

FROM POP CULTURE TO NUCLEAR DEBATE: THE IMPACT OF *THE DAY AFTER* IN
LAWRENCE AND KANSAS CITY

A THESIS IN
History

Presented to the Faculty of the University
of Missouri-Kansas City in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree

MASTER OF ARTS

by
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B.A., University of Missouri-Kansas City, 2014

Kansas City, Missouri
2017

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the creation and response in America to the 1983 nuclear disaster film *The Day After*. Fueled by renewed nuclear buildup of the 1980s Cold War, the release of the movie became a worldwide sensation, but historians have often contested the overall impact of its release on the grounds of its limited influence on nuclear politics in America. This thesis analyzes the political ramifications and the cultural symbolism of *The Day After* from its production to its release, arguing that the importance of the film lies in its use as an influential cultural text amplifying repressed nuclear anxieties and using familiar symbolism to relay the dangers of nuclear weapons to a large public audience and sensationalist media. The path from filming to release is charted through accounts from those involved in its creation and promotion, as well as media accounts in the two cities in which *The Day After* is based and subsequent coverage was focused - Lawrence, Kansas and Kansas City. Ultimately, the movie had limited political influence due to muddled messaging

within the film and intense debate between pro-nuclear and anti-nuclear organizations, but the film clearly influenced the culture of the Cold War, magnifying nuclear fears and interest in the American public.

The faculty listed below, appointed by the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences have examined a thesis titled “From Pop Culture to Nuclear Debate: The Impact of *The Day After* in Lawrence and Kansas City,” presented by Luke Scheil, candidate for the Master of Arts degree, and certify that in their opinion it is worthy of acceptance.

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CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	iii
Chapter	
1. INTRODUCTION	1
2. THE NUCLEAR DEBATE	6
3. THE CREATION AND MEANINGS OF <i>THE DAY AFTER</i>	13
4. LOCAL VIEWS OF <i>THE DAY AFTER</i>	19
BIBLIOGRAPHY	39
VITA	42

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

On November 20, 1983, citizens of Kansas City metropolitan area and Lawrence, Kansas watched in horror as nuclear missiles destroyed their communities.¹ Hundreds of traumatized survivors, some horribly injured and many who would soon succumb to the effects of radiation sickness, wandered helplessly among the ruins of their homes and neighborhoods. In reality, these terrible scenes were part of an ABC TV-movie titled *The Day After*. It premiered to a national audience of over one hundred million viewers, the largest ever for a film's debut on television.² The film became a shared experience for Americans, many of whom for the first time witnessed a realistic portrayal of a crippling nuclear blast that struck the heart of the United States. Viewers witnessed an electromagnetic pulse wave that disabled most electronics and communications, the devastating impact of nuclear warheads, the spread of fallout, and finally, the development of radiation sickness among the survivors. Viewers in Kansas City and Lawrence, who reveled in the media

¹ At the time, the Kansas City metropolitan area featured a population of nearly 1.5 million within Missouri and Kansas. Lawrence, Kansas is the home of the University of Kansas, and featured a population of nearly 50,000 in 1980. U.S. Census Bureau, *1980 Census of Population*, (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1980).

² "About 100 Million Tuned in, ABC Says," *Kansas City Star*, November 21, 1983. The film would go on to debut in fifteen other countries over the next five months through theatrical releases, mostly within Western and Northern Europe. Internet Movie Database, "The Day After," <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0085404/> (accessed December 8, 2016)

attention their communities received in the run up to the film's release, were perhaps especially sobered by the sight of their fictive homes and loved ones obliterated. As the film later faded to black without an uplifting resolution, the impact of *The Day After* and its coverage in both the national and local media was only just beginning.

The Day After attracted extensive media attention in the lead up to its release and immediately following its airing. Prior to its release, political and professional groups issued stern warnings concerning the film's graphic and controversial content. Following its broadcast, the conversation shifted to debate over its implications on American nuclear policy and of nuclear weapons in general. Its notoriety grew in no small part because it coincided with the escalation of Cold War tensions that had accompanied Ronald Reagan's ascendancy to the presidency. Unprecedented increases in U.S. defense spending; including large investments on nuclear weapons, and anti-Communist rhetoric reminiscent of the 1950s not only drew Soviet ire, but also helped fuel a grassroots anti-nuclear weapons movement in Western Europe and the United States.

In spite of all the hullabaloo and hype, it is surprising that historians have had difficulty determining if *The Day After* carried any long-term impact on American political discourse. In fact, wary of alienating commercial sponsors and government officials, ABC producers had intended the film not to carry a clear political message either pro or con on nuclear weapons and U.S. nuclear policy. Responses to the film were as contentious and varied as the greater nuclear debate of the time - ranging from calls to negotiate a bilateral freeze in nuclear weapons production with the Soviets to redoubling the Reagan arms

buildup. National and local polls all showed that the film ultimately failed to significantly sway public opinion one way or another regarding nuclear weapons policy.³

While conceding that the political meanings of *The Day After* turned out to be at best muddled, this study examines the television drama primarily as a nuanced but powerful cultural text. The film is of historical importance because it exposes a 1980s social landscape strewn with nuclear anxieties. Anthropologist Clifford Geertz describes culture not as a fixed entity or power, but as fluid “webs of significance” that provide public context behind events, behaviors and processes.⁴ The power of *The Day After* resided in its realistic portrayals of the physical devastation that would accompany a Soviet-American nuclear exchange and its ability to make popular imaginings of nuclear war real to its audience through well-known and coded cultural symbols. These cultural symbols included not only deep-seeded associations with nuclear weapons during the twentieth century such as fear, destruction, safety, or patriotism, but also depictions of the Midwest, family structures, the urban and the rural American environment. In doing so, *The Day After* served as a tool of nuclear education wrapped in an easily understood and familiar story for the American public. The extensive media coverage the broadcast garnered invited millions of Americans, from all walks of life, to take part in a contentious nuclear debate that had already been growing both nationally and overseas. Anti-nuclear activists, Reagan administration spokespersons, and conservatives might differ in their assessments, but they all felt compelled to speak their minds to a nation whose people had been in some ways traumatized and sensitized by the movie.

³ Gregory S. Reeves, "Survey Finds Many Minds Clouded by Nuclear Specter," *The Kansas City Star*, November 22, 1983.

⁴ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (Basic Books, 1973), 5, 14.

While many commentators often dismissed the film as sensational or as overtly anti-nuclear political propaganda, *The Day After* struck a chord at the grassroots level by articulating Americans' deep-seated anxieties about life in the nuclear age. Historian Paul Boyer examined the nation's ambiguous response to the advent of the nuclear age in his influential study *By the Bomb's Early Light*. On the one hand relieved to have seen a rapid end to World War II with Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the American people nonetheless slowly and unsteadily adjusted to a new age in which destruction by a foreign power or even human extinction itself became a real possibility. Boyer argued that this nuclear anxiety remained an undercurrent in American cultural consciousness during the Cold War, surfacing in times of nuclear unrest, technological advances, and surges of activism to the forefront of mainstream culture.⁵ Historian Stephen Whitfield has explained how popular motion pictures such as the 1960s box office hit *Dr. Strangelove* stand among the era's most powerful, nuclear cultural texts.⁶

This study carries Boyer's cultural analysis forward to the 1980s when a renewed Cold War threatened the nation and the world with an even more destructive outcome than previously believed. The controversial film *The Day After* did not insinuate itself into popular culture organically – it was rather a product of Hollywood capitalizing on embedded emotions and nuclear symbols present in America since 1945. The convergence of popular

⁵ Paul Boyer, *By the Bomb's Early Light: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), 365. Boyer's work focuses on the period of 1945-1950, but notes that nuclear awareness became an integral part of American culture during the early 1960s and the early 1980s as well.

