



Fail-Safe

Eugene Burdick , Harvey Wheeler

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Something has gone wrong. A group of American bombers armed with nuclear weapons is streaking past the fail-safe point, beyond recall, and no one knows why. Their destination—Moscow.

In a bomb shelter beneath the White House, the calm young president turns to his Russian translator and says, "I think we are ready to talk to Premier Kruschchev." Not far away, in the War Room at the Pentagon, the secretary of defense and his aides watch with growing anxiety as the luminous blips crawl across a huge screen map. High over the Bering Strait in a large Vindicator bomber, a colonel stares in disbelief at the attack code number on his fail-safe box and wonders if it could possibly be a mistake.

First published in 1962, when America was still reeling from the Cuban missile crisis, *Fail-Safe* reflects the apocalyptic attitude that pervaded society during the height of the Cold War, when disaster could have struck at any moment. As more countries develop nuclear capabilities and the potential for new enemies lurks on the horizon, *Fail-Safe* and its powerful issues continue to respond.

Fail-Safe Details

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From Reader Review Fail-Safe for online ebook

Robert says

Read the book, as with a few others, shortly after seeing the movie the first time it was shown on TV in the 60's. As usual there was a bit more in the book than would fit on the screen and parts that are nearly unfilmable. It is certainly a striking premise that a president would do what the fictional president does in this book to avert an all-out exchange, a prospect that only continued to grow in horror for the next twenty years or so after the book came out as the stockpile of warheads rapidly grew and increasingly sophisticated methods of delivery were developed with more and better submarines in addition to ICBM's and all combined with MIRV technology. The story line here is a proper use of literary license but I do not believe even under circumstances exactly equivalent to the setting here (allowing that now it is nearly all about missiles, the B-58's being long retired) that the chief executive on either side would solve the problem as is done in *Fail Safe*. But it gives a strong story line while actual aspects of the cold war threat of large scale nuclear war are examined and the dramatic plot highlights the sort of bind we could easily find ourselves suddenly facing if something important goes wrong or even our opponent just a bit jumpy that day (there was an episode that was too close for comfort in 1983).

The movie was remarkably faithful to the book even attempting to represent the most unfilmable of all the book's threads, the matador dream of General Black, with great visual skill but without narrative success. If I had not read the book I would never have figured out what the dream meant from the movie. Still the sacrifice made by Black is still very clear in both book and movie. The main thing missing was some extra detail about the cold war and about the supporting characters, in particular, the civilian expert (played by Walter Matthau in the movie), a Jew in the U.S. army who took pride in intimidating the captured Nazi soldiers he interrogated and held the passivity of European Jewry (the Frank family in particular) in contempt (for him Warsaw was too little too late), who is the main hard liner recommending that the accident be exploited to launch a long overdue all-out first strike, in his view, making the best of the situation in the face of inevitable war in the future.

There are some who have posted online who think the portrayal of right wing characters in this book to be exaggerated or preachy. I disagree. They are decent composites of a few well placed real life figures of that time who genuinely believed, and sometimes said so publicly, that a first strike while a large numerical and delivery advantage was still in hand was overdue and that if in the smoking ruins of civilization there were two of them for every one of the enemy it was a victory, and one well worth winning. Unfortunately, the book was not indulging a joke, a satire, or much of an exaggeration or caricature.

Jeffrey Keeten says

“The world is no longer man's theatre. Man has been made into a helpless spectator. The two evil forces he has created- science and the state- have combined into one monstrous body. We're at the mercy of our monster...”

The Big Board from the 1964 movie.

As I was making my way through the public school system in the 1970s, they were still doing duck and cover drills. In retrospect, of course, these drills were absolutely worthless except as an effective way of convincing all of us that our lives were dangling at the fingertips of madmen. Getting under our desks and

covering our heads with our hands as a way to survive an atomic blast is about as effective as holding up a tissue in front of a speeding bullet heading towards our heart.

It took me years and much reading on my own to undo most of the brainwashing that was just part of our normal psychotic relationship with the Soviet Union. My impression of Russians were that they were deranged lunatics and that our strong military was the only thing standing between them and world domination.

The Cold War.

The Nuclear Weapon Buildup.

Gazillions of dollars were spent by both countries. Paranoia was behind the wheel with the gas pedal mashed to the floor. Both militaries used inflated numbers of the other's strengths to keep blackmailing their politicians for more and more money.

