involves a scheme by Kamal Khan (Louis Jourdain), a smuggler with ties to the Soviet Union, to plant a nuclear device on a U.S. Air Force base. In the 1985 movie *Back to the Future*, the eccentric scientist

Doc Brown, played by Christopher Lloyd, deploys a time-traveling vehicle powered by plutonium stolen from a nuclear-research facility by Libyan terrorists—another anticipation of a major post-Cold War nuclear theme. When the brain-eating zombies of *Return of the Living Dead* (1985) overrun a small town, the government fights back with (what else?) a nuclear bomb. In the potboiler movie *Weird Science* (1985), a nuclear missile disrupts a teenager's house party.

Some mass-culture output of the late 1970s and early 1980s interwove images of nuclear holocaust with fears of social breakdown and urban collapse. The anarchic society of the 1979 Australian film *Mad Max* and its sequels, *Mad Max 2* (1981; released in the United States in 1982 as *The Road Warriors*) and *Mad Max: Beyond Thunderdome* (1985), is presented as the aftermath of nuclear holocaust. As *The Road Warriors* opens, a scrolling text explains in mythic language how this debased, dog-eat-dog society came to be: "Two mighty tribes went to war, and touched off a blaze that engulfed them all." *Terminator* (1984) and *Terminator II: Judgment Day* (1991), both starring Arnold Schwarzenegger, offer nightmarish images of a post-holocaust Los Angeles of half-demolished buildings and wrecked playgrounds, where survivors desperately battle their own machines. Joining nuclear terror to fear of a computer-dominated world, the *Terminator* movies featured an omnipotent computer, Skynet, that has detonated all the world's nuclear weapons, destroying civilization. In *Terminator*, Schwarzenegger is a cyborg (the eponymous "Terminator") who arrives from the future, programmed to kill the person (still in utero) who is destined to lead a rebellion against Skynet. In *Terminator II*, Schwarzenegger has morphed into a robotic defender of the future rebel, now a young boy, against the powers that wish him dead.

William Gibson's 1984 science-fiction novel *Neuromancer* (which introduced the term "cyberspace") gives expression to a host of anxieties, including the existential terrors of a world dominated by powerful corporations possessing the technology to buy, sell, destroy, and even create human beings at will. The horror of nuclear weapons, while only one of Gibson's many themes, is powerfully invoked. One character, Peter Rivera, who can project his thoughts as holograms, generates this image of a city devastated by nuclear attack:



A dark wave of rubble rose against a colorless sky, beyond its crest the bleached, half-melted skeletons of city towers. The rubble wave was textured like a net, rusting steel rods twisted gracefully as fine string, vast slabs of concrete still clinging there. The foreground might once have been a city square; there was a sort of stump, something that suggested a fountain. At its base, the children and the soldier were frozen. . . . Children. Feral, in rags. Teeth glittering like knives. Sores on their contorted faces. The soldier on his back, mouth and throat open to the sky. They were feeding.

Even as these novels and films appeared, however, the Cold War and the nuclear arms race—realities woven tightly into the fabric of American life and culture—were ending. The sequence of now familiar events needs no elaboration: Mikhail Gorbachev's rise to power in 1985; his meetings with President Reagan; the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989; Germany's reunification; the collapse of the Soviet Union itself in 1991.

Simultaneously, a series of nuclear-arms treaties, spawning a new set of acronyms—INF (1987), START I (1991), START II (1993)—reversed years of nuclear escalation. Negotiators also addressed complex issues related to dismantling nuclear weapons, the disposal of plutonium and other nuclear by-products, and the security of remaining missiles. President Bill Clinton, in his 1997 State of the Union address, called for renewed efforts toward nuclear disarmament and nonproliferation agreements. Clinton and Russian president Boris Yeltsin later that year agreed in principle on START III, aimed at cutting stockpiles to between 2,000 and 2,500 warheads by 2007.

### THE MASS CULTURE RESPONDS

Given the historically cyclical pattern of Americans' cultural engagement with nuclear issues, which intensifies in times of heightened fear and activism and diminishes when fear and activism fade, one might have expected these events to have ushered in another cycle of cultural neglect. Don DeLillo's 1997 novel *Underworld*, exploring the cultural and psychological ramifications of America's half-century encounter with

nuclear weapons, implicitly placed those ramifications in the past. The nuclear arms race and all its by-products had profoundly shaped, and warped, American life for decades after 1945, DeLillo suggested—but they were now history and could be grasped imaginatively and summed up novelistically.

In fact, however, the process of “cultural fallout” goes on—changed, certainly, but in some respects barely diminished. A decade after the Cold War’s end, cultural concern with the nuclear menace was still pervasive. What the emotional and psychological effects of this outpouring of cultural material would be remained an interesting unanswered question.

Why this persistence? In contrast to the early 1950s, the federal government in the late 1980s and early 1990s did not downplay nuclear dangers with soothing propaganda about civil defense or the atom’s peacetime uses. And in contrast to the post-1963 years, the late 1980s and 1990s did not see the emergence of such all-consuming issues as the Vietnam War, urban riots, or Watergate, which had earlier diverted attention from nuclear issues. On the contrary, the fiftieth anniversary of the atomic bombing of Japan and the controversy over the Smithsonian Institution’s *Enola Gay* exhibit (see chapter 16) actually heightened nuclear awareness.

The language and imagery of the mass media and of everyday life in the later 1990s underscored the cultural persistence of the nuclear theme. We “nuke” foods in our microwaves. A PBS news commentator, speaking of a volatile political issue, says: “I don’t want to get too close to this; it could be radioactive.” A legislator criticizing a proposed bill observes on CNN: “It’s like using a nuclear weapon to try to kill a fly.” An anti-smoking activist admits in the *New York Times* that he “goes thermonuclear” when people ignore No Smoking signs. A Kentucky flood victim tells a reporter: “The only worse thing would be a nuclear disaster.” Though the songs on the 1996 compact disk *Dr. Dre Presents . . . the Aftermath* did not deal with nuclear war, the cover featured a mushroom cloud, that generic, instantly recognizable symbol of menace. The third edition of the *American Heritage Dictionary* (1992) defined “apocalypse” as: “Great or total devastation: *the apocalypse of nuclear war*” (emphasis

added). After half a century, in short, the language and the imagery of nuclear war so permeated U.S. culture that one hardly noticed them.

