

This article was downloaded by: [Middlebury College]

On: 01 September 2013, At: 14:54

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



## Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/chjf20>

### 'Remember! it's Only a Movie!' Expectations and Receptions of The Day After (1983)

Deron Overpeck

Published online: 20 Apr 2012.

To cite this article: Deron Overpeck (2012) 'Remember! it's Only a Movie!' Expectations and Receptions of The Day After (1983), *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 32:2, 267-292, DOI: [10.1080/01439685.2012.669882](https://doi.org/10.1080/01439685.2012.669882)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01439685.2012.669882>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Taylor & Francis makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of all the information (the "Content") contained in the publications on our platform. However, Taylor & Francis, our agents, and our licensors make no representations or warranties whatsoever as to the accuracy, completeness, or suitability for any purpose of the Content. Any opinions and views expressed in this publication are the opinions and views of the authors, and are not the views of or endorsed by Taylor & Francis. The accuracy of the Content should not be relied upon and should be independently verified with primary sources of information. Taylor and Francis shall not be liable for any losses, actions, claims, proceedings, demands, costs, expenses, damages, and other liabilities whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with, in relation to or arising out of the use of the Content.

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at <http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions>

# 'REMEMBER! IT'S ONLY A MOVIE!' EXPECTATIONS AND RECEPTIONS OF *THE DAY AFTER* (1983)

Deron Overpeck

On November 20, 1983, during a sweeps week<sup>1</sup> and a tense period of the Cold War, the American Broadcasting Company (ABC) aired *The Day After*, a television movie dramatizing the effects of a nuclear attack on the United States. The broadcast attracted approximately 100 million viewers, which translated into a 46 rating and 62 share for the time period,<sup>2</sup> making it the most-watched television film in the medium's history.<sup>3</sup> Avowing that the film was apolitical, its makers—network executive Brandon Stoddard, director Nicholas Meyer and writer Edward Hume—claimed that they had made a 'public service announcement' that would let 'ordinary Americans' know of the potential hell on earth they faced if international tensions escalated towards war.<sup>4</sup> Not surprisingly, the film engendered a great deal of controversy in the weeks leading up to and the days following its air date. Members of the nuclear Freeze movement—which publicly demonstrated against the proliferation of nuclear weapons or for nuclear disarmament—procured advance copies of *The Day After* and organized viewing parties and other public activities in the belief that the film would galvanize public support for their cause.<sup>5</sup> Supporters of the prevailing Mutually Assured Destruction policy (MAD), which argued that 'in a nuclear world, security lay in maintaining a retaliatory capacity so powerful and so invulnerable that no nation would dare attack us . . .',<sup>6</sup> charged that the film would overwhelm the public and lead them to favor foreign policies inimical to US interests as framed by the Reagan administration, effectively if not explicitly calling the film and its producers unpatriotic.<sup>7</sup>

---

Correspondence: Deron Overpeck, Department of Communication and Journalism, Auburn University, 232 Tichenor Hall, Auburn, AL 36849, USA. E-mail: dmo0001@auburn.edu

This article traces how *The Day After* became a major television event in late 1983, one that generated weeks of media coverage and stimulated increased public involvement in the debate about America's nuclear-arms policy. As Daniel Boorstin has argued, beginning in the late 1950s the pressure to generate stories increasingly led the media industry to develop 'pseudo-events,' planned happenings that are created in order to perpetuate coverage of themselves.<sup>8</sup> In the days before the film's broadcast, media coverage focused on it *as* an event as much as a work of popular art or political statement.<sup>9</sup> Yet to treat the film as such a 'pseudo-event' is problematic. By attracting such a large audience and so much controversy, *The Day After* became the common currency with which an important political issue was discussed; but through its status as an event, concerns about its potential effects on the viewing public became more important than its political message or the science behind its representations of nuclear war and winter. Freeze groups, deterrence advocates and film-makers alike were concerned with the response and/or representation of 'ordinary Americans'—a term that was never explicitly defined but used as though it meant presumably apolitical, hardworking citizens in the geographical center of the country who either possessed the critical faculties necessary to process the troubling information the film dramatized or were too ill-informed to respond with anything other than impulse and emotion. Those on either side of the nuclear weapons issue believed the film would provoke its audience to act, yet, as will be examined in more detail below, 'ordinary Americans' displayed a variety of responses to the film, including increased political activism and existential worry, but also recalcitrance and apathy.

*The Day After* thus stands as both an important part of the history of the nuclear freeze movement in the USA and an example of the television industry fulfilling one of its most important functions in a democracy. In his discussion of television's potential to enrich citizenship in Western democracies, Graham Murdock argues that 'complex citizenship is best served by open programs that offer a diversity of positions and require the engaged participation of viewers.'<sup>10</sup> The film-makers at least initially claimed to be making an open text that took no position on nuclear weapons policy but presented information that the public needed to know. However, comments by director Nicholas Meyer and the resources used by writer Edward Hume to dramatize nuclear war and its aftermath suggest the project was not as politically neutral as announced. Furthermore, both proponents and detractors of *The Day After* tried to close off any potential plurality of meanings by insisting the film supported a nuclear weapons freeze and was necessarily a political statement. Indeed the perception of the film as a closed text motivated much of the public engagement with the film. And although *The Day After* ultimately had little impact on public opinion about a nuclear freeze, it did motivate many Americans, ordinary and otherwise, to become involved in the nuclear war debate, perhaps the most important issue facing America and the world at the time.

The public response to the film underscores the diversity of interpretive positions audiences take in response to media programs. Proponents and opponents of *The Day After* more or less expected viewers to soak up the images and act, though each side took a different attitude towards that anticipated action. By 1983, however, more nuanced theories of audience reception were available. Beginning in the late 1970s, British scholars, including Stuart Hall and David Morley, argued that media texts are

polysemous: although programs clearly bear the marks of a capitalist–industrial production process, they offer a wide range of positions with which audience members can identify and thus interpret them.<sup>11</sup> Celeste Michele Condit added nuance to the polysemic argument when she argued that audience response was polyvalent—that viewers could agree on the message of a text yet evaluate that message differently based on their previously held value systems.<sup>12</sup> In the years since then, studies have traced the complex interactions between the audience, the text as a cultural and industrial product, and the social forces that shape both audience and text; this scholarship includes ethnographic research that analyzes specific audiences in their respective milieux,<sup>13</sup> work on the means by which the style of a program can shape the viewing experience,<sup>14</sup> and investigations of fan cultures that incorporate their favorite films and series into their lives in complicated, even contradictory ways.<sup>15</sup> This research has established that audiences do not respond to texts as undifferentiated, easily motivated masses.

At the same time, however, other scholarship has demonstrated that the capitalist structure of Western media, particularly in the United States, necessarily limits the range of messages that a film or program can present and thus the range of possible interpretations.<sup>16</sup> Texts that question the ideological base of society are rarely if ever offered by mainstream media outlets. In *Manufacturing Consent*, Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman offer a 'propaganda model' of media analysis; they argue that corporate ownership, the need to attract advertisers to make media a profitable venture, a close relationship with official power structures and a general anti-leftist ideology shape how and what the news media cover. To be sure, the authors note, '[t]he mass media are not a solid monolith [on all issues]. Where the powerful are in disagreement, there will be a certain diversity of tactical judgments on how to attain generally shared aims, reflected in media debate. But views that challenge fundamental premises or suggest that the observed modes of exercise of state power are based on systemic factors will be excluded from the mass media . . .'.<sup>17</sup> Media theorists also have examined how this structure similarly determines the kinds of films and television programs that mainstream production companies offer because, at root, their products are seen as goods to be sold to consumers, or goods with which to attract audiences to be sold to advertisers.<sup>18</sup> As will be discussed below, the format and some of the content of *The Day After* was changed to soften any perceived critique of American foreign policy and to attract advertisers. Furthermore, its focus on 'ordinary Americans' in the Midwest is itself part of a tradition that has aligned those citizens with the nation's traditional social and economic systems. Yet the film also criticizes the idea the nuclear war would be survivable—a concept that the Reagan administration had promoted during the early 1980s and a critique that it objected to. Indeed, the post-war American government is presented as ineffectual for those who survive the conflagration. *The Day After* thus provides an important case study for understanding the intersection between reception theories that promote an active, engaged viewer and structural theories that emphasize the limits capital and ideology place on media texts.

This article also opens new space for the study of nuclear war films. The canon of films that directly or indirectly refer to fears about nuclear destruction is diverse, encompassing star-studded melodramas—*On the Beach* (Stanley Kramer, 1959),

*Twilight's Last Gleaming* (Robert Aldrich, 1977)—black satire—*Dr. Strangelove, or how I learned to stop worrying and love the bomb* (Stanley Kubrick, 1963), *Radioactive Dreams* (Albert Pyun, 1985)—post-apocalyptic docudramas—*The War Game* (Peter Watkins, 1965), *Threads* (Mick Jackson, 1984)—and pulpy B-movies of various flavors—*Kiss Me Deadly* (Robert Aldrich, 1955), *The Amazing Colossal Man* (Bert I. Gordon 1957). Although the scholarship on such films is impressive, it has primarily analyzed what the films 'say' (or don't) about nuclear war<sup>19</sup> or argued for a genre of atomic films.<sup>20</sup> The few media studies articles specifically about *The Day After* have fallen within these broad categories as well.<sup>21</sup> However, such studies generally eschew any examination of how nuclear films were consumed by Americans, 'ordinary' or otherwise and effectively assume that the audience must have read or understood the films in a specific way. In his study of early nuclear-themed films as propaganda, Garth Jowett admits that whether or not films such as *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (Robert Wise, 1951) actually functioned in this way is 'unclear' but then asserts that 'they must have had an effect on the audience.'<sup>22</sup> That the aforementioned films, and others like them, reflected social concerns regarding the potential and dangers of nuclear power seems undeniable. However, to recognize that does not necessarily tell us anything about how those films affected or were received by audiences. *The Day After* offers an opportunity to more closely examine the impact of nuclear war films on American culture, to build on approaches that treat these works as symptoms of a general social anxiety and instead consider them as parts of specific cultural dialogues about life in the atomic age.

