

How We Learned to Stop Worrying and Love (Teaching) the Bomb

Lori Clune and Connor Naylor

“U.S. Fears Russia Might Put a Nuclear Weapon in Space”

“North Korea Says Its New Submarine Can Launch Nuclear Missiles”

“U.S. to Build New Nuclear Gravity Bomb”

Headlines from the 1950s? 1960s? No, they’re from 2023 and 2024.

In the fall of 2023, appropriately in a 1950s-era classroom with tiered seats, we took students on a cinematic, nuclear-fueled journey. For fifteen weeks, thirty-five undergraduates and a handful of graduate students met for three hours each Wednesday evening to explore nuclear history. Lori Clune was the instructor of record, and graduate student Connor Naylor audited the class to observe both the course’s content and its approach, in preparation for being Lori’s teaching assistant in spring 2024.

In 2022, Lori wrote a chapter on teaching the history of nuclear activism using cultural sources.¹ On a lark, she decided to craft an upper division course that grappled with nuclear history, using sources in music, games, comic books, articles, and films as a foundation. While Lori remembers ducking and covering, Connor and the students are too young. Within a week into the semester it became clear that this class was more essential and meaningful than originally envisioned. In this article, we would like to share what we learned.

The Students Don’t Know Much

This is not a criticism, but more of an observation. Many students thought that nuclear bombs were only a threat in (for them) the ancient, black and white footage history of the Cold War. Many students were unaware that the United States still possesses nuclear weapons, and were shocked to learn we store thousands. In the list of dangers to humanity, many students rightly ranked climate change or other phenomena among the most significant. In exploring a chronological history of the bomb through the lens of film and other media, however, we were able to reframe and recenter the threat these weapons of mass destruction still represent.

This class provided necessary historical context for understanding a variety of twenty-first century events, including the discovery that U.S. nuclear power plants were on the target list for the September 11th attacks, the 2011 earthquake/tsunami-caused accident at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power station in Japan, the nuclear programs of Iran and North Korea, and the threat of accidents and stolen nuclear materials. These and others continue to keep the world on the brink of madness.

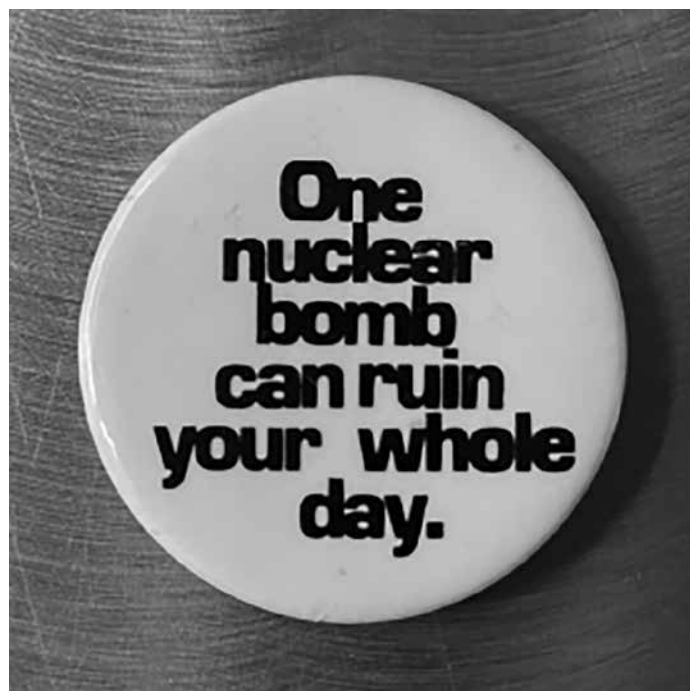
Dark Humor Can Be Therapeutic

The class began with a viewing of the classic dark documentary, *Atomic Cafe* (1982). As students giggled awkwardly at outtakes of Truman and duck and cover footage, they learned that laughter can be a great release for the absurdity and horror involved with nuclear weapons. Over Thanksgiving the students read a short piece from the Office of Nuclear Energy on “How Many Turkeys Can a Reactor Cook on Thanksgiving Day?” (2020). “Weird Al” Yankovic’s “Christmas at Ground Zero” exposed the hysterical absurdity of Reagan’s nuclear weapon policy. John Oliver, in his 2014 *Last Week Tonight* episode on “Nuclear Weapons,” used his muckraker style to satirize the current state of our nation’s stockpile.

To highlight the dark humor of the classic *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964), students first viewed *Fail-Safe* (2000). The immediacy and horror of the live television broadcast helped to highlight the absurdity and dark comedy behind *Dr. Strangelove* in an effective way. Pairing these two films together threw the terror and senselessness involved with nuclear weapons into sharp relief for students.

Students Enjoyed(?) It

The class itself was well-received; students responded positively in evaluations and gifted the professor a first edition of Heinz Haber’s *Our Friend the Atom* (1956), to show how much the class meant to them. Some of their written comments highlighted what they had learned, as well as their enjoyment of the course:



Button in Lori’s collection (1982)

"Thank you for the wonderful and terrifying semester."