The mass media's imitative nature doubtless played a part as well. A theme that had inspired so many movies, novels, and television programs from the 1950s to the early 1980s clearly invited further exploitation, whatever the shifts in world realities. Just as Hollywood continued to churn out World War II movies long after the war was over, an occasional "nuclear" film or novel is hardly surprising.

Beyond all this, however, lay an additional and obvious causal factor: the persistence of nuclear hazards. The 1986 Chernobyl disaster revived fears of nuclear power. The cleanup of contaminated nuclear sites and the long-term storage of deadly radioactive waste (estimated by the Department of Energy to cost \$230 billion or more for the United States alone) posed massive problems. By the mid-1990s, the United States possessed nearly one hundred tons of weapons-grade plutonium and almost one thousand tons of enriched uranium; Russia's stockpiles were even larger.

Further, despite significant moves toward nuclear disarmament, START II remained unratified by the Russian parliament, and Russian conservatives and military leaders ominously denounced Boris Yeltsin as a traitor for agreeing to START III in 1997. Even if fully implemented, these treaties would still leave Russia and the United States with several thousand nuclear warheads each—a stockpile that would have horrified the Americans of 1945, who had just seen what *two* atomic bombs, puny by 1990s standards, could accomplish.

Further, the continued presence of nuclear missiles, missile-grade materials, and atomic scientists in highly unstable regions of the former Soviet sphere (including Russia itself) spawned fears of nuclear blackmail or the clandestine transfer of nuclear materials or know-how to aspiring nuclear powers like North Korea, Iraq, or Libya—or even to small terrorist groups desperate to achieve their goals. In October 1997, a Russian nuclear scientist told a congressional committee that in the 1970s the Soviet KGB had had in its possession more than eighty suitcase-sized nuclear bombs; he added the alarming charge that this cache of micro-weapons had vanished in the breakdown of the chain of command after

the Soviet Union's collapse. Commenting on this testimony, Senator Richard Lugar of Indiana warned of the danger of nuclear weapons falling into the wrong hands. (The FBI issued a statement denying that the eighty-four bombs were unaccounted for).

The uncertainties of the post-Cold War era, exacerbated by stories such as this, kept nuclear-related issues at the forefront of Americans' awareness and provided a rich lode of material for the mass culture of the late 1980s and 1990s. While nuclear fear may ultimately fade from American imagination and culture, it seems destined to have a very long half-life indeed.

### THE LATE 1980S: YEARS OF TRANSITION

By a kind of cultural inertia, the nuclear preoccupations of the early 1980s persisted in U.S. mass culture as the decade wore on, despite the changing international climate, as projects already in the pipeline reached fruition. Tom Clancy, for example, followed *The Hunt for Red October* with *Red Storm Rising* (1986) and *The Cardinal of the Kremlin* (1988). In *The Cardinal of the Kremlin*, U.S. spies in the Kremlin seek information about Russia's missile-defense system. In *Red Storm Rising*, an interesting transitional novel, Clancy again takes the world to the brink of nuclear war, setting up a classic Cold War superpower confrontation while also introducing ambiguities and complexities that anticipated the post-Cold War era ahead. The action begins when Islamic fundamentalist terrorists destroy a major Soviet oil facility, crippling the nation's energy flow. Deciding on a desperate strategy, the KGB stages a coup and launches an invasion of western Europe as a prelude to seizing the oil-rich Persian Gulf.

The resulting war repeatedly threatens to go nuclear. When Moscow launches a surveillance satellite, U.S. authorities mistake it for an ICBM and nearly retaliate. As the Red Army faces defeat in conventional combat, pressures to play the nuclear card increase. In a showdown with the Soviet Defense Council, a Russian field commander, General Alekseyev, warns against this fateful step. Ridiculing the Defense Council chairman for urging the use of "tactical" nuclear weapons, Alekseyev fumes: "He's talking like one of those NATO idiots! There is no wall between a tactical

and a strategic nuclear exchange, just a fuzzy line in the imagination of the amateurs and academics who advise their political leaders.” Should the Defense Council proceed with its mad plan, he goes on, Russia’s very survival “would be at the mercy of whichever NATO leader is the *least* stable.” Seizing power, Alekseyev arranges a cease-fire with NATO and prevents nuclear war—by the narrowest of margins. In this scene, Clancy in fact powerfully critiqued NATO strategy, which included a nuclear first-use option if the Soviets invaded.

Cold War themes of nuclear menace pervade several movies of the late 1980s, in some cases reflecting the time lag in bringing novels to the screen. Frederick Forsyth’s 1984 novel, *The Fourth Protocol*, for example, appeared as a movie (starring Michael Caine) in 1987. *The Hunt for Red October* reached movie screens in 1990, with Sean Connery and Alec Baldwin in the starring roles, although the international climate had changed radically since 1984. The made-for-TV movie *By Dawn’s Early Light* (1990), the last of the “traditional” Cold War nuclear thrillers, was based on William Prochnau’s novel *Trinity’s Child*, published seven years earlier, when nuclear fear and activism had dominated U.S. life. In *Superman IV: The Quest for Peace* (1987), the Man of Steel belatedly emerges as a nuclear-freeze advocate, hurling the world’s thermonuclear arsenals into the sun.

Other late-1980s novels and movies, however, moved beyond the familiar superpower showdown to explore more ambiguous post-Cold War forms of nuclear menace. In Stephen Hunter’s 1989 novel, *Day before Midnight*, Russian commandos angered by Gorbachev’s concessions seize a U.S. missile silo, intent on launching a nuclear war they can *win* through a decisive first strike. In the 1986 movie *The Manhattan Project*, a teenager eager to impress his girlfriend steals plutonium from a nuclear-weapons facility and constructs his own reactor.

In Roman Polanski’s *Frantic* (1988), starring Harrison Ford, a young American couple, Richard and Sondra Walker, arrive in Paris to find that an airport mixup has left them with the wrong suitcase—one containing a nuclear triggering mechanism that a beautiful young French woman, Michelle, has smuggled into France for an Arab terrorist organization. Sondra is kidnapped, the detonator is nearly lost on a Paris rooftop, Richard is erotically attracted to Michelle, and many other plot twists

ensue before the terrorists murder Michelle, the Walkers are reunited, and a disgusted Richard Walker throws the nuclear device into the Seine.