⁶ Stephen Whitfield, *Cold War Culture* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996.), 220-221.

culture and nuclear fears surrounding the release of *The Day After* once again forced Americans to recognize their nuclear anxieties, and drew out intense political debate concerning the future of American nuclear policy.

To probe the movie's broadcast as a constructed yet collective, psychic event this essay focuses not only on the film's narrative, but also on the media coverage and public discussion it provoked. Responses no doubt varied from community to community. This paper charts and analyzes the build-up in coverage and interest in the film and the ensuing debate at fictional 'ground zero', namely in Lawrence, KS and the Kansas City area where the film was in fact shot. Focusing on Lawrence and Kansas City allows for an especially detailed discussion of the local media's coverage of *The Day After*, since local reading and viewing audiences followed the movie's journey from conceptualization and filming in the summer of 1982 through its broadcast and subsequent responses surrounding the release of the film in November 1983.

The first section of this paper contextualizes the nuclear policy debate in the early 1980s, as well as the increasing Cold War tensions and arms buildup of the early Reagan administration. The second section analyzes *The Day After* itself, including its production, plot, and mixed political meanings. The third and final section of this paper tracks the coverage of *The Day After* and public reactions to the film in Lawrence and Kansas City. This includes the initial reactions to the film's production, the increasingly politicized reactions that both preceded and followed the film's broadcast, and the resulting impact of the local debate ignited by the film.

CHAPTER 2

THE NUCLEAR DEBATE

The debate over nuclear weapons that *The Day After* ignited on TV screens and in media coverage did not begin or end with the film, but rather stood as the latest flash point in a long history of anti-nuclear sentiment fostered by groups of scientists, politicians, and activists throughout much of the Cold War. The nuclear debate during the Cold War centered primarily on the opposing beliefs in a pro-nuclear policy of deterrence versus support of nuclear de-escalation, arms control or removal. The platform of nuclear deterrence supported the theory of "peace through strength," in that the existence of international nuclear arsenals prevented large-scale aggression or conflict during the Cold War through the threat of mutually assured destruction.¹ On the other side of the debate, individuals and groups questioned the viability of nuclear arsenals on ethical, financial, environmental and political grounds. To them, deterrence could not be sustainable forever, with too much of the world at risk with the threat of a new nuclear conflict, no matter how unlikely.

In the infancy of the nuclear age, scientists such as Eugene Rabinowitch of the *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists* and pacifist groups sought to inform the American public of the alarming dangers of radioactive fallout and the destructiveness of the rapidly increasing supply of nuclear weapons. In the McCarthy era, some arms build-up defenders accused

¹ Lawrence Wittner, *The Struggle Against the Bomb, Volume Three: Toward Nuclear Abolition* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), ix.

early anti-nuclear intellectuals and activists of sympathizing or cavorting with the Soviet Union.² The red baiting eased over time, however. In 1957, the National Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy, or SANE, formed out of a merger of pacifist, religious, and scientific groups with the urgent mission to educate the public and encourage political action in an attempt to encourage the U.S. to ban nuclear testing. SANE embarked upon an advertising campaign that warned the American public of the health risks of continued widespread nuclear testing and the potential destruction of nuclear war.

When the U.S. and Soviet Union began negotiating a test ban treaty in 1958, SANE broadened its message to promote nuclear disarmament rather than just an end to nuclear testing.³ SANE also participated more directly in international nuclear politics, including helping to broker a return to test ban negotiations between Nikita Khrushchev and John F. Kennedy in 1963.⁴ SANE continued as an advocate for peace during the Vietnam War, harnessing liberal, middle class opposition to the war during the 1960s and early 1970s. After the war, SANE continued to promote anti-nuclear causes such as campaigning to stop the development and deployment of new missile and nuclear technology, as well as supporting nuclear treaties such as SALT and SALT II in the 1970s, during the détente period of eased Cold War hostilities. As historian Milton Katz notes, SANE's popularity and influence

² Milton Katz, *Ban the Bomb A History of SANE, the Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1987), 11.

³ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 84.

nonetheless effectively declined during the Cold War détente of the late 1960s-1980s, as public concern about nuclear weapons decreased.⁵

SANE and other anti-nuclear groups experienced a renaissance in the early 1980s as a result of the policies of the Reagan administration and increased Cold War hostility between the two world powers. The largest and most popular anti-nuclear movement of the period was not SANE, however, but the largely grassroots based nuclear freeze campaign formed in 1981. Similar to SANE, the freeze campaign began from the merger of smaller anti-nuclear liberal groups and focused its advertising and political strength on educating the middle-class public and engaging in political lobbying. According to sociologists Frances McCrea and Gerald Markle, what made the freeze campaign different and ultimately more popular than its predecessors was its focus on clearly stated peace goals that must be "realistic, significant, and attractive to the public."⁶ This was primarily due to the influence of former arms analyst and MIT graduate Randall Forsberg, who suggested that a freeze on nuclear weapon testing, production, and deployment would prove to be a more politically feasible goal than a total nuclear disarmament. Forsberg hoped that a measured approach would also effectively control the nuclear arms race as well as preserve social and political order until the negotiation of long-term nuclear arms reductions. With the nuclear freeze campaign, more controversial or minority support measures "...were to be sacrificed for broad, middle-class appeal."⁷

⁵ Ibid., 125.

⁶ Frances B. McCrea and Gerald E. Markle, *Minutes to Midnight: Nuclear Weapons Protest in America* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1989), 98.

⁷ Ibid., 99, 104.

By 1982, the freeze campaign enjoyed a majority of support by the American public, consistent coverage by the national media and political support by liberal members of both federal and state governments. On June 12, one million people marched in the streets and Central Park of New York City to show support for limiting military spending and ending the arms race, the largest march in American history at the time. That same year, a CBS/New York Times poll found that seventy-two percent of Americans favored a bilateral nuclear freeze, as grassroots support and organizations were present in all fifty states.⁸ A freeze resolution in the House of Representatives was only narrowly defeated, 204-202 in 1982, and state resolutions supporting the freeze in the midterm elections of that year were approved by nine of the ten states in which it appeared on the ballot.⁹

Internationally, anti-nuclear groups in Northern and Western Europe also enjoyed a dramatic surge in popular support during the early 1980s. Similar to the United States, anti-nuclear protest within Europe sought to counter U.S. and NATO military policy, as well as the deployment of new advanced nuclear weapons within Europe. Five million anti-nuclear protesters took to the streets across Europe in the fall of 1983 alone, including crowds of 500,000 in Bonn, West Germany and 400,000 in London.¹⁰ Like SANE in the late 1950s and early 1960s, the worldwide anti-nuclear movement in the 1980s achieved its greatest success when it was able to directly counter a heightened level of Cold War rhetoric and nuclear awareness brought to the forefront of society.

