Living with the Bomb: American Culture in the Nuclear Age

Peter Kuznick

Department of History, American University
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HIST-348.01/648.01
See AU Registrar for registration details

Course Description:

This course examines the evolution of American culture in the nuclear age, with particular emphasis on the ways in which the threat of nuclear war and annihilation have shaped American thought and behavior. We will study the history of the nuclear arms race in the context of the politics, culture, and diplomacy of the Cold War. Designed on the premise that current attitudes and assumptions about nuclear weapons and national security are embedded in the American historical experience, the course analyzes the debates over these issues with careful attention to their origins and evolution. The course will pay particular attention to the symbols, images, language, and representational strategies used to depict nuclear arms, nuclear energy, and nuclear war, and will attempt to ascertain and make sense of popular attitudes about living in the nuclear age. The "texts" for the course will include works of history, social science, and literature, as well as films, music, television programs, newspapers, comics, and contemporary documents.

Course Requirements:

Undergraduates will write a five-page paper, a seven-page paper, and a final exam. Graduate students will write a seven-page paper, a twelve-page paper, three critical book reviews, and a final exam (20%).

Required Texts:

Paul Boyer, By the Bomb's Early Light
E. L. Doctorow, The Book of Daniel
Pat Frank, Alas, Babylon
John Hersey, Hiroshima
Robert F. Kennedy, Thirteen Days
Tim O'Brien, The Nuclear Age
Jonathan Schell, The Fate of the Earth
Mark Selden and Laura Hein, eds., Living With the Bomb

Required Texts for Graduate Students:

Gar Alperovitz, The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb
Edward Linenthal and Tom Engelhardt, History Wars
Lawrence Wittner, Resisting the Bomb
Text of the Smithsonian's Enola Gay Exhibit (First Draft)

Recommended Texts:

Gerard Clarfield and William Wieck, Nuclear America
John Dower, War Without Mercy
Raymond Gartoff, Reflections on the Cuban Missile Crisis
Milton Katz, Ban the Bomb
Peter Kuznick, Beyond the Laboratory
Robert Jay Lifton and Greg Mitchell, Hiroshima in America
Elaine Tyler May, Homeward Bound
James Nathan, The Cuban Missile Crisis Revisited
Martin Sherwin, A World Destroyed
Spencer Weart, Nuclear Fear
Allan Winkler, Life Under a Cloud

Course Outline:

August 25 Living with the Bomb: Surviving the First 58 Years of the Nuclear Age The Roots and Persisting Images of U.S. Nuclear Culture
Films: Atomic Attack and A Child Is Crying
September 8 Science and Social Responsibility in 1930s America
Building the Bomb: The Manhattan Project
The Morality of Strategic Bombing
Read: Vonnegut
Film: Bugs Bunny in "Nip the Nips," Excerpts from Know Your Enemy-- Japan
September 15 The Atomic Bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki: A Military Necessity, a Crime Against the People of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, or a Crime Against Humanity?
September 22 Haunting Visions of Hiroshima and Nagasaki
Film: Hiroshima, Nagasaki--August, 1945
Excerpts from Genbaku Shi: Killed by the Atomic Bomb, After the Cloud Lifted, Hiroshima, Mon Amour, Black Rain, Rhapsody in August, Fat Man and Little Boy, Infinity, and Truman
Read: Hersey
September 29 Early Nuclear Fears and Mythology
Film: The Beginning or the End
Read: Boyer
November 3 Controlling the Bomb: The Early Abortive Efforts of Henry Stimson, Henry Wallace, and their Allies Around the World
The Evolution of Nuclear Strategy: 1945-63

