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FRAMING “BOMB TALK”: THE MACRO CONSEQUENCES OF THE MICROFOUNDATIONS OF SOCIAL INTERACTION IN A GOFFMANIAN NUCLEAR WORLD¹

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Abstract

This paper, originating with issues generated in Professor Deegan’s seminar on contemporary sociological theory at the University of Nebraska, explores the “frames” or microfoundations of everyday interaction and their consequences for the ultimate macrosociological threat: global nuclear annihilation. The theoretical basis of this study is Erving Goffman’s *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*. The adequacy and comprehensiveness of Goffman’s major constructs are substantiated by data from the everyday world of newspapers and popular culture. “Keys” (or transformational conventions) are pivotal in this analysis. The central thesis of this paper holds that the keys used to transformationally restructure and “make sense of” frames in everyday, interpersonal interactions allow us to routinely ignore the high probability of macrosociological annihilation by keying it into less lethal frames, thereby dangerously increasing the probability of global nuclear holocaust. The paper concludes with the hypothesis that solving the macrosociological threat of global genocide requires inventing a new framework of meaning for the micro-level organization of everyday life.

PART I: INTRODUCTION

This paper concerns “bomb talk”: the many ways we talk about our lethal and precisely-targeted global nuclear arsenal. It is a theoretical and applied exercise based on Erving Goffman’s insightful study, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*. Most “bomb talk” is socially irresponsible to the extent that it continuously allows us to “escape” the serious and single-minded resolution of our macrosociological nuclear reality. The most dangerous features of “bomb talk” lie embedded in the very rules we use to give meaning and structure to interpersonal interaction.

By focusing on the rules for organizing and transforming meaning in everyday life, this paper addresses our perplexing cultural preparedness for global annihilation. The thesis of this paper holds that the way we “frame” or engage in microfoundational talk about our lethal macro reality defeats our efforts to find a solution to the threat of global nuclear annihilation. This is the potential horror of life/death in a Goffmanian nuclear world. I conclude that to find a solution to this macrosociological nightmare we must radically overhaul, if not revolutionize, the microfoundational framework of everyday language and interpersonal social interaction.

¹ Presented to the Parsons Conference on Microfoundations of Macrosociology, Department of Sociology, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts, April 9, 1988. This paper shared first-place honors in being one of two submissions selected for presentation in this national graduate student paper competition. The authors of both papers were awarded honoraria from the Talcott Parsons Memorial Fund.

As academics, we generate quite a bit of “bomb talk” ourselves, and this paper is no exception. Let me emphasize that this paper in itself is not “part of any solution.” The only genuine solution lies in coordinated, macro-social action. We need constantly to remind ourselves that academic and professional “bomb talk” is no less problematic than the everyday, garden variety.

We go to great lengths as intellectuals to “make sense of” the nuclear threat. We teach about it in courses, we write analytic monographs, we organize symposia. Using Goffman’s concept of frame analysis, I demonstrate that our nuclear world can be (and has been) “made sense of” in so many disparate ways (including courses, monographs, and symposia) that we are in danger of failing to effectively confront the awesome, untransformed reality of nuclear destruction. I question here whether all our “bomb talk” in all its formats is helping in any significant way to reduce the probability of nuclear holocaust. Indeed, the plethora of formats may be a root microfoundational factor in our inability to concentrate our attention on the nuclear threat and act effectively.

Curiously, sociologists as a group have been remarkably quiet on the problem of nuclear annihilation. The most cogent analysis to-date is still C. Wright Mills’ (1960) *The Causes of World War Three*. Mills calls on the world’s intellectuals to sensitize us to the macrosociological aspects of nuclear threat. He urges recognition, study, and publication of the vested interests of politicians, military men, and munitions merchants. I conclude here, however, that the world’s cultural laborers have a much more difficult task ahead than generating more studies and symposia on another “public issue” (Mills, 1959).

In any event, few sociologists have responded to Mills’ call for academic mobilization. Ronald Kramer and Sam Marullo (1985) survey the recent sociological literature and find it largely barren. They recount a content analysis by Finsterbush of the three mainline sociology journals: *American Sociological Review*, *American Journal of Sociology*, and *Social Forces*. Finsterbush examined the 6500 articles published in the years 1945 to 1984, but, Kramer and Marullo (1985: 283) report, Finsterbush found only six that “deal with nuclear weapons related issues.” Unlike many who are gravely disappointed by this low level of production, I do not call here for a crash program of specifically sociological studies focused on nuclear devastation per se. Workers in related social science disciplines, including history and political science, have written a great deal about nuclear conflict and the history of the arms race — without discernable effect. I see no reason to expect the standard sociological treatments to do any better. We do need to get to work, but our labors must take us in directions that differ dramatically from traditionally-defined sociological practice.

I argue here, paradoxically, that symposia, conferences, special panels, and papers (such as the one now in hand) are symptomatic of a deep cultural sleep that fogs our thinking, our reflections, and our debates where globally destructive nuclear devices are concerned. My thesis is simply this: Our microfoundational cultural apparatus appears ill-equipped, if not unable, to conceptualize or frame the present nuclear threat in a way that lets us truly come to grips with it. We keep “making sense” of it in ways that let it slip away from us. My reasons for this dismal assessment rest on the arguments found in Erving Goffman’s (1974) analytical study of everyday life: *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*.

Goffman is well-known for his studies of the microfoundations of interpersonal interaction, but these have only recently been interpreted as having wider sociological importance. Goffman’s influential early work includes: *Asylums*; *Behavior in Public Places*; *Encounters*; *Gender Advertisements*; *Interaction Ritual*; *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*; *Relations in Public*; *Stigma*; and *Strategic Interaction*. With the publication of *Frame Analysis*, however, Goffman’s microfoundational analyses took a much more formal, systematic turn that informs our understanding of macrosociological possibilities. Anthony Giddens now writes:

Goffman's writings thus contribute much more to an understanding of 'macro-structural' properties than Goffman supposed. (Giddens, 1987: 138).

In this paper, I concentrate on Goffman's analysis of the ways in which interacting persons "make sense" of their situation and activities by resorting to "frames." It will become painfully clear that these techniques of "making sense," while extraordinarily useful to everyday interactants, allow us to play disastrous "mind games" in the face of full force nuclear destruction. Drawing such macrosociological consequences from microfoundational analyses has been resisted by symbolic interactionists during the last two decades.

The apolitical tone of much microsociological analysis is, in its own way, a social construction of reality — a construction whose full explication lies beyond the scope of this paper. It is helpful however, to point out that micro analysis has always had a macro political component — if one chooses to emphasize it. It is striking how few symbolic interactionists emphasize the fact that George H. Mead (1934) wrote on mind, self, and society. Much of Mead's work and writing (and that of W.I. Thomas and Jane Addams, for that matter) focused on organized social action, and he took part in many political activities in Chicago. For Mead, the development of "international mindedness" was the mark of a fully mature "self" (Mead, 1934; Deegan, 1988).

So too with Jessie Taft (a Chicago student of G.H. Mead and W.I. Thomas). Taft concluded her doctoral dissertation on the interpersonal meaning of the women's movement with this observation:

The fundamental purpose of the woman movement, therefore, as of any great social movement, is bound to be the producing of social scientists who will be capable of offering hypotheses that are based on the actual data constituting the problems, and the bringing about of an increasing social consciousness among all people such that they too will become sufficiently aware of the real content of social relationships and be willing to undergo the adjustments of the social order necessary to make actual the theories which promise salvation. (Taft, quoted in Deegan and Hill, 1987: 46).

Taft states the platform for sociological action. Study of micro-level human experience and situations, and the offering of hypotheses based on these studies, calls forth social consciousness — and macro-level change.

