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THE APOCALYPSE WILL BE TELEVISED: REPRESENTATIONS OF THE COLD WAR
ON NETWORK TELEVISION, 1976-1987

by

AUBREY N. UNDERWOOD

Under the Direction of Michelle Brattain

ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines how the major television networks, in conjunction with the Reagan administration, launched a lingering cloud of nuclear anxiety that helped to revive the Cold War during the 1980s. Placed within a larger political and cultural post-war context, this national preoccupation with a global show-down with the Soviet Union at times both hindered and bolstered Reagan's image as the archetypal conservative, cowboy President that could free America from its liberal adolescent past now caustically referred to as "the sixties." This stalwart image of Reagan, created and carefully managed by a number of highly-paid marketing executives, as one of the embodiment of peaceful deterrence, came under attack in the early 1980s when the "liberal" Nuclear Freeze movement showed signs of becoming politically threatening to the staunch conservative pledging to win the Cold War at any cost. And even if the nuclear freeze movement itself was not powerful enough to undergo the Herculean task of

removing the President in 1984, the movement was compassionate enough to appeal to a mass audience, especially when framed in narrative form on network television. In the early 1980s, debates over the possibility of nuclear war and other pertinent Cold War related issues became much more democratized in their visibility on the network airwaves. However, the message disseminated from the networks was not placed in an educational framework, nor did these television productions clarify complicated nuclear issues such as nuclear winter theory and proliferation. I argue this renewed network attention on nuclear issues was not placed in an historical framework and likely confused American viewers because it routinely exposed audiences to both fact and fiction, undifferentiated at the level of the mass media.

INDEX WORDS: Ronald Reagan, Cold War, Network television, Made-for-television movies, *World War III*, *Special Bulletin*, *The Day After*, *Threads*, *Amerika*, Nuclear freeze movement, Nuclear winter theory, Nuclear weapons, Strategic Defensive Initiative, “Star Wars,” Great *Nuclear Arms Debate*, Infotainment, “Morning in America campaign” 1984 US Presidential Campaign, Walter Mondale.

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ON NETWORK TELEVISION, 1976-1987

by

AUBREY N. UNDERWOOD

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2011

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Aubrey Nell Underwood

2011

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ON NETWORK TELEVISION, 1976-1987

by

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August 2011

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to Dr. Donald Dixon and his amazing daughter, Elaine Lett.

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A great many people, including faculty, family, friends and colleagues as well as numerous others I have met through this project, have been generous in helping shape my understanding of this vast topic. When I first began this process of looking at the Cold War during the Reagan administration through the lens of the made-for-television movie, I was warmly received by my dissertation advisor, Dr. Michelle Brattain. Her insight into archival research, organization, writing, teaching, and overall insight into the profession of the historian has been incalculable throughout the years. Her continued support for this endeavor and ability to see the work's potential has also been a great source of motivation. In addition, I am indebted to another early mentor from the history department, Dr. Joe Perry, who continued to provide thoughtful, critical comments into writing and the process of undertaking a historical project of this magnitude. Kathy Fuller-Seeley has demonstrated how crucial it was to interweave the political with cultural history and as a scholar illustrated that looking at popular culture was indeed academic.

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Introduction

“If a scholar a thousand years from now had no evidence about what had happened in the United States between 1945 and 1985 except the books produced by the cultural and intellectual historians he or she would hardly guess that such a thing as nuclear weapons had existed.”¹

In November of 1983, high above the panoptic eye of the international media, NATO engaged in a routine military exercise that was intended to assess the strength and speed of the U.S. nuclear arsenal. The ABLE/ARCHER exercises, as they came to be known, tested NATO’s ability to mobilize from Norway to Turkey in the event of a nuclear strike. This nuclear exercise occurred at a time when the United States was engaged militarily around the world, fighting in Central America and Lebanon, as well as deploying state of the art nuclear hardware in Western Europe. However, this large-scale exercise was interpreted by the Soviets as a potential first strike, and by some accounts the Soviets were prepared to launch their own nuclear weapons in retaliation.² Although the ABLE/ARCHER scare did not lead to World War Three, the early 1980s saw a rejuvenation of the Cold War that permeated every aspect of America life and helped to end the years of political and cultural détente. By late 1981 an NBC/Associated Press poll reported that over 75% of Americans expected a nuclear war to occur in their lifetime.

This pronounced cultural belief in the end of days reflected a dramatic shift in American Cold War culture. For the first time since 1973, the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists moved the infamous “Doomsday Clock” to four minutes to midnight, signaling to an uneasy public that nuclear annihilation was indeed a contemporary reality. While the Reagan administration focused national attention on the “evil” machinations of the expansive Soviet empire, the

¹ Paul Boyer, *By the Bomb’s Early Light: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age* (New York: Pantheon, 1985), xvii.

² Richard Rhodes, *Arsenal of Folly: The Making of the Nuclear Arms Race*, (New York: Knopf, 2007), 181.

American public became aware that the possibility of nuclear war might result from the geopolitical movements of the Soviet empire or the bellicose military build-up under Reagan's leadership. Even worse, World War Three might occur due to a technological mishap.

In the United States, the national media was focused on the premiere of a new primetime television movie special depicting the American landscape after a nuclear war. On Sunday, November 28, 1983, ABC aired the made for television film, *The Day After*, and an estimated 100 million viewers tuned in to watch the complete annihilation of America in a cataclysmic nuclear war. Weeks prior to the premier of the film, ABC began an extensive promotional campaign that was matched by unflinching coverage in the popular press. While the national network news shows discussed the potential political impact of *The Day After*, NATO's ABLE/ARCHER incident went virtually unnoticed by American television viewers. Not only was the national media focused on nuclear culture, but the national discourse began to reflect the renewed visibility of Cold War imagery and fears.