Mass-culture producers continued to exploit the nuclear theme as the 1990s dawned. But as the full implications of the Soviet collapse became apparent, this protean theme assumed a variety of forms fascinating and revealing in their diversity.

### COLD WAR NOSTALGIA

For Americans accustomed to “the Soviet threat” and the icy reassurance of a superpower balance of terror, the abrupt transformation of world realities proved disorienting. As Harry Angstrom complains in John Updike’s 1990 novel, *Rabbit at Rest*: “It’s like nobody’s in charge of the other side any more. I miss it, the cold war. It gave you a reason to get up in the morning.” In the same vein, a character in the 1995 movie *Crimson Tide* pines for “the good ol’ days of the Cold War, [when] the Russians could . . . be depended upon to do what was in their own best interest.”

Reflecting this almost nostalgic mood, some mass-culture products emulated the Tom Clancy novels of the later 1980s in continuing to portray Russia as America’s adversary, and global holocaust as imminent, even as the Cold War and the nuclear arms race wound down. Reluctant to abandon such a rich theme, the mass-culture producers only slowly acknowledged that a new order had dawned. Whatever the evidence to the contrary, the Cold War and its stark polarities—Washington vs. Moscow; NATO vs. Warsaw Pact; good vs. evil—together with the nuclear confrontation that was its by-product, would surely survive! In *Star Trek: First Contact* (1996), a U.S. nuclear missile left over from World War III is discovered in the distant future. Cold Wars may come and go, but in the mythic realm of *Star Trek*, global nuclear holocaust still awaits.

The burgeoning world of teenage video games, played in arcades and on home consoles, offered another arena of Cold War nostalgia in late-1990s mass culture. A game called *Soviet Strike* remained popular. *Silent Steel* featured a nuclear-armed submarine. “They said the cold war was over,” snarled the promotional copy; “—it ain’t.” An ad for *Tunnel B1* warned darkly: “Welcome to your tomb. The light at the end of the tunnel is a heat-seeking thermonuclear missile.”

Like the *Mad Max* movies, several futuristic urban-combat video games ascribed the devastation and anarchy of their virtual cities to nuclear attack. Ads for *Fallout* promised a "Postnuclear Adventure." Mushroom clouds proliferated, as did such terms as "overkill," "ground zero," "meltdown," and "radioactive fog." One company promoted a game called *Scorched Planet*. Ads for another new game of the later 1990s, *MDK*, featured images of blasted cities and proclaimed: "On a good day, only 1.5 billion people will die."

But while the video game industry continued to exploit Cold War hostilities and nuclear showdowns, it also responded to changing realities. In Nintendo's *Dixie Kong's Double Trouble*, the villains were thinly disguised as "Kremlings." In *Soviet Strike*, the covert operations squad posted in eastern Europe to "make sure the cold war stays in the fridge" deploys such conventional weaponry as Apache helicopters, and snowplows to bulldoze Warsaw Pact encampments, but *not* nuclear weapons.

In a variation on a long-term trend in the game world, many 1990s video games preserved the Cold War's absolutist moral framework while shifting the confrontation to some faraway time. *King's Field II* was set in King Alfred's England; *Blood Omen: Legacy of Kain* unfolded in a vaguely medieval age, where the forces of righteousness struggle against usurpers bent on imposing a reign of terror. In *Realms of the Haunting*, "the Battleground between Ultimate Good and Evil" is set in an apocalyptic future age.

The video games *Red Alert* and *P.T.O. II* (Pacific Theater of Operations) were particularly ingenious in avoiding scenarios of nuclear holocaust while preserving the Cold War's black-and-white moral polarities. *Red Alert* melded World War II and the Cold War. The action unfolds in the pre-nuclear 1940s, but the enemy is the Soviet Union, not Nazi Germany. (A time traveler kills Adolph Hitler, preventing the rise of Nazism, but also enabling the Soviet Union to invade Europe.) The player at last gets to engage in full-scale war with Russia—but with 1940s weaponry, not including a nuclear option.

Players of *P.T.O. II* refought World War II in the Pacific "from Pearl Harbor to unconditional surrender," as the ads proclaimed. But the game rewrites history in one crucial respect: The options do *not* include the atomic bomb. The player must devise strategies for defeating Japan

without the “winning weapon” that scientists presented to Truman in July 1945.

## SOURCES OF NUCLEAR MENACE

### *Chaos in the Former Soviet Sphere*

“Go to one of the old Soviet republics,” says a character in the 1996 movie *Broken Arrow*, “—they’ll fix you up with a couple [of nuclear weapons] for the price of a BMW.” While the Cold War and threats of global nuclear holocaust lived on in some novels, movies, and video games of the late 1980s and the 1990s, the more typical strategy was to adapt to the changed realities and offer more plausible scenarios of nuclear menace. Once the Soviet Union’s collapse deprived Americans of a single, well-defined enemy, the mass culture introduced a multiplicity of threats, less terrifying than the ultimate nightmare of world cataclysm, but in some ways more troubling just because of their amorphous, hydra-headed nature.

Upheaval in eastern Europe, turmoil in the former Soviet republics (some of which housed nuclear-weapons facilities), and disorder verging on anarchy in Russia itself offered ample raw material for mass-culture narratives of nuclear danger arising within the former Soviet sphere. Like Stephen Hunter’s *Day before Midnight*, several novels and movies of the 1990s featured dissident groups or criminal elements in the domain once ruled by Moscow that seize nuclear weapons or engage in nuclear blackmail. In the action movie *Jackie Chan’s First Strike* (1997), Chan pursues Russian mobsters who have stolen a nuclear warhead. Stephen Coonts’s novel *The Red Horseman* (1993) involves corrupt Soviet military leaders who orchestrate a Chernobyl-like disaster to cover their theft of warheads from a base near the crippled reactor. In Tom Clancy’s well-named 1991 novel, *The Sum of All Fears*, a complex tale with many interwoven plotlines, one leader of the terrorist group that plots a nuclear detonation in the United States is Günther Bock, an East German Communist. Dismayed by capitalist America’s triumph and by Moscow’s betrayal of Marxism, and embittered by his wife’s suicide in a West German



prison, Bock seeks his apocalyptic revenge. In *Sword of Orion*, Robin White's 1993 novel of nuclear menace, the Russian Pavel Markelov, a disgruntled intelligence agent left jobless by the Soviet Union's collapse, plays a key role.