### International tensions

By 1983, the Cold War between the United States and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics seemed on the verge of becoming hot. During his presidential campaign in 1980, Ronald Reagan had painted his opponent, the incumbent Jimmy Carter, as soft on communism; as President, Reagan increased military spending and warned the nation that the USSR had a greater capacity to wage nuclear war than America had. Under the so-called 'Reagan Doctrine,' the United States provided material assistance to anti-Communist forces across the globe.<sup>23</sup> President Reagan announced the Strategic Defense Initiative in March 1983,<sup>24</sup> and plans to deploy Pershing II missile batteries in West Germany led to a stalemate in US–Soviet arms-reduction negotiations.<sup>25</sup> Richard Pipes, an assistant on the National Security Council, asserted that unless the USSR abandoned communism, war was all but inevitable.<sup>26</sup> More provocatively, in April 1983, US fighter jets had flown deliberately into Soviet airspace during a training exercise,<sup>27</sup> and in early November, the Soviet military had nearly confused the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's Able Archer exercise for a nuclear first strike.<sup>28</sup> At home, Reagan used religious rhetoric to paint the Cold War in black and white terms. In a March 1983 address before the National Association of Evangelicals, he (in)famously referred to the USSR as an 'evil empire' that could not be trusted to abide by any nuclear non-proliferation treaty.<sup>29</sup> Political commentators, including William F. Buckley, Charles Krauthammer and George Will, applauded the president for his moral clarity about the USSR. To them, the Soviet Union was a cruel totalitarian regime manned by leaders whose inferior economic and political systems

had robbed them of common morality.<sup>30</sup> When the Soviet Air Force shot down Korean Airlines flight 007, killing all onboard, after it had strayed into restricted air space on September 1, 1983, an event President Reagan described as 'a crime against humanity . . . an act of barbarism,'<sup>31</sup> it only confirmed the worst expectations of many critics in the West.

The heightened criticism of the Soviet Union and the administration's willingness to confront it militarily raised public fears about the likelihood of the use of nuclear weapons. One poll, conducted in late 1981, indicated that three-fourths of Americans expected nuclear war within a few years.<sup>32</sup> To allay the public's concerns, Reagan appointees began to argue that a nuclear war could be easily survivable. Thomas K. Jones, a deputy undersecretary for Defense, asserted that makeshift ditches covered with doors, plastic tarps and dirt would do the trick, adding in a now-infamous quip, 'if there are enough shovels to go around, everyone is going to make it.'<sup>33</sup> A Department of Defense film on civil defense averred that hiding under a work bench would provide plenty of protection from the blast and fallout.<sup>34</sup> Such efforts were part of what Edward Schiappa has analyzed as the government's efforts to 'domesticate' nuclear war, 'a rhetorical strategy by which nuclear concepts are introduced into public discourse in a non-threatening manner.'<sup>35</sup> By emphasizing elements found in most homes as the keys to surviving nuclear war, the Reagan administration continued a tradition of describing weapons and political decisions in quotidian terms to make them 'more palatable' to the average citizen.<sup>36</sup> Domestication campaigns, part of what Schiappa terms 'nukespeak,' stretched back to the Eisenhower administration, as demonstrated by the documentary *The Atomic Café* (Jayne Loader, Kevin Rafferty and Pierce Rafferty, 1982).<sup>37</sup> Such programs had been begun to counter early warnings about their dangers. In 1947 then-chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission David Lilienthal claimed that 'scaring the daylights out of everyone . . . , inducing fear and unthinking hysteria . . . is not going to get us anywhere'<sup>38</sup>—a complaint that would be echoed by critics of *The Day After* 35 years later.

Such domestication campaigns, however, were never universally well received,<sup>39</sup> and shortly after Reagan's inauguration, nuclear freeze groups renewed their efforts to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons in the United States. In 1981, the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists had set its Doomsday Clock, which it used to signify how close the world was to self-destruction, at four minutes to midnight, and then in December 1983, to three minutes.<sup>40</sup> Several scientists, including American astronomer Carl Sagan, published papers warning that even a small nuclear conflict would lead to a 'nuclear winter' that could cause the extinction of the human species, a sharp rebuke to the Reagan administration's propaganda.<sup>41</sup> Religious organizations, including the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, United Presbyterians and the American Baptists, announced their support for a freeze on nuclear weapons proliferation in 1981, as did Ed Asner, Meryl Streep, Stevie Wonder and Jackson Browne, among other celebrities.<sup>42</sup> By 1982, public opinion polls indicated that as many as 8 in 10 people supported a nuclear arms freeze, although as many suspected the Soviet Union could not be trusted to honor such a treaty.<sup>43</sup> In June of that year, hundreds of thousands of people marched in New York City to support the anti-nuclear weapons cause.<sup>44</sup>



## The production of *The Day After*

The public discourse that would surround *The Day After* could trace its origins to controversies and debates that begun in the mid-1940s. Films and television programs with nuclear themes had flourished in the ensuing four decades, and as such *The Day After* was not the only cultural artifact of the 1980s to address international tensions and nuclear war. The NBC television miniseries *World War III* (David Greene and Boris Sagal, 1982) and theatrical films *Octopussy* (John Glen, 1983) and *Red Dawn* (John Milius, 1984) presented worlds in which Soviet bloc forces invaded the United States or otherwise threatened to provoke World War III, while pop songs like '99 Luftballons' (Nena, 1983), 'Russians' (Sting, 1984) and 'Two Tribes' (Frankie Goes to Hollywood, 1984) mused on the pettiness of the two superpowers' disagreements. In December 1983, Lynne Littman's *Testament* was released to movie theaters; originally produced for the Public Broadcasting System, the film followed the residents of a small California town as they succumbed to radiation after nuclear explosions level much of America.

However, concerns about a domestic energy disaster, not fears about the Reagan administration provoking a nuclear war, spurred the development of *The Day After*. Brandon Stoddard, the president of ABC Motion Pictures, came up with the initial idea for a four-hour miniseries about nuclear war during the Carter administration, after seeing *The China Syndrome* (James Bridges, 1979), a theatrically released thriller about an accident at a nuclear power plant.<sup>45</sup> That film debuted two weeks before the partial meltdown of a reactor core at the Three Mile Island facility and became swept up in the popular demonstrations against nuclear power that followed. After approval from the network, Stoddard developed the project with Edward Hume and Nicholas Meyer.

From its initial inception through the controversy surrounding its presentation, *The Day After* was described by Stoddard as an 'apolitical' film that would reach 'ordinary Americans' who were perhaps confused or unaware of what a nuclear conflict might entail. 'We wanted to do a movie about . . . what their lives would be like after a nuclear war,' Stoddard told the *New York Times*. 'Not what it would be like in the President's bunker or in the war rooms.'<sup>46</sup> In fact, the film-makers declined any government cooperation on the production when the Department of Defense insisted that the script blame the Soviet Union for the war.<sup>47</sup> (However, a reference to the deployment of Pershing missiles in Western Europe, which was deemed inflammatory by nuclear deterrence advocates, was dropped from the film.<sup>48</sup>) But the impetus to make a film that at least appeared to be apolitical also has an economic explanation. Because broadcast television is an advertiser-supported medium, the networks have historically been averse to difficult or challenging programs. This is clear even if one does not agree with Chomsky's propaganda model. According to Todd Gitlin, the poor ratings for politically themed television movies and miniseries led network executives to focus on more escapist fare and muted material that might be considered critical of the United States. 'The networks were aiming at the surest and least troublesome 30 shares,' he writes. 'With advertisers fidgeting about controversy, the networks gravitated toward the theory that the country had shifted to the right, or, what with the economic misery, toward escape, or both.'<sup>49</sup> For example, *World War III* blamed the destruction of civilization on treacherous KGB officers who stymie the

benevolent efforts of both American military personnel and their own peace-loving premier. Given the perception that Reagan's election signaled a political shift to the right, a film that took an explicitly pro-disarmament stance could have been disastrous.

The network was concerned about losing potential sponsors. The project was scaled back from a mini-series to a roughly two-hour film to curtail costs. Additionally, Although ABC offered to place most advertising spots in the first half of the film, before the nuclear exchange, reports circulated in the weeks before the airdate that few advertisers were lining up to purchase time during the broadcast.<sup>50</sup> Because of fears that conservative critics would pressure advertisers to not buy commercial time or cancel spots that had already been bought, it kept secret the list of companies that did buy time.<sup>51</sup> Ultimately, ABC did sell all of the advertising slots for the time period, although reportedly at less than the \$135,000 it had initially asked for a 30-second commercial.<sup>52</sup> With the economics of the film in question, the decision to emphasize 'ordinary Americans' over politicians, and to remove explicit references to current geopolitical events, must have seemed all the wiser.

However, the texts that Hume used to develop the screenplay problematize the alleged apolitical nature of the film. According to the 'Writer's list of major sources of research,' distributed with ABC's official press release about the broadcast, he relied exclusively on pro-freeze or disarmament texts, or sources that emphasized the horrendous destruction that would be ensue after a nuclear exchange. These sources included Helen Caldicott's *Nuclear Madness* (1981) and Jonathan Schell's *The Fate of the Earth* (1982), as well as materials published by Physicians for Social Responsibility, including its short film 'The Last Epidemic: the medical consequences of nuclear weapons and nuclear war,' which had already been shown at nuclear freeze meetings across the country.<sup>53</sup> The two government publications listed, *The Effects of Nuclear Weapons* (1977), by physical chemist Samuel Glasstone, and *The Effects of Nuclear War* (1979) by the Congressional Office of Technology Assessment, went into detail about the destruction that would be caused by widespread nuclear war. The Congressional report, prepared two years before public pronouncements of Thomas Jones, openly doubted that any plans to help Americans in the aftermath of a nuclear exchange would be 'effective.'<sup>54</sup> None of the works cited as Hume's sources offered any support for the idea that surviving a war would be as easy as the Reagan administration suggested.