During the years of détente in which Carter precipitously announced an end to the Cold War due to the SALT II agreement, the idea of "winning" and surviving nuclear war with the Soviet Union was once again propagated by White House officials. During the 1980s, network television was peppered with docu-dramas, made for television movies that foretold the story of an impending nuclear war against Communists to a new generation of television viewers, generation X. The televised and dramatized depictions of the Cold War on network television during the Reagan administration represents a continuation of the symbiotic and intertwined relationship between the government and the networks to sell the Cold War project to the Americans, generate ratings for the major networks and also produce profits for corporate sponsors. However, in pursuit of viewers and a friendly relationship with the government,

network television intentionally avoided consistent interpretation of nuclear issues or critical analysis of the Reagan administration. This dissertation argues that the networks attempted to capitalize on escalating nuclear fears by producing “made for television” movies that were meant to engage viewers on all sides of the political spectrum. As the political maneuverings of Reagan’s Cold Warriors heightened national anxiety about nuclear war, network television brought the “fictional” accounts of possible nuclear narratives to nervous Americans viewers, and their children.

This dissertation examines how the major television networks, in conjunction with the Reagan administration, launched a lingering cloud of nuclear anxiety that helped to revive the Cold War during the 1980s. Placed within a larger political and cultural post-war context, this national preoccupation with a global show-down with the Soviet Union at times both hindered and bolstered Reagan’s image as the archetypal conservative, cowboy President that could free America from its liberal adolescent past now caustically referred to as “the sixties.” This stalwart image of Reagan, created and carefully managed by a number of highly-paid marketing executives, as one of the embodiment of peaceful deterrence, came under attack in the early 1980s when the “liberal” Nuclear Freeze movement showed signs of becoming politically threatening to the staunch conservative pledging to win the Cold War at any cost. And even if the nuclear freeze movement itself was not powerful enough to undergo the Herculean task of removing the President in 1984, the movement was compassionate enough to appeal to a mass audience, especially when framed in narrative form on network television. In the early 1980s, debates over the possibility of nuclear war and other pertinent Cold War related issues became much more democratized in their visibility on the network airwaves. However, the message disseminated from the networks was not placed in an educational framework, nor did these

television productions clarify complicated nuclear issues such as nuclear winter theory and proliferation. I argue this renewed network attention on nuclear issues was not placed in an historical framework and likely confused American viewers because it routinely exposed audiences to both fact and fiction, undifferentiated at the level of the mass media.³

This dissertation has five chapters organized in chronological and thematic order from 1977 through 1987. It explores how network television attempted to translate political discourse to a national audience through made for television docudramas that dealt with nuclear issues. Each chapter presents a specific made-for-television film as a case-study to examine how network television and the Reagan White House engaged nuclear debates and moreover how these films represent the larger historical significance of Reaganism. Television underwent a radical transformation in the 1980s with the inclusion of a number of technological changes including the remote control and cable television.⁴ Furthermore, television, as a medium charged with informing and entertaining the public, grew in tandem with the Cold War. By examining television movies, network television shows, and televised news specials, I argue that television helped to complicate Reagan's nuclear message throughout both terms of his presidency. In addition, even though at times network nuclear programs generated a great deal of heightened controversy regarding the political meaning of various nuclear programs, I argued the interplay between the White House, television networks and corporate advertisers proved profitable for all parties involved.

The era of eighties television is complex in that the imaginary characters brought to life by the networks were not dissimilar from the fictionalized persona of President Reagan. During the decade, network television was still steeply invested in maintaining political orthodoxy

³Ibid, 169.

⁴ Jane Feuer, *Seeing through the Eighties: Television and Reaganism* (Duke University Press, 1995), pp 2.

however the hegemonic power of the mass media became more complicated through the development of new technologies, cable television, and federal deregulation. Furthermore, the line between entertainment and network news programming became more obscured as network ratings began to wane in the midst of the availability of cable television. The verisimilitudes of the decade, especially in the context of the Cold War, complicate Alan Nadel's cultural analysis of network television acting as brainwashing agent to promote American Cold War orthodoxy during the post-war period. Rather, as this dissertation argues, network television was engaged in a more complicated relationship not only with the White House, but also with television viewers during this ten year period, approximately 1977-1987. Television technologies, from the introduction of cable stations, satellite television, the remote control, and the VCR challenged the control of the traditional three major network's command of the viewing audience. However complicated and enigmatic this relationship became, I argue the method of investigating this relationship through the television lens provides much needed analysis on how Americans continued to grapple with politics, the mass media, and contradictory Cold War messages delivered on network television during the late atomic period.

Methodological approaches to the Cold War employed in this dissertation include but are not limited to John Fiske's work on popular culture and the "subordinate" television viewer, Alan Nadel's cultural analysis of television working as a state and corporate sponsored apparatus, and also Jane Feuer's idea that network television underwent a transformation during the eighties because of new technologies and changing viewership⁵. Finally, guiding this method is the work of Paul Boyer and the assertion that the "idea" of the bomb permeates every aspect of American culture, especially when it is dramatized and democratized on television. In an attempt to move "beyond the cultural turn," I interweave cultural analysis within the larger political

⁵ John Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 23.

narrative.⁶ Other thematic issues discussed in this dissertation include Reagan and the media, docudramas and activism, suburbia and generation X, and finally the objectivity of network news. Archival sources procured at UCLA and Vanderbilt, such as Reagan's 1984 presidential television ad, "Morning in America," offers visual texts to decode how masculinity, militarism, and capitalism became synonymous with Reaganism.