The 1995 Hollywood thriller *Crimson Tide* similarly viewed political turmoil in Russia as the spawning ground of nuclear holocaust. The plot, drawn from current headlines, featured an ultra-nationalist demagogue, Vladimir Radchenko, who exploits the international protests against Russia's brutal crushing of the breakaway province of Chechnya. Rallying dissident military officers against the Russian president, Radchenko gains control of much of eastern Russia, including Vladivostok, a nuclear missile base and home port to a fleet of nuclear-armed submarines. As the situation deteriorates and a nuclear attack on America appears imminent, the Pentagon orders the commander of the nuclear sub *Alabama*, Captain Ramsey (Gene Hackman), to launch ten nuclear missiles on Vladivostok. A second command follows, but technical difficulties prevent its delivery. Ramsey's subordinate, Executive Officer Hunter (Denzel Washington), urges that the launch be delayed until the second command can be read, but Ramsey insists on proceeding. After a tense period of verbal sparring, physical conflict, and a near-fatal attack by a Russian submarine, the second message finally arrives: Radchenko has surrendered, the attack order is canceled, and global holocaust is averted—for the moment.

### *Rogue States, Terrorist Groups*

A closely related plotline in many novels and movies of the 1990s dealing with nuclear menace involved the acquisition of warheads or fissionable materials from the former Soviet Union by hostile states or terrorists from various trouble spots, often assisted by greedy middlemen. Sometimes, the terrorists are generic, with no specific identification. In the 1992 movie *Under Siege*, armed men seize a decommissioned U.S. battleship transporting nuclear missiles, with the intent of selling them to vaguely described foreign "investors."

Most often, however, reflecting another major preoccupation of the 1990s, the terrorists were explicitly identified as Muslim. Even in *Under*

*Siege*, the ultimate recipients of the stolen missiles are at one point generically referred to as "François and Muhammed." The enemy in Arnold Schwarzenegger's 1994 action comedy *True Lies* is the "Crimson Jihad," a band of Islamic fundamentalists led by the fanatic Aziz (played by Art Malik, a British-reared Pakistani who earlier starred in *A Passage to India* and the PBS special *A Jewel in the Crown*). Schwarzenegger plays Harry Tasker, a computer salesman who leads a double life as a member of the Omega Sector, a secret antiterrorist unit. Tasker and his Omega Sector associates battle Aziz and the Crimson Jihad, who have acquired a nuclear warhead from a former Soviet republic and threaten to destroy the Florida Keys unless their demands are met.

In Robin White's *Sword of Orion*, the disgruntled Russian intelligence agent Markelov helps Hezb Islami, a Muslim faction in Afghanistan, hijack a Russian army unit transporting a hydrogen bomb for dismantling. Hezb Islami then resorts to nuclear blackmail to force the cancellation of Afghan elections from which they have been excluded. After many plot twists, Russian and U.S. security forces find the bomb and disarm it.

The anti-Islamic strain in this material illustrates the skill of mass-culture producers at combining multiple sources of anxiety. Linking nuclear uneasiness with the much-publicized menace of "Islamic terrorism" (reenforced by such acts as the 1988 downing of Pan Am 103 over Scotland and the 1993 World Trade Center bombing), the mass-culture industry both reflected and aggravated these anxieties. Reacting to the stereotyping, Muslims picketed *True Lies* and otherwise protested movies and fiction that portrayed members of their faith in negative terms.

In a variation on this theme, the source of menace was a hostile state intent on acquiring stolen nuclear components or co-opting renegade scientists. As early as 1976, in an episode entitled "The Plutonium Connection," the PBS science program *Nova* had documented how readily nuclear-weapons materials and know-how could be obtained. In the same vein, a 1989 television movie, *The Terror Trade: Buying the Bomb*, documented the nuclear black market. It is no surprise, then, to find this theme in popular fiction and films of the edgy post-Cold War era.

Several novels in this vein gained force by drawing on actual situations and familiar events. In Clancy's *Sum of All Fears*, the East German

Communist Günther Bock joins forces with Palestinian extremists funded by Iran and led by the fanatic Ismael Qati. When Jack Ryan (now deputy director of the CIA) proposes a Mideast peace plan that involves Palestinian acceptance of Israel's existence and shared rule in Jerusalem, Qati's followers grow desperate. Their opportunity comes when a farmer discovers an atomic bomb in the wreckage of an Israeli plane that crashed in Syria in the 1973 Yom Kippur War. Ibrahim Ghosn, a Palestinian bomb expert working for Qati, and Manfred Fromm, an East German nuclear engineer, upgrade the aging fission bomb to a thermonuclear weapon of devastating power. The terrorists conceal this superbomb outside Denver's Skydome and detonate it during the Super Bowl (a nice touch), while Fromm and Bock simultaneously instigate a confrontation between U.S. and Soviet troops in Berlin. The aim is to revive the Cold War, which the Palestinians hope to turn to their advantage.

The plot nearly succeeds. Owing to last-minute glitches the bomb proves less devastating than expected, but the American president, Robert Fowler, rashly blames fanatical elements in a disintegrating Soviet Union, and prepares a massive nuclear retaliation. He is egged on in this misguided course by his hysterical national security adviser, who is also his mistress. (Clancy's novels are nothing if not imaginative.) But Jack Ryan, convinced that the bombing is the work of terrorists, not a Soviet plot, commandeers the White House hotline, negotiates a stand-down with the Russian leader, and captures Qati and his co-conspirators. Once again, global cataclysm is averted by the narrowest of margins.

Frederick Forsyth's more realistic *Fist of God* (1994), unfolds during the Persian Gulf War and, according to the blurb, tells "the utterly convincing story of what may actually have happened behind the headlines." Using the names of actual persons, among them U.S. secretary of state James Baker and Iraqi foreign minister Tariq Aziz, Forsyth offers a fictionalized account of the efforts of an international team of specialists to find and destroy Iraq's nuclear bomb.

Like countless nuclear disarmament activists of the past, these authors evoked the horrors of nuclear war as a means of heightening the drama of their story. Of the bomb-hunting team in *The Fist of God*, Forsyth writes: "They did not need to be scientists to know that the first explosion would kill more than a hundred thousand young soldiers.