The widespread view of micro analysis as apolitical derives in some part from the popular and well-known work of Peter Berger, a student of phenomenologist Alfred Schutz. Berger's work on the social construction of reality (Berger and Kellner, 1964; Berger and Luckmann, 1966) gives primary emphasis to the individual and his/her social development. Schutz' (1944) "stranger" is not a citizen, but a social outsider whose main concern is to learn the rules, typifications, and relevances of a new society. Yet, buried within Schutz is a political presupposition of major importance.

Reflecting on the multiplicity and great variety of human systems of relevance and typifications (i.e., multiple realities), Schutz found no problem in their proliferation or coexistence, except when we are forced to accept the worldview of more powerful agents. Specifically, he said, if a person:

. . . has the power to impose his system of relevance upon the individuals typified by him, and especially to enforce its institutionalization, then this fact will create various repercussions on the situation of the individuals typified against their will. (Schutz, 1971: 255).

Thus, Schutz was clearly aware of the potential for hegemonic domination and ideological oppression (and he wrote a thoughtful analysis of the need for the United Nations as a forum for international cooperation). In like vein, Goffman presupposes the possibility of ideological hegemony, but he is interested in a quite different and more fundamental problem: explicating the “frames” in which both oppressor and oppressed can become jointly ensnared. Goffman’s goal in *Frame Analysis* is truly microfoundational, and the consequences of his findings — when applied to the nuclear world of today — are genuinely macrosociological.

In the introduction to *Frame Analysis*, Goffman (1974: 14) wrote:

The analysis developed [here] does not catch at the differences between the advantaged and disadvantaged classes and can be said to direct attention away from such matters. I think that is true. I can only suggest that he who would combat false consciousness and awaken people to their true interests has much to do, because the sleep is very deep. And I do not intend here to provide a lullaby but merely to sneak in and watch the way people snore.

These words alert us that Goffman does not intend a political analysis in the usual sense. Nonetheless, his analysis is fundamentally political and filled with macrosociological consequences. He warns us that we have ways — deeply ingrained cultural practices — for “fooling ourselves,” for remaining asleep when we think we are wide awake, as, for example, when we cast an “informed” vote, listen “attentively” to a “thoughtful” lecture, or “carefully analyze” an “intellectual” debate while, in fact, remaining largely ignorant of the crucial points. These practices are the very ones to which we, as cultural laborers, so often turn and so often offer to others as “solutions.” I submit that the present reality of nuclear annihilation is normalized by our cultural practices such that we cannot effectively comprehend that an unprecedented, unfathomable order of lethal magnitude confronts our world and our minds. This is a deeply political assertion for cultural laborers because it suggests that we — and the way we think as intellectuals — may be an integral part, perhaps even a sustaining cause of “the nuclear problem.”

Given this assertion, it is crucial to ask why have I written this paper, to ask why I have the audacity to make yet another addition to the great pile of intellectual commentary on life in the nuclear age. I present two justifications. First, I do not think that our intellectual tools are useless, only that they are inadequately developed as things now stand. Second, I do not think that we are helpless. The present threat was/is constructed by human architects and thus humans can — I trust — dismantle it virtually overnight if so inclined. The point I suspect to be true and that I emphasize here is that our present, extensive battery of cultural practices and conceptual categories results — for whatever reasons — in situations that disable us as cultural workers when we confront the reality of nuclear annihilation. Thus, this paper is not a “call” for the end of the arms race, for such calls have been made repeatedly without significant effect by persons in far more powerful and influential positions than me. Our past efforts and standard cultural practices have everywhere failed us and I suggest that we will not succeed by doing “more of the same.” This paper is a call, however, to the intellectuals who read these comments to devise an effective way to fully and simultaneously comprehend the finality and the solubility of our socially-constructed nuclear predicament.

It is, I think, difficult for those of us who have analyzed the proliferation of destructive nuclear devices to stop and question reflexively whether we are really doing anything that will effectively remove the reality of the planned nuclear holocaust. We believe deeply in the efficacy of our studies and reports. We too have vested interests that Mills (1960) too easily forgets. It is certainly true that research, lectures, and teach-ins, for example, often make us feel better, give us a sense of action, and help keep alive our beliefs in democracy and free speech in significant and important ways. I do not deny these admirable outcomes, but I do point out that these — and many

related intellectually-rooted activities (i.e., writing books, organizing symposia, drafting manifestoes, etc.) — have not been effective in any demonstrable sense in reducing the escalating probability of nuclear annihilation on a global scale. Because you are a member of a thoughtful audience of readers, I hope you will reflect on the microfoundational issues raised in this paper. If so, I enlist your effort in what appears to me, at least, to be the foremost cultural and intellectual puzzle of our time. Specifically, we must invent a new and as yet unimagined way of speaking and thinking about global annihilation that cannot be ignored, devalued, debated, coopted, subverted, exaggerated, or denied. Here is a distinctly cultural task that demands our sweat, dedication, cooperation, and urgent attention.

The nature of the task before us is immense. The tools with which we must work include our systems of logic, our conceptual categories, our social practices. These tools are not only inadequate, they are also part — if not parcel — of the problem we must solve. Our current techniques for “making sense” of things allow us to transform the immediacy of nuclear annihilation and to talk about it in many other terms, including: prayers, treaties, jokes, songs, portentous statements, and so on. This transformational ability is indeed useful in many social instances, but in the case of destructive nuclear devices it permits us to easily — I think too easily — distance ourselves from the lethal reality we inhabit daily, moment to moment. These transformations — and the factors that make them possible — are the central issue in Goffman’s *Frame Analysis*. My purpose in the next several pages is to illustrate clearly that our cultural practices permit us too easily to escape — or at least distance ourselves — from the finality of our lethal reality. We need new frames in which such irresponsible escape is not possible. Recognizing this social need, however, is predicated on an understanding of our old frames and why they fail us. Goffman, when writing *Frame Analysis*, frequently resorted to published anecdotes, newspaper stories, and artifacts from popular culture to illustrate his major points. I have followed his methodological example in writing this paper. In Goffman’s words, let us now sneak in and watch the way we snore.

PART II: THE PRIMARY FRAMEWORKS

Goffman systematically outlined the ways in which we “make sense of” events in our world. Relevance to the issue at hand is direct: How do we go about “making sense of” our nuclear reality? How do we “make sense of” the socio-physical fact that sufficient destructive force to destroy all life ten times over (a conservative estimate) stands “ready to go at a moment’s notice”? The Goffmanian answer is that we interpret everyday events in terms of two primary frameworks: (1) natural laws, such as those found in physics, chemistry, and biology which “identify occurrences seen as undirected, unoriented, unanimated, unguided, ‘purely physical’” and (2) guided doings which “incorporate the will, aim, and controlling effect of a live agency,” usually understood as human (Goffman, 1974: 22).

Thus, the falling of an apple to the ground is explained or “made sense of” by reference to the local laws of gravity. On the other hand, a young person throwing an apple through Dr. Newton’s window in the physics building illustrates a guided doing. This example, apples thrown through windows, highlights a special feature about “guided doings.” They involve the simultaneous coordination of human intent, bodily action, and the utilization of natural laws. Thus, spiking apples through a window — to be a guided doing — requires intent to throw, plus the bodily coordination to properly fire the missile such that it goes where intended. This last part requires at least an experiential understanding of the physics of trajectory. In addition, “guided doings” are always subject to failure, that is, there is always the real possibility that our young thrower will miss Dr. Newton’s window altogether. Shortly, I will note the circumstances which account for guided doings which go “haywire” when they shouldn’t — as well as those which succeed in the face of seemingly impossible odds.