As the airdate of the film grew closer, Meyer began to deviate from the official line that the film was apolitical. 'ABC is spending millions of dollars to go on the air and call Ronald Reagan a liar,' he told journalists—a clear if indirect reference to administration's domestication propaganda. He also announced his goal was to 'lobber sixty million people over the head.'<sup>55</sup> If he felt the need to bludgeon his audience out of its complacency, that may be because he harbored a somewhat condescending attitude toward it. Meyer considered them regular, if perhaps confused, television consumers, and his attempt to promote television as the appropriate venue for *The Day After* instead managed to demean it. 'I would not have wanted to make this as a feature film,' he told the *New York Times*. 'I did not want to preach to the converted. I wanted [*The Day After*] to reach the guy who's waiting for *The Flying Nun* to come on.'<sup>56</sup> Meyer thus described the average television audience member as a shut-in: someone who doesn't go out to the cinema, and



prefers reruns of a 15-year-old black-and-white fantasy series about an airborne novice to current, perhaps more politically relevant programs. By extension, television was a medium best suited to reaching those who were out of touch, unlike cinema with its apparently more astute audience. Meyer's concept of the average American viewer also resonates with the religious terms Reagan had to describe the mortal threat posed by the Soviet Union. His desire to not 'preach to the converted' implies a desire to proselytize. Even the trite series that his ideal viewer still seeks out is religiously themed. Although its audience likely included politically liberal viewers, *The Flying Nun* (ABC, 1967–1970) focused on a well-meaning member of a religious order, was produced with the participation of the National Catholic Office for Radio and Television, and was commended by Catholics for humanizing the mission of the church.<sup>57</sup> Its gentle approach to religion and entertainment suggests a conservative audience, one more comfortable with tradition than confronting unpleasant realities—realities that Meyer intended to 'lobber' them with.

### 'Ordinary Americans'

Meyer's concept of his target viewer reflects a long tradition of identifying culturally conservative viewers, particularly those in the American Midwest, as the idealized audience for television. At least since the end of the 19th century, the Midwest, also known as the American 'heartland,' has come to symbolize the balance between the nation's agricultural traditions and its market-capitalist present, 'the "middle" ground both figuratively and literally between the urbanized East and the western wilderness...'<sup>58</sup> And, as Victoria Johnson has demonstrated, the heartland and its presumed white, middle class, Christian denizens have long been central to debates about the social role of television: '[T]elevision industry policy, regulatory statements, network development and promotional plans and programming have *strategically* engaged regional mythology to define and meet "public interest" standards, to attract a broad, "populist" audience, and to appeal to audiences through the promotion of Heartland ideals.'<sup>59</sup> Johnson notes that although specific representations of Midwestern culture and residents may be negative depending on historical contexts, 'the Midwest is *idealized*... as the site of "authentic" culture—a region marked by stability and producerist energy...endearingly amateurish, ordinary, non-threatening, unswayed by fads and materialism, devout, hard-working, simple, and at the center of US culture both figuratively and geographically.' This bastion of American values is 'steeled against hipster elites from either coast' who are identified with 'progressivism, rebelliousness... African American culture [and] gay culture...'<sup>60</sup> The political potential of appealing to this 'real' America has been exploited at least since November 1969, when President Nixon identified a 'silent majority' of patriotic Americans who inhabited the Midwest and South, in counterpart to an East Coast-based elitist 'vocal minority' that agitated against his policies in Vietnam.<sup>61</sup> By the beginning of the 1980s, cultural conservatives were using New York, Los Angeles and San Francisco as symbols of the moral depravity they believed the United States was falling into,<sup>62</sup> and had begun to turn Midwestern states into consistently Republican-voting enclaves.<sup>63</sup>

Thus, although missile silos have dotted the Midwest since the 1950s and make Lawrence, Kansas and Kansas City, Missouri legitimate locales for the film, setting *The Day After* in a region that has traditionally been coded as the home of 'ordinary' or 'real Americans' who reflect conservative political and social values, has a political connotation. New York and Los Angeles would have been equally legitimate choices, as 'ordinary Americans' live there too.<sup>64</sup> Indeed, New York is a popular site for disaster films; prior to 1983, the Big Apple had already been vaporized by an atomic bomb in *Fail Safe* (Sidney Lumet, 1964), ravaged by a stray planet in *When Worlds Collide* (Rudolph Maté, 1951), rendered into a desert by unspecified warfare in *Planet of the Apes* (Franklin Schaffner, 1968) and turned into a maximum security prison in *Escape from New York* (John Carpenter, 1981). However, setting the film in New York City would not have allowed for rural characters preparing for church weddings or soldiers struggling to find their families. The Kansas and Missouri locations allowed the film-makers to invoke such traditional images of Americans as their victims of nuclear conflict.

Graham Murdock notes that who is allowed or chosen to represent a social group or class necessarily also colors the representation and reception of the issues that are important to them. 'Questions of representation,' he writes, 'are . . . questions of social delegation, about who is entitled to speak for or about others, and what responsibilities they owe to the constituencies whose views and hopes they claim to articulate.'<sup>65</sup> By claiming to make a film for and about 'ordinary Americans,' Stoddard, Hume and Meyer also claimed to know their lives and concerns and thus to be able to speak on their behalf. The characters of *The Day After* illuminate how Stoddard, Hume and Meyer conceived of these 'ordinary Americans.' The Midwestern setting permitted them to present both hardworking farmers and decent bourgeois suburbanites. Dr. Russell Oakes (Jason Robards) lives and practices in suburban Kansas City, and teaches in Lawrence at the University of Kansas, where he is friendly with a physics professor (John Lithgow) who knows a great deal about nuclear weapons and radioactive fallout. On a farm southeast of Kansas City live and toil the Dahlbergs. As international tensions escalate, the Dahlbergs plan the wedding of their daughter, Denise (Lori Lethin). At a nearby Air Force base, airmen debate the possibility of nuclear war and then, after the missiles have been launched, argue about whether their duty is to their country or their families. The film thus presents both affluent college-educated professional characters and 'salt of the earth' Americans who make their living off the land or by defending the nation. However, this cross-section is actually quite narrow. 'Everyone we meet is middle class or higher,' noted one reviewer. 'There are no ghettos in town . . . , no agribusiness on the outskirts (the rippling seas of wheat . . . appear to be managed by a family right out of Norman Rockwell).'66 The reference to Rockwell is a polite means of saying the families in the film are all white and Christian. No Jewish, Muslim or Hindu characters, or reflections of their faiths, are evident in the film. The cast includes only one significant African American character, Billy McCoy (William Allen Young), an airman who flees his missile silo post in a futile attempt to reach his wife. Dying of radiation sickness, he joins the throngs of wounded walking to the university hospital in Lawrence. Whereas most of the white characters develop over the course of the narrative, Billy has little to do other than try not to panic as he loses his teeth and hair.

Similarly, the film's one Asian American character, a surgeon at the university hospital, is distinguished primarily for his concern for the dying.

Although Jim Dahlberg (John Cullum) could be expected to enjoy reruns of *The Flying Nun*, the film does not portray him or other characters as out of touch with reality. As the USA and USSR move closer to nuclear war, the citizens of Lawrence and Kansas City are well aware of the stakes. While the women in his house tend to the wedding plans, Jim recognizes the peril that events occurring in Germany could place his family in, and helps his neighbors prepare bomb shelters. Russell Oakes and his wife cuddle in bed on the eve of destruction, reminiscing about the Cuban Missile Crisis in order to reassure themselves that wiser minds will again prevent Armageddon. All of the men in the film are sensitive and in touch with their emotions. Stephen (Steve Guttenberg), a medical student who arrives at the Dahlberg farm after the nuclear attack, becomes a surrogate husband to Denise as she breaks down mentally and physically (unbeknownst to the Dahls, her fiancé was incinerated in a nuclear fireball as he tried to get home to them). In Lawrence, at the only functioning hospital in the area, the doctors gamely treat everyone they can while also monitoring the health of each other. The final image of the film places a dying Oakes in the ruins of his home, weeping as a male squatter comforts him. Overall, the 'ordinary Americans' of *The Day After* are decent, hard-working individuals who work together to overcome adversity. No character expresses any political position or even hints that they oppose the existence of nuclear weapons. Other than a barbershop lecture by Lithgow's physics professor and the nervous reactions of a few students, little mention is given to the effects of nuclear war until they are actually visualized onscreen. Nuclear war might be political, but its victims are decidedly and perpetually non-partisan.

Yet despite the 'ordinary American' characters' best efforts to remain positive, *The Day After* made clear that the Midwestern lifestyle that they represented would not survive the unearthly heat and ruinous radiation of nuclear warfare. Pets are left to die while families cower in basement fallout shelters. Dead horses and cows dot the devastated farmland, and Jim and his neighbor farmers scoff at the government's request that they scrape off several inches of irradiated top soil to resume planting. A few days later, Jim is killed by squatters on his farm, while Stephen and Denise succumb to radiation poisoning at the hospital in Lawrence. Before finally finding his demolished home, Oakes wanders through the ruins of Kansas City, past hollowed out buildings and piles of debris. The film was thus an effective counterargument to the administration's domestication strategy. By presenting a devastated heartland and ruined lives, the film eviscerated the notion that shovels and doors were all that Americans would need to survive nuclear war—that is, it told a national audience that Ronald Reagan was a liar, just as Meyer had said it would.