When Reagan first entered the White House in 1981, he brought to office a team of hard line anti-communists, as many as 50 drawn from the ranks of the neo-conservative group, the Committee on the Present Danger (CPD).⁷ Network made-for-television movies provide a visual and thematic trajectory of Reagan's political motives. For example, in the early 1980s NBC produced *World War III* and *Special Bulletin*, two films that presented a "liberal" message of the dangers of nuclear proliferation. By 1983, as nuclear fears escalated around the globe, network programming reflected this climate of fear by producing the seemingly horrific and timely made-for-television drama, *The Day After*. The White House was so concerned about the political fallout that the film might have on American voters that staffers distributed numerous internal memorandums that presented a specific media plan as to how to counter any negative press the film might bring for the President. Archival records from the Reagan Library suggest the White House was prepared to launch a three prong strategy to combat any negative press these made-for-television films might produce amongst American voters. The first step was to reiterate the position that mutually assured destruction (MAD) was the most effective way to prevent global nuclear war. The next strategy was to present high-ranking White House officials, such as Casper Weinberger and George Schultz on television to reassure Americans that the Reagan

⁶ Victoria Bonnell and Lynn Hunt, eds. *Beyond the Cultural Turn: New Directions in the Study of Society and Culture*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

⁷ Jules Tygiel, *Ronald Reagan: The Triumph of American Conservatism* (New York: Pearson, 2005), 120.

administration was confident it could successfully defend Americans from the Soviet menace. Finally, the White House was prepared to use aggressive Cold War red-baiting tactics to discredit any television program that questioned the tenets of peaceful nuclear proliferation.

In addition, the official White House “Day After” plan discusses how European audiences might react to the depiction of cataclysmic nuclear war on American television. As a growing wave of nuclear freeze activist galvanized in Europe, by 1984 the BBC produced its own made-for-television docudrama, *Threads*, which not only humanized nuclear war but also imagined how the effects of a nuclear war would shape the lives of the next two generations of European children. After a private viewing of the *The Day After* in October of 1983 Reagan reportedly became depressed about the possibility of nuclear war irrespective of his militaristic foreign policies.⁸ By Reagan’s second term, television and the mass media were more optimistic about America’s cultural and political supremacy and presenting imagery that suggested faith in Reagan could rebuild society, reassert masculinity, and solidify global supremacy.

As the nuclear freeze movement became more detrimental to the Reagan administration both abroad and at home, Reagan sent visible, televised message of a mythical America, protected by the futuristic Strategic Defense Initiative, and unstoppable in its jingoistic religiosity through his televised appearances and national speeches. In turn, network television programming mirrored Reagan’s new conciliatory tone. In 1987, ABC aired its epic docudrama, *Amerika*, a teleplay about American life under Soviet occupation. Although this film received respectable ratings for the network it created a torrent of controversy for both corporate advertisers and the White House. Network television’s unskillful and cumbersome portrayal of Communism served to only embolden the puzzling message of peaceful deterrence orchestrated by the White House.

⁸ Rhodes, *Arsenal of Folly: The Making of the Nuclear Arms Race*, 168-169.

Ronald Reagan is arguably the first television-created president. From his early days as a Hollywood agent and actor, to his ascension to national political prominence through his powerful televised speeches of the 1950s and 1960s, Reagan was remarkably astute at utilizing the media to further his political career. The image of Ronald Reagan, as the well-crafted legendary cowboy maintained by his handlers, offered to the people, just as Gary Willis asserted about John Wayne, a man that “stood for an America people felt was disappearing or had disappeared.”⁹ Reagan’s popularity, particularly after the failed assassination attempt on his life by John Hinckley Jr., achieved an iconic level. Historian Philip Jenkins notes that the assassination attempt, which was widely televised, “was chilling to a nation just recovering from the horrors of the 1970s and hoping desperately that Reagan’s leadership would mark the start of better times.”¹⁰ Reagan’s stalwart image, coupled with his brilliant command of the camera lens, offered a layer of familial nostalgia that in many ways harkened back to the nascent post-war years, before New Left liberal politics.

This work explores the methods that Reagan, along with the major television networks and the mass media, utilized to escalate the climate of nuclear fear that characterizes the late atomic period. Television has been inextricably linked with the Cold War since its inception and moreover has been a conduit for the West’s position on combating the spread of Communism. Reagan came to political prominence through Hollywood, became an ardent Cold-Warrior and demonstrated a preternatural command of the camera, all integral skills for the post-war, atomic climate. Historical investigations on the 1950s established the symbiotic relationship between the

⁹ Gary Willis, *John Wayne’s America* (Simon and Schuster: New York), 14.

¹⁰ Philip Jenkins, *Decade of Nightmares: The End of the Sixties and the Making of Eighties America* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2006), 239.

Cold War and television; however surprisingly little attention has been given to Reagan era.¹¹

Reagan brought to the camera what the American television audience valued most: a strong visual presence and a vaunted affability. Reagan also had the ability to simplify the most abstract national issues--deficits, territorial jurisdictions, and nuclear stalemates. By finding the essential narrative in these matters, and then by humanizing those narratives, Reagan produced his own unique style of conservative politics. Television favors that style since it is, after all, the most intimate of the mass media, with its ability to show emotion and to do so in tight focus.