First, however, let me be quite clear about the way Goffman's basic scheme applies to nuclear weapons. Consider a nuclear detonation in its purely physical aspects. This event can be explained or "made sense of" by making reference to natural laws, specifically the laws of physics. The origin of the energy released by nuclear devices is contained in Einstein's famous and compact equation:

$$E = mc^2$$

where m is mass and c is the speed of light (Craig and Jungerman, 1986: 112). More dramatic and less terse was President Harry Truman's characterization of atomic energy during his announcement of the first military use of nuclear fission:

It is an atomic bomb. It is a harnessing of the basic power of the Universe. The force from which the sun draws its powers. . . . (*New York Times*, 8-7-45: 8).

Now, consider the dropping of an atomic bomb on Hiroshima on August 6, 1945. This was, in no uncertain terms, a complex and coordinated example of a "guided doing." The following statement, made by the Secretary of War, Henry Stimson, on August 7, 1945, underscores this point:

The recent use of the atomic bomb on Japan, which was today made known by the President, is the culmination of years of herculean effort on the part of science and industry working in cooperation with the military authorities. (*New York Times*, 8-7-45: 8).

The available documentary record includes the specific order instructing the United States' military to drop the bomb. The order said, in part:

1. The 309 Composite Group, 20th Air Force will deliver its first special bomb as soon as weather will permit visual bombing after about 3 August 1945. . . . (Source: Documentary in Japanese (untranslated) on the Hiroshima bombing, University of Michigan library).

Through reference to such documentary evidence, an unequivocal case is made that the nuclear destruction of two Japanese cities by the United States was a guided doing.

The obliteration of Hiroshima and Nagasaki by the delivery and detonation of nuclear weapons is "made sense of" by reference to Goffman's two primary frameworks: natural laws and guided doings. In our culture, there is nothing mysterious here, nothing beyond our grasp of understanding — and this I argue should be (but isn't) seen as deeply problematic on a microfoundational level. We may have great moral anguish and questions about the military use of nuclear weapons, but these do not negate the fact that someone did order the pilot and crew of the *Enola Gay* on a destructive mission of unprecedented dimensions. We may not approve of the action taken, but we understand it as a guided doing. Was the bombing of Japan a "sin"? Was it the act of an insane person to give such an order and for others to obey it? Perhaps — but insanity and sin can be made sense of — can be understood in our culture — by reference to natural laws and guided doings. The point is this: the comprehensive facticity of Hiroshima and Nagasaki do not escape our basic, fundamental ways of explaining our world to ourselves. To summarize at this point, I have identified Goffman's two primary frameworks and have demonstrated that the U.S. initiation of intentionally destructive nuclear detonations fits well within these frameworks. That is to say, we have no other culturally-sustained accounting of these events, such as magic, the whims of angry gods, or extra-terrestrial intervention, for example.

PART III: BRIDGE EXPLANATIONS

Here, I will try to illuminate the built-in potential for both failure as well as exceptional performance in guided doings. For example, first suppose the crew members of the Enola Gay had got their bearings wrong, made a mistake, and detonated an atomic bomb over Honolulu instead of Hiroshima. Alternatively, suppose the crew of the Enola Gay had faced turbulent weather and Japanese anti-aircraft fire over Hiroshima so heavy as to virtually guarantee an aborted mission and yet somehow managed to drop a bomb on the intended target. How could these hypothetical possibilities, if realized, be explained? In the first case, Goffman refers to “muffings” and in the second he refers to “stunts.” These (and two additional categories of explanation noted below) are the major “bridge explanations” in Goffman’s scheme. By this term, I mean that these are formulas we use to “make sense of” events that do not fall easily into the two primary frameworks. These ways to account for things help to keep the epistemological foundations of our everyday world intact — and, I submit, vulnerable to future nuclear devastation.

III. A. Muffings

A “muffing” occurs when the control normally expected in a guided doing is absent or is temporarily lost. Hence, when persons normally able to walk up a flight of stairs without falling down do in fact lose their footing and fall down, one can speak of a muffing. At the micro level, muffings allow us to forgive interpersonal faux pas, goofs, and slips. As linguistic ploys, they are extraordinarily useful, allowing us time and again to recover our social footing.

On the other hand, one can easily understand that muffings where nuclear weapons are concerned are potentially consequential in the extreme. The “relatively minor” nuclear contamination catastrophes at Three Mile Island and Chernobyl give pause for reflection on the socio-global significance of nuclear muffings. Indeed, President Truman, in his announcement on August 6, 1945, emphasized the safety of the bomb manufacturing process. And well he should have, because the question readily comes to mind: If a bomb can destroy cities in Japan, what happens if one goes off “by accident” in the U.S.? Truman put it this way:

Although the workers at the sites [in the U.S.] have been making materials to be used in producing the greatest destructive force in history they have not themselves been in danger beyond that of many other occupations, for the utmost care has been taken for their safety. (*New York Times*, 8-7-45: 8)

Such is the stuff of Presidential assurances.

Accounts of nuclear events since 1945 have often made recourse to “muffings” as a category of explanation. For example, the *New York Times* reported the following as part of a story about muffings involving nuclear weapons:

The Pentagon yesterday released details on 32 nuclear accidents that killed at least 56 persons in the last 30 years. . . . Nuclear weapons and material were lost in several of the cases. (*New York Times*, 5-17-81: 17)

The point here is not so much that nuclear bomb accidents do happen, but that we have available such linguistic categories as “accident,” “mistake,” “carelessness,” and “muffing” and that we do apply them in situations where persons have failed to exhibit “appropriate control” during the performance of “guided doings” involving nuclear weapons. We do not see the application of these

categories as reprehensible or dangerous. Quite the opposite, we appear culturally programmed to readily accept their use.

Commentators on our nuclear age have already worried that World War III could be started “by accident.” Military officials rush to note, however, that the estimated statistical probability of such an accident is extremely small. C. Wright Mills (1960) found such assurances less than comforting, observing that given enough time an event with a low probability of occurrence becomes a virtual certainty in the long run. Seen in this light — and considering the irreversible character of mutually assured wholesale nuclear destruction — the category “muffing” is unforgiving, not subject to remedy, lacking any opportunity of “doing better next time.”

III. B. Stunts

In contrast to muffings, doing a “stunt” displays remarkable control where none is expected. Goffman (1974: 30) defines a stunt as:

The maintenance of guidance and control by some willed agency under what are seen as nearly impossible conditions.

The A-bomb mission flown to Hiroshima was by no means a stunt. It was carefully planned and rehearsed. The military mind does not like stunts and no doubt actively discourages them in conjunction with nuclear weapons. Indeed, the government bureaucracy applies strict controls on access to and possession of weapons-grade nuclear materials as well as to information on how to construct and detonate nuclear devices. These tight security measures, however, create the “nearly impossible conditions” that not only tempt the prankster, but also make successful espionage a financially and politically lucrative activity.

It is worth considering that the “impossible odds” may be media constructions and official propaganda rather than actual reality. The high odds against stealing nuclear secrets and materials are a central feature in fictional accounts of the James Bond variety. The protagonists in such stories require super-human resolve, technological sophistication and gadgetry, and uncommon athletic prowess in to carry off the enemy’s nuclear secrets. Real life spies, however, are typically mundane and — when aided by the “muffings” and oversights of others — find that the actual theft of nuclear secrets is much easier than many of us would suspect.

A recently reported theft of both secrets and bomb-grade uranium was attributed to a man involved in such an array of prior criminal acts that one suspects a serious muffing in his being approved for a Top Secret security clearance. The *Detroit News* reports:

Washington — A nuclear facility technician with a top security clearance is accused of selling classified documents and uranium to the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) as well as being involved in rape, arson, robbery, illegal drugs, and impersonating a police officer, a government report said Thursday. . . . The GAO report said the technician suspected of committing the series of crimes got an initial security clearance in 1974 and answered security questionnaires in 1978 and 1984 but that no derogatory information was uncovered until a deputy sheriff told the Energy Department about the employee’s arrest for carrying a weapon and having an expired license plate. (*Detroit News*, 4-10-87: 7A).