### ***The Day After* and the nuclear freeze movement**

Because the film promised to be a potent recruitment tool for them, groups in the freeze movement worked hard to take advantage of the moment. Their efforts helped to make *The Day After* into a public event. Beginning in the late summer, the Nuclear Weapons Freeze Campaign (the Freeze), the Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy

(SANE) and Physicians for Social Responsibility (PSR) coordinated their efforts as well as cooperated with anti-nuclear groups that formed because of the film. 'This show presents an unprecedented opportunity to reach tens of millions of people uninvolved in the nuclear issue,' enthused one activist.<sup>67</sup> Pam McIntyre, the education/outreach coordinator for the Freeze, wrote to members that '[t]he film . . . offers an occasion for not only educating millions of Americans about the consequences of nuclear war, but also encouraging to act now to prevent this nuclear devastation from ever happening.'<sup>68</sup> These groups made no bones about the fact that they felt the film served their political purposes. Janet Michaud of the Committee against Nuclear War boasted to the *New York Times* that 'ABC is doing a \$7 million advertising job for our issue.'<sup>69</sup>

The freeze activists were determined to be perceived as 'ordinary Americans' who loved their country, not as radical political operatives. One member of the Freeze wrote to Randy Kehler, the group's national director and a long-time pacifist activist, to encourage the organization to begin a letter-writing campaign in support of *The Day After*; the writer had heard a rumor that the White House was pressuring the network to cancel the film. However, he insisted that this lobbying should be seen as the actions 'of individual citizens, not of FREEZE advocates or peaceniks.'<sup>70</sup> Communications between the various freeze groups emphasized that the film-related activities they were sponsoring would be made up of 'families, friends and neighbors who come together to support each other in viewing *The Day After* and then discussing their personal reaction to it.'<sup>71</sup> Similarly, the Freeze and SANE leadership insisted that, rather than provide only a national toll-free telephone number for viewers to call for more information about nuclear war and how to prevent it, local television and print advertisements should carry local telephone numbers staffed by local organizers.<sup>72</sup> The deputy director of Ground Zero, Theo Brown, suggested that the movement adopt the American flag for *The Day After*-related activities because it was a 'national symbol of the resolve of the American people to prevent nuclear war' and 'might help us break away from the identification of peace efforts as something that is unpatriotic.'<sup>73</sup>

Ground Zero, the Freeze and other groups developed kits to help local activists organize events and campaigns in their communities.<sup>74</sup> In addition to conducting regular activities such as setting up information tables in public areas and canvassing neighborhoods, local groups were encouraged to organize viewing parties that would attract new members.<sup>75</sup> In his memo Brown emphasized that the viewing parties should represent 'all segments of a community but special emphasis will be upon organizing groups among members of religious organizations, schools and colleges.'<sup>76</sup> These kits also included viewing guides with sample questions that party organizers could use to stimulate discussion. The viewing guides were based on literature that ABC's Community Relations department had produced in tandem with the Cultural Information Service, a New York-based non-profit organization focused on spiritual education. The guide included 'exercises' designed to help people process their feelings before and after watching the film. These exercises included thinking about 'what book, film, television program, song, magazine article or newspaper report has most shaped your views on nuclear war' and whether or not 'Americans worry about too many things that never come to pass.' After watching the film, viewers were encouraged to muse on how much they knew about 'the mission and operations of the United States Strategic Air Command' and, curiously, whether or not they possessed

'any practical talents and knowledge . . . that would make [them] an asset in time of crisis.'<sup>77</sup> PSR, concerned with the mental turmoil the film might cause, issued guidelines regarding whether or not families should allow children or young adults to watch the film, and how to talk to them about it.<sup>78</sup> A teacher organization, Educators for Social Responsibility, participated in special conferences to help teachers, administrators, scientists and parents develop plans to focus public response to the film in 'a positive way.'<sup>79</sup>

The freeze organizations were also keen to benefit from media coverage of *The Day After*. SANE and the Freeze worked together to produce radio spots and display posters to be distributed to local radio stations or to local freeze organizations to place around their communities, and made multiple media appearances. PSR members alone appeared on more than 150 television programs and more than 100 radio programs in the day before and after the broadcast.<sup>80</sup> The Freeze prepared a speaker's manual to help media-unsavvy chapter members who might be interviewed by local stations or newspapers. The guide included copies of press releases from the network, a plot synopsis, and detailed explanations of the various political, scientific and cultural references found in the film. Although the text of the manual makes clear that its writer or writers had already seen the film, the frontispiece furthered the idea that that nuclear freeze advocates were ordinary Americans, not political activists or Hollywood liberals: 'This manual was produced by citizens concerned about the increasing danger of nuclear war. It is not affiliated with ABC or the making or the distribution of *The Day After*.' The guide advised its readers on how to prepare for different program formats and encouraged them to write down ahead of time 'good quotes' to use on air that would emphasize the numerous ways people 'can get involved in stopping the arms race.'<sup>81</sup>

Several new anti-nuclear groups formed to capitalize on *The Day After*, including Let Lawrence Live, the 800-NUCLEAR Project and the Day Before. The Project had to license the toll-free number 800-NUCLEAR from a private entrepreneur who had secured the number as a venture enterprise.<sup>82</sup> The group intended to buy advertising time during the broadcast of *The Day After* but, in late September, learned that ABC would refuse to air their ad for the time slot or for 48 hours after the telecast.<sup>83</sup> Another group, the Day Before, made no effort to hide its peacenik outlook and took a more spiritually therapeutic approach to participating in *The Day After*-related events. Formed by a psychotherapist and a comparative religion scholar who described herself as 'a pioneer of Despair and Empowerment transformational processes,'<sup>84</sup> the Day Before sought to organize one hundred community forums, or 'chatauquas' that would 'unleash the power trapped behind people's psychic numbing and despair so that it can coalesce into a potent political force.'<sup>85</sup>

In addition to the viewing parties, the Freeze and associated organizations organized and carried out a number of rallies on the night of the broadcast and following day. Let Lawrence Live held a candlelight vigil at the Campanile Memorial, which honored World War II dead; it was attended by more than 500 people,<sup>86</sup> while Target Kansas City, which was organized by the PSR, held a similar event at that city's Liberty Memorial. The following day, Target Kansas City invited women to come to a luncheon featuring the governor of Missouri's wife. Let Lawrence Live sponsored a town hall meeting with Mayor David Longhurst, who offered Lawrence as a site for President Reagan and Soviet Premier Yuri Andropov to meet for disarmament talks.<sup>87</sup>

Of course, no such summit occurred on the Kansas plains, and it would be more than a year before the USA and USSR returned to the negotiating table to discuss nuclear arms limitations.<sup>88</sup> But *The Day After* clearly had provided the freeze movement with a tool with which it felt it could build momentum, to demonstrate that its members were patriotic 'ordinary Americans' who cared for their country and families as much as those who supported the maintenance of a large nuclear arsenal. Supporters of MAD, however, were also vocal about *The Day After* and would use it to assail both the freeze movement and challenge its concept of engaged, intelligent Americans.

### Deterrence advocates respond

As bootleg copies of the film began to circulate among freeze organizations, conservative commentators began to complain about the apparent political bias of a film they had not yet seen. The fact that they had not been presented with advance copies proved to them that the producers had a political agenda. 'Clearly someone associated with the production has a significantly different perspective than we do, because the pirated version hasn't been exposed to people on our side of the issue,' complained the president of the American Security Council, a pro-deterrence think tank. 'This movie says deterrence failed and that's a political statement.'<sup>89</sup> The Rev. Jerry Falwell said the film constituted 'a pre-emptive strike' against deterrence and demanded that ABC provide equal time on its airwaves to deterrence advocates.<sup>90</sup> William F. Buckley, the founder of the conservative fortnightly *National Review*, derided the nuclear freeze activists' viewing guides as 'nuclear war prevention kits': 'I plan to send for one of those kits... and if [the activist groups] don't send me an MX missile, I'm going to report [them] to the Postal Service people for fraud.'<sup>91</sup> He kept up his attacks after the broadcast. 'Not since the Flat Earth Society,' he opined in his weekly column in the *Review*, 'has there been any movement as silly as the Nuclear Freeze Movement';<sup>92</sup> elsewhere he added that *The Day After* was 'an enterprise debilitating to the United States.'<sup>93</sup>

If the freeze advocates believed *The Day After* would rally people to the cause, conservatives fretted that viewers would panic or prove unable to evaluate the film critically, echoing complaints from the beginning of the atomic age. William Rusher, the publisher of *National Review*, announced that the film 'would generate an ignorant public hysteria at a time when calm resolution to preserve a credible deterrent is called for.'<sup>94</sup> Howard Phillips, the director of the Conservative Caucus, asserted that the film 'deceived' viewers into thinking that the American government was spoiling to attack the USSR and that 'the multitudes [of Americans] remain plunged in ignorance.'<sup>95</sup> Congressman Henry Hyde (R-Illinois) suggested that television was too simplistic to do anything but mislead the public about so crucial a subject: 'Television, we all know, is a medium best suited to conveying emotions (which is why we see... many stories portraying the graphic... pain of unemployment and few explaining the economic impact of sharply reduced inflation)... [The Day After], by ignoring the underlying political and military issues, gives viewers only one side of the story: the fear side. It encourages many, like those in the freeze movement, to look for panaceas, which also ignore the fundamental issues.'<sup>96</sup> The Reagan administration agreed that the film would have a deleterious effect on the American



psyche. David Gergen, the White House communications director, complained that the film ‘will leave many people feeling a sense of hopelessness.’ He took issue with what he saw as the film’s incompleteness. ‘The film poses an important question: what will happen in a nuclear war, which we all agree will be horrible,’ he explained. ‘But the film does not address an even more important question: how do you prevent such a catastrophe?’<sup>97</sup> To the Reagan administration and its partisans, the answer, at that time at least, was to continue to pursue the policy of deterrence, and any other suggestion was a calumny that could undermine America’s interests.