This book came out in 1962. The timing could not have been better. The Cuban Missile Crisis in that same year gave the world a very genuine taste of what had previously just been academic conjecture.

The end of the world was very real.

This book was an instant best seller. The copy I appropriated from the library was a fifteenth printing. I'm sure it went into many more printings than that. Frankly, the book depicts a terrifying scenario. Being a child of The Cold War, it certainly pressed all the right buttons for me. To those who have grown up with illusions of safety, it is ludicrous for most of them to even think that something as crazy as a Nuclear Exchange could ever happen. To those who don't understand the historical significance of this novel, they could think this scenario to be...well... unbelievable. To those of us who lived through it and felt the haunting spectre of war hovering over every international crisis, this book confirms every worse fear that we experienced while living in a nuclear unstable world.

In the book they talk a lot about Fail-Safe. **"Fail-safe means that a device will not endanger lives or property when it fails."** The plot begins with a blown fuse that sends an errant message to a bomber group hovering in the designated "Fail-Safe" area. Computers have replaced men, and protocols are in place that are based off those same paranoias that sustained the whole Cold War. Once the GO signal is given it is almost impossible to stop the process from proceeding.

I watched the excellent 1964 movie right after reading the book. Being a natural optimist, even though I knew the ending from the book, I was still hoping for an eleventh hour reprieve. The book and the movie (it follows the book very closely) both left me shaken. The decisions of the world leaders, I can guarantee, will shock and surprise you. The book is compelling especially in the last hundred pages, but the movie might even be more so from start to finish. The dark, stark black and white footage lends a feeling of desolation to the actions of the characters. The director snaps close ups of eyes widening, of sweat glistening on skin, and of lips saying words that are devastating in their impact.

One of the more interesting and abhorrent characters in the book is Professor Groteschele (played very well by Walter Matthau in the movie), who shares end of the world scenarios at cocktail parties with the intention of leaving those listening to him shocked and disturbed. The prospect of war is a punchline for him.

"Knowing you have to die, imagine how fantastic and magical it would be to have the power to take everyone else with you." Groteschele said. **"The swarms of them out there, the untold billions of them, the ignorant masses of them, the beautiful ones, the artful ones, the friends, the enemies...all of them**

and their plans and hopes. And they are murderers: born to be murdered and don't know it. And the person with his finger on the button is the one who knows and who can do it."

Walter Matthau conveys smug very well.

He is smug in his objectivity. War is a series of calculations that ignore the human cost as long as more of us survive than those who oppose us. When soldiers follow orders, even immoral orders, they have to become less than human. Groteschele fears our best intentions the most. *"What frightened us was not so much the madman problem, ' Groteschele was saying, 'but its opposite: at the last moment someone might refuse to drop the bombs. A single act of revulsion could foil the whole policy of graduated deterrents.'"*

With six United States Vindicator bombers flying towards Moscow with a large enough payload of atomic bombs to wipe six cities the size of Moscow off the map, the tension continues to ratchet up as the President tries to keep Nikita Khrushchev, The Soviet Premier, from launching all out war.

Henry Fonda as the President in the movie.

It may have just been an accident, a horrible accident, but still with paranoia flowing freely it is difficult for both sides to convince themselves that this is not just a trick perpetrated to create an advantage in war. Everyone involved is trying to decide what exactly is true and what is subterfuge. As the bombers approach Moscow, the President orders his military advisors to tell the Russians the weaknesses in the Vindicator's defenses. *"General Bogan felt his finger tips shaking against his trousers. He felt for a moment as if he were being exposed to some strange torture; some spikelike split of his allegiance; some rupturing of his life."*

As the Vindicator planes score victories, it is hard for the United States military men not to cheer, even though the fate of the world rests on the ability of the Russians to shoot all the planes down. The ballooning tension kept my gut churning and my mind spinning with all the potential outcomes. The ending was not what I expected at all. The book was good. The movie was even better. I felt like the experience was enhanced by reading the book and watching the movie, but I would highly recommend anyone who is interested in this era or fascinated by human behavior under pressure to, at the very least, watch the movie.

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I also have a Facebook blogger page at: <https://www.facebook.com/JeffreyKeeten>

Philip says

Thank you demotivationalposters. I couldn't have said it better myself.