First Papers Due: Present Brief Oral Reports on Your Findings

October 20 Early Nuclear Culture in Fiction, Television, and Music
Films: Excerpts from The Lady from Shanghai, The Best Years of Our Lives, The Day the Earth Stood Still, Above and Beyond, Incredible Shrinking Man, The Amazing Colossal Man, Invaders from Mars, It Came from Beneath the Sea, Beast from 20,000 Fathoms, Split Second, War of the Colossal Beast, Fiend Without a Face, Them!
Read: Hein and Selden
On the Beach will be shown on 10/26 at 3 pm and 10/27 at 3 pm and 5:30 pm.
October 27 Anxiety on the Homefront: Fallout, Civil Defense, Missile Gaps, and the Nuclear Family
Film: The Shelter
Excerpts from Atomic Cafe
Read: Frank
Discussion of On the Beach
The Day After will be on 11/2 at 3 pm and 11/3 at 3 pm and 5:30 pm.
November 3 Controlling the Bomb: The Early Abortive Efforts of Henry Stimson, Henry Wallace, and their Allies Around the World
The Evolution of Nuclear Strategy: 1945-63
13 Days will be shown on 11/9 at 3 pm and 11/10 at 3 pm and 5:30 pm
November 10 Fallout, Bomb Shelters, and 1960s Nuclear Strategy
A World on the Brink: The Cuban Missile Crisis
Guest Speaker: Professor Philip Brenner, American University
Read: Kennedy
Discussion: 13 Days
Dr. Strangelove will be shown on 11/16 at 3 pm and 11/17 at 3 and 5:30 pm.
November 17 1960s Nuclear Culture: The Bomb, Technological Betrayal, Black Humor, and Sexual Symbolism
Film: Fail-Safe
Discussion of Dr. Strangelove and Fail Safe
Threads will be shown on 11/23 at 3 pm and 11/24 at 3 and 5:30 pm.
November 24 The Antinuclear Movement in Historical Perspective
Guest Speakers: Dr. Robert Musil, Executive Director, Physicians for Social Responsibility
Read: Schell
Nuclear Nightmares of the 1980s
Films: Excerpts from War Games, Desert Bloom, September, Red Dawn, Never Say Never Again
Testament will be shown on 11/25 at 7 pm and 12/1 at 12 pm, 3 pm, and 5:30 pm
December 1 American Defense Requirements in the Post-Cold War and Post-9/11 World
Guest Speaker: Joseph Cirincione, Senior Associate, Non-Proliferation Project, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace
Nuclear Culture of the 1990s and 2000s
Films: Excerpts from Blue Sky, Broken Arrow, The Hunt for Red October, Under Siege, The Peacemaker, Special Bulletin, Mulholland Falls, By Dawn's Early Light, Diplomatic Siege, Atomic Train, Atomic Twister, Under Siege, The Sum of All Fears, On the Beach (remake), Fail-Safe (remake) The China Syndrome will be shown on 12/7 at 3 pm and 12/8 at 3 pm and 5:30 pm
December 8 The Strange Career of the Peaceful Atom: From Our Friend the Atom to Three Mile Island to Chernobyl
Films: Excerpts from The Plutonium Incident, Silkwood, and "The Amazing Colossal President"
Read: O'Brien
Discussion of The China Syndrome, The Day After, Testament, and Threads

Second Papers Due

December 15 Final Exam

Supplementary Readings:

Len Ackland and Steven McGuire, eds. Assessing the Nuclear Age
Ruth Adams and Susan Cullen, eds. The Final Epidemic: Physicians and Scientists on Nuclear War
Kenneth Adelman, The Great Universal Embrace: Arms Control--A Skeptic's Account
Thomas Allen and Norman Polmar, Codename Downfall
Thomas Allen and Norman Polmar, Rickover: Controversy and Genius
Graham Allison, The Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis
Graham Allison, et. al. Hawks, Doves, and Owls
Gar Alperovitz, Atomic Diplomacy
Gar Alperovitz, The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb
William Au, The Cross, the Flag, and the Bomb
Lawrence Badash, et. al., eds. Reminiscences of Los Alamos
Paul Baker, ed.. The Atomic Bomb
Howard Ball, Justice Downwind: America's Atomic Testing Program in the 1950s
Brian Balogh, Chain Reaction: Expert Debate and Public Participation in American Commercial Nuclear Power, 1945-1976
David Barash, The Arms Race and Nuclear War
Rodney Barker, Hiroshima Maidens
Donald Baucom, The Origins of SDI, 1944-1983
Peter Beckman, ed. The Nuclear Predicament: Nuclear Weapons in the Cold War and Beyond
Barton Bernstein, The Atomic Bomb: The Critical Issues
Richard Betts, Nuclear Blackmail and Nuclear Balance
P.M.S. Blackett, Fear, War, and the Bomb
Bruce Blair, The Logic of Accidental Nuclear War
James Blight, et. al. Cuba on the Brink
Stephen Blumberg and Gwinn Owens, The Life and Times of Edward Teller
Paul Brians, Nuclear Holocausts: Atomic Wars in Fiction
Edgar Bottome, The Balance of Terror
Paul Bracken, The Command and Control of Nuclear Forces
Mick Broderick, Nuclear Movies
Bernard Brodie, Absolute Weapon: Atomic Power and World Order
Bernard Brodie, Strategy in the Missile Age
Lester Brooks, Behind Japan=s Surrender
McGeorge Bundy, Danger and Survival: Choices about the Bomb in the First Fifty Years
Eugene Burdick and Harvey Wheeler, Fail-Safe
Ian Buruma, The Wages of Guilt
Vannevar Bush, Pieces of the Action
Robert Butow, Japan=s Decision to Surrender
James Byrnes, All in One Lifetime
James Byrnes, Speaking Frankly
Nigel Calder, Nuclear Nightmares: An Investigation into Possible Wars
Helen Caldicott, Missile Envy
Virginia Carmichael, Framing History: The Rosenberg Story and the Cold War
David Cassidy, Uncertainty: The Life and Science of Werner Heisenberg
Jim Castelli, The Bishops and the Bomb
Catherine Caufield, Multiple Exposures: Chronicles of the Radiation Age
P. R. Chari, Indo-Pak Nuclear Standoff: The Role of the United States
Ira Chernus, Nuclear Madness: Religion and the Psychology of the Nuclear Age
Ira Chernus, Dr. StrangeGod: On the Symbolic Meaning of Nuclear Weapons
Ira Chernus and Edward Linenthal, A Shuddering Dawn: Religious Studies and the Nuclear Age
Haakon Chevalier, Oppenheimer: The Story of a Friendship
Haakon Chevalier, The Man Who Would Be God
Frank Chinnock, Nagasaki: The Forgotten Bomb
Gerard Clarfield and William Wieck, Nuclear America
Arthur H. Compton, Atomic Quest
Robert Coover, The Public Burning
David Cortright, Peace Works: The Citizen=s Role in Ending the Cold War
Norman Cousins, In Place of Folly
Nuel Davis, Lawrence and Oppenheimer
John Dower, Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II
John Dower, Japan in War and Peace
John Dower, War Without Mercy
David Dowling, Fictions of Nuclear Disaster
Edward Drea, MacArthur=s ULTRA
Freeman Dyson, Disturbing the Universe
Freeman Dyson, Weapons and Hope