### After *The Day After*

The controversy about the film helped to make the film more of a ratings success—and an event—than it might otherwise have been; its eventual audience was tens of millions more than had been expected.<sup>98</sup> *Time*, *Newsweek*, the *New York Times*, *Village Voice*, *Washington Post* and other major new outlets covered—or helped to generate—the hullabaloo. Articles detailed the creation of the special effects, the early distribution of the film to freeze groups, and the disapproval of deterrence advocates. An important feature of this coverage, however, was the potential for *The Day After* to traumatize its audience, as its critics on the right claimed it would. *Newsweek* featured such concerns in its cover story on the film, noting that it might ‘leave viewers . . . numbed by a sense of hopelessness and helplessness.’<sup>99</sup> Some psychiatrists even suggested that no one should view the film alone (to which one reviewer quipped, ‘if you don’t have a family, please try to find one by [November 20]’),<sup>100</sup> while one group of education specialists suggested that pre-teens not be allowed to see the film and that children between the ages of 12 and 15 should be closely monitored if they did watch it.<sup>101</sup> To cope with the expected deluge of bereft viewers, PSR members cleared their schedules on the day following the film’s broadcast.<sup>102</sup>

At least in its immediate aftermath, the film did spur some viewers to action. Thousands made phone calls after watching the film: The White House received so many calls that its switchboard operators required a day to tally them all,<sup>103</sup> while the ABC switchboards reported receiving 1000 calls, mostly in support of the film.<sup>104</sup> The film did disturb many people. Some viewers left the room during the sequence in which nuclear fire sweeps across the American farm belt. ‘I was about to pass out,’ one viewer in Houston commented to the *New York Times*.<sup>105</sup> As was feared, some younger viewers were particularly upset. One telephone operator at a Washington, DC station reported receiving a plaintive call from a 10-year-old girl who was apparently watching the show unsupervised.<sup>106</sup> Many students at a Catholic high school in Maryland, interviewed the following day, seemed too numb to discuss the film; some fretted that the nation’s safeguards against an accidental nuclear exchange were insufficient.<sup>107</sup>

These overwhelmed, despairing reactions fit with the expectations of commentators and were the focus of the news reports about the broadcast. Indeed, many stories about the overnight reaction to the film led with distraught viewers, even if the body of the story contained as many instances of people responding with equanimity.<sup>108</sup> Some of the Lawrence residents who appeared as extras treated the film as a lark. ‘It’s exciting,’ said one University of Kansas student. ‘Tomorrow night,

I'm going to curl up with my teddy bear and watch the end of the world.'<sup>109</sup> Although some people did call for help, the hotlines to calm distraught viewers remained largely silent.<sup>110</sup> 'We anticipated a panic,' one DC-area hotline operator said. 'It seems people had a thoughtful reaction, not a panicked one. I don't think it set off the chain of terror we expected.'<sup>111</sup> Even children, who were of particular concern to commentators, seemed to have few lasting effects. Although the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* both reported that some children expressed anxiety and hopelessness in the days after the broadcast,<sup>112</sup> other sources suggested that children proved more resilient than expected. If some cried that they 'would rather die than survive a nuclear war,'<sup>113</sup> others wondered aloud, 'When is it supposed to be scary?'<sup>114</sup> One psychology professor theorized that the film might have seemed "mild" compared to horror films like *Halloween II*.<sup>115</sup> Some educators and doctors expected children to express increasing levels of anxiety in the months to come.<sup>116</sup> Yet this suspicion was not borne out either. Six months after *The Day After* aired, several students in New York City or Chicago-area high schools were brought together to describe how the film affected them. They discussed how the film inspired them to vote or otherwise become more involved in the political process. 'I vote for the first time this fall,' one high school senior told the *New York Times*, 'and the nuclear issue will be a major factor in deciding. I think the movie had something to do with that.' On the other hand, a student said that he and his friends considered the movie a 'flop'; they had talked about it for a few days after it aired but quickly tired of it as a topic.<sup>117</sup>

Some viewers interpreted *The Day After* through their own political beliefs. *The McNeil/Lehrer NewsHour* followed two families, the Bartons and the Levys, who represented opposing points of view on disarmament and had participated in public demonstrations on the issue in the months prior to the film's airdate. Their responses to his questions demonstrate that the film galvanized their previous beliefs, supporting Condit's argument on the polyvalence of audience response. Gene Levy, a deterrence advocate, asserted that "[*The Day After*] didn't change my opinion because I felt this was propaganda . . . . This is the start of a real large media campaign to stop Americans from defending themselves."<sup>118</sup> His wife agreed: "I feel this is a psychological warfare tactic being perpetrated on the American people, and it's to condition us . . . to disarm." When asked if the film accurately portrayed life in a post-apocalyptic world, Helene replied, "I feel that it may or may not be factual, but you've got to take into consideration the people who produced it."<sup>119</sup> Their pro-freeze counterparts, the Bartons, also interpreted the film from their previously held positions. They considered the film "a slap . . . in the face" to people who had previously been complacent about maintaining nuclear arsenals. "Once the people of the world understand that the stakes of this game we're playing, this game of nuclear chicken, that they are going to go out and get very active and very vocal."<sup>120</sup> Interestingly, neither the Bartons nor the Levys could identify with any specific part of the film with which they agreed or disagreed, or which seemed to support or denigrate their perspective. The content of the film was already in line with or in violation of the political attitudes each household held. They agreed *The Day After* advanced an anti-deterrence position; they differed in the value judgment they place on that position and thus on the film itself.

That the film would not prompt its audience to rash action was further demonstrated during a live edition of *Viewpoint*, which aired immediately after the

film's broadcast. Host Ted Koppel framed his opening remarks with the same concern about the mental state of the audience that had been so prevalent in coverage of the film: he grimly reassured viewers that Lawrence, Kansas City, Chicago and Moscow had not been destroyed in a nuclear exchange, 'good news' that he felt the audience needed, though presumably people in those cities were already aware that they were still alive.<sup>121</sup> The bulk of the special was taken up by a panel discussion with three former members of presidential cabinets—Robert McNamara, Henry Kissinger and Brent Scowcroft; Carl Sagan; William F. Buckley; and Elie Weisel, who Koppel said had been invited for a 'humanistic touch.' The last third of the 90-minute broadcast was devoted to questions from the audience. Contrary to Koppel's assumption that the audience was too numb to realize it had not suffered nuclear destruction and Kissinger's cranky complaints that the 'simple-minded' film would do little more than encourage the nation to 'make policies by scaring ourselves to death,' the audience members demonstrated themselves to be calm, rational and well versed in international affairs. Several had taken notes during the film and panel discussion in order to better inform their questions, and one prefaced her question to the panel by citing a scholarly argument against a unilateral freeze.<sup>122</sup> They were clearly not the easily frightened or brainwashed masses conservatives feared or the eager converts hoped for by disarmament activists.

Reagan administration officials used the post-broadcast coverage of the film to promote its nuclear policies, which it presented as in line with the film's message. At the beginning of the *Viewpoint* special, Koppel interviewed Secretary of State George Shultz, who appeared from his living room via a remote link to provide the administration's official response to the film.<sup>123</sup> Shultz described *The Day After* as 'vivid, dramatic portrayal of the fact that nuclear war is simply not acceptable. . . [which] has been the basis of the policy of the United States for decades now.' The Secretary repeated the deterrence line that 'the only reason we have nuclear weapons is to see to it that they aren't used' but added that the Reagan administration was committed to a reduction in the number of nuclear arms the superpowers possessed.<sup>124</sup> Assistant Secretary of Defense Richard Perle, who would go on to play an important role in the 2003 invasion of Iraq by US-led coalition forces, continued to argue that a strong nuclear arsenal was essential to the nation's security.<sup>125</sup> Two days after the broadcast, President Reagan himself spoke on the film, which he described as 'well-handled.' But, he added, 'it didn't say anything we didn't already know, that is that nuclear war would be horrible, which is why we're doing what we're doing—so there won't be one.' Reagan also added that he believed that his administration's policies represented the extent that could be done to prevent a nuclear war.<sup>126</sup> After leaving office, Reagan wrote in his memoirs that *The Day After* 'left me greatly depressed' and resolved 'to do all we can to have a deterrent and see that there is never a nuclear war.' The film demonstrated to him that a nuclear war could not be winnable and, when he realized that personnel within both the American and Soviet military expected it could be, ordered that research into SDI be expedited, as he believed it to be the best hope to prevent a conflict. However, Reagan continued to insist on the placement of Pershing II and Tomahawk missiles in Europe, believing they were necessary to prod the Soviets back to the negotiating table. Thus the film had no immediately noticeable impact on Reagan's foreign policy.<sup>127</sup>

As the afterglow of *The Day After* waned, many freeze advocates felt that the film had done as they had hoped. A position paper prepared by PSR asserted 'there appears to be a greater desire on the part of more people to learn more about this issue and to learn how they can become an active part of the search for solutions' though it cited no research to back up this claim.<sup>128</sup> Tina Krasover of Nurses Alliance for Nuclear Arms Control asserted the film would be remembered as an essential event in ending the threat of nuclear war: 'It's going to be the B.C. and A.D. of the movement. People no longer have excuses for ignorance.'<sup>129</sup> However, the impression of many educators and physicians was, in the words of one journalist, that 'the film had no measurable impact' on the public.<sup>130</sup> A poll conducted by George Washington University determined that the level of support for the nuclear freeze movement remained the same after the film was broadcast.<sup>131</sup> *Time* magazine reported that one poll indicated that more people supported President Reagan's nuclear defense policies and thought nuclear war was less likely after watching the film.<sup>132</sup> *The Day After* neither compelled vast numbers of people to march on Congress to demand a nuclear weapons freeze nor to drive them panicked into the streets and deliver the nation into the hands of the Soviets. Instead those viewers either interpreted the film through their previously held political perspectives or understood that it was a work of fiction; the upset responses were far fewer than expected. And while the film might have been the proximate cause of specific pro-freeze activities, this must be considered in the light of the already existing nuclear freeze movement and its actions in the early years of the Reagan administration. *The Day After* did not by itself inspire public action; it was caught up in an already contentious public debate and used by the participants to further their own goals. The film-makers catered to both sides, changing the script to remove politically charged references but also offering media kits to pro-disarmament forces. *The Day After* did not change the terms of the nuclear debate; the nuclear debate shaped *The Day After* and the popular response to it.