Within hours, the radiation cloud, sucking up billions of tons of active sand from the desert, would begin to drift, covering everything in its path with death."

Many authors took pains to link their fictions to real-world conditions. In an afterword to *The Fist of God*, Forsyth warned of unstable or dictatorial regimes' ready access to nuclear technology, and accurately summarized how Iraqi strongman Saddam Hussein (in the novel) made the country a nuclear power: "For a decade the regime of the Republic of Iraq was allowed to arm itself to a frightening level by a combination of political foolishness, bureaucratic blindness, and corporate greed." Tom Clancy, in an afterword to *The Sum of All Fears*, made a similar point: any "sufficiently wealthy individual could, over a period of from five to ten years, produce a multi-stage thermonuclear device." And delivery of such a doomsday weapon, he added, "is child's play."

As Forsyth's novel suggests, the mass-culture industry of the 1990s found in Saddam Hussein an all-purpose villain. As the ads for the video game *Back to Baghdad* proclaim: "Time to Finish the Job . . . Time to Go Back to Baghdad." This is, indeed, what happens in R. J. Pinero's *Ultimatum* (1994), the story of a second Gulf War (led by President Clinton) against a nuclear-armed Saddam. Charlie Sheen's 1991 comedy *Hot Shots!*, a parodic vision of the same theme, involves a mission to destroy Saddam's nuclear-weapons facility. In the cathartic and (for Americans) deeply satisfying climax of Coonts's *Red Horseman*, after Saddam has acquired the stolen warheads, they are recovered, Saddam and the renegade Russians are captured, and Saddam is shot through the heart by one of his Russian partners in crime.

Saddam Hussein's Iraq in the 1990s replaced the Soviet Union as the paradigmatic nuclear threat. Demonized by the media (often with good reason), Iraq and its supreme ruler were seen as unambiguously evil and menacing. Having long associated nuclear danger with a single, clearly defined enemy, Americans for a time elevated Saddam (sometimes in tandem with North Korea's Kim Il Sung) to that role.

While "Islamic terrorists" were the preferred villains in these dramas of nuclear menace, other candidates surfaced as well. Tom Clancy's *Debt of Honor* (1994) linked lingering nuclear fears with worries about America's trade imbalance with Japan. When a horrible accident involving defective gas tanks on imported Japanese cars leads Congress to slam the

door on Japanese imports, the corporate leaders who (in Clancy's world) control Japan retaliate with a combination of economic and military measures. Their campaign includes undermining the U.S. economy, gaining access to oil resources, and recovering the Mariana Islands, lost in World War II.

To the shock of U.S. officials, Japan's military offensive includes a nuclear threat. Having acquired deactivated SS19 missiles from Russia, supposedly for peaceful purposes, the Japanese have secretly built a small but deadly arsenal of twenty MIRV missiles, each with seven separately targeted warheads, giving Japan the capacity "to cut the heart out of 140 American cities."

Once again, indomitable Jack Ryan (now national security adviser) rises to the challenge, utilizing a combination of diplomacy, military measures, and parachute commando drops in Japan. The nuclear threat is forestalled, and an embargo threat forces Japan's surrender. (Advised by Ryan, the president rejects the Truman option of 1945 and magnanimously rules out an atomic attack on Japan.) Ryan becomes vice president at the end of *Debt of Honor*, preparing the way for Clancy's next novel, *Executive Orders* (1996), in which he achieves the position for which he is obviously destined: president of the United States.

A disgruntled Bosnian Serb, resentful of America's intervention in the Balkans conflict, is the villain of the 1997 nuclear-menace film *The Peacemaker*. Working with unscrupulous Russian middlemen, he hijacks a trainload of nuclear weapons scheduled for demolition, smuggles one into New York City, and prepares to detonate it. (This plotline revived a fifty-year-old scenario of atomic horror on America's shores that first surfaced in the immediate post-Hiroshima period, before the era of ICBMs.) Only Nicole Kidman, playing the acting head of the "White House Nuclear Smuggling Group," aided by sidekick George Clooney, fresh from his starring role in the hit television series *E.R.*, foil the plot and save Manhattan. "The Cold War Is Back, Nuclear Bombs and All," the *New York Times* captioned its review of *The Peacemaker*.

### ***Nuclear Technology Run Amok***

The hazards of nuclear technology past and present deepened America's realization that the Cold War's end did not erase nuclear danger from the world. Even if all the missiles were deactivated, the legacy of decades

of nuclear testing would remain, along with the problem of disposing of tons of radioactive waste that would remain deadly for thousands of years, and the threat of more nuclear power plant malfunctions like those at Three Mile Island in 1979 and Chernobyl in 1986. These issues, too, figured largely in the representations of nuclear danger in post-Cold War mass culture.

Harking back to the 1950s, several movies probed the nuclear-weapons tests and the medical experiments with radioactive substances conducted in those years. *Nightbreaker* (1989), starring Martin Sheen and Emilio Estevez, explored the U.S. government's secret radiation testing of civilians in the 1950s. In *Desert Bloom* (1986), set in the Nevada of the 1950s, John Voight plays Jack Chismore, a gas-station operator obsessed with the comings and goings of military brass involved in the top-secret atomic tests at a nearby site. A coming-of-age story, *Desert Bloom* alternates the tensions in Chismore's family with his rising anxiety about the government's mysterious activities.

A series of documentaries heightened public awareness of the dangers of nuclear technology. *Building Bombs* (1994), an Academy Award nominee, dealt with mismanagement at the Savannah River nuclear-weapons facility in South Carolina. *Plutonium Circus* (1995) focused on the Pantex hydrogen-bomb assembly plant in Amarillo, a subject A. G. Mojtabei had earlier explored in *Blessed Assurance: Living with the Bomb in Amarillo*.

Technological failure as a source of nuclear menace also propels several Hollywood movies of the 1990s. In *The Cape* (1996), a nuclear-powered Russian spy satellite malfunctions and threatens to crash to earth, spewing deadly radioactivity. An emergency NASA shuttle mission—including a Russian cosmonaut, in the spirit of post-Cold War amity—averts the catastrophe by the usual hair's-breadth margin.