Barbara Epstein, Political Protest and Cultural Revolution
James Farrel, The Nuclear Devil=s Dictionary
Herbert Feis, The Atomic Bomb and the End of World War II
Laura Fermi, Atoms in the Family  
Rachel Fermi and Esther Samra, Picturing the Bomb: Photographs From the Secret World of the Manhattan Project  
Daniel Ford, Meltdown: The Secret Papers of the Atomic Energy Commission  
Daniel Ford, Three Mile Island  
Philip Fradkin, Fallout: An American Nuclear Tragedy  
Jerome Frank, Sanity and Survival: Psychological Aspects of War and Peace  
H. Bruce Franklin, Countdown to Midnight: Twelve Great Stories About Nuclear War  
H. Bruce Franklin, War Stars: The Superweapon and the American Imagination  
Lawrence Freedman, The Evolution of Nuclear Strategy  
Paul Fussell, Thank God for the Atomic Bomb and Other Essays  
Raymond Gartoff, Reflections on the Cuban Missile Crisis  
Walter Gellhorn, Security, Loyalty, & Science  
Peter George, Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb  
Michele Gerber, On the Home Front: The Cold War Legacy of the Hanford Nuclear Site  
Richard Gerstell, How to Survive an Atomic Bomb  
Alan Geyer, The Idea of Disarmament: Rethinking the Unthinkable  
Peter Goodchild, J. R. Oppenheimer: Shatterer of Worlds  
F. G. Gosling, The Manhattan Project  
Kurt Gottfried and Jonathan Dean, Nuclear Security in a Transformed World  
Samuel Goudsmit, Alsos  
Margaret Gowing, Britain and Atomic Energy, 1939-1945  
Donna Gregory, The Nuclear Predicament  
Harold Green, The Oppenheimer Case: Security on Trial  
Owen Green, et. al. Nuclear Winter  
Joseph Grew, Turbulent Era: A Diplomatic Record of Forty Years  
Stephane Groueff, Manhattan Project  
Ground Zero, Nuclear War: What's In It For You?  
Leslie Groves, Now It Can Be Told: The Story of the Manhattan Project  
Robert Guiffain, I Saw Tokyo Burning: An Eyewitness Narrative from Pearl Harbor to Hiroshima  
Hugh Gusterson, Nuclear Rites: A Weapons Laboratory at the End of the Cold War  
Barton Hacker, The Dragon's Tail: Radiation Safety in the Manhattan Project, 1942-1946  
Walter Hahn, and John Neff, eds. American Strategy for the Nuclear Age  
Morton Halperin, Nuclear Fallacy  
Haywood Hansell, The Strategic Air War Against Germany and Japan: A Memoir  
Chuck Hansen, The Swords of Armageddon  
Stephen Harper, Miracle of Deliverance: The Case for the Bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki  
Arthur Harris, Bomber Offensive  
J. B. Harris and Eric Markusen, Nuclear Weapons and the Threat of Nuclear War  
Selig Harrison and Leonard Spector, Nuclear Weapons and the Security of Korea  
Harvard Study Group, Living with Nuclear Weapons  
Martin Harwit, An Exhibit Denied: Lobbying the History of the Enola Gay  
Margot Hendrikson, Dr. Strangelove's America  
Greg Herken, Counsels of War  
Greg Herken, The Winning Weapon  
John Hersey, Hiroshima  
James Hershberg, James B. Conant  
Mark Hertsgaard, Nuclear Inc.: The Men and Money Behind Nuclear Energy  
Stephen Hilgartner, et. al. Nukespeak: The Selling of Nuclear Technology in America  
David Holloway, Stalin and the Bomb  
Robert Holsworth, Let Your Life Speak: A Study of Politics, Religion, and Antinuclear Activism  
Masuji Ibuse, Black Rain
Akira Iriye, Power and Culture
Robert Jervis, The Illogic of American Nuclear Strategy
Charles Johnson and Charles Jackson, City Behind a Fence: Oak Ridge, Tennessee, 1942-1946
Paul Joseph and Simon Rosenblum, eds. Search for Sanity: The Politics of Nuclear Weapons and Disarmament