At the same time, however, *The Day After* addressed an issue of central importance to American society in the early 1980s. The film was able to generate weeks of controversy over its political content—content that challenged government propaganda about life in a post-nuclear world. It sought neither to manufacture consent for the Reagan administration's policies or damn the leaders of any nation as warmongers. Even if confected as such by the press coverage, the film was an event, something that more than half of adult Americans, of whatever political stripe, felt compelled to watch.<sup>133</sup> Many viewers debated the film with others and acted on their beliefs through marches, membership in freeze organizations or other activities. This participation allowed 'ordinary Americans' to act and speak for themselves. Even if these 'ordinary Americans' were not treated as 'experts' on nuclear war, and even if the film did not reflect their diversity, their cares and worries were printed in newspapers and magazines, and broadcast on television programs across the country. To an extent, then, the lack of lingering impact is beside the point; the film motivated popular action, if not political change. *The Day After* was not, then, a pseudo-event or reflection of cultural anxiety; it is an example of television fulfilling one of its most important roles in a democratic society.

## Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Sharon Sharp, Ed Youngblood and the journal's anonymous reviewers for their feedback, which improved this article.

## Notes

- 1 In American television, a sweeps period is when Nielsen Media Research compiles ratings and share information for all television markets in the nation. Sweeps occur four times a year: November, February, May and July. (Because the American television season has traditionally begun in the fall, November is technically the first sweeps period.) The information will then be used to establish advertising rates for the upcoming ad-time buying periods. The networks and their local affiliates frequently air special events such as *The Day After* that will attract large audiences in order to inflate ratings and share numbers collected during these periods. James G. Webster, Patricia F. Phalen and Lawrence W. Lichty, *Ratings Analysis: the theory and practice of audience research* (Mahwah, NJ, 2000), 134–137.
- 2 Jay Sharbott, Three days after, the ratings dim. *Los Angeles Times*, November 23, 1983, I:1.
- 3 John Carmody, 'Hill Street' and 'Cheers' top Emmy nominations, *The Washington Post*, August 3, 1984, B1. It was not the most watched program of the year, however; the series finale of *M\*A\*S\*H* drew nearly 106 million viewers. Until Super Bowl XLIV in 2010, that final episode was the most watched television program in history. Superbowl XLIV game a ratings winner, *Los Angeles Times*, February 9, 2011. Electronic version.
- 4 Stephen Farber, How a nuclear holocaust was staged for TV, *New York Times*, November 13, 1983, II:1.
- 5 See, for example, undated letter from Chuck Blitz to members of the National Nuclear Weapons Freeze Campaign, National Nuclear Weapons Freeze Campaign Records, Folder 35 (hereafter NNWF 35), State Historical Society of Missouri, University of Missouri–St. Louis. In addition to evidence of the NNWF's efforts, the files contain correspondence with other nuclear freeze groups, as well as copies of their press releases, organizing kits and other materials. Blitz was the director of Hope for the Future, a nuclear freeze organization.
- 6 Paul S. Boyer, *By the Bomb's Early Light: American thought and culture at the dawn of the atomic age* (New York, 1985), 358.
- 7 See, for example, Richard Grenier, The Brandon Stoddard Horror Show, *National Review*, December 9, 1983, 152–154.
- 8 Daniel Boorstin, *The Image: a guide to pseudo-events in America, 25th anniversary edition* (New York, 1987), 11–12.
- 9 See, among others, Arthur Unger, Controversy surrounds ABC's apocalyptic 'Day After,' *Christian Science Monitor*, November 16, 1983, 43; Tom Shales, Nightmare for a small planet; ABC's 'The Day After': convincing catastrophe, *Washington Post*, November 18, 1983, C1; John Corry, 'The Day After': tv as a rallying cry, *New York Times*, November 20, 1983, II:1.

- 10 Graham Murdock, Rights and Representations: public discourse and cultural citizenship, in Jostein Gripsrud (ed.) *Television and Common Knowledge* (London, 1999), 13.
- 11 David Morley, *The Nationwide Audience: structure and decoding* (London, 1980); Stuart Hall, Encoding/decoding, in: Stuart Hall, Dorothy Hobson, Andrew Lowe and Paul Willis (eds) *Culture, Media, Language* (London, 1980).
- 12 Celeste Michele Condit, The rhetorical limits of polysemy, *Television: The Critical View*, op. cit., 426–447.
- 13 See, for example, Ien Ang, *Watching Dallas: soap opera and the melodramatic imagination* (London, 1985); David Morley, *Family Television* (London, 1986); Roger Silverstone, Television and everyday life: towards an anthropology of the television audience, in: *Public Communication: the new imperatives* (London, 1990); Lyn Spigel, *Make Room for TV: television and the family ideal in post-war America* (Chicago, 1992); Anna McCarthy, *Ambient Television: visual culture and public space* (Raleigh, 2001).
- 14 See, for example, Andrea Miller and Glenn Leshner, How viewers process live, breaking and emotional television news, *Media Psychology*, 10 (2007), 23–40; Benjamin H. Detenber, Melissa R. Gotlieb, Douglas MacLeod, and Olga Malinkina, Frame intensity effects of television news stories about a high-visibility protest issue, *Mass Communication & Society*, 10(4) (2007), 439–460.
- 15 The central text in fandom studies remains Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: television fans and participatory culture* (New York, 1992). Other work in the field includes Lisa A. Lewis, *The Adoring Audience: fan culture and popular media* (London, 1992); Cheryl Harris and Alison Alexander (eds) *Theorizing Fandom: fans, subculture and identity* (New York, 1998); Matt Hills, *Fan Cultures* (London, 2002); Jonathan Gray, Cornel Sandvoss and C. Lee Harrington (eds), *Fandom: identities and communities in a mediated world* (New York, 2007).
- 16 Douglas Kellner, Cultural studies, multiculturalism and media culture, in: *Gender, Race and Class in Media: a critical reader* (Thousand Oaks, CA, 2011).
- 17 Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: the political economy of the mass media* (New York, 1988), xii. See also Benjamin M. Compaine (ed.), *Who Owns the Media? Concentration of ownership in the mass communications industry* (White Plains, NY, 1979); Douglas Kellner, *Television and the Crisis of Democracy* (Boulder, CO, 1990); Thomas Streeter, *Selling the Air: a critique of the policy of commercial broadcasting in the United States* (Chicago, IL, 1996).
- 18 Matt Ryan and Douglas Kellner, *Camera Politica: the politics and ideology of contemporary Hollywood film* (Bloomington, IN, 1988); Toby Miller, Nitin Govil, John McMurria and Richard Maxwell, *Global Hollywood* (London, 2001); Jon Lewis (ed.), *The End of Cinema as We Know It: American film in the 1990s* (New York, 2001); Paul McDonald and Janet Wasko (eds), *The Contemporary Hollywood Film Industry* (Malden, MA, 2008); Jennifer Holt and Alisa Perren (eds), *Media Industries: history, theory and method* (Malden, MA, 2009).
- 19 Toni A. Perrine, *Film and the Nuclear Age: representing cultural anxiety* (New York, 1998); Jerome F. Shapiro, Atomic bomb cinema: illness, suffering and the apocalyptic narrative, *Literature and Medicine* 17 (Spring 1998), 126–148; Cyndy Hendershot, *Paranoia, the Bomb and 1950s Science Fiction Films* (Bowling Green, OH, 1999); Patrick B. Sharp, *Savage Perils: racial frontiers and nuclear apocalypse in American culture* (Norman, OK, 2007).