Such accounts give one pause to wonder why nuclear-based stunts are not, in fact, much more common. Perhaps they are. The proverbial barn door appears left open on too many occasions. If “high risk” espionage is executed by agents sufficiently astute to keep their car registrations current, their exploits may well go undetected — and unappreciated by the general public.

In some ways more stunning than the exploits of nuclear spies is the documented work of J.A. Phillips, an undergraduate physics student who “beat the odds” by successfully designing an atomic bomb as a class project. His autobiographical account, titled: *Mushroom: The Story of the A-Bomb Kid* (Phillips and Aristotle, 1978), is fascinating reading. Phillips’ design resulted by combining his basic physics training with information in unclassified documents readily available for purchase from the U.S. National Technical Information Service.

Rank amateurs can also “beat the odds.” Howard Morland (1979), a reporter for *The Progressive* magazine, wrote an article detailing the basic principles of the H-bomb. He based his research on declassified government documents. Morland was apparently close enough to “the secret” that the U.S. government strenuously attempted to have the article suppressed.

Presumably the actual construction of an A-bomb is not difficult if the required materials can be obtained. *Mechanix Illustrated* (yes, really!) reported the following in an article titled: “A Homebuilt Atomic Bomb?”:

How do you make an A-bomb? Any number of ways. One is to take two metal salad bowls, line them with wax, fill with plutonium and solder them together to form a sphere. Then wrap them with plastic explosives and detonate, making sure the explosive material goes off evenly all around the sphere. (*Mechanix Illustrated*, 1977: 158).

The example above may exaggerate the ease of constructing nuclear devices, but the difficulty of nuclear “stunts” may also be overrated. Craig and Jungerman (1986: 381) conclude that:

A team of skilled terrorists could probably produce a low-yield weapon. Nuclear weapons are small, and a terrorist organization could probably place one in any major city, with little danger of being caught.

The reality of nuclear stunts is at hand. They appear for the moment limited to local rather than global productions. They may still be relatively difficult but we know now that they are not impossible.

III. C. Astounding Complexes

The previous examples lead to a third bridge explanation explicated by Goffman. At issue here are those few times when something really does seem impossible, when we encounter something that we just cannot account for reasonably in terms of natural law, guided doings, muffings, or stunts. Goffman calls a situation of this character an “astounding complex.” In practice, Goffman (1974: 28) notes, we approach an astounding complex with a sort of intellectual holding action. That is, we “expect that a ‘simple’ or ‘natural’ explanation will soon be discovered.”

Goffman (1974: 30) argues, and it is a central point in his analysis, that:

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.

When no explanation is at hand, when we encounter an astounding complex, we rest comfortably and confidently that explanations in terms of the two primary frameworks, natural laws and/or guided doings, will soon arrive.

When the first atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, many Japanese reacted to this event as an “astounding complex.” The destruction of Hiroshima was too great and too quick to be accounted for by the officials of the Japanese Government in terms of their knowledge of the military capabilities of the United States. Indeed, a temporary problem faced by the U.S. Government after the first atomic bombing was to convince the Japanese Government that the devastation was neither fluke nor accident.

A central function of the news media in our era is to supply explanations — when available — and to assure us that “the details” will follow on the 11:00 p.m. news when no explanations are immediately at hand. For example, following the destruction of Hiroshima:

The [U.S.] Office of War Information began telling the Japanese today what hit them. OWI branch transmitters in San Francisco, Hawaii and Saipan beamed President Truman’s statement on the atomic bomb to Japan. (*New York Times*, 8-7-45: 1).

The U.S. Government wanted no doubt about its part in the bombing. It wanted the Japanese Government to understand clearly that the bombing was a devastating “guided doing” that could be repeated many times over.

III. D. Fortuitousness

Unexplained events can also be accounted for in our culture 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. (Goffman, 1974: 33).

Thus, as a simple matter of fortuitousness, many citizens of Hiroshima found themselves “out of town” on business or other errands on August 6, 1945, while Japanese from other cities made trips to the doomed city with no thought to what the day would bring. The classic French film, *Hiroshima — Mon amour*, invokes precisely this appeal to fortuitous timing in a conversation between two lovers, one of whom lived in Hiroshima and recounts how he escaped the bombing just by “luck.” Survivors’ accounts from Hiroshima and Nagasaki tell of persons who walked away from infernos and collapsing buildings without a scratch while friends standing next to them were instantly incinerated. We explain such events as happenstance, fortuitous, “as luck would have it,” but — and this is the important part — without recourse to any forces or powers beyond natural law and/or guided doings.

III. E. Summary

Goffman asserts that our epistemological schema is fundamentally simple and comprehensive. All events, even the most diabolically lethal, are “made sense of” or accounted for in terms of natural laws and/or guided doings — these are the two primary frameworks. Any events that strain our ability to apply these two frameworks in a direct and unvarnished fashion are easily and quickly accounted for by one of the available bridging explanations which hold our everyday epistemological world together. These include: muffings, stunts, astounding complexes, and fortuitousness.

I trust that the foregoing discussion and examples have made it clear that Goffman’s microfoundational categories are not merely hypothetical. That is, where destructive nuclear devices are concerned, these categories — these ways of making sense — are used in our culture. It is important — and sobering — to recognize that nuclear weapons and nuclear warfare have not been accorded extra-epistemological status outside Goffman’s two primary frameworks. That is to say, we “make sense of” nuclear warfare in our culture in the very same way that we make sense of everything we encounter in everyday life, from cornflakes to circus clowns to murder and mischief. Nuclear warfare and the threat of nuclear annihilation, despite the unprecedented, industrialized capacity for instantaneous mass violence (Giddens, 1985), do not receive special conceptual treatment in our culture. I submit that this micro-level, business-as-usual approach to nuclear annihilation is a serious, macro-level socio-cultural threat.

PART IV: KEYS

Before I leave the above hypothesis in final form, however, there is more to glean from Goffman. Insights derived from his work underscore the extreme lengths which we have already traveled in this culture to incorporate nuclear war within the bounds of our epistemological frameworks. The elasticity of our frameworks is amazing and impressive — and in the past this has served us well by giving rise to a nearly inexhaustible stream of transformation and invention. Yet, is it possible that we are reaching our cultural limit? Have we socially constructed a situation in which it no longer makes sense to stretch our conceptual categories to cover a phenomenon which in the final analysis will blow us — and our categories — to oblivion? Before we engage an answer, however, let me review the basic ways in which we transform events of one kind into events of another kind. To conduct this inventory efficiently, I invoke the Goffmanian concept of “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 that is clearly understood by all concerned to be something quite different. For example, suppose we observe an atmospheric or above ground detonation of a nuclear weapon. We interpret this event initially in terms of guided doings and the laws of physics. Now, however, suppose we watch an episode of the television show *Battlestar Gallactica* in which large, global arsenals of nuclear weapons are detonated. Indeed, just such a display was offered as entertainment during a recent re-run of the *Gallactica* episodes. The make-believe images on the television screen are a “key” on actual nuclear detonations. The images on *Battlestar Gallactica* were been produced according to a set of “special-effects” conventions, conventions we accept as television viewers. In the same way, we discriminate between a “real” fight and persons who are only “playing” at fighting. Play is a key, a set of rules, by which any serious activity can be transformed into something less serious, perhaps even funny.