Network television emerged at the dawn of the Cold War and the two have shaped American political and cultural life since 1945. In the battle against Communism, television news became viewed by American politicians as a vital tool to spread American consumer and democratic ideas. Moreover, most Americans believed that “the corporate owned and commercially sponsored television industry represented the freest, best and only alternative to state-controlled information.”¹² As early as 1951, advertisements warned parents that not buying television sets could prove detrimental to their children’s well-being, particularly in light of a Cold War fears knowing specific civil defense measures.¹³ Network television was given the specific task of using its powerful influence to propagate anti-communism to the growing American post-war audience and continued to do so until the collapse of the Berlin Wall.

The emergence of network television is also indelibly linked to the growth of suburbia. During the 1960s when Vietnam and social movements occupied the government’s attention, network television began to neglect Cold War inspired programming and instead focused on creating national television past-times such as weekly network sports, children shows, and

¹¹ Nancy Bernhard, *U.S. Television News and Cold War Propaganda, 1947-1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 1999). pp. 1-2

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Thomas Doherty, *Cold War, Cool Medium: Television, McCarthyism and American Culture* (Columbia University Press: New York, 2003), pp. 4-5.

variety programs intent on capturing the growing suburban audience. Television networks proved it was not only an economic threat to Hollywood films but also that it could retain more viewership thanks in part to the advent of suburbia. In the postwar era, television provided conventional mass entertainment in infinitely greater abundance, as well as far more cheaply, than Hollywood studios.¹⁴ In the late 1960s television was able to garner huge audiences by broadcasting the First World Series, the Super Bowl as well as “made for television” movies.

During the 1970s, television entered into a new age of network film: the made for television movie. The 1977 “made for television” film *Roots* achieved incredible success, drawing the largest audience in television history with more than half the American population, over 130 million viewers, watching at least some part of the eight hour mini-series.¹⁵ By the late 1970s, television executives such as ABC President Brandon Stoddard found that American audiences were once again interested in Cold War culture and in turn the three major networks played an active role in escalating nuclear anxieties for a new suburban generation by producing an onslaught of news specials, television narratives, and religious programming that created a national discourse and disquiet about the greatest of all fears in Cold War history: nuclear war with the Soviet Union. This television genre was also exposed to a new faction of American viewers: Generation X. After years of relative hibernation, the Cold War rebounded in the late atomic period with a renewed immediacy that became explicitly connected with the network television, the Reagan administration, and suburban conservative politics.

Central to this dissertation is the “Reagan Revolution,” which is more cultural than economic in scope. The year 1983 stands out as one of great contradictions. For a small

¹⁴ Paul Monaco, *The Sixties: 1960-1969, History of the American Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 3.

¹⁵ Bruce Shulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in America Culture, Society and Politics* (Da Capo Press; Cambridge, MA, 2001), 77.

percentage of privileged Americans, the Reagan economic reform reenergized a culture of capitalism and consumer abundance that became synonymous with individuality. As many political activists found identification with social movements of the 1960s, by the early 1980s Americans were identifying with commodities, especially technology. For most Americans, these new technological innovations were still restricted by either federal legislation or economic access. For the privileged white-collar yuppie class cultivated by Reagan's economic policy, the ideas of satellite or cable television, home video recording, and niche channels opened up this new world of television viewing. Similarly, Reagan's approach for peace through superior technological might, as outlined by the Strategic Defensive Initiative, promised a world free from nuclear war

The renewed interest in nuclear war was also becoming a hotly contested political issue between the nuclear freeze activists associated with the New Left and the New Right Cold Warriors. Scientists, journalist and government officials published a number of reports that presented alternative nuclear scenarios. From the discussion of nuclear arms on television news shows to nuclear-themed television narratives, for a moment it looked like what Amy Carter told her father in 1980 was indeed true: Nuclear war was the most important issue of her generation.¹⁶ This brief contest, played out in the media, between anti-freeze activist and the ambassadors of the Reagan Right, did little to educate the public since it was filled with nuclear jargon. Additionally, the New Right routinely red-baited those involved in the nuclear freeze movement, including prominent scientists such as Carl Sagan.

¹⁶ Meyers, xiii.

Television and the Cold War: A Brief history

Television has a long history of presenting the Cold War project to Americans in a number of forms. Television executives and Cold War political architects alike understood that the American public would never accept network news that overtly resembled state-sponsored propaganda.¹⁷ One way of avoiding this connection was through the legitimization of individual television reporters. By 1951, Edward R. Murrow's show, *See it Now*, as well as NBC's highly successful, *Meet the Press*, offered examples of the "objectivity" of individual network news reporters by permitting them to challenge the corporations that they ultimately answered to and the government officials presumably hostile to their reporting. Although network-scripted prime-time programming grew disinterested in the political machinations of the Cold War, particularly after the reign of McCarthyism, network news portrayed itself as steadfast in the "pursuit of truth" in the atomic age.

The post-war period is filled with examples of the mass media's complicit cooperation in promoting the Cold War and investigating potential American communists, particularly during the Second Red Scare. Nancy Bernhard, in her work on the symbiotic relationship between network news and government officials during the early and high atomic periods, uses the framework of "normative objectification," a term coined by sociologist Alvin Gouldner to describe the process in which the practices and ideologies of objectivity incorporate prevailing social and political norms, but retain and even strengthen their claims to objectivity. Bernhard argues the networks claimed objectivity in terms of individual reporters and investigative journalism, while adhering to formal Cold War ideology. This was a dangerous precedent, as Bernhard suggests, since it involves cooperation between government officials, network executives, and the corporations that reign supreme in the capitalist structure. One example she

¹⁷ Bernhard, 46.

cites is the relationship between CBS and the CIA in the nascent years of the Cold War.