- 20 Jack G. Shaheen (ed.), *Nuclear War Films* (Carbondale, IL, 1978); Mick Broderick, *Nuclear Movies: a critical analysis and filmography of international feature length films dealing with experimentation, aliens, terrorism, holocaust and other disaster scenarios* (Jefferson, NC, 1991); Jerome F. Shapiro, *Atomic Bomb Cinema: the apocalyptic imagination on film* (New York, 2002).
- 21 Gregory Waller situates the film within the context of the television movie genre in Re-Placing *The Day After*, *Cinema Journal* 26(3) (Spring 1987), 3–20. Karen A. Foss and Stephen W. Littlejohn, *The Day After: rhetorical vision in an ironic frame*, *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 3 (1986), 317–336, analyzes the organizational strategies of the film through a communication theory frame. Susan Boyd-Bowman traces the production and broadcast context of the film in Britain in ‘The Day After’: representations of the nuclear holocaust, *Screen*, 25(4–5) (1984), 71–91
- 22 Garth Jowett, Hollywood, propaganda and the bomb: nuclear images in post-World War II film, *Film & History* 18 (May 1988), 36. See also Boyer, *By the Bomb’s Early Light*, 353–362.
- 23 Stephen S. Rosenfeld, The Reagan doctrine: the guns of July, *Foreign Affairs* (Spring 1986). Electronic version retrieved from LexisNexis.com.
- 24 Address to the nation on national security by President Ronald Reagan, March 23, 1983. <http://www.fas.org/spp/starwars/offdocs/rrspch.htm>. Electronic version.
- 25 William Drozdiak, Kohl eyes curb on Pershing IIs; call to review rejected plan touches U.S., Allied nerves. *Washington Post*, July 24, 1983, A17. Electronic version retrieved from Access World News.
- 26 Hedrick Smith, Discordant voices, *New York Times*, March 20, 1981, A2.
- 27 Seymour Hersh, *The Target Is Destroyed: what really happened to flight 007, and what America knew about it* (New York, Random House, 1986), 17.
- 28 Peter Vincent Pry, *War Scare: Russia and America on the nuclear brink* (Westport, CT, 1999), 44.
- 29 Francis X. Clines, Reagan ideology of Soviet as ‘focus of evil,’ *New York Times*, March 9, 1983, A1.
- 30 See, for example, William F. Buckley, The king is dead, *National Review*, December 10, 1982. Electronic version retrieved Academic Search Premier. Charles Krauthammer, Deep down, we’re all alike, right? Wrong, *Time*, August 15, 1983. Electronic version retrieved from [www.time.com/time/archive](http://www.time.com/time/archive). George Will, Peace has its moral limits, *Washington Post*, February 20, 1983. Electronic version from Access World News.
- 31 Ronald Reagan, Address to the nation on the Soviet attack of a Korean civilian airliner, September 5, 1983, <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1983/90583a.htm>.
- 32 Cited in Ronald Powaski, *Return to Armageddon: the United States and the nuclear arms race, 1981–1999* (Oxford, 2000), 18.
- 33 Jones’s ideas about fallout shelters and the remarkable manageability of a radioactive landscape were first reported in Robert Scheer, ‘U.S. could survive in administration’s view’, *Los Angeles Times*, January 16, 1982. Scheer writes more extensively of his interview with Jones, as well as with Ronald Reagan, George Bush and other officials in Robert Scheer, *With Enough Shovels: Reagan, Bush, and nuclear war* (New York, 1982).

- 34 Margaret Engel, Civil defense: thinking about the unthinkable, *Washington Post*, November 12, 1981. Electronic version retrieved from Lexis-Nexis on May 13, 2011.
- 35 Edward Schiappa, The rhetoric of nukespeak, *Communication Monographs* 56 (January 1989), 253. Schiappa identifies domestication as part of a two-prong campaign of 'nukespeak' to obscure the truth about the horrors of nuclear conflict; the other prong was 'bureaucratization,' in which 'nuclear concepts are insulated from public inspection by acronyms or sanitized jargon' (ibid.). Although Schiappa focuses on the Strategic Defense Initiative as an example of domestication, the larger campaign to make nuclear war appear little more than irksome also fits this model.
- 36 Schiappa, 256.
- 37 For another historical account of the battle over how to present the likelihood of survival after a nuclear war, see Paul Boyer, *Fallout: a historian reflects on America's half-century encounter with nuclear weapons* (Columbus, OH, 1998), especially 71–86 and 167–174.
- 38 Quoted in Boyer, *Fallout*, 172.
- 39 Boyer *By the Bomb's Early Light*, especially 49–59 and 291–351.
- 40 Peter McGrath, David Martin, Marilyn Achiron, Phillis Malamud and Tony Clifton, Thinking the unthinkable, *Newsweek*, October 15, 1981, 34; see also <http://www.thebulletin.org/content/doomsday-clock/timeline>.
- 41 Paul Crutzen and John W. Birks, The atmosphere after a nuclear war: twilight at noon, *Ambio* 11 (2–3, 1982), 114. R.P. Turco, O.B. Toon, T.P. Ackerman, J.B. Pollack and Carl Sagan, Nuclear winter: global consequences of multiple nuclear explosions, *Science* 222 (December 23, 1983), 1283–1292. Electronic version.
- 42 David S. Meyer, *A Winter of Discontent: the nuclear freeze and American politics* (New York, 1990), 101–105.
- 43 Ibid., 87–88.
- 44 Paul L. Montgomery, Throngs fill Manhattan to protest nuclear weapons, *New York Times*, June 13, 1981, 1. Estimates of the number of marchers ranged from 500,000 to 750,000.
- 45 Boyd-Bowman, 74.
- 46 Farber, II:1.
- 47 Said Federal Emergency Management Agency spokesman Jim Halton, '[*The Day After*] does not have our blessing. We have not endorsed it whatsoever.' Quoted in Farber, How a nuclear war was staged for television. See also Lawrence S. Wittner, *The Struggle against the Bomb, Volume Three: toward nuclear abolition: a history of the world nuclear disarmament movement, 1971 to the present* (Stanford, CA, 2003), 187 and 266–267.
- 48 Lawrence Wechsler, ABC drops the big one, *The Nation*, November 26, 1983, 543.
- 49 Todd Gitlin, *Inside Prime Time* (Berkeley, 1994), 195.
- 50 Tom Shales, 'The Day After' approaches. See also Harry F. Walters, Nancy Stadtman and Chuck Twardy, Fallout over 'The Day After,' *Newsweek*, October 24, 1983, 126.
- 51 Sally Bedell Smith, ABC film depicting consequences of nuclear attack stirring debate, *New York Times*, October 6, 1983, C25.

- 52 Fred Rothenberg, 'The Day After' sold out at less than price originally sought, Associated Press, November 19, 1983, retrieved from [www.lexisnexis.com](http://www.lexisnexis.com), June 2, 2010. The Moral Majority threatened to boycott the companies who did advertise on the program, including Commodore Computers, Minolta and Dollar-Rent-a-Car. These companies downplayed the possibility of a boycott and offered mostly economic reasons for choosing to sponsor the program, including the desire to advertise their products so close to the beginning of the Christmas shopping season and the low rates charged by ABC to reach such an enormous audience. Lee Mitgang, Sponsors of 'Day After' defend against 'Moral Majority' critics, Associated Press, November 21, 1983, retrieved from [www.lexisnexis.com](http://www.lexisnexis.com), June 2, 2010.
- 53 NNWF 36: 'Writer's major sources of research,' included in undated ABC press release.
- 54 Office of Technology Assessment, *The Effects of Nuclear War* (US Congress, 1979), 4. Archived at <http://www.fas.org/nuke/intro/nuke/7906/>.
- 55 Quoted in Susan Boyd-Bowman, 'The Day After,' 73–74.
- 56 Farber, II:1. Meyer already had a successful cinematic career. His credits by this time included *Invasion of the Bee Girls* (1973, as writer), *The Seven Percent Solution* (1977, as writer adapting his own novel), *Time after Time* (1979, as writer and director) and *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan* (1982, as director).
- 57 Rick Wolff, *The Flying Nun* and post-Vatican II Catholicism, *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 19 (Summer 1991). Electronic version.
- 58 James R. Shortridge, *The Middle West: its meaning in American Culture* (Lawrence, KS, 1989), 28.
- 59 Victoria Johnson, *Heartland TV: prime time television and the struggle for U.S. identity* (New York, 2008), 21. Emphasis in the original.
- 60 Ibid., 18. Emphasis in the original.
- 61 Bruce Schulman, *The Seventies: the great shift in American culture, society and politics* (Cambridge, MA, 2001), 38–40. See also Ron Perlstein, *Nixonland: the rise of a president and the fracturing of America* (New York, 2008), 747–748.
- 62 Dudley Cleninden, Reverend Falwell inspires evangelical vote, *New York Times*, August 20, 1980, B22. See also John Gallagher and Chris Bell, *Perfect Enemies: the religious right, the gay movement and the politics of the 1990s* (New York, 1996), 18.
- 63 Thomas Frank has discussed how his home state shifted from late 19th/early 20th century radicalism to late 20th century conservatism in *What's the Matter with Kansas? How conservatives won the heart of America* (New York, 2004).
- 64 Rev. Falwell claimed in 1980 that the largest audiences for his television program *The Old Time Gospel Hour* were in Los Angeles, Philadelphia, Boston and New York. Cleninden, Reverend Falwell inspires evangelical vote, op. cit.
- 65 Murdock, Rights and responsibilities, 13.
- 66 Wechsler, 542.
- 67 NNWF 35: Undated letter from Chuck Blitz.
- 68 NNWF 35: Undated memo from Pam McIntyre to local Freeze supporters.
- 69 Bedell Smith, ABC film . . . , C25.
- 70 NNWF 35: August 15, 1983 letter from Norman Hunt to Randall Kehler. Emphasis in the original. *The Day After* had originally been scheduled for May but had been pushed back so special effects artists could perfect the images of