Goffman identifies several keys or transformations common to our culture. The general categories of keys include: make believe, contests, ceremonies, and technical redos. Not all transformations are straightforward keys, however. “Fabrications” are additional transformations in which persons are deliberately deceived about the actual seriousness of events in which they are engaged. Much government propaganda falls into the category of “fabrication.” Deception is fundamentally involved in attempts to establish verification rules by which one nuclear power can monitor the nuclear capabilities of another without being duped as to the real state of affairs. Important as these issues are, they are delayed here for treatment in a subsequent analysis. The relevant point here is that anything that can be keyed can also be faked, and vice versa, apparently ad infinitum. The following review focuses specifically on keys alone and illustrates that we have, in our everyday world, performed every major key upon the serious reality of nuclear destruction. Keep in mind what this implies. It means that we have taken the reality and global horror of nuclear death and — through the use of keys — transformed it into many other things which are not lethal and which may even be thought of as “fun” or entertainment.

My intent here is not to be exhaustive within each category or subcategory of any specific key, but I do intend to be comprehensive in showing that each of the keys Goffman identifies (as well as some he does not) are used in our culture to transform the reality of nuclear weapons into something different, often something less than real, something fictional, even playful. The major possibilities, with examples, are outlined below.

IV. A. Make-Believe

By the term “make-believe,” Goffman (1974: 48) refers to the imitation or running through of the activity that is keyed “with the knowledge that nothing practical will come of the doing.” Specific subcategories include the following:

IV. A. 1. Play and Playfulness

By “play,” Goffman (1974: 48) refers to “relatively brief intrusions of unserious mimicry.” In the following example of atomic play, however, things did get a bit out of hand:

Four children were injured yesterday afternoon when chemicals with which they were playing at making atom bombs exploded [in a Brooklyn apartment]. (*New York Times*, 12-3-45: 12).

IV. A. 2. Daydreams and Private Fantasy

The extent to which members of our society daydream about nuclear war and/or nuclear weapons is unknown, but psychologists remind us that a significant number of youngsters do at least “think about” the possibility of nuclear war. From my own experience as a nuclear weapons guard in the U.S. Air Force, I can relate that I found myself more than once constructing mental “What if?” scenarios involving an atomic missile launch. We know that many people while asleep have dreams and nightmares about nuclear attacks, but these are not discussed here since Goffman analyzes dreams as fabrications rather than keys.

The cerebral musings that philosophers and other thinkers leave to us in memoirs and diaries can be conceptualized as the written aftermath of daydreams and private fantasy. Consider the

following entry in the diary left by Thomas Merton (1965: 249) and recorded at the time of the Cuban missile crisis:

I am only just beginning to realize that we were very close indeed to nuclear war; never so close! The very undignified way Khrushchev backed down makes this very clear indeed. The bombers were all ready to go, and he had no doubts on that score. Thank God it is over.

Thus, Merton provided a written trace of his private, presumably unscripted thoughts.

IV. A. 3. Dramatic Scriptings

The example above, in its written form, introduces scripts intended to unfold publicly as a story. Goffman (1974: 53) included here the wide range of productions offered “to the public through the media of television, radio, newspapers, magazines, books, theater.” He viewed dramatic scriptings as especially significant because:

. . . they provide a mock-up of everyday life, a put together script of unscripted social doings, and thus are a source of broad hints concerning the structure of [unscripted guided doings]. (Goffman, 1974: 53).

Specific sub-categories noted by Goffman include the following (to which I have added a few additional conventional formulas not treated by Goffman, including: television dramas, poems, popular music, proper names, slogans, and jokes):

IV. A. 3. a. Novels

Novels are a paradigm example of scripted nuclear keyings to the extent that they are imaginary stories based on the actuality of potential nuclear destruction. Examples include:

- (1) Eugene Burdick and Harvey Wheeler’s classic, *Fail Safe*.
- (2) N.J. Crisp’s recent thriller, *The Brink*.
- (3) Peter George’s *Dr. Strangelove, or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*.
- (4) Jeff Sutton’s *H-Bomb over America*. This book is described on its book jacket as “a novel of the five most harrowing days and nights ever faced by any nation.”
- (5) John Gardner’s *The Last Trump*. From the book jacket, we learn that this is a book about “The free world’s last chance: Golgotha — a top secret missile installation that can only be activated with bits of information stored in the subconscious minds of sleeper agents.” Such is the stuff of James Bond!

IV. A. 3. b. Television Dramas

Recent offerings on television that key nuclear detonation tend toward the sober side rather than the Ramboid adventurism of the above listed novels. Examples include:

- (1) *Home*, a PBS production, explores the moral dilemma faced by two Air Force officers at an underground launch control facility who receive an order to launch their minuteman missiles at targets in the USSR. It turns out that the launch order is an error, and the officer who resists the launch becomes thereby a hero.
- (2) *The Day After*, a commercial venture, was very successful in U.S. television ratings, a point noted with pride in the trade journal *Advertising Age*.
- (3) *Threads*, a production of the BBC, is also a drama in the realist genre.
- (4) With an attempt at humor, the 1986-87 season run of *Sledge Hammer* ended when the gung-ho police detective “muffs” his attempt to disarm a nuclear warhead, causing an atomic holocaust.

IV. A. 3. c. Legitimate Theater

Numerous stage plays key nuclear themes. Examples include:

- (1) *But with a Whimper*, by Pat Revor, concerns an English couple who survive a nuclear holocaust and speculate on how it occurred while they try to maintain hope.
- (2) *Meet Noah Smith*, by G.L. Bennett, adapts the biblical story of Noah to modern times where nuclear fallout contaminates the earth and a bomb shelter replaces the ark.
- (3) *Ground Zero*, by Brian Shein, is a satire on nuclear war.

Many additional stage plays are found easily by consulting the *Play Index* under the “subject heading” (yet another key!) of “Nuclear war.”

IV. A. 3. d. Motion Pictures

The list here is substantial. Two filmographies cataloging the available nuclear movies were already compiled a decade ago (Dowling, 1977; Shaheen, 1978). Classic film examples include:

- (1) *The Mouse That Roared*, in which the Grand Duchy of Fenwick declares war on the United States so Fenwick can lose and thereby collect foreign aid from the U.S. Through happenstance, however, Fenwick steals a U.S. doomsday bomb capable of destroying the entire planet and thus wins its war by holding the nuclear nations “hostage.”
- (2) *Dr. Strangelove*, in which an Air Force Officer utilizes his knowledge of SIOP plans to purposely launch a nuclear attack on the USSR.
- (3) *Hiroshima — Mon amour*, in which a Japanese man who survived the bombing of Hiroshima as a matter of fortuitousness falls in love with a French woman who, in her own way, survived the ravages of World War II in Europe and has come to Japan as an actress to make a peace film about Hiroshima.

- (4) *War Games*, in which a teenage hacker penetrates the Pentagon's most sophisticated computer network and almost starts a global nuclear exchange "by accident."

IV. A. 3. e. Poetry

Poets have turned their pens to virtually everything, including nuclear destruction. Several examples are found in *The Oxford Book of War Poetry*; *Of Quarks, Quasars, and other Quirks — Quizzical Poems for the Supersonic Age*; *Breaking Silence — An Anthology of Contemporary Asian American Poets*; and other available anthologies. Specific poems are easily located by consulting Granger's Index to poetry under the subject headings "atomic" and "nuclear." I produce here the entire text of a poem from the *Oxford Book of 20th Century English Verse* (pp. 585-86) that keys a nuclear attack:

Your Attention Please
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 instructions
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.
Turn off your radio immediately
The Services end. At the same time
Secure explosion plugs in the ears
Of each member of your family. Take
Down your plasma flasks. Give your children

The pills marked one and two
 In the C.D. green container, then put
 Them to bed. Do not break
 The inside airlock seals until
 The radiation All Clear shows
 (Watch for the cuckoo in your
 perspex panel), or your District
 Touring Doctor rings your bell.
 If before this, your air becomes
 Exhausted or if any of your family
 Is critically injured, administer
 The capsules marked 'Valley Forge'
 (Red pocket in No. I Survival Kit)
 For painless death. (Catholics
 Will have been instructed by their priests
 What to do in this eventuality.)
 This announcement is ending. Our President
 Has already given orders for
 Massive retaliation—it will be
 Decisive. Some of us may die.
 Remember, statistically
 It is not likely to be you.
 All flags are flying fully dressed
 On Government buildings—the sun is shining.
 Death is the least we have to fear.
 We are all in the hands of God,
 Whatever happens happens by His Will.
 Now go quickly to your shelters.