"This class was an eye-opening experience that I will not be forgetting anytime soon."

"Honestly, [I] loved this course and it really gave me an insight into something I had very little knowledge of."

"Let's hope for no more close calls!"

Students also chose from a list of twenty-six nuclear close calls (1956-2010) from Neil Halloran's *The Shadow Peace*, "Part 1: The Nuclear Threat, Estimating Deaths in a Nuclear War" (2017). In Close Call Presentations, groups shared crucial moments in American history when the possibility of nuclear annihilation nearly became reality. As Eric Schlosser notes in *Command and Control*, however, there have been hundreds of close calls caused by accident, mistake, or miscalculation; a future class could spend much more time on these terrifying near misses.²

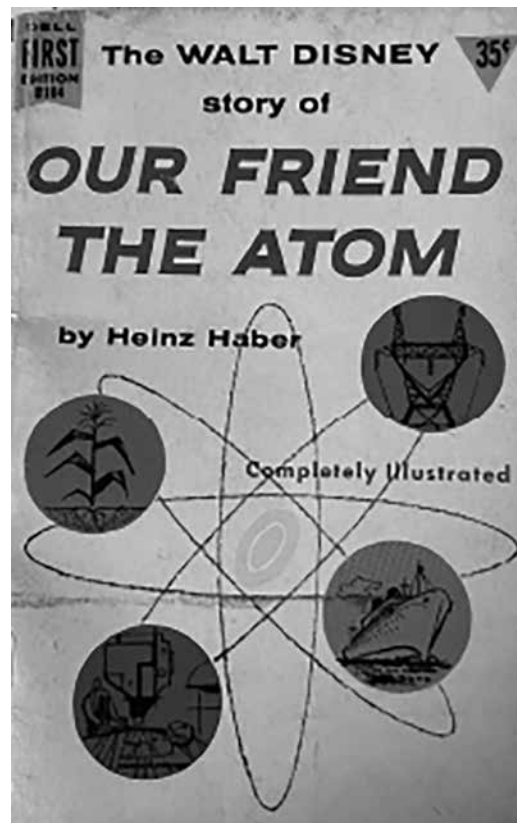
Students also appreciated the reflective and therapeutic nature of the Final Exam, where each student wrote to a chosen government representative to explain what they had learned (referencing at least six of the films), and advise the official on nuclear policy.

What We Read and Watched

Documentaries used included: *A Time Lapse of Every Nuclear Explosion Since 1945* (Isao Hashimoto, YouTube); *To End All War: Oppenheimer and the Atomic Bomb* (NBC, 2023); *Our Friend the Atom* (Disney, 1957); *Three Men Go to War* (2012); *The Movement and the "Madman"* (2023); *Meltdown: Three Mile Island* (2022); Helen Caldicott's *If You Love This Planet* (198, 2022); *Chernobyl: The Lost Tapes* (2022); and *Command & Control* (2016).

Films included: *Fail-Safe* (2000); *Dr. Strangelove* (1964); *WarGames* (1983); *Thirteen Days* (2001); *The Day After* (1983); and the *Butter Battle Book* (1989 animated television film).

Students read **book chapters** from Paul Boyer's *Bomb's Early Light: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age* (1985). Articles included discussions of Artificial Intelligence and nukes, the Cuban Missile Crisis origins of the holiday song "Do You Hear What I Hear?," and whether Nixon ordered a nuclear strike while drunk. Primary sources encompassed speeches by President Eisenhower, National Security Archive documents on the Cuban Missile Crisis, the nuclear football, the Able Archer test, Operation



Heinz Haber, *The Walt Disney Story of Our Friend the Atom* (New York: Dell, 1956)

Teapot (testing effects of nuclear explosions on beer and soda), comic books on the A-Bomb and the H-Bomb, and an online exhibit from the Museum of the City of New York "A Danger Unlike Any Danger": Nuclear Disarmament Campaigns 1957-1985.

Future offerings may replace some of the shorter readings with important new works, such as Annie Jacobsen's *Nuclear War: A Scenario* (Dutton, 2024) and Ananyo Bhattacharya's *The Man From the Future: The Visionary Life of John von Neumann* (Norton, 2022). While students did have the opportunity to process these readings via weekly online Reflections, next time, we may view fewer films to allow for more in-class time to discuss and grapple with students' intellectual and emotional responses.