Fail Safe was originally written in 1962 - a time of terrible uncertainty when it comes to nukes and the cold war. That's the same year as the Cuban Missile Crisis... This was also the height of the MAD doctrine and while maybe classroom teachers were betting on the desks, I think I'd be betting on the bomb.

It's difficult to recreate feelings in history. We resort to relying on our own experiences and perspective and casting them on past events. Not having lived through the Cold War, I apply a muted post 9-11 fear over the entire era to capture the mood. But they can only be similar. Not having lived through it, I can never know.

Knowing the outcome of the Cold War, it may be easy to trivialize its place in history as inconsequential - but that's just Monday morning quarterbacking.

Fail Safe does a fantastic job of realizing and capturing the fears of the moment in the moment as well as outlining the consequences for humanity.

The authors of the book were both Poli-Sci professors at various prestigious schools - i.e. Harvard, University of California, Johns Hopkins, etc... you get the point. They probably knew what they were talking about. *BUT* Fail Safe wasn't written in some intellectual prose mumbo-jumbo that the Average Joe layperson *ahem* *me* couldn't understand. It was fast-paced and riveting.

Mike (the Paladin) says

I read this way, way, way back...high school I believe, late 60s. This was and, if you let yourself get into it and the times it was written, still is, the proverbial white knuckle, nail biter. There are times the frustration level at humans and our almost pathological self destructiveness will cause you to want to beat your head (or possibly a character's head) against a wall. You'll wish that the characters would just for an instant use some common sense. And the whole acting sort of like the U.S. and the Soviets are opposing football teams or something by the forces who are supposed to be trying to prevent an accident from turning into WW3 will also get you. A good book and thought provoking, for that time and for now as certain "other nations" are arguing they should "be allowed" to have nuclear weapons.

J. Shimotake says

While reading this book, it's hard not to smell Burdick's cigarette burning and the clack-clack-clack of his typewriter. Anyway, it's an awesome read and beats the shit out of the teleplay CBS did in 1999...

Also, this is the first in a series we have dubbed "The Kedzie Classic." To become a "Kedzie Classic," Brandon, Marty and I must all have a turn of it within 72 hours. It's a pretty exclusive club. So far it's this book, Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade, and Linda Davenport.

Then again, I didn't finish with Linda...ba-zing!

Peter Mcloughlin says

The book is mostly like the 1964 movie except the characters are a little more filled out. The end is more moving in my opinion than the movie. See my updates for more about the book.

Thom says

This new era of duck-and-cover suggested a reading of this classic book, first produced as a magazine serial

during the Cuban Missile crisis. The book doesn't start well but ends strong, with a powerful message to beware complete automation. The human element saves the world.

"What if the president went mad?" Black asked abruptly... "Then we would have trouble," Groteschele said with a laugh.

As new characters are introduced in the early chapters, a flashback brings them to the current day. These slow the tension down, and would have been better as a standalone first chapter. The early chapters are also jargon heavy, giving name to the technology of the time. The middle chapters ramp up the tension and work well, and the finish is perfectly revealed at the last moment.

From what I remember of the classic film, the tension is higher and Groteschele (played by a very serious Walter Matthau) was perfect. I did not see the remade film, but have put both on hold to watch and compare. Seattle is one of the closest large mainland cities to North Korea.

Judy says

This novel was the #6 bestseller of 1962. It was originally serialized in three weekly issues of the Saturday Evening Post in October, 1962, during the Cuban Missile Crisis. It was an eerie and discomforting read covering a possible breakdown of technology leading to nuclear war.

Of course, that was the fear I lived under in high school. That some mad man would "push the button" and within 24 hours we would all be fried and gone.

The book is liberally loaded with technical terms and nuclear gear, systems, etc. Much was made of the psychology behind military commanders. It gives a look into the secret bunkers and procedures for dealing with threats, attacks, and technical hitches. All of that was as fascinating to me as it must have been to the American public at the time.

The scenes where the President (obviously Kennedy though his name was never used) and Krushchev are on the top secret phone line working out a deal required a lot of suspension of disbelief on my part. It was pretty far from what I read in the Kennedy biography last year. The King Solomon-like deal that Kennedy made in this book was as melodramatic a climax as I have ever read.

I gained a new appreciation for what every President since Truman has had hanging over his head like a Damocles sword. Imagine holding the power to bring about the end of the world! I am still a pacifist, I still believe in nuclear disarmament, but I have got a more realistic idea about the possibilities of my dreams for our planet and mankind coming true.

