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Weapon of Past Destruction

# TIME BOMB

BY MICHAEL ATKINSON

## B-52

Written and directed by Hartmut Bitomsky  
Film Forum - Through December 18

War culture has become blithely easy to deride in eras of conflict as well as peacetime, but surely documentarian Hartmut Bitomsky's new film, *B-52*, might have had more of a sting in its tail prior to our most recent September. From the beginnings of the Cold War right up to 9-10, virtually any military expenditure or machine of mass destruction was no more

than a tin-plated Moloch engineered by usurious vanity and used only, if it was used at all, to obliterate peasants in a display of intercontinental racketeering muscle. No wonder Bitomsky saw the legendary bomber jet as a paper-mastodon fit to be smugly shredded. As cumbersome and costly as it has been devastating, the B-52 has been America's malign Wings Over the World, ready "on the drop of a dime" (as one officer puts it) to wreak nuclear havoc anywhere on the globe.

Bitomsky tries to keep his face straight, but his backhanded homage to the war plane and its position in 20th-century social history builds into a smirk. The arc of his narrative—tracing the plane's history from postwar prototype to scrap-yard corpse—is telling but loaded: a 50-year-old piece of hardware is bound to have obsolescences and attrition. Bouncing between Burns-style Americana and *Atomic Café*-type

government archival, Bitomsky is fair about the history—which means being chilled both by the aircraft's carpet-bombing successes and its cock-ups. (The most heinous of these—a mid-air refueling crash that irradiated a huge chunk of the Spanish countryside—has its own, startlingly frank exhibit in the National Atomic Museum in Omaha, Nebraska.)

That the Cold War was a wasteful charade proves Bitomsky's point amply enough, but his movie is a repetitive bore: For all of its ubiquity and power, the B-52 is a paltry source of irony. The film's implicit opposition—lefty peacenik us versus jingoistic baby-killing them—doesn't hold water when interviewing actual pilots and navigators. At least, it doesn't in the final quarter of 2001, when ordinary personnel can no longer be entirely dismissed as pawns in a capitalist campaign. (Only military illustrator Mike Hagel has a fetishistic gleam in

his eye.) It doesn't help that the film's dialoguing narrators—a lispy man and a comatose woman—become numbingly precious, and that Bitomsky shows little visual sense beyond a breathtaking, circular helicopter audit of a B-52 graveyard in the Arizona desert.

Whatever your stance on Afghanistan's current burnt offerings, it's difficult to arouse amused disapproval for the mechanics of traditional warfare after quotidian objects like passenger jets have left us with much more devastating per-episode body counts. (For an 11-day mission in Vietnam, B-52s dropped 15,000 tons of munitions on Hanoi in 730 deployments, racking up a relatively modest 1300 casualties.) At any rate, Bitomsky's movie makes rather more of the plane's symbolic value than it can bear, but it's undeniable that the real American crimes of the last 50 years have been matters of policy, not of airmen and hardware. **M**