⁸ Katz, 150-153.

⁹ McCrea and Markle, 112.

¹⁰ Wittner, 138, 151, 168.

The rise in popularity of the nuclear freeze movement, and the production and release of *The Day After* came at a time when the Reagan administration's foreign policy increasingly relied on nuclear arms as a counterweight to Soviet power. An avid anti-communist ideologue, Reagan railed against the moral and political evils of the Soviet Union, and centralized his national security policy upon the goal of negotiation through strength. Much of this proposed strength came from significant increases in the U.S. defense budget and the buildup of new advanced weaponry and technology. In 1982, the U.S. defense budget increased by fifteen percent over that of 1981, a budget that already increased by twelve percent over President Jimmy Carter's 1980 budget.¹¹ Reagan's five-year planned budget for defense exceeded \$1.6 trillion designed to surpass a much touted Soviet weapons buildup.¹² Much of this buildup focused on the production of new nuclear armaments such as B-1 bombers, intercontinental missiles, submarines equipped with nuclear missiles, and increasing research and development into new nuclear warhead delivery systems. Although Reagan indicated a willingness to negotiate with the Soviet Union, his administration's public policy dictated that it must be from a position of military strength, featuring one of the largest arms buildups of the Cold War.

In addition to increasing nuclear and conventional arms, the Reagan administration in 1982 and 1983 ratcheted up its anti-Soviet foreign policy. The administration began the policy of using "low intensity conflicts" in Third World nations to counteract communist-

¹¹ Melvyn P. Leffler, *For the Soul of Mankind: The United States, the Soviet Union, and the Cold War* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007), 346.

¹² Walter LaFeber, *America, Russia, and the Cold War, 1945-1996* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1997), 302.

leaning regimes in Nicaragua, Afghanistan, and Angola. These conflicts were based around U.S. supported (often using native forces) counterinsurgency campaigns designed to prevent the direct or indirect spread of communism.¹³ In March 1983, Reagan announced his intention to launch the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI, also nicknamed "Star Wars" by its critics), a plan to build a space-based system to intercept enemy missiles. The president proposed eventually sharing the completed technology with the Soviet Union, but the announcement deeply concerned Russian leaders who believed that such a system jeopardized their own defensive capabilities and undermined the nuclear balance of power.¹⁴ President Reagan derided the Soviet Union in speeches concerning foreign policy and the Soviet society, often painting the Soviet Union as incompatible with a peaceful world. In a speech given to evangelical Christians in March of 1983, Reagan referred to Russia as an "evil empire," one living in "totalitarian darkness."¹⁵

The rhetoric and actions from the Soviet Union in kind also considerably raised Cold War anxieties. The Soviet Union continued escalating its military campaign in Afghanistan, and defensive posturing from the new Soviet Premier Yuri Andropov continued fueling the tension between the two sides. The Soviets countered the United States' nuclear armament buildup with their own increasing military budgets and production, accelerating the nuclear arms race. Diplomatic relations increasingly frayed between the two Cold War enemies. In September 1983, the Soviet Union shot down a South Korean commercial airliner that accidentally flew over secret Russian military bases during a course deviation.

¹³ Ibid., 307.

¹⁴ Leffler, 354.

¹⁵ Ibid, 353.

Believing the flight to be part of a U.S. spy effort, the Soviet Union called the incident "a deliberate provocation," while the U.S. was infuriated by the attack on a civilian airliner that also had a U.S. congressman aboard.¹⁶ By the end of 1983, a member of the Soviet Politburo referred to the tension between both sides as "white hot, thoroughly white hot," and Andropov declared that the Cold War in 1983 was at its tensest point since the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962, when both sides came perilously close to nuclear war.¹⁷

¹⁶ LaFeber, 321.

¹⁷ Leffler, 357-358.

CHAPTER 3
THE CREATION AND MEANINGS OF *THE DAY AFTER*

With social awareness of nuclear weapons at a high point in America, the stage was set for a film that dealt graphically with the horrors of nuclear warfare. Hollywood capitalized on the hot button issue with *The Day After* along with several other commercially successful nuclear war films during the early 1980s. Communications scholar Joyce Evans notes that Hollywood's cultural interaction with nuclear subjects largely coincided with periods of social concerns surrounding nuclear technology, political issues or public awareness of nuclear strategy. During these periods, productions would exploit deep-seated nuclear anxieties concerning destruction, war, and radiation, while often updating the subject matter to mirror new nuclear concerns or potential scenarios.¹ Nuclear themed films *On the Beach* (1959), *Dr Strangelove* (1964) and *The China Syndrome* (1979) each enjoyed commercial success coinciding respectively with the rise of SANE, the Cuban Missile Crisis, and the Three Mile Island nuclear power disaster.² With the public interest in nuclear issues of the early 1980s, a new wave of popular films mixing the threat of nuclear warfare with popular culture began to emerge, including *War Games*, *Testament*, and *The Day After* all in

¹ Joyce A. Evans, *Celluloid Mushroom Clouds: Hollywood and the Atomic Bomb* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998), 171.

² Michael London, "Nuclear Disasters Proliferate on Film," *The Kansas City Times*, November 19, 1983.

1983. According to MGM/United Artists vice chairman Frank Yablans in an interview that same year, "...when you have hundreds of thousands of people protesting and raising the issue, it becomes viable in terms of film and television."³

The commercial viability of the depressing subject of nuclear annihilation during the 1980s is mainly what spurred the interest in ABC Circle Films' production of *The Day After*. The 1979 nuclear power disaster film *The China Syndrome* deeply affected ABC Motion Pictures president Brandon Stoddard, and he initially conceived the idea of ABC creating a four-part miniseries dealing with the reality of another public concern, nuclear war.⁴ Stoddard later considered *The Day After* to be one of the most important TV-movies to ever air.⁵ After ABC signed off on the contentious film, the network attached writer Edward Hume and director Nicholas Meyer to the project. Meyer, fresh off the success of *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan*, initially had reservations about directing what could be seen as a step down in his career, a TV-movie. The importance of the film's subject, as well as the potential of a large TV-viewing audience, convinced Meyer, as it had Stoddard, to work on the project.⁶ Meyer observed at the time that a reasonably accurate account of the aftermath of a

³ Ibid.

⁴ Deron Overpeck, "'Remember! It's Only a Movie!' Expectations and Receptions of *The Day After* (1983)," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 32 (June 2012): 272. During the process of production and editing, *The Day After* was reduced in scale from a four-part miniseries to a two part film to be aired over two nights, and then finally to the single-night 127 minute movie.

⁵ Michael London, "Nuclear Disasters Proliferate on Film," *The Kansas City Times*, November 19, 1983.

⁶ Chuck Twardy, "Nicholas Meyer Tackles Biggest Fantasy," *Lawrence Journal-World*, September 5, 1982.

nuclear exchange would give the public "a look at what nuclear war will look like." It would "be informational at least and sobering at best."⁷

The Day After centers on several sets of characters and their families, and opens on scenic landscape shots as people go about their daily lives in Kansas City, Lawrence, Kansas, and the surrounding rural communities. According to ABC spokesman Dan Doran, the story was placed in Kansas City and Lawrence because: "We wanted to show the average citizen, not the president of the United States. This is the middle of the country geographically, politically, financially. It's a cross section of the country."⁸ Meyer also noted that the location was "in the crosshairs of the country," an area surrounded by missile silos along the border of Missouri and Kansas and other military targets such as Whiteman Air Force Base in nearby Knob Noster, Missouri.⁹ As it happened, the location also took in a wide swath of cultural environments, each with corresponding character archetypes: Kansas City as the bustling urban center, Lawrence as the small college town, and the surrounding area as a patchwork of rural development and farmland.