- mushroom clouds rising over Kansas City. This encouraged rumors that the Reagan administration was pressuring the network to cancel the movie outright, though no credible evidence exists of the truth of the rumors has surfaced. See Farber, II:1. See also Nicholas Meyer, *The View from the Bridge: memories of Star Trek and a life in Hollywood* (New York, 2009), 150.
- 71 NNWF 36: September 21, 1983 memo from Theo Brown, deputy director of Ground Zero to groups interested in educational activities around *The Day After*. See also NNWF 35: undated memo by David Cortwright, executive director of Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy, encouraging use of house parties to stimulate local news coverage, and undated memo from Pam McIntyre, op. cit., discussing 'small gatherings of friends and acquaintances...to view the film together...where people can share their personal reactions and thoughts...'.  
 72 NNWF 35: Unsigned August 8, 1983 memo regarding conversation with Chuck Blitz. NNWF 35: Unsigned September 19, 1983 memo regarding conversation with Dan McIntyre. McIntyre was a member of the Freeze.  
 73 September 21 memo from Theo Brown, op. cit.  
 74 The Freeze campaign kit can be found in NNWF 37.  
 75 NNWF 35: Undated memo from David Cortwright. Although the memo has no date, its placement in the NNWF files suggests it was written on or around September 21, 1983. See also September 21 memo from Theo Brown, op. cit. and NNWF 35: response form, distributed by the Freeze, offering assistance in organizing recruitment tables, neighborhood canvassing drives and viewing parties.  
 76 September 21 memo from Theo Brown.  
 77 NNWF 36: Cultural Information Service, *The Day After: a viewer's guide*. Founded and directed by Frederic and Mary Ann Brassat, CISTems, Inc. (Cultural Information Service's publisher) wrote viewer's guides for a number of films and television programs in the late 1970s and early 1980s. It now focuses on covering 'the spiritual renaissance' in American culture through its ecumenical website, [www.spiritualityandpractice.com](http://www.spiritualityandpractice.com). The Brassats review films and television programs for their spiritual value, although they don't provide the kind of activity guides that they produced for *The Day After*.  
 78 NNWF 36: ABC's *The Day After*: physicians' recommendations for viewing.  
 79 Bedell Smith, ABC film... The article does not mention how the ESR defined 'positive.' See also NNWF 35: undated memo from Pam McIntyre, education/outreach coordinator for the Freeze.  
 80 NNWF 36: PSR and *The Day After*.  
 81 NNWF 36: *The Day After*: speaker's manual. The manual also included a page about 'legal considerations' that reinforced that 'it would be prudent to briefly mention that [the speaker is] not connected with ABC.'  
 82 NNWF 36: October 29, 1983 letter from Stewart Mott to Dani Frend.  
 83 Undated memo from David Cortwright, op. cit.  
 84 NNWF 35: The Day Before Project Update and Proposal, dated 20 July 1983, 7.  
 85 Ibid., 2.  
 86 Barry Massey, Lawrence mayor says, 'this is still the day before,' *Associated Press*, retrieved from Lexis-Nexis June 20, 2011.  
 87 NNWF 37: Let Lawrence Live/Target Kansas City activities packet. Longhurst's suggestion that Reagan and Andropov meet in Lawrence is covered in Tom Morganthau, After 'The Day After.' *Newsweek*, December 5, 1983, 62.

- 88 Powalski, *Return to Armageddon*, 46.
- 89 Quoted in Cocks, 85.
- 90 Sally Bedell Smith, Film on nuclear war already causing wide fallout of political activity, *New York Times*, November 17, 1983, A20. Falwell and other MAD advocates were not entitled to air time to present their views under the equal time rule, which applied only to political candidates, not issues. The Fairness Doctrine, an FCC policy that required television stations to provide equal time to divergent perspectives on political issues, was in 1983 under attack by social and political conservatives—including Rev. Falwell. The doctrine was weakened over the course of the 1980s and, by 1989, was for all intents and purposes dead. See Craig R. Smith, The campaign to repeal the Fairness Doctrine, *Rhetoric & Public Affairs*, 2(3) (Fall 1999), 481–505. Smith played an important role in the demise of the doctrine.
- 91 Quoted in Cocks, 85.
- 92 William F. Buckley, Jr. On the right: ‘The Day After.’ *National Review*, December 23, 1983, 163.
- 93 Sullivan, ‘After the shock.’
- 94 Bedell Smith, ABC film . . . .
- 95 *MacNeil Lehrer News Hour*, November 21, 1983. Transcript retrieved from Lexis-Nexis.
- 96 Henry Hyde, What the ‘Day After’ [sic] missed, *Chicago Tribune*, November 21, 1983, I:19. See also Grenier, The Brandon Stoddard Horror Show, op. cit., and Jay Cocks, The nightmare comes home, *Time*, October 24, 1983, 86. Even some of the film’s defenders considered television to be too crass a medium to treat so important a subject. For example, renowned film critic Andrew Sarris generally liked the film but ultimately felt it didn’t do enough to break out of the standard television movie formula; see Andrew Sarris, Heavy subjects, *Village Voice*, December 6, 1983, 59. Paul Attanasio, while agreeing with the film’s message that war would not be survivable, negatively compared the film to *Kiss Me Deadly* and *Dr. Strangelove*; see Paul Attanasio, Big bang, little box, *The New Republic*, November 28, 1983, 14.
- 97 David Hoffman and Lou Cannon, ABC’s ‘The Day After’; White House to counterattack movie, *Washington Post*, November 18, 1983, A1.
- 98 Estimates for the number of viewers the film would attract ranged from 30 to 80 million viewers. See, for example, undated memo from Chuck Blitz, op. cit., undated memo from Pam McIntyre, op. cit.
- 99 Walters, 66.
- 100 Preston, 13.
- 101 Joyce Purnick, Schools given guidance on atom-war tv film, *New York Times*, November 17, 1983, B8.
- 102 Peter J. Boyner and John J. Goldman, ‘The Day After’ airs amid debate, fear, intense hype, *Los Angeles Times*, November 21, 1983, 18.
- 103 Boyer and Goldman, 18.
- 104 James Barron, Millions of Americans gather to view nuclear war on TV, *New York Times*, November 21, 1983, A18.
- 105 Ibid.
- 106 Carla Hall, Carol Krucoff and Charlotte Sutton, The night of ‘The Day After’; trying to make sense of TV’s nuclear vision, *Washington Post*, November 21, 1983, B1.

- 107 Leon Wynter, TV movie on nuclear war leaves pupils numbed, *Washington Post*, November 22, 1983, B5.
- 108 For example: Barbara Brotman, William Recktenwald and Patrick Reardon, TV's 'Day After' ignites war of emotions, *Chicago Tribune*, November 21, 1983, 1. Judith Michaelson, Aftermath of a long night's watch at USC, *Los Angeles Times*, November 21, 1983, VI:1. Robert D. McFadden, Atomic war film spurs nationwide discussion, *New York Times*, November 22, 1983, A27.
- 109 Malcolm, A26.
- 110 Tom Morgenthau, After 'The Day After.' Six months after the broadcast, one professor of pediatrics and psychiatry flatly stated that 'the cautions [about depression in the wake of the film] were gratuitous and overexaggerated.' Quoted in Glenn Collins, 'Day After' fades, but debate on effects lingers, *New York Times*, June 19, 1984, A12.
- 111 Peter Perl, Film spurs anti-nuclear activities, *Washington Post*, November 22, 1983, A6.
- 112 Glenn Collins, Students voice fear and hopelessness in talks the day after 'The Day After,' *New York Times*, November 22, 1983, A26. See also Hall, Krucoff and Sutton, The night of 'The Day After,' op. cit.
- 113 Ibid.
- 114 Barbara Brotman, 'Destroyed' town at odds the day after, *Chicago Tribune*, November 22, 1983, 2.
- 115 Morgenthau, 62.
- 116 Collins, Students voice fear, and 'Day After' fades.
- 117 Collins, 'Day After' fades.
- 118 Transcript of *McNeil/Lehrer NewsHour*, November 21, 1983. Retrieved from lexis-nexis.com June 2, 2010.
- 119 Ibid.
- 120 Ibid.
- 121 *Viewpoint*, November 20, 1983; recording of telecast provided by Vanderbilt Television Archive, viewed June 20, 2010.
- 122 The questioner seems to cite one 'Dr. Sahadov' but I have been unable to determine exactly who she means or what the scholar's specific arguments were. Her question prompts Sagan's famous analogy in which he compares the situation between the United States and the Soviet Union to two implacable foes sitting in a room 'awash with gasoline,' worrying about who has more matches. Scowcroft interjects to remind Sagan that Russian dissident Andrei Sakharov supported the deployment of MX missiles in Europe. It is possible that the audience member was referring to Dr. Sakharov but pronounced his name in an unusual way.
- 123 That Schultz would provide an official response was announced a few days before the film's broadcast. Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger had also been considered as the administration's representative on *Viewpoint*. See Hoffman and Cannon, ABC's 'The Day After'; White House to counterattack movie.
- 124 In actuality, the Reagan administration had sought to modernize and increase the number of nuclear weapons possessed by the United States. See Powaski, *Return to Armageddon*, 14–18 and Lawrence Wittner, *The Struggle against the Bomb*, 116–123. The administration had removed warheads from Europe but these were older or obsolete weapons with, freeze advocates argued, little strategic or tactical value and thus no meaningful impact on the threat of nuclear destruction. See Michael



- Getler, TV horror heightens nuclear-arms debate, *Washington Post*, November 22, 1983, A1.
- 125 Ibid. See also Fox Butterfield, Foes of nuclear arms raise organize for '84 campaign, *New York Times*, December 5, 1983, A14. On Perle's role in promoting Operation Desert Storm, see James Mann, *Rise of the Vulcans: the history of Bush's war cabinet* (New York, 2004).
- 126 Michael Getler, TV horror heightens nuclear-arms debate.
- 127 Ronald Reagan, *An American Life* (New York, 1990), 585–587. See also Powalski, *Return to Armageddon*, 42–44.
- 128 NNWF 36: The position paper is included with a February 11, 1984 from Abram Claude to Randy Kehler.
- 129 Fox Butterfield, Foes of nuclear arms raise organize for '84 campaign.
- 130 Collins, 'Day After' fades.
- 131 Ibid. See also William Schneider, ABC film has little impact but public still wants a freeze, *Los Angeles Times*, November 27, 1983, 1, 3.
- 132 James Kelly, Fallout from a TV attack, *Time*, December 5, 1983, 39. Two years later, a quantitative study reinforced this argument but noted that the film underscored the importance of nuclear war as a social and political concern in the minds of many viewers. See Stanley Feldman and Lee Sigelman, The political impact of prime time television: 'The Day After,' *The Journal of Politics* 45(2) (1983), 556–578.
- 133 In 1980, the adult population of the United States was 172,456,000. <http://www2.census.gov/prod2/statcomp/documents/1991-02.pdf>.

---

**Deron Overpeck** is an assistant professor in the Radio Television Film program in the Department of Communication and Journalism at Auburn University. His research has appeared in *Film History*, *Film Quarterly*, *American Cinema of the 1970s* (2007) and *Explorations in New Cinema History: approaches and case studies* (2011).

---