Bernhard writes, “CBS and the CIA was so friendly that Allen Dulles, CIA director from 1953 until 1961, hosted annual New Year’s parties for CBS News Staff at his home or at his private club, the Alibi, in Washington, D.C. ...Clearly, at the time, no one who participated felt their gathering violated professional ethics...” even though this relationship between networks news and the government resulted in the firing of over 1400 government officials during the Eisenhower administration alone.¹⁸ Bernhard underscores two important points: the interrelationship between the networks and the government during the post war period and the major three networks’ collective commitment to advertise and sell the Cold War project to American consumers.

According to Bernhard and television historian Gary L. Edgerton, the ABC television network lagged behind NBC and CBS in the immediate postwar years and was also conspicuously immune to direct governmental confrontation. This is not to say the network was completely free from government pressure to help promote the commitment to contain communism in both its network programming as well as its news, however the network never received the ratings the other two major networks garnered. Bernhard provides an excellent example of this aforementioned stunted cooperation with her discussion on a State Department devised television program that sold the militarization of U.S. containment policy for ABC to broadcast during prime-time. The show entitled, *The Marshall Plan in Action*, aired on ABC from 1950 to 1953, and even though ABC aired the program for over three years, the network decided not only to change the name, (it became *Strength for a New World* in 1951), but also moved the show to a different night. The network found that even though it routinely broadcasted government constructed programs it could generate more advertising revenue by

¹⁸ Bernhard, 187-188.

tapping into the newly formed suburban market with family friendly programs such as *Walt Disney Presents*.¹⁹

Building on this audience, ABC moved into more specific types of programming, such as development of its Tuesday night *Movie of the Week*, which became the most popular feature-length series in television history, beginning in 1969.²⁰ Quickly, the movie of the week started grappling with social issues such as race and disease (*Brian's Song*, 1970), homosexuality (*That Certain Summer*, 1972), drugs (*Go Ask Alice*, 1973) to the horrors of America slavery (*Root's*, 1977). The success of ABC's docudramas reflected larger social and political changes occurring throughout the United States during the seventies. Although the concept of television movies had been evolving since the late 1950s, the style of the television movie, which relies heavily on social melodrama, became so popular and successful that no major network dare stray from the formula. Edgerton's work on the history of television argues, "the inclination of NBC, ABC, and CBS to follow similar lines of program development is a long-established pattern that results from the high degree of insularity and interdependence within their oligophy."²¹ The American public wanted to participate in social discussions provoked by docu-dramas and receive the opportunity to discuss their opinions on social issues, without having to get off the couch. As Edgerton explains:

Baby boomers were especially attracted to more contemporary and relevant specials and series of all kinds. ABC, in particular, had been appealing to the tastes of this demographic group since the mid 1950s, and it continued to do so by probing America's headlines and popular culture for TV movie topics that were both attention grabbing and up to the minute. The telefeature format was ideally geared to the immediacy of most docu-dramatic ideas by having a gestation period of only six months to a year; in this way, a television movie could be created and telecast while the newsworthiness of the subject was still fresh on the minds of most Americans.²²

¹⁹ Edgerton, 184.

²⁰ Ibid, 258.

²¹ Ibid, 256.

²² Ibid, 259.

What Edgerton leaves out in this analysis on the success of the docudramas amongst the changing suburban demographic of the new target audience comprised of young, urban, professionals with a growing number of children raised watching television, was that this demographic also enjoyed the implicit resolution of complicated social issues in a feature-film prime-time format, punctuated with commercial reminders of the joys of consumption.

The docu-drama styles that many of the made for television films employed, including *Special Bulletin* and *The Day After*, further obfuscated the already blurred lines between network news, partisan politics, ideological foreign policy, and corporate capitalism. Furthermore, with prominent members of Reagan's administration prepared to launch a political counter-offensive on the effectiveness of mutually assured destruction and exclaiming how the purpose of an immense nuclear arsenal produces peaceful deterrence, not war, the critical message of the films was blunted. American audiences were at best likely to be confused by the mixed messages emanating from television. Yet as television studies have demonstrated, the issue of reception is not only complicated but predicated on larger socio-economic and cultural issues.

In the post-Watergate era, television became the primary medium in which many Americans interpreted the news. The advent of *Nightline* created a unique format for the American public to understand international events without interrupting network programming or barraging the American public with uncomfortable political situations. The news division of ABC created the still-running news program *Nightline* to cover the Iranian Hostage Crisis of 1979. Originally titled, "The Iran Crisis: America Held Hostage," the format of the show was designed to provide a designated 48 minutes of news just pertaining to the hostages every night so to guarantee valuable news times for any other pressing items of the day during the primetime

news hour, while not appearing to be harping on the event as if it were a war. Thus, under these interesting conditions of incubation, *Nightline* was formed and the public had the option to watch further news on the hostage crisis in Iran or alternatively watch *The Tonight Show with Johnny Carson*. Through the influence of *Nightline*, ABC, regardless of the “objectivity” consistently effused by ABC President Brandon Stoddard, was bonded to the current administration just as the other two networks were since 1948. When the same network, now appeared to use the mini-series, specifically *The Day After*, as a way to secretly engage in alleged pro-nuclear freeze propaganda the administration was prepared to offer a rapacious and scripted response. The administration’s choice of rebuttal was ABC’s own *Nightline*. The same network, which had just aired the highly anticipated social melodrama, now had to calm the nation of any nuclear anxieties it just provoked.

