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<< NOTES ON >>

BOMB TALK: FRAMING THE UNTHINKABLE

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Paper presented at the Annual Meetings of the
Midwest Sociological Society
Session on the Sociology of Peace
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Chicago, Illinois
April 15-18, 1987

THESIS

Our cultural apparatus appears ill-equipped, if not unable, to conceptualize or frame the present nuclear reality in a way that lets us effectively come to grips with it as it really is: a deployed, targeted, industrialized capacity to instantaneously annihilate all human life. This paper demonstrates that we key or transform our nuclear reality in virtually every conceivable way, thus normalizing it and treating it culturally the same as any other phenomenon, including the most mundane. I argue therefore that we have before us the immense and challenging task of finding a way -- working with flawed and inadequate intellectual tools -- to transcend the fundamental constructs of an outmoded and deeply imbedded cultural framework for "making sense of" events in our world. We apparently require a new cultural invention, comparable in magnitude to language, writing, or numbers before we can both grasp and solve the nuclear menace. Our present techniques, be they books, lectures, protests, debates, are not working. We need a new cultural framework, and it is our task as cultural laborers to develop it.

The foundation of this paper rests on Erving Goffman's (1974/1986) epistemological study of everyday life: Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience. The following pages outline the Goffmanian concepts employed in this paper.

GOFFMAN'S PRIMARY FRAMEWORKS

We interpret things in terms of two primary frameworks:

(1) natural laws, such as those found in physics, chemistry, and biology, and (2) guided doings which "incorporate the will, aim, and controlling effect of a live agency." Example: The bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki do not escape our basic, fundamental ways of explaining our world to ourselves. The bombing was a guided doing by the U.S.A. that utilized basic knowledge of nuclear physics.

BRIDGE EXPLANATIONS

Bridge explanations (my term) help us account for events that do not fit cleanly into the two primary frameworks, thus preserving the epistemological coherence of the primary frameworks.

(1) A "muffing" occurs when the control normally expected in a guided doing is absent or temporarily lost.

(2) A "stunt" displays remarkable control where none is expected. Goffman defines it as "the maintenance of guidance and control by some willed agency under what are seen as nearly impossible conditions."

(3) An "astounding complex" involves an intellectual holding action, that is, we "expect that a 'simple' or 'natural' explanation will soon be discovered" to account for something when no reasonable explanation is readily at hand. Goffman argues: "In our society, the very significant assumption is generally made that all events -- without exception -- can be contained and managed within the conventional system of belief. We tolerate the unexplained but not the inexplicable."

(4) Unexplained events can also be accounted for as "fortuitous," as when a competently performing person "meets with the natural workings of the world in a way he could not be expected to anticipate, with consequential results. Or two or more unconnected and mutually unoriented individuals, each properly guiding his own doings, jointly bring about an unanticipated event that is significant."

KEYS

According to Goffman, keys are identifiable sets of conventions or rules by which an activity already "made sense of" in terms of the two primary frameworks is transformed into something patterned on this activity but is clearly understood by all concerned to be something quite different. The major categories of keys are outlined below.

(1) Make Believe: By this term, Goffman refers to the imitation or running through of the activity that is keyed "with the knowledge that nothing practical will come of the doing."

(a) Play and Playfulness: Goffman refers here to "relatively brief intrusions of unserious mimicry."

(b) Daydreams and Private Fantasy

(c) Dramatic Scriptings: Included here are the productions offered "to the public through the media of television, radio, newspapers, magazines, books, theater."