Fear of nuclear technology assumed many guises in 1990s mass culture. The video game *Blast Corps* involved transporting decommissioned nuclear warheads through populated areas where one mistake means catastrophe. In the movie *Naked Gun 2½: The Smell of Fear* (1991), a parody of the techno-menace theme, the bumbling antihero Frank Drebin (Leslie Nielsen) battles the nuclear power industry (as well as the oil, gas, and coal industries), which will do anything to thwart a new national

policy favoring safer, less exploitative energy sources. In a 1991 episode of the animated television comedy *The Simpsons*, dim-witted Homer Simpson, a nuclear power plant worker, manages by sheer dumb luck to prevent a meltdown. (He plays “eenie-meenie-miney-moe” to decide which button to push.) Hailed as a hero, he lectures at other plants on crisis management. In the 1986 movie *Class of Nuke ‘Em High* and its 1991 and 1994 sequels, all of which update many 1950s potboilers, mutants from a nearby nuclear waste spill invade a suburban New Jersey high school.

### ***Terrorists, Loners, Madmen***

At the dawn of the atomic age, long before hydrogen bombs, ICBMs, nuclear submarines, and SAC armadas, the media seethed with anxious speculation about foreign agents who could smuggle in the components of an atomic bomb, secretly assemble it, and bring America to its knees. Half a century later, after decades when nuclear fears had focused on the Soviet superpower and on sophisticated doomsday technologies, the media turned again to the smaller-scale worries that had first surfaced in 1945 and 1946. Marching through 1990s novels and movies of nuclear menace is a parade of bomb-brandishing terrorists, crazed madmen, grudge-bearing loners, or normally rational individuals driven over the edge by the stress of doomsday decision-making.

A striking motif of these nuclear narratives is the villains’ irrationality. However menacing the nuclear prospect during the Cold War, people at least had the reassurance—or the comforting illusion—that the arms race was being managed from the top by responsible leaders of reason and restraint. As this assurance faded in the 1990s, the mass media reflected the resulting apprehensions. Nearly every work cited in this essay involves a highly unstable character. Ismael Qati, the mastermind in Clancy’s *Sum of All Fears*, to cite but one example, is not only a religious fanatic; he is also dying, with nothing to lose. The villain of *The Peacemaker*, a cultivated, mild-mannered Sarajevo piano teacher, initially gives no hint of his double life as a nuclear terrorist plotting the destruction of New York City.

The madmen are sometimes heads of state, or are at least near centers of power. Forsyth’s *Fist of God* portrays Saddam Hussein as an erratic,

sadistic leader willing to use any means, including nuclear devastation, to achieve his evil goals. The rantings of Vladimir Radchenko, the ultranationalist Russian who threatens nuclear devastation in *Crimson Tide*, echo the scary sound bites of the actual Russian neofascist Vladimir Zhirinovskiy.

Sometimes, as we have seen, the individuals who precipitate the crisis are motivated not by religious zeal or political ideology, but simply by resentment or personal grievance. Günther Bock in *The Sum of All Fears* is a disgruntled loner with a bone to pick against those who have done him wrong.

Nor are these menacing loners always foreigners. In an America rattled by domestic terrorism, homegrown mad bombers, and antigovernment militias, such anxieties readily found their way into the novels and movies of nuclear menace. While Captain Ramsey in *Crimson Tide* is not insane, his rigidly authoritarian personality borders on the irrational. In one scene, his contorted face dramatically illuminated by a demonic glow, he threatens to kill one of his own crew in his desperate eagerness to launch his missiles. *The Sum of All Fears* contains a similar scene, in which President Fowler, emotionally unhinged by the nuclear blast at the Super Bowl, frantically prepares to retaliate against Russia.

In the 1996 film *Broken Arrow*, John Travolta plays Major Deakins, a Utah-based Stealth bomber pilot embittered by his low status, paltry pay, and lack of promotion. Slipping over the edge of sanity, he takes off with two live nuclear warheads and threatens to obliterate Denver unless his blackmail demands are met. Fortunately for Denver, Deakins's friend and copilot Captain Hale (Christian Slater), with an assist from a resourceful park ranger, foils the plot and saves the city.

In *Under Siege*, the crisis is initiated by a former CIA operative, William Strannix (Tommy Lee Jones), seeking revenge on the agency for having ordered him killed during an abortive earlier operation. Strannix's insanity manifests itself as an obsession with the "Looney Tunes" cartoon series. (Perhaps he saw the Tom and Jerry episode "Tomic Energy.") Assembling a ragtag band of terrorists, and aided by the corrupt and greedy Commander Krill, skipper of the USS *Missouri*, Strannix organizes the raid to steal the nuclear missiles aboard the decommissioned battleship on its final voyage.



The “alienated loner” formula is repeated in *Under Siege 2: Dark Territory* (1995). In this sequel, a computer genius gone bad (Eric Bogosian) develops a CD-ROM that enables him to control a super-sophisticated experimental U.S. spy satellite that is also capable of raining nuclear devastation upon the earth. Bogosian, who designed the satellite in the first place, has now reprogrammed it to obliterate Washington, D.C., unless the federal government pays him one billion dollars. (How he plans to spend the ransom money remains unexplained.) Again the embittered lone madman, who had once contributed his technical genius to the government’s purposes, turns on that same government as the enemy.

The angry-loner-as-nuclear-menace theme was parodied in “Sideshow Bob’s Last Gleaming,” a 1995 *Simpsons* episode in which an embittered ex-TV clown discovers a discarded ten-megaton missile in a trash barrel at an air force base. Resorting to nuclear blackmail, Sideshow Bob threatens to detonate the bomb unless all television is eliminated. When Lisa Simpson pleads, “Don’t do it—that would be taking the easy way out,” he replies, “I quite agree,” and detonates the bomb. But it is a dud; Bob has missed the consumer advisory pasted on the missile: “Best before 1959.” This episode exploits the familiar ephemera of America’s nuclear history. As Sideshow Bob prepares to detonate the bomb, he whistles “We’ll Meet Again,” which Kubrick had used in *Dr. Strangelove*, while Maggie Simpson plucks petals from a daisy, evoking the anti-Goldwater television commercial from the 1964 presidential campaign. In a world without television, one character mutters grimly, “the survivors will envy the dead.”