IV. A. 3. f. Popular Music

An interesting point about keys and keying on the eve of destruction is that no key gets a monopoly on nuclear devastation. The serious poet and playwright are not unique in their gloom or their satire. For example, Peter Tosh's new recording, *No Nuclear War*, was deemed "best reggae album" among the 1988 awards of the recording industry. The lyrics from two popular, mass market music albums are included here to illustrate the practice of keying nuclear annihilation in all quarters. The first lyrics key the potential for propaganda in a nuclear era while the second set is the epitome of understatement, suggesting that after a nuclear attack "it's never gonna be the same."

Man at C & A
 by The Specials

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

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 that it's never gonna be the same
 Watch the fallout, got to save ourselves somehow
 Soldiers call out, nothing here can save us now
 Rendez-vous with radiation
 Rendez-vous with radiation
 I now that it's never gonna be the same.

IV. A. 3. g. Names

The nuclear era brings opportunities to key the A-bomb in terms of one's commercial business operations. That this should happen in a capitalist society is perhaps not unexpected. Consider the following white pages business listings in the Chicago telephone directory:

ATOMIC AUTO RECYCLING INC

ATOMIC DRAINAGE SERVICE

ATOMIC ELECTRONICS

ATOMIC ENGINEERING CO

ATOMIC SUBMARINE

ATOMIC TELEVISION SERVICE

IV. A. 3. h. Slogans

Ban the Bomb!

No Nukes!

IV. A. 3. i. Jokes and Cartoons

“If You’ve Seen One Nuclear War You’ve Seen them All!”

The attached cartoons (Figures 1 and 2, below) attest that we are never above a bit of mirth, even when what is being keyed is grave, grim, and final.

IV. B. Contests

Can we have nuclear games, complete with rules for winning and losing? Of course. One can purchase a board game titled *Nuclear War*.² This transformation includes the built-in assumption that someone, presumably “our side,” can “win.”

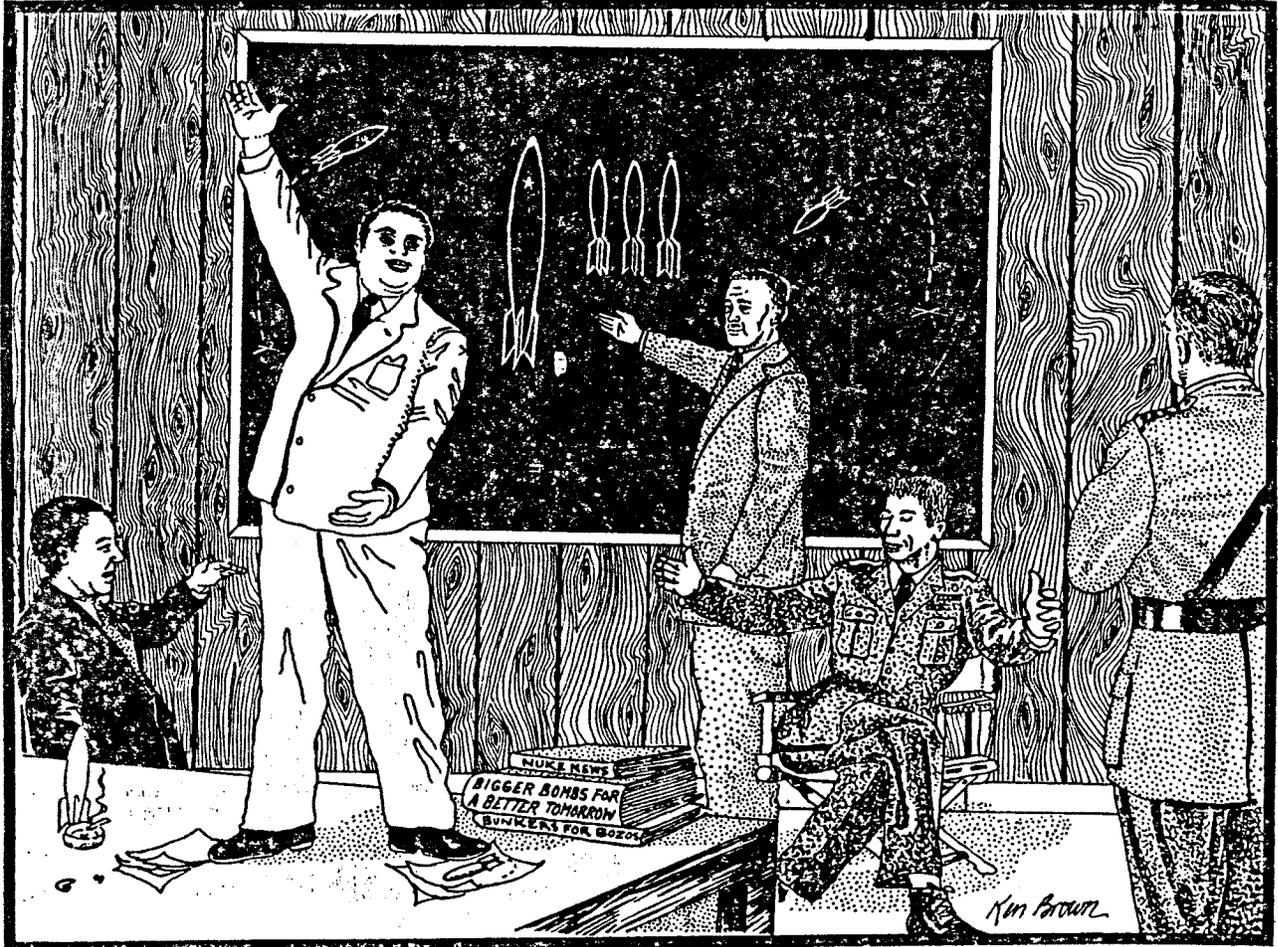
IV. C. Ceremonials

Nuclear ceremonies take various forms. When we take time to look, we see ritual dramas of many types unexpectedly embedded in and structuring our everyday lives (Deegan, forthcoming). The thrice daily loading of SIOP (Single Integrated Operation Plans plans on board SAC’s continuously airborne secondary command posts has distinctive ritual traits grounded in centuries of military pomp and circumstance.³ Other ceremonies are commemorative. Recently, those involved in the design of the first atomic bomb arranged an official reunion, complete with all the ritual reminiscing that typifies reunions. The *New York Times* reported:

Los Alamos, N.M. After 40 years, the memories of the men and women meeting here this weekend went back to little things. . . . A buildings manager remembered the impatience of a famous nuclear scientist whose quarters were too cold. It turned out that Edward Teller did not know how to turn up the thermostat. (*New York Times*, 6-17-85: 12).