Hands down the most relevant book I have read this year.

Rebecca McNutt says

Love the front cover graphics on *Fail-Safe*, admittedly that's what drew me to it, but this war thriller is just as vivid and evocative in its content as it is in its cover. It's an exciting story that will have any reader questioning the world around them.

George K. says

"S.O.S. Πεντ?γωνο καλε? Μ?σχα", εκδ?σεις ΒΙΠΕΡ.

Πριν τρεις μ?ρες π?τυχα το τρομερ? αυτ? θρ?λερ στο Μοναστηρ?κι, εν? δεν ?ξερα καν ?τι ε?χε μεταφραστε? στα ελληνικ?. Ο τ?τλος μου θ?μισε κ?τι (ε?ναι ?διος με τον ελληνικ? τ?τλο της ταιν?ας Dr. Strangelove), ε?δα τον τ?τλο πρωτοτ?που (Fail-Safe), και αμ?σως χτ?πησαν δ?κα καμπαν?κια μαζ? και θυμ?θηκα ποιο μυθιστ?ρημα ε?ναι. ?παθα την πλ?κα μου. Λοιπ?ν, πρ?κειται για ?να απ? τα πιο κλασικ? ψυχροπολεμικ? θρ?λερ εκε? ?ξω και την χρονι? που κυκλοφ?ρησε ?κανε πραγματικ? π?ταγο.

Δεν χρει?ζονται πολλ? στοιχε?α για την πλοκ?: ?ξι αμερικ?νικα βομβαρδιστικ? που φ?ρουν πυρηνικ?ς κεφαλ?ς, τα οπο?α αν?κουν σ'?να σμ?νος, δ?χονται εντολ?ς μ?σω ηλεκτρονικ?ν συστημ?των για επ?θεση στην Μ?σχα. Η εντολ? αυτ? ?μω? δεν δ?θηκε απ? καν?ναν και ε?ναι αποτ?λεσμα σοβαρ?ς βλ?βης στους υπολογιστ?ς. Η επικοινων?α με τα αεροπλ?να ε?ναι αδ?νατη λ?γω παρεμβολ?ν. Η συν?χεια πραγματικ? αγωνι?δης και τρομακτικ?... Την εποχ? που κυκλοφ?ρησε το βιβλ?, ο ψυχρ?ς π?λεμος ?ταν στα ντουζ?νια του και δεκ?δες σεν?ρια με πυρηνικ? ολοκαυτ?ματα και ολοκληρωτικο?ς πολ?μους ?ταν στην ημερ?σια δι?ταξη. Το βιβλ?ο αυτ? εξετ?ζει ?να τ?τοιο σεν?ριο. Ο τρ?πος αφ?γησης ε?ναι τ?τοιος που β?ζει σιγ?-σιγ? τον αναγ?στη σε αναμμ?να κ?ρβουνα και τον αγχ?νει για το πως θα εξελιχθε? το ?λο δρ?μα, μ?χρι να φτ?σει στο συγκλονιστικ? φιν?λε. Το βιβλ?ο δεν γ?νεται ιδια?τερα συναισθηματικ?, περιγρ?φονται ?λες οι πολιτικ?ς και στρατιωτικ?ς διαδικασ?ες, καθ?ς και οι εν?ργειες που ακολουθο?ν οι υπε?θυνοι, και βλ?πουμε πως μπορε? να εξελιχθε? μια τ?τοια τραγωδ?α.

Σ?γουρα δεν ε?ναι το πιο καλογραμμ?νο θρ?λερ που υπ?ρχει, σε μερικ? σημει?α πλατει?ζει και σε ?λλα κουρ?ζει λ?γο με τεχνικ?ς λεπτομ?ρειες, στο σ?νολο του ?μω? πρ?κειται για ?να ?κρως ιντριγκαδ?ρικο μυθιστ?ρημα, το οπο?ο κατ?φερε να με συγκλον?σει με την ρεαλιστικ? εξ?λιξη της πλοκ?ς του. Σ?γουρα ε?ναι ?να βιβλ?ο που δ?νει μπ?λικη τροφ? για σκ?ψη, ακ?μα και πεν?ντα χρ?νια μετ? την πρ?τη κυκλοφορ?α του. ?δη κατ?βασα την κλασικ? ταιν?α του 1964 και λ?αν συντ?μω? θα την δω.