The madman scenario presumed that the nuclear option was never a rational alternative. This presumption (which also underlies the black humor of *Dr. Strangelove*) appears in President Truman’s 1953 State of the Union address, quoted earlier: “The war of the future would be one in which man could extinguish millions of lives at one blow. . . . Such a war is not possible for rational man. We know this, but we dare not assume that others would not yield to the temptation science is now placing in their hands.”

Truman’s faith in “rational man,” and his certainty that “we” would never use the bomb, ring hollow, coming only eight years after Hiroshima. The ironies become explicit in *Crimson Tide* when a crewman

aboard the USS *Alabama*, in a moment of self-consciousness rare in this cultural material, insists that the Russian nationalist Radchenko must be a “dangerous lunatic” for threatening nuclear war to achieve his goals. Another crewman retorts: “What’s that make us, since we’re the only one who’s ever dropped a nuclear bomb on anyone?” A heated discussion of the Hiroshima decision ensues, as the nuclear past and possible nuclear future intertwine.

Stephen Hunter’s *Day before Midnight* offers another twist on the madman motif. Arkady Pashin, mastermind of the Russian commandos who seize a U.S. missile silo, is repeatedly dismissed as “crazy” or “nuts.” Yet his plan possesses a certain rationality. His first strike will not only assure victory for the Soviet Union, but also cripple the U.S. nuclear arsenal. Rather than await an eventual world-destroying nuclear Armageddon, he will start a war that will leave only *half* the world in ruins. As he explains, “The fact is, I’ll kill only a few hundred million. I’ll *save* billions. I’m the man who saved the world.” Pashin is mad, yet his first-strike strategy is the brainchild of “Peter Thiokol,” a famous U.S. strategic theorist. “Thiokol’s” logic, in turn, echoes arguments seriously put forward by actual American military figures early in the Cold War (see chapter 4).

Paralleling the “alienated loner” theme, in many post–Cold War cultural productions *one’s own government* is the enemy. In a 1994 opinion poll, only about 20 percent of Americans (down from about 80 percent in 1964) expressed confidence that the government “always or almost always does the right thing,” and the mass culture mirrored this skepticism. In *The Hunt for Red October* and *Red Storm Rising*, lower-level military figures frantically seek to thwart their own government’s insane plans for a nuclear first strike. In *Under Siege*, the CIA has ordered the death of one of its own. In the horror movie *Return of the Living Dead*, because secret government experiments have produced the zombies that terrorize the city, the government must and does destroy the city with a nuclear bomb to prevent the zombies from spreading.

The premise of Kevin J. Anderson’s *Ground Zero* (1995), based on the Fox network’s popular *X-Files* series of the 1990s, is that despite the Cold War’s end, government nuclear-weapons research continues. In a scene reminiscent of the “peaceful atom” propaganda of earlier days, visi-

tors to the "Teller Nuclear Research Facility" view an upbeat video that glorifies the vast promise of atomic research, offers soothing reassurances about the facility's safety, and pooh-poohs the alleged dangers of radiation. In these stories, as in the *X-Files* series as a whole, official candor is an illusion; those in power invariably conceal the truth.

Even when not overtly sinister and deceptive, the governments in these novels and movies are impersonal, unthinking, inhumane bureaucracies. As an East German official says of NATO's nuclear-war strategizing in *Red Storm Rising*, "Their government reports are written by computers to be read by calculators. Just like ours. Just like ours."

The post-Cold War mass culture visions of nuclear menace portray a world not of government versus government, but of individuals maneuvering in an anarchic, film noir-like environment. Loners like Deakins in *Broken Arrow*, Strannix in *Under Siege*, or Bock in *The Sum of All Fears* take desperate measures against the irrational, dangerous, or unfair actions of their superiors. But the nuclear catastrophes threatened by such alienated individuals are typically averted by *other* loners who must act in the face of the inept stupidity of *their* superiors. Tom Clancy's Jack Ryan and General Alekseyev are only two of many such intelligent loners thwarted by bumbling, wrongheaded higher-ups. In *Under Siege*, a low-ranking cook, Casey Ryback (Steven Seagal), emerges as the hero, foiling the embittered Strannix. Seagal reprises his Casey Ryback role in *Under Siege 2: Dark Territory*, saving Washington, D.C., from destruction at the hands of a mad computer genius.

In the movie *Bloodfist IV: Ground Zero* (1994), an obscure military courier battles the terrorists who overrun a U.S. Air Force base to commandeer its nuclear weapons. The hero of Hunter's *Day before Midnight* is a semiliterate Vietnam War veteran released from military prison to help repel the missile-silo invaders. At the end, an army general soberly reflects that it wasn't the "professionals" who prevented catastrophe, but "the regular people, the Rest of Us."

### ***Amoral Scientists***

Brilliant but amoral scientists and technocrats often appear nearly as pathological as the nuclear madmen in these novels and films. Drawing on a very old "mad scientist" motif in Western culture, the representation

of science and scientists in this material is usually of the Dr. Frankenstein variety. A central theme of America's nuclear discourse from 1945 on—atomic energy as the ultimate example of scientific discovery outstripping ethics—took on fresh life as the moral certitudes of the Cold War era faded. Without a clear enemy, the ethical rationalizations for nuclear scientists and technologists seemed more ambiguous than ever.

In Clancy's *Sum of All Fears*, the nuclear engineer Manfred Fromm epitomizes the unscrupulous genius motivated solely by a project's technical challenges. Employed to repair and upgrade the aging fission bomb acquired by the Palestinians, Fromm displays no interest in how the weapon will be used. In Forsyth's *Fist of God*, the giant cannon that is to launch Iraq's sole nuclear weapon is the brainchild of Gerry Bull, a politically naive weapons designer embittered because his ideas have been repeatedly rejected by his superiors.

*Terminator II* adds a feminist twist to the amoral scientist theme. A brilliant nuclear scientist realizes too late that his technical discoveries have horrendous implications. In a self-justificatory mood he asks rhetorically, "How were we supposed to know?" At this, the mother of the boy who is destined to lead the anti-Skynet rebellion explodes: "Right. How were you supposed to know. . . . Men like you built the hydrogen bomb. Men like you thought it up. You think you're so creative. You don't know what it's like to really create something, to create a life, to feel it growing inside you. All you know how to create is death and destruction."