The idyllic surroundings and lives of those living in Kansas City and Lawrence become the focus of the film's first act. Within this act, the viewer follows the normal daily routines of Dr. Russell Oakes (played by Jason Robards, the primary star attached to the project), a group of rural farmers named the Dahlbergs, and the other main characters. The cast includes a wide variety of character types, drawn from diverse backgrounds and

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Sharon Applebaum, "Lawrence Folks Dying to be in Movie," *Kansas City Star*, September 3, 1982.

⁹ Chuck Twardy, "Fake Farmstead Goes Up in Flames for Film," *Lawrence Journal-World*, August 17, 1982.

representing many races, socioeconomic backgrounds, age groups, and political leanings. Their lives take on an almost mythical simplicity often associated with life in the Midwest. One father disapproves of his daughter's boyfriend. Another ponders the pitfalls of spending too much time at work. According to Meyer, the "seductive banality" of the characters' lives intended to impart a comforting cultural familiarity to the viewer, before presenting the unfamiliar and shocking story of nuclear destruction and its aftermath.¹⁰

As the Midwesterners go about their daily business, news reports on televisions and radios that the characters listen to give updates about an increasingly dangerous conflict brewing between the Soviets and NATO in Germany. Many of the characters brush off the chance of an actual war as slim, noting that they had lived with nuclear weapons for forty years and that an actual nuclear war was inconceivable. Dr. Oakes' own apathy toward the threat of nuclear warfare is clear as he comments that the Cuban Missile Crisis resulted in no nuclear exchange, and that nuclear deterrence would surely continue to work. The filmic nuclear apathy mirrors the nation's very real lack of nuclear awareness that can only be punctured by the outbreak of a real war.

When the news reports coming out of Europe report on the escalation of a full-blown conflict, the nuclear belligerent's identity remains a mystery – a deliberate ploy according to Meyer and screenwriter Edward Hume. They wanted to make the film "not about global politics, not about generals or presidents. It's what happens to this family." Notably, ABC also promoted the film as having no "political stand" on specific foreign policy or nuclear

¹⁰ Nicholas Meyer, *The View From the Bridge: Memories of Star Trek and a Life in Hollywood* (New York: Viking, 2009), 143.

arms plans.¹¹ Instead of portraying the Soviet Union as an 'evil empire' that ushered in a nuclear war, the ambiguity of the conflict points toward a message of universal concern over nuclear destruction itself. The principal purpose was to explore the deeply human and emotional consequences of nuclear war rather than the implications of who started such as conflict.¹²

The conflict soon engulfs Europe and chaos on the streets of Lawrence and Kansas City unfolds. The launch of U.S. missiles from their silos surrounding the cities fill the skies and the populace panics when familiar air raid sirens sound. In an instant, an airburst nuclear detonation hits Kansas City and the surrounding area. The airburst delivers an electromagnetic pulse that wipes out all electricity within the region, and viewers learn that a nuclear attack encompasses more than a mere blast. It disrupts the very core of modern, daily life. As the stunned populace scrambles for shelter, several nuclear warheads detonate in Kansas City and at other nearby targets, obliterating the city and hundreds of thousands of lives in a violent montage of special effects and stock footage. The destruction of Kansas City, most of Lawrence and the surrounding area is only the halfway point for the film, as the survivors must now cope with the issue of fallout, radiation sickness, the breakdown of public order, and the lack of supplies through limited government intervention.

The days after the nuclear devastation turn into weeks, and the film becomes a macabre tale of limited survival with limited hope of rebuilding in the aftermath. Those that

¹¹ Chuck Twardy, "Students Assume War-torn Look as Film Shooting Winds Down," *Lawrence Journal-World*, September 8, 1982.

¹² Meyer, 151-152. Network executives preferred a more direct answer as to the aggressor in the film so as to be more palatable to the American public, but Meyer's vision prevailed.

survived were either far away from the blasts or within the temporary safety of fallout shelters. The surviving U.S. president delivers a radio address promising that the U.S. hit the Soviets just as hard (it is not made clear if it was as a first strike or in retaliation) and that America will never surrender its values. In the backdrop of this speech, there is no hint of recovery on the ground. The heartland and its people lay devastated, leaving those who survived, along with the viewing audience, with little hope that a better tomorrow in fact exists. The film's sobering ending in many ways reinforces Meyer's intended message, as he hoped that "most people are frightened by it, most people are disturbed by it, upset by it, depressed by it." It was this sense of overwhelming emotion that Meyer hoped would shock viewers into confronting the destructive reality of nuclear war, awakening their nuclear anxieties.¹³

¹³ Chuck Twardy, "Meyer Says Film Speaks for Itself," *Lawrence Journal-World*, October 13, 1983.

CHAPTER 4
LOCAL VIEWS OF *THE DAY AFTER*

The message that a Soviet-American nuclear exchange would wreak devastation and despair on the heartland constituted only part of the cultural footprint of *The Day After*. Surrounding the film's debut on November 20, 1983, media coverage sensationalized the broadcast, but it also tried to highlight its didactic qualities. Most commentators characterized *The Day After* as an important educational tool and as a vehicle for emotional yet informed public debate on nuclear weapons policy. The question is: how much educational content did the film contain and what importance was placed upon the film by the media and public? Thus, an in-depth analysis of the print and broadcast media provides considerable insight into the film's deep but ambiguous cultural power.

While the film captured nationwide media attention, the coverage proved especially extensive in Kansas City and Lawrence primarily due to the film's production and plot centering on these communities. Indeed, local media outlets descended in droves on shooting locations for interviews and commentary from July to September of 1982. The early local coverage of the film in Lawrence and Kansas City largely omitted the narrative of nuclear debate and public fears that surrounded the film's release in the fall of 1983. The big story centered instead on the public excitement the production evoked.

The very first reporting focused on the film producers' desire for local actors and extras, including tryouts in Lawrence and at a forum at the Crown Center shopping mall in downtown Kansas City. ABC casting directors Ross Brown and Mary West remarked that many of those who auditioned appeared "too glamorous," and that they were casting in Kansas City to look for "real people types."¹ If the casting process initially failed to yield "authentic" mid-westerners, the local excitement surrounding the film was very real. The production certainly constituted a local cultural event. Residents in Lawrence were described as "filled with Kansas hospitality but genial Midwestern doubt" when the film's crew asked to transform their property into the site of a missile silo. Another property owner willingly gave the film crew permission to destroy his old barn, with the studio had promising to build a new livestock pen in its place.² Production designer Peter Wooley remarked that property owners initially met him with skepticism over cooperation to create the devastated scenes in Lawrence, noting that, "The hardest thing is making people believe you when you say 'Hello, can we tear out the front of your building?'"³

Heavily featured in this early media coverage of *The Day After* were accounts of local extras appearing in the film and their excitement to be involved in the production. These stories detailed the novelty of dressing up in tattered clothes and smeared with dirt, faux-fallout, or gruesome makeup, and acting out nuclear fiction, a process that thousands excitedly took part in. In one scene filmed in Lawrence, "everyone from college professors to

¹ Michael Cheers, "Search for TV Stars Not Yielding Right Types," *The Kansas City Times*, July 19, 1982.