(i) Novels

(ii) Television Dramas

(iii) Legitimate Theater

(iv) Motion Pictures

(v) Poetry

Your Attention Please (excerpt)

by Peter Porter

The Polar DEW has just warned that
A nuclear rocket strike of
At least one thousand megatons
Has been launched by the enemy
Directly at our major cities.
This announcement will take
Two and a quarter minutes to make,
You therefore have a further
Eight and a quarter minutes
To comply with the shelter
Requirements published in the Civil
Defence Code--section Atomic Attack.
A specially shortened Mass
Will be broadcast at the end
Of this announcement--
Protestant and Jewish services
Will begin simultaneously--
Select your wavelength immediately
According to instruction
In the Defence Code. Do not
Take well-loved pets (including birds)
Into your shelter--they will consume
Fresh air. Leave the old and bed-
ridden, you can do nothing for them.
Remember to press the sealing
Switch when everyone is in
The shelter. Set the radiation
Aerial, turn on the geiger barometer.
Turn off your Television now.

(Source: Oxford Book of 20th Century Poetry. Oxford University Press, 1973, pp. 585-6.

(vi) Popular Music

Man at C & A

by The Specials (Dance Craze soundtrack album)

Warnin' warnin' nuclear attack
Atomic sources designed to blow your mind
World War III
Nuclear nuclear attack
Rocking atomically in this third world war
Atomic sounds
The man in black he told me the latest Moscow news
about the storm across the Red Sea
They drove their ballpoint views
I'm the man in grey, I'm just the man at C & A
And I don't have a say in the wargames that they play
Warnin' warnin' nuclear attack
Shock attack to hit you in the back
World War III
The Mickey Mouse bunch told the Ayatollah at his feet
You'll drink your oil you schmuck, we'll eat our heads of wheat
But I'm the man in grey, I'm just the man at C & A
And I don't have a say in the wargames that they play
Don't chuck another bomb
Nuclear nuclear nuclear war
Warnin' warnin' nuclear attack
The bomb will never fall
Shock attack.

Rendez-vous with Radiation

by Rob Bolland (Domino Theory album)

Bombs exploding, silver shadows in the night
Plans unfolding, telling me we're gonna die
Vision's fading, burning fires in the night
Should have stayed in, it's not safe to be outside
Rendez-vous with radiation
Rendez-vous with radiation
I know it's never gonna be the same
Watch the fallout, got so save ourselves somehow
Soldiers call out, nothing here can save us now
Rendez-vous with radiation
Rendez-vous with radiation
I know that it's never gonna be the same.