This mordant view of science pervades Kevin J. Anderson's *Ground Zero*. In the opening chapter, a mysterious burst of radiation kills Dr. Emil Gregory, the nuclear-weapons designer in charge of Project Bright Anvil, which is supposed to develop a radiation-free nuclear bomb. Reflecting on the problematic nature of such research in the post-Cold War era, an FBI agent investigating Gregory's death muses: "Here we are, still building bombs to fight against the bad guys—yet we're not at all certain who the bad guys are anymore."

But Gregory's successor as head of Bright Anvil defends the project in classic technocratic language: "Is a gun manufacturer responsible for the people killed in convenience-store robberies? My team has created a *tool* for our government to use, a *resource* for our foreign policy ex-

perts. . . . I have no more business dictating this country's foreign policy than . . . a politician has coming into my laboratory and telling me how to run my experiments." Warming to his subject, however, the scientist quickly abandons his apolitical, technocratic pose: "Bright Anvil is *fall-out free*, man! . . . It removes the big political stigma of using a nuclear weapon. Bright Anvil finally makes nuclear weapons *usable*, not just bluff cards. . . . If some nutcase like Saddam Hussein or Moammar Khadaffi [of Libya] wants to lob their own homemade uranium bomb at New Jersey, I want to make sure that our country has the means either to defend itself or strike back."

As a foil to this morally obtuse breed of scientist, the novel introduces Miriel Bremen, a former Bright Anvil scientist who, after a visit to Hiroshima and Nagasaki, has founded the protest group Stop Nuclear Madness! Shortly before a planned test of Bright Anvil on a Pacific atoll, Bremen arrives with Ryan Kamida, the sole survivor of a group of Pacific Islanders displaced by a U.S. nuclear test in the 1950s. Kamida brings with him a barrel of dark powder—the ashes of his people and the mysterious focal point of their collective spiritual energy. In the novel's climactic scene—a classic *X-Files* denouement—the atoll, along with the Bright Anvil scientists and their weapon, vanish in a mysterious burst of radioactive energy such as had earlier vaporized Dr. Gregory. History has come full circle. The human spirit has triumphed over amoral science.

Although themes of nuclear menace clearly pervaded post-Cold War mass culture, documenting nuclear-related material and cataloging its themes and motifs tell us little about its meaning and influence. The nuclear strand in a complex plot may, in fact, be relatively unimportant, hardly noticed consciously by readers, moviegoers, or video game players.

The H-bombs, ICBMs, and nuclear devices that litter these mass-culture products are often little more than gimmicks. In many of the post-Cold War films—*Under Siege*, *Broken Arrow*, *Jackie Chan's First Strike*, and others—the nuclear bombs or missiles appear quite unthreatening: We see the weapons, but not the destruction. In *Jackie Chan's First Strike*, the characters toss around a "uranium core" concealed in an ordinary oxygen tank. ("Talk about good clean fun," observed the *New York*

*Times* reviewer, “here it is.”) While these films exploit the hard-wired cultural awareness that nuclear weapons are scary and dangerous things, they rarely bother to dramatize their actual effects. In the 1996 blockbuster *Independence Day*, a futile attempt to use nuclear warheads to destroy the alien spaceship threatening Washington is little more than a minor diversion amid the spectacular special effects.

Despite these caveats, however, the pervasiveness of this theme in post-Cold War mass culture demands that anyone interested in the continuing effects of the nuclear reality in contemporary America sit up and take notice. So, too, do the ways in which the danger was presented. Representations of nuclear menace in the 1990s differed radically from those of the 1950s or even the early 1980s. No longer involving two superpowers posturing across an Iron Curtain, the menace now unfolded in a destabilized, decentered world where deadly hazards arise in unexpected places and assume many guises. The emblematic slogan of this new genre of nuclear horror might be the incantatory phrase used on *The X-Files*: “Trust no one.” The prospect of a future in which nuclear weapons and nuclear know-how form a constant of the human condition is hardly reassuring.

Equally sobering is the fact that so many of these plots deal (admittedly in fanciful ways) with actual post-Cold War nuclear realities: the hazards of nuclear-waste disposal, the dangers of nuclear weapons and nuclear materials in highly unstable if not anarchic settings, the risk that dictatorial regimes or terrorist groups could acquire doomsday weapons. To be sure, the nightmarish prospect of global annihilation envisioned by Cold War movies, novels, and nonfiction writers like Robert Jay Lifton and Jonathan Schell had clearly faded by the end of the 1990s. But in place of one big menace, the latest wave of nuclear novels, movies, video games, and science fiction stories featured a mass of complex and shadowy dangers hardly less unsettling in their cumulative effect.

The opportunistic way these themes are often treated, noted above, is itself noteworthy. Many earlier works in this genre had been marked by profound moral seriousness. Science-fiction stories like Walter Miller Jr.’s *A Canticle for Leibowitz* (1959); the songs of Tom Lehrer; and movies like *On the Beach*, *Dr. Strangelove*, *China Syndrome*, or even *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951), with its message of global cooperation or global

annihilation, were deeply engaged with the issues they addressed in a fictionalized or satirical way. With some exceptions, post-Cold War novelists, moviemakers, and video game designers exploited nuclear danger mainly for its capacity to stir fear and build tension. Seriousness of purpose beyond the desire to elicit a passing frisson of fear was rarely evident. As Dean Devlin, cowriter and producer of *Independence Day*, conceded: "Our movie is pretty obvious. The closest we get to a social statement is to play upon the idea that as we approach the millennium, and we're no longer worried about a nuclear threat, the question is, Will there be an apocalypse, and if so, how will it come?" *Time* magazine's comment on *Independence Day* suggests the impact of this "social statement": "You leave saying 'Wow!' instead of a speculative 'Hmmm.'" (Interestingly, the one filmmaker who continued in the 1990s to bring moral seriousness to the nuclear theme was the octogenarian Japanese director Akira Kurosawa. His *Rhapsody in August* of 1991, for example, evokes an aging Japanese woman's memories of the bombing of Nagasaki.)

Whatever the level of trivialization, one thing was clear as the twentieth century ended. Neither the reality of nuclear danger nor the continued presence of nuclear fear in American mass culture had disappeared with the end of the Cold War. Like the radiation-affected creatures in the science-fiction stories and movies of the 1950s, the cultural expression of that fear had simply mutated into sometimes bizarre new forms.