² James Kindall, "Apocalypse Now," *STAR*, October 17, 1982.

³ Evie Lazzarino, "From Production Crew to Extras, A Day in the Life of 'Day After'," *Lawrence Journal-World*, August 29, 1982.

an entire quilting club had signed up."⁴ The excitement surprised director Nicholas Meyer, who extolled the refreshing cooperation and willingness of the locals to work twelve-hour days or cut patches out of their hair for \$50-\$75 and a chance to be in the film.⁵ Extra Naomi Mensch of Lawrence, for example, eagerly agreed to participate in a post-apocalyptic haircut, declaring, "I'm a mess and I'm enjoying it."⁶ By publicly seeking "real people types" and praising the virtues of the local populace during production, the early media narrative of *The Day After* in many ways echoed the film's cultural narrative of Midwestern values as wholesome and idyllic – yet also “average.” Kansas City and Lawrence were portrayed as “All American” locations during filming, a cultural label given and evoked in the movie itself, as if this fictional disaster could realistically happen anywhere.

Despite the excitement over Hollywood’s presence in mid America, local reporting also made clear that the film's intention was to be informative and shocking while remaining politically neutral on the issue of nuclear arms. Limited local reactions by actors and extras touched on the importance of the film informing viewers through its potentially shocking scenes. Kansas City actor Harliss Howard noted, "people are going to have to start paying attention" with the film's release, noting that he was pleased to be associated with a project that informed the public of the danger of nuclear weapons.⁷ Kansas City actress Barbara Schaeffer presented perhaps the most politically pointed account of the film's message for the

⁴ James Kindall, "Apocalypse Now," *STAR*, October 17, 1982.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Doug Hitchcock, "Movie Makeup Manufactures Medical Mess," *Lawrence Journal World*, September 5, 1982.

⁷ Chuck Twardy, "Fake Farmstead Goes Up in Flames for Film," *Lawrence Journal-World*, August 17, 1982.

Kansas City Times, describing her hope that young people who see the film would discuss the issue and become "anti-war, anti-military."⁸

Political viewpoints such as Schaeffer's were a rarity in the movie's early media coverage, as much of the media discussion concerning the movie's nuclear meanings followed the apolitical messaging from those affiliated with the film and studio. Director Nicholas Meyer, producer Robert Papazian, and ABC representatives such as Dan Doran participated in multiple media interviews during filming, each echoing their contention that the film contained no clear political endorsement or goal. Meyer publicly announced the film's goal as a way to give viewers the ability to "take away a more informed view of what might happen to them in a nuclear war." In an interview with the *Lawrence Journal-World* (LJW), he contended that politicians and the political discourse were responsible for a "lack of appreciation for what a nuclear war will mean."⁹ Robert Papazian noted in an interview by LJW that he "absolutely" had opinions concerning the debate over nuclear arms, but such private thoughts should not and cannot influence the movie.¹⁰ The *Kansas City Times* quoted ABC's Dan Doran, who said that, "people who believe in larger arsenals will walk away from this film and they can still believe in larger arsenals, people who believe in disarmament will still believe in that."¹¹ In this early local coverage of *The Day After*, the narrative had it that

⁸ Howard Goodman, "KC Holocaust a Mix of Horror and Hollywood," *The Kansas City Times*, September 11, 1982.

⁹ Chuck Twardy, "Nicholas Meyer Tackles Biggest Fantasy," *Lawrence Journal-World*, September 5, 1982.

¹⁰ Chuck Twardy "Students Assume War-torn Look as Film Shooting Winds Down," *Lawrence Journal-World*, September 8, 1982.

¹¹ Howard Goodman, "KC Holocaust a Mix of Horror and Hollywood," *Kansas City Times*, September 11, 1982.

the film would register as an informative production, designed to awaken public nuclear awareness. The film's divisive narrative as a political controversy had not yet materialized.

By the time *The Day After* premiered on October 12, 1983 to local crowds in Lawrence, media coverage had shifted considerably. During the weeks and days leading up to the premiere, the film gained nearly daily coverage. More important, the reporting increasingly focused on the film's obvious political ramifications, with the national and local nuclear freeze movement promoting the film and pro-nuclear groups condemning it.¹² Anti-nuclear activists expressed hopes that the shocking display of a nuclear holocaust might convince the American public to refuse to support the continuation of the nuclear arms race. On the other hand, pro-nuclear groups feared the film would cause viewers to believe that nuclear conflict under a system of deterrence was ultimately inevitable and hopeless. Rather than the apolitical curiosity described in earlier reporting, *The Day After* took on a new role in the local media as a political and cultural public event marked with controversy. Such an event required serious political discussion, fear-inducing warnings to the public, and opinions on the value of the film as a debate piece concerning the Cold War nuclear arms race.

The politicization of the broadcast occurred across the nation, not just locally. In the months leading up to the film's premiere, national anti-nuclear political groups promoted the movie, fueling controversy and creating a pre-narrative in the media that *The Day After*

¹² For more on national receptions to "The Day After," see Deron Overpeck, "'Remember! It's Only a Movie!' Expectations and Receptions of The Day After (1983)," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 32 (June 2012): 272.

transmitted a decidedly ideological message.¹³ A member of anti-nuclear organizations in California named Joshua Baran led this campaign to promote *The Day After*. Fearful of ABC's attempts to censor the film without his consent (due to pressure from the Reagan administration and studio executives) or potentially "bury" the movie's airing with no publicity, director Nicholas Meyer gave Baran an early cut of the film on the condition that he spread the word about it to anti-nuclear groups and journalists in order to drum up support for its release. While Meyer kept the meeting secret in order to avoid reprisal from ABC, his goal was ultimately to increase the viewing audience and interest in the film through increased publicity.¹⁴

While Baran was not sold on the merits of the movie alone to educate the public on nuclear weapons, he felt the important imagery of a brewing nuclear nightmare could become a "centerpiece of activism" for the anti-nuclear movement at the time.¹⁵ The goal for Baran and other anti-nuclear activists involved was to "hijack" the public promotion of the movie away from ABC and portray *The Day After* as a vehicle to spur political discussion of nuclear weapons on a large scale. This organized response to the film's airing began as early as April 1983, nearly six months prior to its broadcast.¹⁶ In anticipation of the film's debut, Baran and anti-nuclear activists arranged for leaders to be interviewed by both local and national media outlets, organized post broadcast local discussion groups, and formed viewing groups for the

¹³ Chuck Twardy, "Meyer Says Film Speaks for Itself," *Lawrence Journal-World*, October 13, 1983.

¹⁴ Joshua Baran, interview by author, June 20, 2017.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ The Day Before, "Project Update and Proposal," file 35, National Nuclear Weapons Freeze Campaign Records, 1980-1986, State Historical Society of Missouri, University of Missouri-St. Louis, St. Louis, MO.

film's upcoming premiere in over one hundred cities.¹⁷ For Baran, the campaign's goal was to make the movie's release a public political event, to bolster small-scale demonstrations by anti-nuclear groups that had won only limited media coverage.¹⁸ In response to its promotion by anti-nuclear organizations, pro-deterrence groups and conservatives predictably condemned the film and warned of its harmful psychological effect in perpetuating nuclear fears. This effort to convince the public to either ignore or rally against the film had the effect of garnering yet additional media attention and creating a groundswell of public curiosity about the film.