Robert Jungk, Brighter Than a Thousand Suns: A Personal History of the Atomic Scientists
Jerome Kahn, Security in the Nuclear Age
Herman Kahn, On Thermonuclear War
Herman Kahn, Thinking about the Unthinkable
Fred Kaplan, The Wizards of Armageddon
Gordon Kaufman, Theology for a Nuclear Age
Charles Kegley and Eugene Wittkopf, eds. The Nuclear Reader: Strategy, Weapons, War
George F. Kennan, Nuclear Delusions: Soviet-American Relations in the Atomic Age
Robert F. Kennedy, Thirteen Days
Thomas Kerr, Civil Defense in the U.S.: Bandaid for a Holocaust?
Daniel Keves, The Physicists
Heinar Kipphardt, In the Matter of J. Robert Oppenheimer
Henry Kissinger, Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy
Michael Klare, Rogue States and Nuclear Outlaws: America's Search for a New Foreign Policy
Steven Kull, Minds at War: Nuclear Reality and the Inner Conflicts of Defense Policymakers
James Kunetka, City of Fire: Los Alamos and the Birth of the Atomic Age
Lester Kurtz, The Nuclear Cage: A Sociology of the Arms Race
Peter Kuznick, Beyond the Laboratory: Scientists as Political Activists in 1930s America
Phyllis La Farge, The Strangelove Legacy: The Impact of the Nuclear Threat on Children
Victor Langer and Walter Thomas, The Nuclear War Fun Book
William Lanouette, Genius in the Shadows
LaMont Lansing, Day of Trinity
Ralph Lapp, My Life with Radiation: The Truth About Hiroshima
Ralph Lapp, The Weapons Culture
William Lawren, The General and the Bomb: A Biography of General Leslie R. Groves, Director of the Manhattan Project
William Leahy, I Was There
Jennifer Leaning, Civil Defense in the Nuclear Age
Ned Lebow and Janice Stein, We All Lost the Cold War
Ernest Lefever and Stephen Hunt, eds. The Apocalyptic Premise: Nuclear Arms Debated
Robert J. Lifton, Death in Life: Survivors of Hiroshima
Robert J. Lifton and Richard Falk, Indefensible Weapons
Robert J. Lifton and Nicholas Humphrey, In a Dark Time
Robert J. Lifton and Greg Mitchell, Hiroshima in America: Fifty Years of Denial
Hal Lindsey, The Late Great Planet Earth
Edward Linenthal, Symbolic Defense: The Cultural Significance of the Strategic Defense Initiative
Edward Linenthal and Tom Engelhardt, eds. History Wars: The Enola Gay and Other Battles for the American Past
Paul Loeb, Hope in Hard Times: America's Peace Movement and the Reagan Era
Franklin Long, ed. Weapons in Space
Robert Maddox, Weapons for Victory: The Hiroshima Decision Fifty Years Later
John Major, The Oppenheimer Hearing
Michael Mandelbaum, The Nuclear Question: The United States and Nuclear Weapons, 1946-1976
Joseph Marx, Nagasaki: The Necessary Bomb?
Elaine Tyler May, Homeward Bound
George Mazuzan and J. Samuel Walker, Controlling the Atom
David McCullough, Truman
Howard Rosenberg, Atomic Soldiers: American Victims of Nuclear Experiments
Ronald Schaffer, Wings of Judgment: American Bombing in WW II
Robert Scheer, With Enough Shovels: Reagan, Bush, and Nuclear War
Jonathan Schell, The Abolition
Thomas Schelling, Controlled Response and Strategic Warfare
Thomas Schelling, The Strategy of Conflict
Thomas Schelling and Morton Halperin, Strategy and Arms Control
Jim Schley, Writing in a Nuclear Age
Walter and Miriam Schneer, Invitation to an Inquest
Dietrich Schroeer, Science, Technology and the Nuclear Arms Race
William Schull, Effects of Atomic Radiation
William Schwartz and Charles Derber, The Nuclear Seduction