A 1977 Congressional hearing investigating the relationship between the CIA and network news agencies concluded the 1950s was a time when government officials were most active in cooperating with significant media outlets such as the *New York Times*, *Time*, and *CBS*.²³ In contrast, ABC intended *Nightline* to be cancelled once the Iranian Crisis hostage was over, fearing the accusation of the network working in conjunction with the federal government for political gain. However, the continued popularity of *Nightline*, as well as its format, allowed Ted Koppel to maintain his legitimacy as an objective reporter. In a continued response to impending nuclear television mini-series, *The Day After*, an April 1983 episode of *Nightline* presented a special hour-long newscast entitled, “The Crisis Game,” in which a war game was simulated for the American people. In typical eighties cinematic style, former Secretary of State Edmund Muskie appeared as the president. *Time* Magazine published a four-part segment on how the United States and the Soviet Union would respond to a “superpower showdown.” This onslaught

²³ Bernhard, 184.

of atomic discourse pouring out of television and print journalism served to only frighten the American public and more importantly is reminiscent of the earlier postwar cooperation between network news and Cold War propaganda. The immediacy within which television programming could bring to life important, relevant current events allowed for the exploration of numerous political issues in narrative form and contributed to growing nuclear anxieties. The Reagan administration kept a watchful eye on a number of high-profile network mini-series that depicted atomic issues making sure the administration was literally waiting in the wings for a rebuttal, especially ABC who, as argued in chapter five repented for the alleged inflammatory 1983 film *The Day After*, with the overtly patriotic docudrama, *Amerika* in 1987.

Building on Bernhard's contention, which argues that network television news legitimized its own objectivity by clinging to anticommunism orthodoxy, even if the orthodoxy undermined the network's objectivity, this work examines how network television during Reagan's 80s, understood that television news and programming must adhere to political orthodoxy for fear of being labeled "liberal" during the Reagan revolution. Although Bernhard focuses primarily on network news as the site of this implicit cooperation between the networks and the government, this dissertation argues that other types of network programming, including the social melodramas, were also visual sites that reveal television's complicity in furthering late Cold War orthodoxy. Bernhard's contention, which argues that television became one of the largest corollaries for selling the Cold War project to the American people, influences this work. I argue that the network television mini-series, which relies on capitalist corporate sponsorship, grappled with contemporary political issues in order to provoke audiences and sell cars---in short to sell American ideology to its consumers. The American Broadcasting Company, with its commitment to presenting pressing political and social issues, through both its network news and

primetime programming, continued to struggle with the bipolar nature of the Cold War. ABC found itself accused of undermining anticommunism, and by extension this meant the network was accused of not supporting national security and foreign policy. White House documents indicate the Reagan administration urged corporate advertisers to avoid paying television time during the “liberal” made-for-television films such as *The Day After*.²⁴ This criticism, which helped to shape network news in the early post-war period, repackages Allan Nadel’s assertion of American television working as a hypnotic influence, or brainwashing, over the masses all to serve a capitalist agenda.

The End of Détente and the Rise of Reaganism

Even in the midst of the era of Cold War détente, adamant Cold Warriors propelled by the “Vietnam Syndrome” were strategically aligning their forces to reheat the military contest with the Soviets. In response to mounting pressure from groups such as the Committee on the Present Danger, a group founded in 1976 with the sole aim of drawing attention to the escalating Soviet menace, numerous U.S. intelligence agencies concluded that the U.S. had calamitously underestimated impending Soviet military plans. Even if the Apollo missions had designated a win for the U.S. in terms of the space race, U.S. intelligence agents warned that the United States was considerably losing the arms race. When Reagan assumed office in 1981, a litany of supporters calling for nuclear rearmament received appointments to Reagan’s cabinet. Although many Americans strongly favored an arms control agreement with the Soviets, by 1980 the pendulum swung towards higher defense spending and the landslide election of not only President Reagan but also Congressional Republicans.

²⁴ Karna Small-Stringer File: OA 9118, Folders 1-5, Ronald Reagan Papers, Ronald Reagan Library.

The new team of Cold Warriors appointed by Reagan was charged with the task to “restore the shattered American prestige and position around the world.”²⁵ This new conglomeration of Republicans would take a draconian position towards the Soviet Union, Communist led governments in Central America, and launch a massive military build-up, all in the name of “beating the Russians.” According to Republican rhetoric, the United States was emasculated during the Carter years by the President’s humanitarian agenda, the opening of the SALT II agreements, and finally the Iranian Hostage Crisis. In order to restore geopolitical supremacy, the U.S. ordered the production of the B-1 bomber, the Pershing II missile, and even allowed American arms manufactures to sell weapons on an unprecedented scale during peacetime. Given this new attention to weapon production, the arms industry grew exponentially during the early 1980s, with worldwide military spending peaking at approximately \$550 billion annually.

This dissertation argues that the early years of the Reagan administration are reminiscent of the nascent years of the Cold War under Truman. Furthermore, there is a congruent cultural and political pattern in the late atomic era that echoes many cultural fears present during the first atomic period, (1945-1950). Although cultural fears about nuclear war had been somewhat diminished by 1955, atomic energy was heralded in the same era by scientists as a possible formula for other scientific inquiries. This same idea that atomic energy could provide a permanent solution to our nation’s energy crisis was recycled in the mid-1970s, in the wake of the 1973 energy crisis and the ascendance of OPEC. In addition, the preoccupation with atomic secrecy that permeated the country in the wake of the 1950s atomic explosions in the Pacific, were duplicated under Reagan with his commitment to Cold War ideologies. In this context,

²⁵ Stephen E. Ambrose and Douglas G. Brinkley, *Rise to Globalism: American Foreign Policy since 1938* (Penguin Publishing: New York, 1997) 8th edition, 303.