- (vii) Names
- (viii) Slogans
- (ix) Jokes

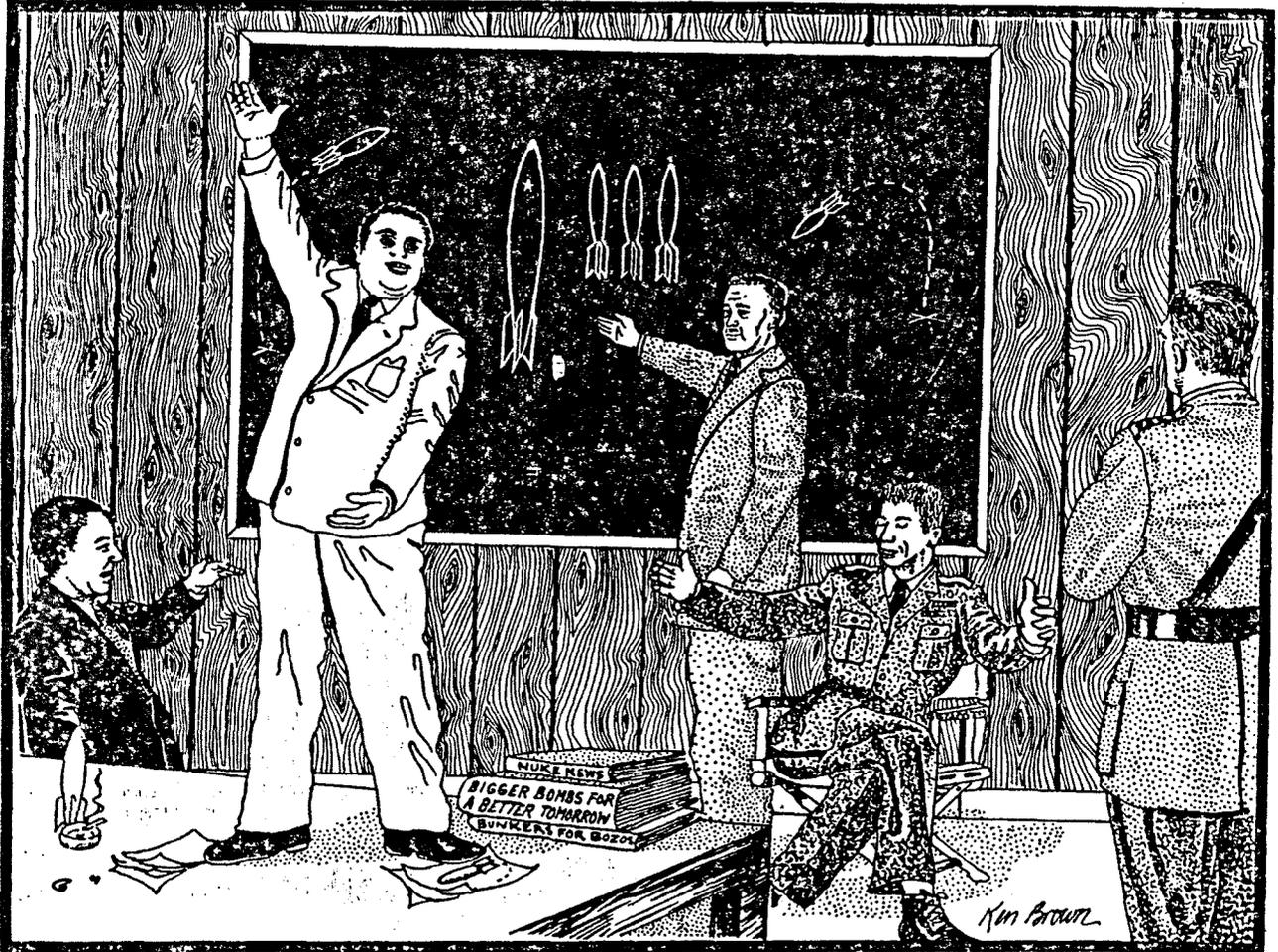
(2) Contests

(3) Ceremonials

- (4) Technical Redoings: Technical redoings involve performing an activity out of its unusual context with the understanding that the original outcome of the activity will not occur, yet the redoing is still for a utilitarian purpose.
- (a) Practicing
 - (i) Simulations
 - (ii) Rehearsals
 - (iii) Planning
 - (b) Demonstrations
 - (c) Replays
 - (i) Documentation
 - (ii) Exhibits and Museums
 - (d) Group Psychotherapy and Role-Playing
 - (e) Experiments