Peter Schwenger, Letter Bomb: Nuclear Holocaust and the Exploding Word
Glen Seaborg, Kennedy, Khrushchev, and the Test Ban
Emilio Segre, Enrico Fermi
Kyoko and Mark Selden, eds. The Atomic Bomb: Voices from Hiroshima and Nagasaki
Dr. Seuss, The Butter Battle Book
Jack Shaheen, Nuclear War Films
Martin Sherwin, A World Destroyed
Nevil Shute, On the Beach
Leon Sigal, Fighting to a Finish: The Politics of War Termination in the United States and Japan, 1945
Norman Silber, Test and Protest
John Ray Skates, The Invasion of Japan
Alice Smith, A Peril and a Hope
Alice Smith and Charles Weiner, eds. Robert Oppenheimer: Letters and Recollections
Gerard Smith, Double Talk: The Story of SALT I
Jeffrey Smith, Unthinking the Unthinkable
Richard Smoke, National Security and the Nuclear Dilemma
Henry D. Smyth, Atomic Energy for Military Purposes
Hideko Snider, One Sunny Day: A Child=s Memories of Hiroshima
Leonard Spector, Nuclear Ambitions
Leonard Spector, Nuclear Proliferation Today
Ronald Spector, Eagle Against the Sun
Ronald Spector, Listening to the Enemy
Jonathan Stein, From H-Bombs to Star Wars
Philip Stern, The Oppenheimer Case
James Sterba, ed. The Ethics of War and Nuclear Deterrence
Henry Stimson and McGeorge Bundy, On Active Service in Peace and War
Lewis Strauss, Men and Decisions
Ferenc Szasz, The Day the Sun Rose Twice: The Story of the Trinity Site Nuclear Explosion
Ronald Takaki, Hiroshima: Why America Dropped the Bomb
Strobe Talbott, Deadly Gambits
Strobe Talbott, Endgame
Strobe Talbott, Master of the Game: Paul Nitze and the Nuclear Peace
Yuki Tanaka, Hidden Horrors: Japanese War Crimes in World War II
Edward Teller, Better a Shield Than a Sword
Edward Teller, The Legacy of Hiroshima
Gordon Thomas and Max Whitts, Ruin from the Air: The Enola Gay's Atomic Mission to Hiroshima
E. P. Thompson and Dan Smith, eds. Protest and Survive
Kosta Tsiplis, Arsenal: Understanding Nuclear Weapons
John Treat, Writing Ground Zero: Japanese Literature and the Atomic Bomb
Union of Concerned Scientists, The Fallacy of Star Wars
U.S. Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, Arms Control and Disarmament Agreements
Frank von Hippel and Roald Sagdeev, Reversing the Arms Race: How to Achieve and Verify Deep Reductions in the Nuclear Arsenals
Douglas Waller, Congress and the Nuclear Freeze
Michael Walzer, Just and Unjust Wars
Harvey Wasserman and Norman Solomon, Killing Our Own: The Disaster of America's Experience with Atomic Radiation
Spencer Weart, Nuclear Fear
Spencer Weart and Gertrude Szilard, Leo Szilard: His Version of the Facts
Alvin Weinberg, The First Nuclear Era
Jonathan Weisgall, Operation Crossroads: The Atomic Tests at Bikini Atoll
Burns Weston, Toward Nuclear Disarmament and Global Security
John Wexley, The Judgment of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg
Ralph White, ed. Psychology and the Prevention of Nuclear War
Leon Wieseltier, Nuclear War, Nuclear Peace
Robert Williams, Klaus Fuchs, Atomic Spy
Allan Winkler, Life Under a Cloud
Lawrence Wittner, The Struggle Against the Bomb
Thomas Wolfe, The SALT Experience
Peter Wyden, Day One
Stanley Yalkowsky, The Murder of the Rosenbergs
James Yamazaki, Children of the Atomic Bomb
Herbert York, The Advisors: Oppenheimer, Teller, and the Superbomb
Herbert York, Making Weapons, Talking Peace: A Physicist's Odyssey from Hiroshima to Geneva
Herbert York, Race to Oblivion
Solly Zuckerman, Nuclear Illusions and Reality