Reagan era militarism and the construction of new technologies, such as Strategic Defense Initiative, not only rejuvenated the political climate of fear that surrounded nuclear proliferation but also widened the chasm between scientists and the military. Scientists had occupied a curious position for many Americans since detonation of the first atomic bomb. Boyer writes, “The same scientific discovery that had apparently brought an end to one terrible war simultaneously raised the specter of future wars of inconceivable destructiveness. An almost schizophrenic view of the scientist as public benefactor and as sinister impresario of death pervaded American culture.”²⁶

The Reagan administration employed a variety of propaganda schemes in order to erase the destructive capabilities of nuclear weapons and also emphasized what David E. Lilienthal, the first chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission, described as the “bright promise of atomic energy.”²⁷

Cold War Historiography

Since the detonation of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945, the idea of the “bomb” and “nuclear annihilation” has captured the imagination of people around the world. In the United States the advent of the “Atomic Age” ushered in a new era in American life characterized by fear, paranoia and the apocalyptic imagination.²⁸

“Nuclear culture” is an umbrella term that describes different cultural products ranging from film, to literature, to television, to the emergence of specific genres like science fiction and post-apocalyptic narratives. More importantly, nuclear culture can be understood as the ways in which popular culture responded to both the social and political factors that precipitated the use and proliferation of nuclear weapons, and secondly, how the American public came to

²⁶ Paul Boyer, *Fallout: A Historian Reflects on America's Half-Century Encounter with Nuclear Weapons* (Ohio State University Press, 1998), 179

²⁷ Ibid, 180.

²⁸ Douglas Robinson, *American Apocalypses: The Image of the End of the World in American Literature* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1985), xi.

understand and comprehend the potential implications of the bomb through public discourse. Immediately following the first use of the atomic bomb, Hollywood began incorporating atomic weaponry into its scripts. Works of both fiction and non-fiction began to contemplate the horrors of atomic imagery, and science fiction emerged as a distinct genre with its basis located in the nucleus of science and technology. Since the late 1940s, roughly thousands of films have been released in the United States alone depicting images of nuclear warfare and/or Cold War paranoia. However, it was not until the 1980s that scholars began the difficult task of examining the cultural, political and religious implications of atomic cinema. Science fiction films, in particular, were predominately dismissed as sub-par B movies devoid of any serious political, cultural or social meanings. For the most part historians have dismissed atomic films as simply monster films, mad scientists films, or disaster films without addressing the crucial, inextricable link inherent between technology and science fiction. However, more than any other genre science fiction has been able to capture and represent the paranoia and fear that accompanied the atomic age. As Susan Sontag writes in her watershed essay on postwar science fiction, “One gets the feeling...that a mass trauma exists over the use of nuclear weapons and the possibility of future nuclear wars. Most of the science fiction films bear witness to this trauma, and in a way, attempt to exorcise it.”²⁹

During the 1980s scholars began to produce serious examinations of atomic culture. Originally published in 1985, Paul Boyer’s work, *By the Bomb’s Early Light: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age*, was one of the first serious historical works that not only documented the cultural fears present within the nuclear age, but also exposed the complicated public anxiety and discourse disseminating from Washington, the popular press, the

²⁹ Susan Sontag, “The Imagination of Disaster,” in Mick Broderick, ed., *Hibakuska Cinema: Hiroshima, Nagasaki and the Nuclear Image in Japanese Film* (London: Kegan Paul International, 1996) 46.

media, and Hollywood. Boyer argues that post-war American life has been characterized by cultural waves of nuclear anxiety that span from 1945 to the collapse of the Soviet Union. He spends a considerable amount of time discussing the American reaction to the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and asserts that one of the most important visual artifacts first to emerge was *Life's* magazine atomic bomb issue released August 20, 1945. The visual imagery presented in the magazine became the dominant way that many Americans first encountered the bomb and perhaps more importantly became a cultural touchstone for U.S. scientific achievement.³⁰ In addition, he argues that the American reaction to the atomic bombing of Japan was shaped by a pronounced fear that this might happen in the United States. But more importantly he argued that the media helped to generate and perpetuate the myth that the utilization of atomic weapons not only shortened the Second World War but also saved American and Japanese lives.³¹

Margot Heinriksen and Allan M. Winkler agree that the bomb revolutionized American society, but perhaps more importantly, they argue that scholars only came to understand the enormity of atomic culture due to the heightened Cold War tensions exhibited in the early 1980s.³² Furthermore, it is only after social critics and cultural historians began writing in the late 1980s, in response to the “wave of antinuclear protests that was aroused in the early 1980s,” that a discourse on nuclear culture began to emerge out of the academic world.³³ Boyer’s subsequent work on the topic of atomic culture also echoes this assertion that the regeneration of

³⁰ Paul Boyer, *By the Bomb's Early Light: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), pp. 8-9.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 186-187.

