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**The Nuclear Taboo and Nuke Porn
in the Nuclear Vault**

A rainy, cold spring morning on H Street in Washington: I recall with great clarity the circumstances of my first encounter in “the nuclear vault,” with the so-called Burke documents, the ones that laid out a road not taken in the development of our nuclear strategy a half-century ago. A road that yet might take us back from the still all too dangerous default hair-trigger posture we remain in today. Take us back if not all the way to Zero, then a giant step in that direction, a giant step away from “world holocaust,” a chilling phrase I first came upon in the Burke documents.

The “nuclear vault” is the informal name given to a division of the privately funded National Security Archives, now housed in the library of George Washington University on H Street. The archives, founded two decades ago, has devoted itself to getting millions of pages of top secret, classified national security documents declassified, primarily through the Freedom of Information Act. The nuclear vault, the repository for an astonishing compilation of confidential declassified discussions about the bomb, has been presided over for two decades by Dr. William Burr, another Yoda of FOIA, using that legislative tool like a light-saber to cut through the fog of secrecy that surrounds nuclear weapons and nuclear war strategy. The conference room of the nuclear vault is a Dickensian jumble, an Old Curiosity Shop of the nuclear age, filled to bursting point with documents; file folders were piled to the ceiling for archiving and digitizing into the nuclear vault’s “Electronic Briefing Books.”

Dr. Burr is a youthful-looking though slightly gnomish gentleman, a Californian who did his doctorate in pre-nuke American history and whose mind is a marvel of memory for the documents he’s been pursuing so relentlessly for so long and for the themes and subtexts that connect them. Maybe Yoda isn’t so much the right name for him, perhaps he might better be thought of as a nuclear Talmudist. You can hear the deep satisfaction in his voice when he learns that he’s got some document re-declassified, which didn’t declassify enough the first time Burr filed suit. Sometimes he will go back to litigate several times over declassifying a single paragraph. I once met a Pentagon contactor hired to redact, black out, passages in declassified documents, who, when I mentioned Burr’s name, visibly shrank with a look of dread like Dracula reacting to a bulb of garlic. Burr is as relentless as a buzz saw to the paper empire of secrecy the Pentagon has built.

The feeling of a Strangelovian Old Curiosity Shop was reinforced when I first sat down across a conference table from Burr and noticed the rather bizarre backdrop: a semicircular wall of brown cardboard packing boxes that had all been Magic Markered “NUCLEAR WEAPONS SECRETS.”

“They’re from the Hansen Collection,” Burr said, noticing me staring at the boxes. It turns out Hansen was some California techie who had devoted his life to FOIA and other private investigations into the design, engineering, and deployment of nuclear warheads, and it seems after his recent death he’d willed his wall of storage cartons to the nuclear vault where Burr has only begun to plumb them.

They looked like props from a bad thriller or a *parody* of a bad thriller (like *Strangelove* was). But setting aside the Strangelovian edge to it, a visit to the nuclear vault either in person or even virtually on their Web site is cumulatively awe-inspiring. The real thing. The target-planning documents. Heavily redacted parts of the sacred SIOP. Revelations of once above-top-secret struggles over whose finger was on what triggers.

When I first coined the term “nuke porn” I was mostly disparaging this genre of nuclear thriller, caricaturing it as “the finger on the trigger, bringing the trembling world to the brink of a shattering climax.” I was disparaging exploitative fiction. But the factual reality of it can be even more luridly alluring. And the nuclear vault is ground zero for all the lurid allure.

I’ve always found those blacked-out redacted passages the most teasing and seductive. They let you see so much that is disturbing. What can be behind the many Xeroxed layers of blackness that betray no hints of coherent words?

It’s the forbiddenness of it. Getting to listen in to the secretive talk about the deadly embrace that was Mutually Assured Destruction, getting to listen in to the debates over first use, first strike, preemptive war, preventive war, and the subtle distinctions between launch on warning and launch on alert and the strategic thinking behind the distinctions—it has the perverse attraction of letting you envision your own death.

I don’t want to aestheticize it, after all we are dealing with the record of humanity’s ongoing flirtation with self-destruction. But being present in an archive of the most intimate conversations of White House and Pentagon officials, generals and admirals, all speaking about the unspeakable with the candor that comes from not thinking that—thanks to a few obsessed archivists like the nuclear vault’s Burr and the Federation of American Scientists’ Kristensen—they would ever be overheard. The pillow talk of the war planners.

Thanks to Burr, I came across in my vault research the chilling phrase “world holocaust.” All the more chilling since it was uttered by a member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Arleigh A. Burke, a half-century ago during a heated and ultimately tragic debate over our nuclear strategy. It was a debate Burke lost then, but which offers what is now an even more powerful argument for his “finite deterrence” nuclear strategy.

Having read thousands upon thousands of pages of declassified documents, I can say that by the time you get to be one of the gods of the nuclear realm, one of the Joint Chiefs of Staff—at the very peak of the military and nuclear pyramid, you don’t hear or read phrases like “world holocaust.” You hear euphemisms like “maximum damage expectancy.” It was genuinely shocking to find a four-star admiral using such inflammatory language in a classified communiqué, which led me to pay closer attention than I might have otherwise, to the cache of secret, top secret, confidential, and classified-stamped documents that made up the just declassified series of Admiral Burke papers in the Nuclear Vault Electronic Briefing Book #275. They turned out to be the Dead Sea Scrolls of nuclear history, an alternate vision that casts light on why we are still shackled to those thousands of missiles in silos on hair-trigger alert.

The Burke documents, I’ve come to believe, are not just a historical footnote to nuclear strategy history but could serve as evidence of the still urgent need for debate over whether a civilization-destroying nuclear war, a world holocaust, is avoidable or inevitable. Electronic Briefing Book #275—the digital collection of the Burke documents, whose publication coincided with my visit—seemed to me a sensational recovery of a lost past, a lost path in nuclear history.

In Burke, I came across a plan. Not for Zero, which I still believe is probably unattainable. But for ten. Or less than a hundred. One that sacrifices the perfection of Zero for the attainability of minimum numbers.

At the very least the Burke papers offer a contribution to the debate—something I refrained from offering the first time I immersed myself in the mechanics and the morals of nuclear war at the height of the Cold War in part because I couldn't imagine the experts would have failed to find a fail-safe solution, but they did fail. They were only saved by the bell, by the fall of the Wall from the Armageddon we were heading for.

As it turns out, the late Admiral Arleigh Burke—the unexpected theoretician—first called the worst-case scenario a “world holocaust” more than half a century ago at a decisive turning point in nuclear arms deployment. According to Jesse Sheidlower, the American editor of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the word “holocaust” as in “nuclear holocaust” had first been used in 1954. “Nuclear holocaust” took a while to catch on; it's a powerful phrase conflating as it does Hitler and Hiroshima, Hitlerizing the nuclear cataclysm. But “world holocaust” seems to have been Burke's own coinage.