Organizations in the Kansas City metro area and Lawrence similarly mobilized, with Baran's help. By August 1983, Kansas City and Lawrence area anti-nuclear groups 'Target Kansas City' and 'Let Lawrence Live' formed with the explicit purpose of promoting the film, and began planning local events for the film's upcoming release.¹⁹ In articles reporting on the film's premiere, the media gathered opinions from Let Lawrence Live and Target Kansas City spokespersons, as well as the local chapter of the conservative and pro-nuclear deterrence organization Young Americans for Freedom.²⁰ According to Jerry Keating of the

¹⁷ "Don't Wait Until The Day After: The Day After: Speaker's Manual," file 36, National Nuclear Weapons Freeze Campaign Records, 1980-1986, State Historical Society of Missouri, University of Missouri-St. Louis, St. Louis, MO.

¹⁸ Joshua Baran, interview by author, June 20, 2017.

¹⁹ Chuck Blitz, "Dear Freeze People," file 35, National Nuclear Weapons Freeze Campaign Records, 1980-1986, State Historical Society of Missouri, University of Missouri-St. Louis, St. Louis, MO. Joshua Baran, interview by author, June 20, 2017. Baran helped to coordinate public relations and press releases by the two groups.

²⁰ Target Kansas City was a Kansas City area group formed by the anti-nuclear Physicians for Social Responsibility. Let Lawrence Live was a Lawrence area grassroots anti-nuclear group. Young Americans for Freedom is a national youth based group promoting conservative ideologies.

latter organization, the film promoted "nuclear hysteria," while Allan Hanson of Let Lawrence Live argued that "this movie has the potential of getting people who haven't made that decision [to oppose nuclear weapons] to make it."²¹ For those in the advance screening audience, he continued, the film transformed viewers into "quiet, somber, stone-faced men and women." Bob Palmateer, who happily volunteered the use of his property during the production of the film, remarked, "I think it will have a real impact when it airs. I hope it will start people thinking about nuclear war and what effects there might be."²²

As previously noted, *The Day After* inspired a significant political discourse in Kansas City and Lawrence even before its release. Taking cue from the new political importance prescribed to the film, the local media reported on those who had begun using the film to advance their side of the nuclear debate. The upcoming release of *The Day After* now took the form of either an important educational movie, an emotional cultural event, or a piece of dangerous propaganda.

In the week before its release on November 20, 1983, local media coverage of *The Day After* continued portraying the film both as a controversial political track and as an informative and thought provoking cultural spectacle. Copies of *Newsweek* featuring *The Day After* as the cover story sold out across Lawrence.²³ Education groups and dozens of religious congregations across both cities issued warnings concerning the film's realistic

²¹ Jake Thompson, "Nuclear War Hits Home in Lawrence Premiere of Controversial Film," *Kansas City Times*, October 13, 1983. "Local Peace Group Focuses on Film," *Lawrence Journal-World*, October 9, 1983.

²² Ron Jensen, "Viewers Confront Nuclear War's Horror," *Lawrence Journal-World*, October 13, 1983.

²³ Mary Hoenk, "You Can't Read All About It," *Lawrence Journal-World*, November 17, 1983.

content, portraying the potential of a nuclear holocaust with modern nuclear weapons that had much greater impact than that of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. These warnings often urged viewers to view the film in a group setting only. Some local school districts and national groups, such as the National Education Association, recommended that parents "not let children watch the show alone and should be sure to discuss it with them."²⁴ National political groups and both national and international media outlets descended on Kansas City and Lawrence in order to debate or report on the film and capitalize on local interest. The Young Americans for Freedom organization set up temporary headquarters in Lawrence on November 16, initiating a press campaign designed to "do battle with ABC and against the freezeniks." Young Americans for Freedom spokesman Robert Dornan argued that the film showed the U.S. and Soviets as moral equals, while "the Soviets are seeking world domination while the United States is trying merely to protect itself." Echoing President Reagan's speech from earlier in 1983, Dornan called for more protection against Soviet nuclear arsenals, declaring, "...we can't stop the hordes...of an evil empire."²⁵

Groups associated with the national freeze campaign, such as Let Lawrence Live and Target Kansas City promoted public forums and group viewings, as well as candlelight vigils immediately following the movie's airing. These vigils were to take place at the Liberty Memorial in Kansas City (the largest World War I memorial in the U.S.) and on the Kansas University campus quad in Lawrence. Dr. Joseph P. Iser of Target Kansas City

²⁴ Barry Garron, "Should Children Watch 'The Day After'?", *Kansas City Star*, November 10, 1983.

²⁵ Doug Hitchcock, "Group Claims ABC Aided 'Freezeniks'," *Lawrence Journal-World*, November 17, 1983.

declared, "we (Kansas City) will be the center of attention" for the nuclear debate. Iser hoped that organized discussions and local forums would stir emotions and "offer an opportunity for people to explore those feelings and speak out on various sides of the issue."²⁶ Lawrence mayor David Longhurst drew attention to the college town's traditionally liberal leanings, declaring the week following the release of the film "Let Lawrence Live Week." He went so far as to propose a peace summit in Lawrence between President Reagan and Soviet Premier Andropov.²⁷ Allen Hanson of Let Lawrence Live noted that the community had long been a bastion of anti-nuclear sentiment and reached back to the city's antebellum history as the capital of anti-slavery "Free State" Kansas declaring that "this city has been founded on humanitarian principles." The film presented an opportunity for Lawrence to "speak to the nation...it's one more step in the general peace process that has been going on here for years."²⁸

Even before the film aired nationwide on the evening of Sunday, November 20, viewers were hard-pressed to avoid opinions, emotional warnings, or political discussion surrounding the film in the media. The film's politicization and the near-constant coverage before its release led viewers to form opinions based on the national and local narratives of its message that had initially intended to force viewers to confront the realistic depiction of

²⁶ Fred Schecker, "World Will be Watching KC for Days After 'The Day After'," *Kansas City Star*, November 18, 1983. E.A. Torriero, "The Day Before 'The Day After'," *Kansas City Times*, November 19, 1983.

²⁷ Fred Schecker, "World Will be Watching KC for Days After 'The Day After'," *Kansas City Star*, November 18, 1983.