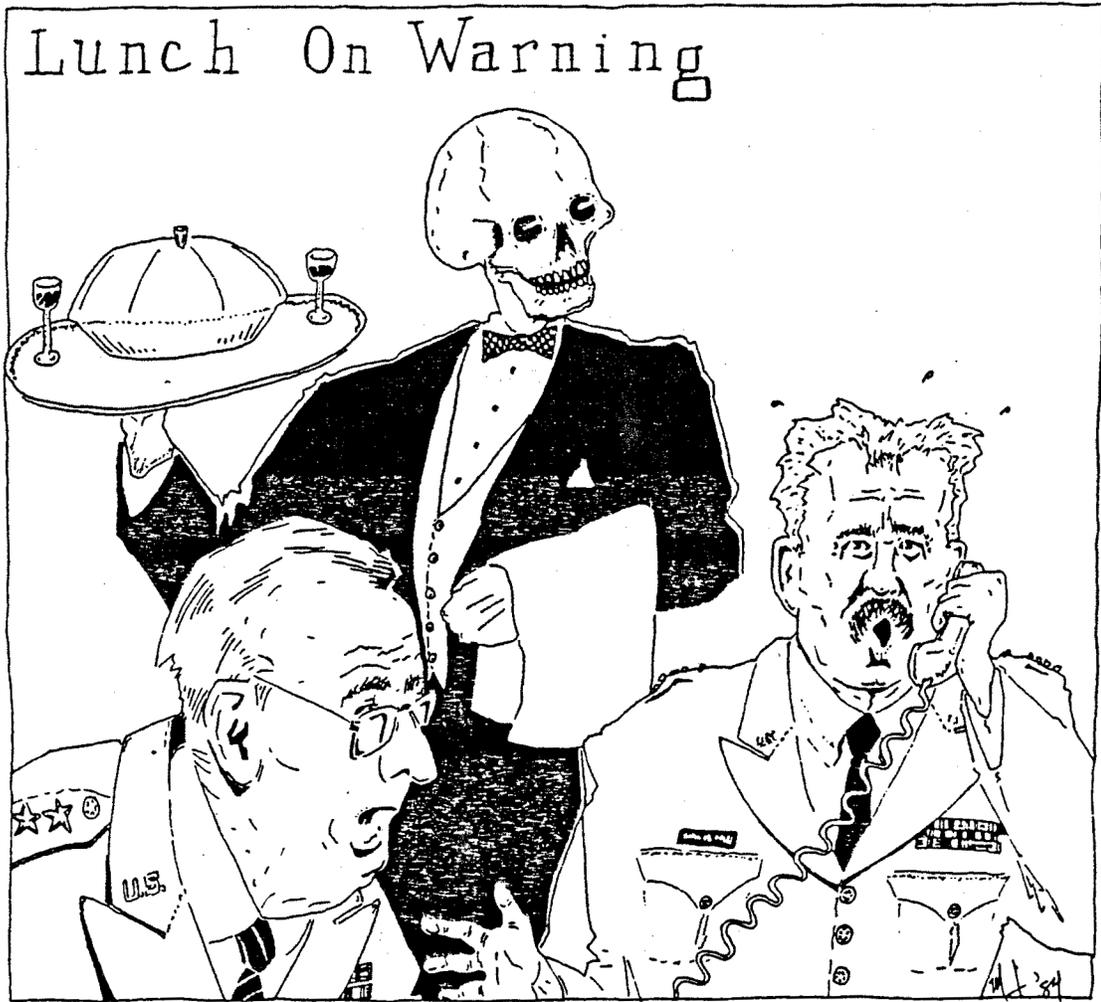
² Seen for sale in the window of a hobby shop in Ann Arbor, Michigan.

³ Regularly witnessed during my tour of duty in the Strategic Air Command at Offutt Air Force Base.



WHITE MEN IN TIES DISCUSSING MISSILE SIZE

Figure 1.



Matthew Finch, United States

Figure 2.

Formal religious services were recently performed on the exact site of the first atomic explosion (the “Trinity Test”) complete with an alter steeped in nuclear symbolism:

Rev. Layton Zimmer of St. Adrian’s Episcopal Church in Albuquerque . . . celebrated the Eucharist at an alter bearing earth from Hiroshima and Nagasaki. (*New York Times*, 7-17-85: 14).

A particularly somber series of ceremonies are the annual reunions, peace marches, and vigils of the Hibakusha, or “survivors,” of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. These ceremonial marches and demonstrations were documented recently in a PBS special titled: *Remembering the Bomb*. Specifically artistic celebration is also possible. A recent article in Print titled “Celebrating Survival” tells how:

The 40th anniversary of the atomic disaster at Hiroshima is commemorated by 125 U.S. designers and illustrators, Joining with their Japanese colleagues to create posters as a gift to the city [of Hiroshima].

IV. D. Technical Redoings

Technical redoings involve performing an activity out of its usual context with the understanding that the original outcome of the activity will not occur, yet unlike play the redoing is for a utilitarian purpose. Sub-categories include the following:

IV. D. 1. Practicing

IV. D. 1. a. Simulations

Since the atmospheric test ban, all United States nuclear tests have been carried out underground at a test site in Nevada But underground tests are of limited utility in gauging the actual effects of nuclear weapons on housing and military facilities, so simulated tests are carried out from time to time using chemical explosives. (*New York Times*, 6-28-1985: 10).

IV. D. 1. b. Rehearsals

Consider this news story on practice runs flown by B-52 bombers in the U.S. The account began:

To train for a nuclear strike against the Soviet Union, the B-52 bomber thundered down the icy runway and lifted off over the North Dakota prairie just as dawn broke. (*New York Times*, 12-2-55,II: 11).

A central feature of nuclear wargames is that these practice runs can mimic but never achieve “real” conditions. As Goffman (1974: 65) put it:

This dilemma is seen most clearly perhaps in war games, where participants must take seriously that which can ultimately be made serious only by what can't be employed: "live" ammunition lethally directed.

IV. D. 1. c. Planning

Attentive readers of newspapers need few reminders that the U.S. Department of Defense is continually reviewing and revising its plans for future nuclear devastation. Budget approval for ever more sophisticated deployment and delivery systems, if temporarily slowed from time to time, has become routine. Recent history clearly documents the planning and acquisition of the B1-bomber, MIRVs, Long-wave radio transmitters, the neutron bomb, and now, the so-called Strategic Defense Initiative (whose lasers, paradoxically, are powered by H-bomb detonations).

IV. D. 2. Demonstrations

Demonstrations or tests of actual nuclear devices have a long and continuing history. A nuclear test is a redoing because although a real nuclear weapon is detonated, it is not intended to have lethal consequences. The fallout from atmospheric tests does have long-range health implications even if the test site per se has been fully evacuated. Thus, such tests have been suspended by nuclear powers. Hence, the use of chemical simulations of above ground tests and the present use of below ground tests which are assumed not to have the potentially lethal consequences of above ground tests.

IV. D. 3. Replays

Recent developments in photographic and electronic technology have vastly increased our capacity to document and then review our actions on film and video.

IV. D. 3. a. Documentation

The documentary format includes news reports, microfilm, histories, photo essays, illustrations, news film archives, interviews, documentary films, and so on. Several PBS documentaries during the past few years have focused on the development of nuclear devices, their testing, use, and present deployment.

I recently received a catalog of "Documentary Photo Aids" to use in classroom teaching. For the price of \$42.00, one can obtain a set of 40 "photo aids" that depict "The First Nuclear War." The text in the catalog states that:

The pictures take you into Hiroshima and Nagasaki minutes after the atomic explosions to show the appalling devastation. The set asks difficult questions about our rationale for being the first to use the atomic bomb.

A companion set of 18 photos, titled "Development of the Atomic Bomb," is available for \$17.00.

IV. D. 3. b. Exhibits

Museums in Japan and the United States enshrine the history of the nuclear age. The U.S. National Atomic Museum is located at Kirtland Air Force Base in New Mexico. Facilities include:

Library of books on the history of nuclear weapons available on premises; devices, models and actual weapons explaining atomic structure and the use of nuclear energy in war and peace. (Source: *American Museum Directory*).