Υ.Γ. Η (σχεδ?ν) σαρ?ντα π?ντε χρ?νων μετ?φραση των εκδ?σεων ΒΙΠΕΡ μου φ?νηκε πραγματικ? πολ? καλ? για τα χρ?νια της.

Mike Hankins says

Before there was Tom Clancy, there was books like this: guesses at doomsday scenarios and nuclear Armageddon brought about by the increasing escalation in the Cold War. Written in 1962, this novel, emblematic of what became an entire genre, attempt to warn us of our own impending destruction because of the out-of-control nuclear arms race that existed at the time. While it's very preachy, it raises some good points and, if nothing else, provides a valuable look at the mindset of the time period.

The basic plot is that a group of bombers on a fairly routine mission, standing by to attack Russia in case anything goes awry, fails to receive a cancel order, and proceeds to begin an attack course to launch nukes on Moscow. The majority of the action plays out in the now-familiar setting of secret government war rooms with big map boards, electronics, and giant conference table full of generals arguing about options, while the President's hand hovers over a button. But the novel also includes characters like nuclear scientists and military theorists on both sides of the nuclear argument. Some of the most memorable scenes are of debates between those that argue for a "strike-first" policy versus those favoring disarmament. Burdick and Wheeler show a strong familiarity with the various arguments from the period, and take time to really think through their outcomes, putting various doctrinal stances into the mouths of the characters.

This becomes the main flaw of the book, mainly that the characters are simply non-persons designed to either fulfill a certain plot role, or to spew a certain ideology. Since the main point of the book is to discuss and critique the various arguments of nuclear deterrent as a theory and strategy, this makes sense. The only problem with this approach is that the book barely qualifies as a novel at this point.

The other fatal flaw of the book is how incredibly preachy it is. I will refrain from spoilers, since the ending of the book is incredibly eyebrow-raising. But thematically, the main thrust ends up being a very anti-technology stance wherein humanity is chastised for our horrible choices and self-destructive tendencies. The dialog becomes so over-the-top, cliched and preachy that all semblance of fiction is lost as the characters just become mouthpieces for the author's polemic against the engineers of the Cold War.

The book will appeal to fans of military history or of military fiction in general. The authors demonstrate an accurate knowledge of the technology of the time, although some admitted liberties are taken. The book provides a revealing insight into the mindset of the 60s, where fear of nuclear war ran rampant. The idea that humanity was on the brink of annihilation at any point, which could be set off from any misstep, is a powerful notion. There's a sense of frustration and confusion that pervaded the period, which this book accurately captures. In that sense, while it may not stand the test of time as a work of fiction, it does still provide a valuable window into the past.

Mkfs says

Surprisingly not too dated. Sure, the Cold War is over and the chance of a mechanical malfunction triggering global thermonuclear war is minimal -- but the world hasn't changed that much.

Stuart Dean says

An epic anti war novel that builds tension from the beginning and maintains it to the very brutal end. Set in 1967, a computer malfunction in the infallible fail safe device sends a rogue flight of nuclear bombers toward Moscow. What follows is the story of how soldiers and politicians react, how they try to stop the bombers from accidentally starting World War III and what they plan to do if the planes can't be stopped. Immensely suspenseful.

The major characters are each given a chapter to show that they are supremely logical men, but each has flaws so they are not automatons just unthinkingly following orders. Each reacts to the potential end of the world in his own way. There are some technological reaches in the novel, mainly the idea that 6 B-58's could evade the entire Soviet defense mechanism and shoot down some 5 score Soviet aircraft considering they couldn't possibly carry that many missiles. But Burdick's predictions concerning spy satellites were spot on.

Practically all of the characters are either rich socialites or Ivy League intellectuals. The President, identified only as "The President", is obviously JFK, for whom the author obviously has great admiration. Nikita Khrushchev is named, but he is basically the only real person identified. Everyone is portrayed in a good light so that the conclusion can be seen as believable. There is even a token mental breakdown to show that not everyone can take the strain.