²⁸ Barry Massey, "For Some, Film Recalls Lawrence History," *Lawrence Journal-World*, November 19, 1983. Lawrence, KS was founded on anti-slavery principles in 1854, and the city and Kansas University became a center for peace and environmental protests during the 1960s and 1970s.

nuclear war and its aftermath. Joshua Baran described the reporting as a snowball that rapidly formed after grassroots attempts to promote the movie, almost entirely independent from ABC.²⁹ Speaking about an informal poll taken on his Friday evening talk radio show on Kansas City's Public Radio station KCUR, the commentator known as "Mr. Kansas City," Walt Bodine, noted that while most citizens he polled planned to watch *The Day After*, many already voiced pointed opinions or concerns about the film based on the media narrative. Commenting on the early politicization of the film and its coverage, Bodine asserted that the public focus should be on "life or death, not left or right."³⁰

Most news outlets attempted to stay neutral on the movie's subject and ideological messaging, even decrying the very political arguments they covered surrounding the film. On the day before its release, a *Lawrence Journal-World* editorial lamented that local viewers were now unable to view the film with an open mind, that many "will now view the film with a preconception of what they are expected to see and feel, and truly honest opinions will be hard to come by."³¹ A *Kansas City Star* editorial on November 20 bemoaned the spectacle of the film's gruesome imagery, yet noted that its presentation of ideology as cultural entertainment set a dangerous precedent. To the *Star*, the film was an "attempt to persuade politically and in the end, to influence American foreign policy," but overall, "will not add a constructive element to the debate over nuclear weapons and their limitations and

²⁹ Joshua Baran, interview by author, June 20, 2017.

³⁰ *KMBC 9 News at 10 P.M.*, KMBC-TV, November 20, 1983.

³¹ "Lawrence's Movie Stardom," *Lawrence Journal World*, November 19, 1983.

reductions."³² As both the *Star* and *Journal-World* took issue with the film's hype and contentious messaging, the local media nonetheless continued devoting lead stories to the film capitalizing on the movie's almost certain popularity. Like ABC, local news coverage attempted to remain apolitical to appeal to the widest audience and sponsors possible. Kansas City ABC affiliate KMBC-TV refused to air any advertising spots that politicized nuclear issues, with station manager R. Kent Replogle noting that "this is such a volatile issue that we'll let the program and the discussion programs that follow be the vehicles for public discussion."³³ Stations and newspapers had no issue however in taking advantage of public interest in the political minefield and fear-inducing motion picture that *The Day After* had become.

After weeks of discussion and promotion, *The Day After* aired on the evening of November 20, 1983 to a record-breaking audience for a TV movie. According to ratings returns, over one hundred million Americans watched, constituting nearly seven out of ten television watchers that evening. The movie's final hour was presented commercial-free, a consequence of sponsors not wanting to associate their product with nuclear destruction.³⁴ Immediately following the film's airing, as well as the days following November 20, coverage of *The Day After* continued to center on the discourse associated with the film and the potential likelihood that such an attack might occur in reality.

³² "There is Ideology in ABC's Foreign Policy Nightmare," *The Kansas City Star*, November 20, 1983.

³³ "Channel 9 Rejects Ads with 'Day After' Theme," *The Kansas City Star*, November 18, 1983.

³⁴ "About 100 Million Tuned in, ABC Says," *The Kansas City Star*, November 21, 1983.

Both preceding and following the airing of the film on ABC affiliates nationwide, ABC presented additional information and debate concerning the film and nuclear weapons, cementing the film's perceived status as a discussion or educational piece. In reality, *The Day After* contributed more emotion in its images than any new information about nuclear weapons or destruction. To play up the educational narrative and to attempt to regain its apolitical aura, ABC broadcast a recommended reading list on the issue of nuclear deterrence and works detailing survival precautions to take or detailing the futility of survival in the event of a nuclear attack through its affiliates and distributed through accompanying materials. In its effort to appear apolitical however, many of these sources offered conflicting information. Following the ending of the film, most affiliates immediately aired a special broadcast of "ABC News Viewpoint," a roundtable discussion hosted by national "Nightline" anchor Ted Koppel. The special featured a message from Secretary of State George Schultz meant specifically to calm any nuclear fears and denounce any potential impact the film and its reaction might have on foreign policy. "Viewpoint" also included a discussion from a panel including Dr. Carl Sagan (who recently spoke out against nuclear arms), conservative commentator William F. Buckley, Jr., former Secretaries of State and nuclear policy veterans Dr. Henry Kissinger and Robert McNamara, as well as others.³⁵

Instead of airing "Viewpoint" directly after the film, Kansas City ABC affiliate KMBC-TV preempted the national special first with an hour of local coverage and discussion

³⁵ *ABC News Viewpoint*, ABC, November 20, 1983. During the forum, Dr. Sagan and Secretary McNamara applauded the film's potential ability to encourage debate and discussion towards future arms reduction; while Secretary Kissinger noted that the film's message presented the issue of nuclear arms as too simplistic, noting the complicated issue of keeping Soviet power in check while also potentially reducing reliance on nuclear weapons.

in a special entitled "Sunday, Nuclear Sunday." Hosted by lead KMBC news anchor Larry Moore, "Sunday, Nuclear Sunday" featured a more locally oriented debate, with area representatives, scientists, and commentators taking sides on the issues. As the national discussion of "Viewpoint" featured a panel discussing primarily national nuclear policy, "Sunday, Nuclear Sunday" including scientists and officials on both sides of the nuclear arms issue centered on the potential reality of a nuclear attack as depicted in the film. Even with the program's emphasis on the film's factual basis, political debate on nuclear policy did occur. Dr. Jennifer Leaning from the anti-nuclear Physicians for Social Responsibility argued that the need for an educational film would be non-existent if the superpowers simply entered into a firm system of bilateral arms control. Countering Leaning's claim, Dr. Sidney Williams of Doctors for Disease Preparedness dismissed the film as propaganda for the freeze movement, designed to create trauma and fear and to promote the national freeze campaign.³⁶ Turning to the film's realism, biologist Dr. Paul Ehrlich weighed in that the film's depiction of the nuclear aftermath seemed "overly optimistic," citing recent studies concerning the effects of fallout and the potential for a nuclear winter. Nuclear physicist Carsten Haaland and regional Federal Emergency Management Director Patrick Brehen, however, argued that the film did not take civil defense measures into account. Characterizing *The Day After* a "hopeless movie," Brehen insisted that "civil defense is hope."³⁷

As the local broadcast took questions from its viewing audience, it became clear that local concerns turned mainly on specific scientific, environmental, and logistical aspects

³⁶ *Sunday, Nuclear Sunday*, KMBC-TV, November 20, 1983.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

of a nuclear attack rather than issues of Cold War geopolitics and nuclear policy. The discussion covered the environmental impact of radiation on plants, animals, and soil; the efficacy of civil defense; and of the human costs associated with nuclear war. Late in the broadcast, Walt Bodine argued that the ultimate effect of the film may be that "those on the left and right of the movement will work harder than ever, and those in the center will now know why those people are so passionate."³⁸ Based on the initial reactions and impact of *The Day After*, the film and its accompanying debate had succeeded in "coax[ing] us out of our apathy concerning nuclear war," as Larry Moore editorialized, but did not give viewers clear political answers they may have sought from the film's sobering message.