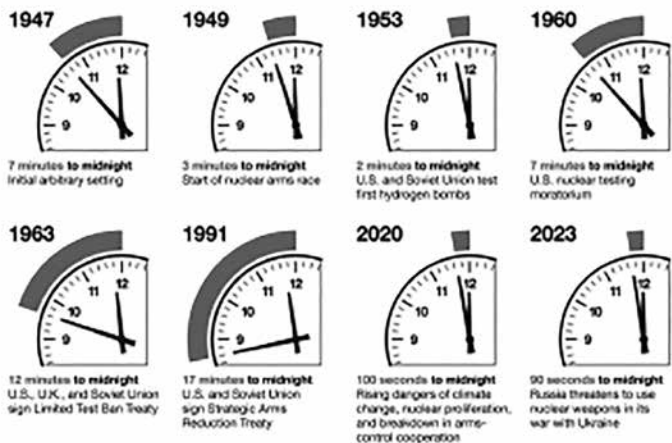
If Not Now, When?

Since 1947, the *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists* has been measuring the minutes until midnight on its Domsday Clock, functioning as a metaphor for humanity's proximity to the apocalypse. It began at seven minutes before midnight, marking the atomic-fueled strains of the Cold War. Due to battling American and Soviet hydrogen bombs, the closest to midnight was 1953, with two minutes before midnight. In the heady, post-Soviet days of 1991 we



Navy Cake to Celebrate Operation Crossroads, 1946

Doomsday Clock



Based on the Doomsday Clock announcements of The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists <https://thebulletin.org/doomsday-clock/timeline/>

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luxuriated in a full seventeen minutes.

Then came the twenty-first century, with the dual threats of nuclear armageddon and climate change. We're dealing in seconds now. In 2020, the clock was set to 100 seconds until midnight. It moved to 90 seconds before Doomsday in 2023, where it remains today. As of spring 2024, the U.S. Department of Defense confirmed the U.S. maintains a stockpile of approximately 3,708 nuclear warheads which can be delivered by ballistic missile and aircraft.

In April 2024, the UN Security Council voted on a resolution to prohibit, among other things, nuclear weapons in space. Russia vetoed it. As of 2024, the *New York Times* opinion series declared, "It's Time to Protest Nuclear War Again". This course is an urgently needed corrective for students coming of age in a world with a proliferating nuclear arsenal, and an increasing ambivalence towards its use.

Notes:

1. Kimber Quinney and Amy L. Sayward, eds., *Understanding and Teaching Contemporary American History since 1980* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2022).
2. Eric Schlosser, *Command and Control: Nuclear Weapons, the Damascus Accident, and the Illusion of Safety* (New York: Penguin Press, 2014).

CALL FOR APPLICATIONS:

"Writing the History of U.S. Foreign Relations in an Age of Crisis" 2025 SHAFR Summer Institute, June 21-25, 2025 Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut

Faculty Directors: Alvita Akiboh and Michael Brenes (Yale University)

The largest land war in Europe since World War II, looming conflict with China, war in Gaza, and instability in states such as Haiti, Syria, and Afghanistan have fundamentally reshaped global affairs. These conflicts exist alongside unprecedented rates of economic and racial inequality, the escalating havoc wrought by climate change, and the reemergence of autocratic figures in the United States and around the world. Indeed, the world is currently embroiled in what commentators have called a "polycrisis." These crises present challenges and opportunities for historians of U.S. foreign relations to explore the origins of our current moment, to offer scholars and the public nuanced perspectives on how to understand our world. Yet the historical profession—and the humanities broadly—is in the throes of its own crisis. Decades of austerity, neglect, and precarity have eroded the historical discipline—and the ranks of historians—with many scholars of U.S. foreign relations unable to secure tenure-track positions or produce enduring scholarship in alternative careers.

In this light, we ask crucial questions about the role of historians of the United States and the world at this critical juncture. What role can history serve to inform in our age of crisis? How should historians of U.S. foreign relations write history in an age of crisis? What key themes and subjects should be the focus of the field given the turbulence of our age? How can we situate and comprehend our professional crisis within the context of a global "polycrisis?" We will seek to answer these questions and others, while also helping a cohort of young scholars to develop sophisticated and nuanced perspectives that will shape their work on the inevitable crises of the future.

The theme of "crisis" informs the revived Summer Institute of the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations, which will take place June 21-June 25, 2025, at Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut. The Institute will be co-directed by historians Alvita Akiboh and Michael Brenes, and will include a range of guests from within the historical profession.

Geared toward advanced Ph.D. students in history, the institute will feature seminar-style discussions and meetings with leading scholars. The Summer Institute will also provide a forum for participants to present their research and participate in workshops on professional development, teaching, and publishing. Each participant will be reimbursed for travel to New Haven and to a return destination, will be provided with accommodation and meals, and will receive a modest honorarium.

The deadline for applications is December 15, 2024. The 2025 SHAFR Summer Institute is open to advanced Ph.D. students with ABD status. If interested in participating, please submit a c.v., a brief cover letter (stating why the summer institute would further the applicant's career goals and dissertation project), a 250-word abstract of the dissertation project, and a letter of recommendation from a dissertation supervisor or committee member. These materials should be submitted as a PDF or Word document to Alvita Akiboh (alvita.akiboh@yale.edu) and Michael Brenes (michael.brenes@yale.edu). Please send all questions to the faculty directors.