To prove its anti-war point the novel takes some liberties, not unlike "Dr. Strangelove" or "War Games". It defies reason to believe that the people who created the technology that could deliver a "Go" command without fear of it being intercepted or falsified could not also build a box that could deliver a "Recall" command. Or that the President could not have a special "stand down" code that he could give to the pilot over the radio that is changed daily in the same way that the fail-safe code does. It is highly unlikely that every person involved would sit around talking baseball after the President announces his solution to the insoluble dilemma, or that he could get them to carry it out. Or that Nikita Khrushchev, though more Trotskyite than Stalinist, would take the actions he does. This is the same Khrushchev who presided over many of Stalin's purges, sent missiles to Cuba, crushed the Hungarian revolutionaries, built the Berlin wall, was present at Stalingrad, and was such a fervent Marxist that he would not allow his wife's casket to be taken inside a church. He was a born peasant with the unshakable belief that the Soviet people could withstand any hardship. He sent fewer people to the gulag, but the internal exile of being expelled from the Party was just as effective at shortening people's lives. Not likely to be a pragmatist when facing the end.

An excellent cold war novel from a time when the threat of nuclear annihilation was a clear and present danger. Burdick creates a Kobayashi Maru scenario and even finds a clever way to come out of it. There is much said about the policy of Mutual Assured Destruction, and much about the increasing presence of computer automation in the military. It is even pointed out that having human intervention over the computers is no solution, since just as no machine is infallible no man is infallible as well. A cerebral novel well worth discussing.

YoruHara says

Al principio un poco aburrido pero el final es impactante. No tenía muchas expectativas, pero sin duda fue una buena experiencia. En las partes de tensión, puedes escuchar tu corazón latiendo y piensas: "Oh Dios, ¿de verdad?". Lo pueden leer, al principio es aburrido pero sin duda se vuelve emocionante al final

Bob Mayer says

Most people think we are relatively safe from nuclear weapons. That couldn't be further from the truth. There are way too many nukes floating around out there. And the United States has the most. Having been in Special Operations I applaud those whose duty it is to defend our country, but it is inevitable that a nuke will go off, most likely inside a container in a port city. Since they exist, they will be used. There is also the possibility of a mistake as outlined in this book. Yes, mistakes happen. It's the rule of seven-- it takes seven things to go wrong for a catastrophe to occur, as I teach in Who Dares Wins. How many times we've been to six with nukes will never be known. But we'll know when we hit seven.

stormhawk says

I grew up with the Cold War being a real, active, living thing. Duck and cover drills, discussions of mutually assured destruction, and eventually the Star Wars program. Then it all went away. The dangers became smaller, individuals and small groups became the enemy, rather than an entire nation half the world away. The fears of Failsafe were once very real. This is a short, intense novel about the failures, and in this case, unfortunate successes of systems designed to take the human factor out of the decisions of power and nuclear destruction.

Natylie Baldwin says

I don't know what the President is doing, but whatever it is he'd better be right. Khrushchev isn't going to sit around forever and watch those planes move in on Moscow. The whole thing rests on the President's ability to persuade Khrushchev it was an accident. If he doesn't, then we're going to have all-out, 100 per cent, slam-bang, hell-bent war. That's right, isn't it, General?

-Congressman Raskob, "Fail-Safe," page 206

For those who are familiar with the story of Fail-Safe due to the 1964 film directed by the legendary Sidney Lumet and starring Henry Fonda in an unforgettable performance as a U.S. president who finds himself in a nuclear crisis with the Soviet Union, the book is much like the film but delves deeper into the central themes as well as some of the main characters' psyches and background.

The story explores not only the ideological foundation of the Cold War conflict of 1945 – 1989 and its contribution to creating the immediate crisis but also the related political, psychological and technological foundations. On the political level, the question is implied throughout: why do ideological differences in how to organize one's society have to mean confrontation that puts all of humanity at risk as opposed to a "live and let live" approach? As the US president and Soviet premier (openly referred to as Khrushchev) attempt to deal with the crisis, it is clear that a psychological spiral of long-standing mutual distrust and perceived escalations have made the situation worse, creating circumstances that compound the crisis as it is learned that an understandably suspicious Soviet military leadership has already jammed radio communications on the US nuclear bombers that are on their way to attack Moscow as the result of a mistaken "go" order. The jamming has prevented the US leadership from communicating the error and an abort mission order to the pilots.

This poisoned atmosphere of distrust leads directly to the horrendous decisions made to resolve the crisis later on.

Continue reading review at:

<http://natyliesbaldwin.com/2016/06/fa...>

Erik Graff says

I saw this as a motion picture with my dad at Park Ridge's Pickwick Theatre when it came out in 1964. Soon thereafter I purchased the text at the downtown bookstore on Prospect Avenue, read through it once, then,

impressed and having a new tape recorder, read it through again, aloud. This wasn't all that long after the Cuban Missile Crisis, a series of events I'd followed closely. The threat of nuclear holocaust was present throughout childhood.