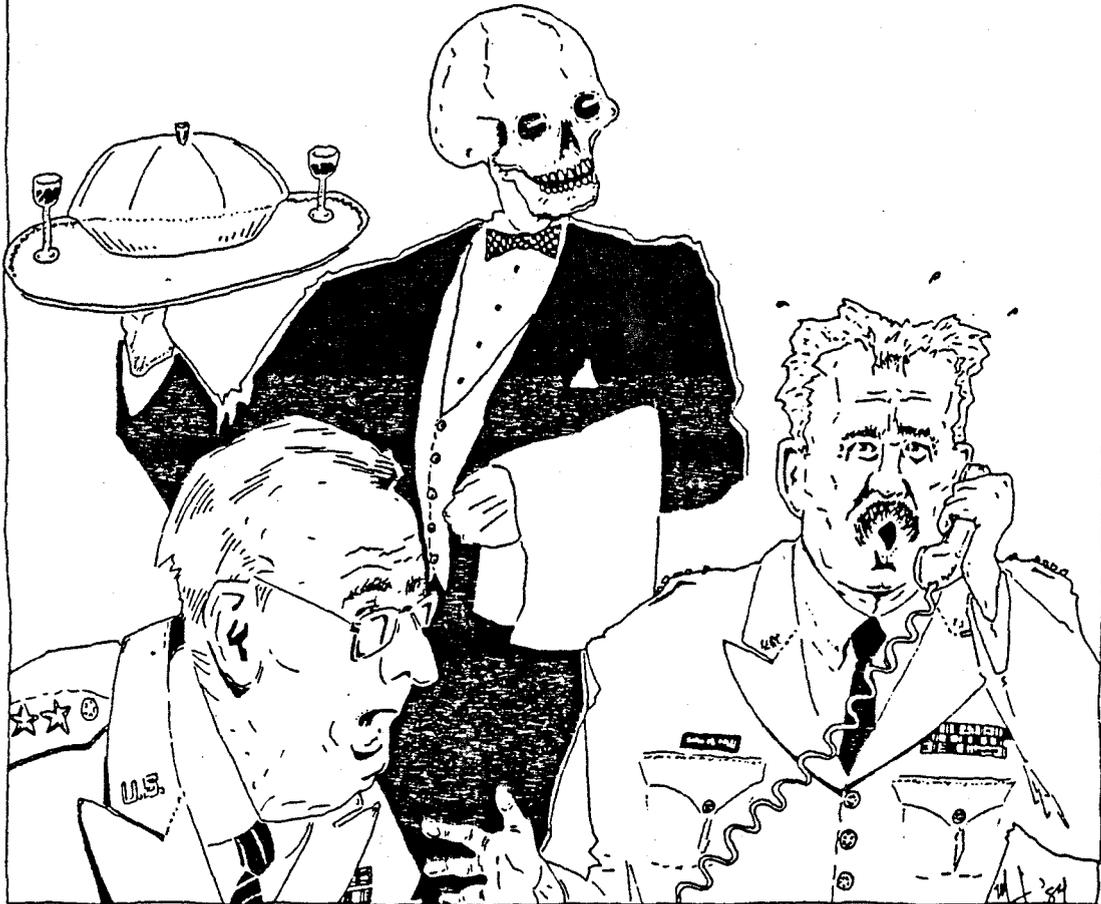
CONCLUSION

This nuclear based tour of Goffmanian keys has a purpose: to remind ourselves of the extreme flexibility our epistemology and transformational rules permit. They allow us to key at will, to make jokes, movies, novels, experiments, slogans, museums, etc. based upon the most deadly peril our world has ever faced. I submit that we ought to be wary when we key, fabricate, or otherwise transform nuclear annihilation in the same way that we key other socially important but far less serious events such as, for example, AIDS and teenage suicide (both of which have their full complement of jokes, songs, poetry, television dramas, talk show discussions, fund raisers, and self-help groups). We now act on the nuclear threat/reality in exactly the same way, writing letters to congresspersons, organizing talk shows, fund raisers, petitions, television ads, newsletters, and staging marches, demonstrations, and teach-ins. I noted in the introduction to this paper that such activities are not without merit, but their values lies not in their ability to end or reduce the nuclear threat/reality. We must be careful not to confuse these keyed activities with serious actions actually designed to terminate our present global capacity for annihilation. In the same way, those of us with intellectual commitments to end the nuclear threat must also be very careful not to confuse our standard academic practices with the serious, unprecedented cultural work now required to give our society the much improved tools it needs to come to grips with and eliminate our lethal nuclear reality. It may well be, much to our chagrin, that all of our rational debate and reasoned thinking is rapidly paving the way to the final nuclear disaster. All the while our words flow and flower in keyafter key, the deployed nuclear arsenal grows and grows. Is our present work a lullaby that only deepens our Goffmanian slumber? I think the possibility is strong that we are asleep, culturally speaking, and it is now time to wake up and get to work. We have before us the task of finding a way to transcend the fundamental constructs of an outmoded and deeply rooted cultural framework for "making sense of" things in our socially constructed world.



WHITE MEN IN TIES DISCUSSING MISSILE SIZE

Lunch On Warning



Matthew Finch, United States



Raissa Page

Women dancing on a missile silo, Greenham Common,
1 January 1983