

# *Fallout: Documentary about On the Beach*

By Richard Phillips  
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*Written and directed by Lawrence Johnston; co-written and produced by Peter Kaufman*

The subject of Australian documentary filmmaker Lawrence Johnston's *Fallout* is the novel *On the Beach* and subsequent Hollywood movie of the same name. The feature-length work premiered at the 2013 Melbourne film festival and screened in a handful of Australian cinemas late last year.

Published in June 1957, *On the Beach* by popular-fiction writer Nevil Shute (1899-1960) is a story that gave voice to the British-born, former aeronautical engineer's concerns about the possible destruction of humanity. Set in the Australian city of Melbourne in the then near future, Shute's novel occurs in the aftermath of a devastating nuclear war in the northern hemisphere.

Melbourne residents and the crew of a visiting US submarine prepare for their inevitable deaths, including by state-sanctioned suicide pills, as radioactive clouds are pushed southward by prevailing winds. Human life has already been destroyed in North America, Europe, China and the Soviet Union. Melbourne citizens are given about five months to live.

The novel of *On the Beach* was an immediate success. It sold a hundred thousand copies in the first weeks of its release and quickly became an international best-seller. The rights were sold to director Stanley Kramer (*The Defiant Ones*, *Judgment at Nuremberg*, *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*) for £A80,000, the equivalent today of about \$A4 million [\$US3.6 million], and the movie was shot on location in Melbourne by Italian cinematographer Giuseppe Rotunno. Starring Gregory Peck, Ava Gardner, Fred Astaire and Anthony Perkins, *On the Beach* was released in December 1959 with unprecedented simultaneous premieres in 18 major international cities, including Moscow and Tokyo.

Kramer's movie is not a complete artistic success, but it is a commendable work and one that continues to resonate because it seriously grapples with the danger of global nuclear destruction. Perkins' performance is strong, with sincere efforts by the other Hollywood

actors, all genuinely committed to the project. As Ava Gardner later commented: "It was a fictional scenario, but my God, everyone in the cast and crew knew it [nuclear war] could happen... I was proud of being part of this film, proud of what it said."

Johnston (*Night* [1994], *Life* [1996], *Eternity* [2008]), a technically skilled filmmaker, explores the events in *Fallout*, bringing together interesting interviews with Shute's daughter Heather Mayfield, Kramer's wife and many others. Australian historian Paul Ham, the author of *Hiroshima Nagasaki*, and journalist Gideon Haigh provide background commentary, and Wayne Miller, one of the first American press photographers sent to Hiroshima after it was decimated by a US atom bomb, is also interviewed. Miller was later hired to photograph the production of *On the Beach*.

*Fallout* captures something of the period and the widespread and entirely justifiable fears about global nuclear destruction gripping people during the 1950s.

The documentary begins with footage of US President John F. Kennedy's 1961 United Nations address: "Every man, woman and child lives under a nuclear sword of Damocles, hanging by the slenderest of threads, capable of being cut at any moment." The film then reviews the US nuclear destruction of Hiroshima, President Harry Truman's chilling political justification of the bombing and the horrible impact of "radiation sickness" on the Japanese city's residents.

Johnston's work correctly observes that the US was ready to use nuclear weapons against 30 Chinese cities during the Korean War, refers to British nuclear testing in Australia and has footage of US "instructional" films on how ordinary people were supposed to survive a nuclear attack.

*Fallout's* title is not simply a reference to nuclear radiation, but also to the conflict that developed between Shute and Kramer. Shute, a political and socially conservative man, bitterly opposed Kramer's decision to modify the relationship between book's two central characters—US submarine captain Dwight Towers (Peck)

and Melbourne resident Moira Davidson (Gardner). In the movie, their love is consummated; in the book Towers remains loyal to his wife who has died in the US.

Shute was so angry about the change, his daughter tells the documentary makers, that it brought on a serious stroke from which he died not long after *On the Beach* was released. Johnson's *Fallout* focuses too much on this issue, however, to the exclusion of more significant questions.

The documentary, for example, provides no detailed examination of the US government's intense hostility to the film. While Kramer makes brief reference to this in a 1960s television interview, little more information is provided.

In line with its Cold War rhetoric and the growing power of America's military-industrial complex, Washington vigorously worked against *On the Beach*.

A recent essay by Murdoch University academic Mick Broderick points out that there was "an elaborate and orchestrated campaign" by the Eisenhower administration to undermine the film's "cultural and political impact." This involved high-level discussions involving Vice President Richard Nixon, the Secretary of State, the Secretary of Defense, the Atomic Energy commissioner and the heads of the US Information Agency (USIA) and the Office of Civil Defense Management.

The USIA and the State Department, in conjunction with the Pentagon, even drew up "infoguide" notes about the movie for leading government officials. The notes stressed that it was necessary to counteract "the film's strong emotional appeal for the banning of nuclear weapons," which could "lead audiences to think in terms of radical solutions to the problem."

Broderick's essay concludes: "There are few other documented examples, if any, of US Cabinet level deliberations detailing White House directed interventions in an attempt to mould the public reception of a Hollywood film."

The *New York Daily News*, no doubt responding to the government campaign, declared Kramer's film to be a "defeatist movie ... the thinking it represents points the way toward eventual enslavement of the entire human race."

*Fallout*, unfortunately, does not include this crucial material. Nor does it mention the dangers posed by contemporary militarist aggression on the part of the US and other imperialist powers.

Journalist Gideon Haigh, given considerable prominence in the documentary, lends credence to

Washington's oft-repeated claim that the "greatest problem" facing humanity is the prospect of nuclear weapons falling into the hands of terrorists or so-called rogue states. Haigh is not contradicted when he asserts that Iran is attempting to construct a nuclear bomb.

The film's most serious omission is its failure to mention Washington's so-called "pivot to Asia." Overseen by US President Barack Obama, this increasingly aggressive military and diplomatic effort to isolate China is dramatically exacerbating tensions throughout the region and creating the conditions for a US-led military conflict. Washington, in fact, is the most destabilising factor in geo-political relations.

When Shute wrote *On the Beach* in 1957, Australia was regarded as something of a backwater, the last place on earth to be decimated by a nuclear war. All this has changed.

Canberra's active involvement in the "pivot"—coordinated US-Australia military operations, high-level electronic spying and military targeting through the joint Pine Gap base in central Australia and other facilities, the basing of thousands of US marines in Darwin and advanced plans for joint naval blockades against China—make Australia an immediate military target in any future conflict.

Whether the lack of any reference to this reality is deliberate or the product of ignorance is not clear. Whatever the case, it is at odds with the approach taken by Nevil Shute and Stanley Kramer who resolved to use their skills to sensitise millions of ordinary people about the real and growing danger of nuclear war.

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