Jose Moa says

This novel written short time after the Cuban missile crisis, when the USA president was Kennedy and the Soviet Union premier was Khrushchev, is an early warning on the danger of excessive confidence in computerized systems over the decisions in the use of nuclear weapons.

Is a page-turner novel, a bestseller in its time, well written and structured with a plausible accidental nuclear war plot, makes a relatively deep insight into the MAD doctrine and its logic contradictions, also makes insight into the military psychology, where some men are so well trained that are almost automata very efficient for the good but also for the bad and exposes the personal, ethical and logical contradictions in high officers. A striking thing is to see how some people talk about hundreds of millions of casualties without becoming disturbed. As an anecdote I think Doctor Grostechel, a hawk, has inspired Doctor Stangelove (very fitted name) of the movie *Dr. Strangelove* by Kubrick.

On this novel were made two very good movies, *Fail Safe* by Sidney Lumet and *Fail Safe* by Stephen Frears. For those that like movies, in the cold war were made several good movies: *On the Beach*, the dulcified *The Day After* and the more hard and realistic *Threads*.

Where, for me, the novel is rather weak is in its happy utopian end. Is for me not realistic, because a similar situation surely will drive to extremely strong different opinions inside government and army, creating political chaos and possibly a coup (Kennedy had said he even feared a military coup in the Cuban crisis) and very probably ending in a massive nuclear exchange.

The book has not aged at all, in fact the worries expressed in the book have worsened, because to day after the end of "official" cold war, the hardware and software are much more complex, there have been several very near real close calls after the book was written (the Minot Mistake incident, Colonel Petrov incident, Able Archer incident, Norwegian rocket incident, war games tapes incident and surely many others we don't know) and incomprehensibly in a world without blocks, with only an economic ideology and Fukuyama's end of history, there are yet more than 3000 nuclear warheads of near a megaton (a several times overkill capacity) in high trigger or launch on warning in ICBM and SLBM in several nuclear powers and superpowers, that left few minutes to take decisions not hours as in the book.

But oddly very few people seem worried, few people seem understand the enormous gargantuan extreme destructive power and terrible consequences of a single one megaton nuclear warhead explosion, the only explanation is, in my personal opinion, a passive censorship: a blanket of silence, no subject of newspapers articles, television debates, almost no books, no social moves and so on, and the extreme power of the nuclear lobby (a thing about president and general Eisenhower has warned).

Aside a very real danger this policy costs to the world many billions of dollars that could be used for much better things.

Another interesting recommendable book for those that had forgotten that the nuclear weapons yet exist and ready for fast use

Neil says

This was an interesting book; it strongly reminded me of both *Red Alert!* (another novel) and the movie, *Dr. Strangelove, or How I Learned To Stop Worrying And Learned To Love The Bomb*. It moves at a decent pace; the character development is decent. It is set in the historical mid-1960s and has the names of individuals in it who were alive during that time. It is also a bit of a polemic, of sorts, about the dangers of completely trusting every decision to machines and "removing" human responsibility from "the equation."

It is a pretty crazy book, in that it takes place primarily at SAC headquarters, in Omaha, NE, and in the War Room in Washington, D.C. There are occasional snippets from the Commander of Flight Group Six as well, but they occur infrequently. (view spoiler) There is really not a lot of "action" in the book; most of the book centers around people talking(view spoiler).

There were a couple of parts of the book that did get me a little confused. (view spoiler)

On a sided note, I added it to my "technothriller" shelf as it does have some discussions about advanced technology in it. That being said, it does not have the infodumps that future "technothrillers" will have in them. Still, though, it does take the technology currently available at the time and extrapolates forward as to what America could possibly have developed in terms of its military might.

I enjoyed reading the book. I have read some other books that had similar endings to this one, so the ending was not quite as much of a shock as it might have been, otherwise. At the same time, the ending is quite horrific, on various levels (view spoiler). This book does a "good job" of discussing the variables that McNamara and his "Whiz Kids" seemed unable to completely grasp with their using equations to attempt to define the reality they wanted as opposed to the reality that existed at the time.

It was a good book; I am glad that I finally got around to reading it.