Bring the kids, no charge!

IV. D. 4. Group Psychotherapy and Role-Playing

I didn't really expect to find a solid example of psycho- nuclear role play, but a recent book by William and Mary Van Ornum titled *Talking to Children About Nuclear War* rounds out this collection of Goffmanian keys. Here is just one of many "sample dialogs" for parents to study. The reader is asked, "What do you think will be the result of the following conversations?"

Dialog C. It's 9:30 p.m., and the fire siren in a small Midwestern town goes off. Josh, who is six years old, looks at his mother worriedly. Josh: Mom, do you think that could be the Bomb? Mother: It sounds like the fire siren honey. It's a scary thought, isn't it? It seems a lot of people have been thinking about that lately. It's always in the news. What do you know about it honey? Do your friends talk about it? Are you worried?

IV. D. 5. Experiments

Experiments are structurally similar to demonstrations and tests, although there is the presumption that something new will be learned in an experiment whereas nuclear tests and demonstrations may be partially or wholly motivated as a "show of force" rather than a scientific inquiry. If people are duped into being subjects of an experiment without their informed consent, Goffman speaks of their being contained in a category of fabrication, but full analysis of this category lies beyond the scope of this paper (for discussion of the social meaning of fabrications and lies, see Goffman, 1974: 83-122, 156-200, 378-495; and Bok, 1978). Early nuclear detonations were dressed in experimental garb because the specific effects of nuclear blasts were unknown. Nuclear experiments continue to dominate the news since underground detonations of H-bombs are considered essential by the U.S. Government for developing the lasers required for the proposed Strategic Defense Initiative ("Star Wars") missile defense system.

PART V: CONCLUSION

This nuclear-based tour of Goffmanian keys has a purpose: to remind ourselves of the extreme flexibility and transformations permitted by our microfoundational rules for organizing our everyday lives. They allow us in our everyday lives to key at will, to make jokes, movies, novels, experiments, slogans, museum displays, and so on and on, based upon keying the most deadly peril our world has ever faced. This flexibility is itself a threat. We ought to be wary when we key or transform nuclear warfare 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 act on the nuclear threat in exactly the same way, writing letters to congresspersons, organizing talk shows, fund raisers, television ads, newsletters, staging marches, demonstrations, and teach-ins. I noted in the introduction to this paper that such activities are not without merit, but their value does not lie primarily in their ability to end or reduce the nuclear threat. A telling comment to this point was heard on the weekly Midwestern television talk show called "Nuclear Issues." The hostess interviewed the organizer of a nuclear freeze protest march. The organizer, when pressed about the effectiveness of the proposed march, replied that even if it didn't help end the arms race, the march itself would be fun.

I have nothing against a good time or the generation of genuine *communitas*, these are important and fully legitimate human goals. At the same time, we must be careful not to confuse these keyed activities with serious actions actually designed to effectively terminate our present capacity for nuclear 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 microfoundational work now required to give our society the improved tools it needs to come to grips with and solve our nuclear reality.

We must search for and/or invent a new microfoundational frame in which to act on our socially-constructed nuclear world. It has not helped to think about our nuclear dilemma as a natural science or engineering issue, a moral issue, a policy issue, or a military issue. I conclude that our macro nuclear dilemma is rooted fundamentally in a microfoundational flaw: the comprehensive transformational nature of all available frames. We too easily and too often mistake our frames for reality. When we do stumble from time to time upon and recognize the sheer horror of our nuclear situation, we diffuse it in a thousand ways through ready transformations. Transformational keys strip what little understanding we do have of its capacity to generate effective action. Thus, we concentrate our social energies on transformed realities rather than the main event. The question stands before us: "Do we have the microfoundational equipment to understand and confront the radically new world that global nuclear destruction presents to us?" The present answer is negative.

Consider the forms and formats we have already devised and used to discuss, debate, and presumably understand the nuclear threat. We have essays, poems, novels, histories, analyses, symposiums, debates, interviews, documentaries, expert testimony, briefings, prayers, sermons, papal encyclicals, declarations, college courses, catalogs, inventories, surveys, censuses, questionnaires, hearings, referendums, marches, speeches, satire, protests, sit-ins, teach-ins, letters to editors and congresspersons, news reports, memos, committees, agencies, commissions, lobbies, leaflets, ads, myths and parables, comic books, nightmares, glossaries, checklists, plans, exercises, investigations, exposes and, yes, papers such as this one. To what avail is all this work by this society's cultural laborers?

The future consequences of ineffectual activity are horrendous in our nuclear era. The situations we define as "helping" only serve to dissipate our intellectual resources and delay a solution. William and Dorothy Thomas (1928: 572) were correct to observe that, "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences." And Goffman (1974: 1) was even more perceptive in recognizing that the Thomas' famous dictum is:

... true as it reads but false as it is taken. Defining situations as real certainly has consequences, but these may contribute very marginally to the events in progress; in some cases only a slight embarrassment flits across the scene in mild concern for those who tried to define the situation wrongly. All the world is not a stage

Neither is all the world a conference, symposium, or classroom. But few of us are embarrassed that we so often act on the opposite belief. Ineffectual activity, no matter how highly touted by its proponents, has real consequences when the penalty for inaction is severe and final. All the while our words flow and flower in key after key, the deployed nuclear arsenal grows ever more deadly.

We presently live in a Goffmanian, transformationally vulnerable nuclear world. The length of this epoch may be relatively short. This review suggests it is possible that our keys and our frames for “making sense of” things are failing us now when we need them most. It is possible that our microfoundational frameworks allow us to deceive ourselves at the very moment that we think ourselves most rational and serious. Is Goffman now laughing at us as we snore away in the last hours of the nuclear age? Our eventual wholesale extinction at the macro-level may well be rooted in exceedingly micro-level issues. At the same time, I very much hope that my thesis — that our microfoundational cultural apparatus appears ill-equipped, if not unable, to conceptualize or frame the present nuclear threat in a way that lets us truly come to grips with it — is very much wrong. If there is hope for our collective future, it requires nothing less than inventing entirely new frameworks of meaning for the micro-level organization of everyday life, ones in which the reality of nuclear devices and the very real threat of nuclear annihilation cannot be keyed into ineffective frames that become comfortable and less threatening. This is no small task, one that challenges us to think creatively beyond the apparently comprehensive microfoundational limits within which our everyday world is now contained, constructed, and made meaningful.

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**The Department of Sociology
Harvard University**

Proudly Presents

The 1988

PARSONS CONFERENCE

MICROFOUNDATIONS OF MACROSOCIOLOGY

April 9, 1988

Conference Location

William James Hall

33 Kirkland Street

Cambridge, Massachusetts 02138

(617) 495 - 3812

M O R N I N G

105 William James Hall

Nine Thirty

Coffee and Doughnuts

Ten O'Clock

Mr. Michael R. Hill, University of Nebraska, Lincoln
Framing "Bomb Talk": The Macro Consequences of the Microfoundations of Social Interaction in a Goffmanian Nuclear World

Mr. Stephan Fuchs, University of California, Riverside
On the Microfoundations of Macrosociology: A Critique of Micro-sociological Reductionism

Moderator: **Mr. John J. Lie**, Harvard University

Twelve O'Clock

Break for Lunch

AFTERNOON

105 William James Hall

Two O'Clock

Professor Michael Burawoy, University of California, Berkeley
Mythological Individualism

Respondent: Professor Mark Gould, Haverford College

Moderator: Mr. John J. Lie, Harvard University

R E C E P T I O N

Four O'Clock

Please join us for refreshments in 1550 William James Hall