Public concerns about the film's nuclear message were also evident in local polling after its airing. In a survey of area residents by the *Kansas City Star* on November 21, respondents expressed a "feeling of helplessness about the nuclear arms issue" and overall divided opinions concerning the nuclear debate was evident. Fifty-seven percent of respondents felt that their beliefs made no difference to national leaders, or that their views significantly affected foreign policy. Thirty-eight percent of respondents claimed that the anti-nuclear movement had not been effective in its advocacy of arms control, versus thirty-seven percent who claimed that it had. In all, only twenty-seven percent of those surveyed felt that the film had significantly changed their opinion on nuclear weapons, with a majority of the twenty-seven percent claiming it had turned them against nuclear weapons. While those surveyed in Kansas City remained politically divided after seeing the film, eighty-five

³⁸ *KMBC 9 News at 10 P.M.*, KMBC-TV, November 20, 1983.

percent felt that nuclear weapons posed a threat to the United States, and forty-four percent felt that a nuclear war would happen in their lifetime.³⁹

The results of the survey in Kansas City in many ways reinforce the fact that the film effectively built nuclear cultural awareness, but had not given the public a conclusive or long-lasting argument concerning specific -nuclear policy proposals. Paul Boyer notes that cultural over-saturation concerning nuclear anxieties, such as the massive media response to the film, may have trivialized any focused public response.⁴⁰ Political scholar J. Michael Hogan contended that *The Day After* failed to tackle urgent policy issues and thereby inevitably conveyed a one-dimensional message of hopelessness. The film shocked viewers and led many to recognize the destructive possibilities of the nuclear age, but lacked a clear message of salvation through a political policy in order to sway the public.⁴¹ Therefore, the film and its coverage successfully used mainstream culture to convey to viewers the threat of modern nuclear weapons, as ABC and Nicholas Meyer had intended, but a large percentage of viewers remained divided or unsure as to how best to approach this reality.

Those in Lawrence and Kansas City who firmly supported anti-nuclear or pro-deterrence views were anything but passive after the release of *The Day After*. Events and protests surrounding the film continued in the hours and days after the airing, and were covered both locally and nationally. The two anti-nuclear groups formed in direct response to the film's release, Let Lawrence Live and Target Kansas City, each promoted numerous

³⁹ Gregory S. Reeves, "Survey Finds Many Minds Clouded by Nuclear Specter," *The Kansas City Star*, November 22, 1983.

⁴⁰ Boyer, 362.

⁴¹ J. Michael Hogan, *The Nuclear Freeze Campaign: Rhetoric and Foreign Policy in the Telepolitical Age* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 1994), 52.

events before and after November 20, and received front-page coverage from the print media. Let Lawrence Live, which did not particularly commit to a specific anti-nuclear proposal (but supported any successful reversal of the arms race), hosted nine events in the two weeks following the broadcast.⁴² As part of a college community that had historically leaned toward anti-nuclear proposals, Let Lawrence Live continued to enjoy support from city leaders such as Lawrence mayor David Longhurst, as well as many students and faculty at Kansas University.⁴³ Indeed, more than 600 participants attended a candlelight vigil after the film aired on November 20, including Longhurst, state officials, local church leaders and other peace groups.⁴⁴ Members of the Young Americans for Freedom and the Lawrence-based Maranatha Christian Church in turn staged a peaceful counter protest at both the vigil and at a special town meeting convened on November 21 to discuss nuclear weapons. Let Lawrence Live even basked in its fifteen minutes of fame in the November 21 edition of ABC News' "Nightline" when host Ted Koppel chaired a roundtable discussion with live opinion and call in commentary from Lawrence. During the taping, the crowd overwhelmingly supported the film and a message of arms reduction.⁴⁵ While no opinion survey of Lawrence is available, it can safely be concluded that *The Day After* fed a lively political debate in the university town.

⁴² "Let Lawrence Live Programs," file 37, National Nuclear Weapons Freeze Campaign Records, 1980-1986, State Historical Society of Missouri, University of Missouri-St. Louis, St. Louis, MO.

⁴³ Barry Massey, "For Some, Film Recalls Lawrence History," *Lawrence Journal-World*, November 19, 1983.

⁴⁴ Caroline Trowbridge and Mary Hoenk, "Film's Fallout: A Solemn Plea for Peace," *Lawrence Journal-World*, November 20, 1983.

⁴⁵ Ron Jensen, "Lawrence Lives: Late-night News Show Lets Town Give Views of 'Day After' Movie," *Lawrence Journal-World*, November 22, 1983.

Despite surveys showing a divided political opinion, anti-nuclear sentiment within Kansas City also grew in the wake of the film. Target Kansas City, an educational offshoot of Physicians for Social Responsibility that had staged public events surrounding *The Day After*, participated in nineteen public events surrounding the film's release.⁴⁶ Similarly to Let Lawrence Live, Target Kansas City hosted a candlelight vigil at the city's World War I memorial just after the film's airing in which between 600-1000 participants took part.⁴⁷ The next day, the group organized a protest at city hall that received front-page coverage from the *Kansas City Star*. While many citizens did not take direct political action, Target Kansas City associate director Diane Eagle considered any efforts to be important as part of an effort to "reach out to the vast majority of Americans who have not yet formed an opinion on the issue of nuclear arms...it's an issue that transcends political decisions because the effects of nuclear war are not a matter of politics, but a matter of physics."⁴⁸ *The Day After* may not have resulted in the massive political transformation that Eagle and other anti-nuclear activists hoped for, but the film and the media attention that it received did bring nuclear weapons to the forefront of social and political dialogue in Lawrence and Kansas City.

Through its merging of popular entertainment and the nation's long standing nuclear anxieties, *The Day After* stands as one of the most important cultural texts of the Cold War. Its most significant accomplishment may not have been to inform or educate, but

⁴⁶ "Target Kansas City Calendar of Events," file 37, National Nuclear Weapons Freeze Campaign Records, 1980-1986, State Historical Society of Missouri, University of Missouri-St. Louis, St. Louis, MO.

⁴⁷ Kevin Helliker, "'Day After' Yields a Grim Evening," *Kansas City Star*, November 21, 1983.

⁴⁸ "Movie Pushes Button for Nuclear Debate," *Kansas City Star*, November 21, 1983.

to render in graphic fashion the human catastrophe that nuclear war would inevitably entail. In that sense it picked off where earlier nuclear themed films had left off and reminded the public that every nook and cranny of America in the 1980s still lived in the haunting nuclear age. One such viewer, President Ronald Reagan, noted that the film left him “greatly depressed,” and inspired him to strive to “do all we can to have a deterrent and to see there is never a nuclear war” after viewing the movie.⁴⁹ It is hard to conclude that the film had any impact on the hardliner president’s policies, but during his second term in office, Reagan pursued a partnership with his Soviet counterpart Mikhail Gorbachev and renewed détente era efforts to control and even reduce the size of the rival’s nuclear arsenals.

The movie itself offered no clear answers to the nuclear dilemma, yet the media coverage of *The Day After* and the popular response served as a national wakeup call that provoked many Americans to once again grapple with the ambiguities of the nuclear age. Rather than simply a piece of entertainment, *The Day After* forced Americans, and later the world, to confront once again the shared sobering realization that nuclear weapons and the threat of nuclear war was an increasingly dangerous reality. Like the early years of the Cold War and surrounding the Cuban Missile Crisis, fears and anxieties of nuclear destruction bubbled to the surface of mainstream culture, conveyed in film. Over a hundred million Americans witnessed the nuclear destruction of Kansas City and Lawrence, Kansas on

⁴⁹ Ronald Reagan, *An American Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990), 585-586. Reagan specifically cites *The Day After* as being on his mind during ensuing military briefings, where he exhibited a more conflicted tone concerning the prospect of a nuclear conflict.

November 20, 1983, and these communities as well as the national audience hoped that the day after would never become their tomorrow.

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