³² See Margot A. Heinriksen, *Dr. Strangelove's America: Society and Culture in the Atomic Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), xvi, and Allan M. Winkler, *Life Under a Cloud: American Anxiety about the Atom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

³³ Heinriksen, xvii.

the Cold War under Reagan ignited a scholarly interest in our atomic past, present and future.³⁴ Out of this new discourse came the insight that not only was nuclear culture revolutionary, but also that scholars should examine a variety of cultural products if they wanted to gauge how American learned to live under the new threat of nuclear weapons. According to early 1981 poll over half of Americans believed that a nuclear war was possible with the Soviet Union.³⁵ Atomic investigations of the Reagan years were also fueled out of the same nuclear fears engulfing American citizens. From this regenerated nuclear fear emerged a decisively different version of the “end of the world.”

Beginning with Paul Boyer, historians over the last twenty-five years successfully demonstrated how the culture of the Cold War invaded every aspect of post-war life. From the political and cultural objectives of the CIA, as examined in Saunders work *Culture of the CIA and the world of Letters*, to Dudziack’s work on the relationship between the Cold War and civil rights, to numerous works that link containment ideology to gender, sexuality, red-baiting and social movements, it becomes increasingly clear that the Cold War permeated every aspect of American culture. Although, most of these treatments offer brilliant analysis into the culture of the early atomic period; they rarely consider the link between the Cold War and the New Right or the conservative cultural turn during the late atomic period.³⁶

Historiography on the New Right and Reagan is increasing in scope and content, aiming to explain how America made the conservative “Right” turn in American political culture. The overall consensus amongst political historians of the late twentieth-century asserts that Reagan

³⁴ Paul Boyer, *Fallout: A Historian Reflects on America’s Half-Century Encounter with Nuclear Weapons* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1998), xv.

³⁵ Joyce A. Evans, *Celluloid Mushroom Clouds: Hollywood and the Atomic Bomb* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998), 4.

³⁶ One historian who does examine the link between the New Right and the conservative turn is Lisa McGirr’s, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001.

was able to tap into a type of archetypal character, the cowboy conservative, to reassert masculinity and jingoistic religiosity into the fabric of American political culture which had waned during the mid-1970s. Moreover, Reagan exuded a sense of paternalism which mitigated many of the nuclear fears percolating under the veneer of “effeminate” New Left liberalism.

Philip Jenkins, in his 2006 work *Decade of Nightmares: The End of the Sixties and the Making of Eighties America*, persuasively argues that when one investigates the political and cultural milieu of the first Reagan administration, including the colossal military-industrial complex, the CIA’s involvement in Central America, and a strong emphasis on arms and space, it remarkably resembles the early 1950s more than the “liberalism” present during the Johnson and Nixon administrations.

A Contraction of Periodization: The Long 1970s

One of the major problems present in the post-war historiography is tracing the trajectory from the era of 1960s and the beginning of the conservative turn in American politics and cultural attitudes. Historians consistently argue over issues of periodization in terms of defining the “actual” beginnings and end of the postwar decades and the rise tide of conservatism.

Scholarly works such as Bruce Schulman’s *The Seventies*, as well as Peter N. Carroll’s, *It Seemed Like Nothing Happened* and Stephanie A. Slocum-Schaffer’s, *America in the Seventies*, all offer different cultural explanations of how the United States transformed from the decade of “radical” movements to the beginning of the Reagan years. However, whether or not one agrees with Schulman’s assertion that the end of the Sixties is invariably marked by the cultural and political unrest indelibly linked with the events of 1968, or whether the long “decade” continued into the 1970s with the continuation of the Vietnam war, anti-war dissent and the dissemination of counter-culture imagery, music, movies, clothing and attitudes into the heart of American

suburban teenagers, what is generally unanimous amongst postwar historians is the theory that the years ranging from 1968 to 1974 represented a decisive “cooling” of Cold War anxieties.³⁷ Furthermore, in order to explain the transition from Sixties Liberalism to the triumph of the Reagan revolution, one must accept the premise that “the Seventies transformed American economic and cultural life as much as, if not more than, the revolutions in manners and morals of the 1920s and 1960s. The decade reshaped the political landscape more dramatically than the 1930s. In race relations, religion, family life, politics and popular culture, the 1970s marked the most significant watershed of modern U.S. history, the beginning of our time.”³⁸

Another obstacle a historian confronts when examining the first Reagan administration was how the Reagan Revolution was able to become such a triumphant success when his first years were peppered with political problems. The popular press, including *Time Magazine* and *The Washington Post* to name a few, criticized Reagan’s big business agenda at the expense of American union-affiliated workers and warned that the economic climate of 1982, defined by Reagan’s assault on social programs, was too reminiscent of President Hoover and the Great Depression.³⁹ Furthermore, even if Reagan’s first years as President did not establish him as the stalwart, quintessential American cowboy conservative that could save the American public from evil enemies, both external and internal alike, as early as 1984 White House insiders, such as Martin Anderson, proudly proclaimed that Reagan had ignited a “revolution” that would “shake the political establishment of the United States—and the world—for some time to come.”⁴⁰

³⁷ Philip Jenkins, *Decade of Nightmares: The End of the Sixties and the Making of the Eighties America* (Oxford University Press, 2006) 5.

³⁸ Bruce Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society and Politics* (De Capo Press: Cambridge, MA, 2001) xii.

³⁹ For more on this comparison, see Bruce Schulman, as well as Herblock, *Washington Post*, January 23, 1983, reprinted in Herblock, *Through the Looking Glass: The Reagan Years in Words and Pictures* (New York: Norton, 1984), 129. “Gathering Gloom for Workers,” *Time*, December 14, 1981, pp. 64-65. “Jobs that Vanish Together,” *Newsweek*, February 15, 1982, p. 27.

⁴⁰ Martin Anderson, *Revolution* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1988), 6.

The latest publication of Reagan's memoirs also confounds the question of ideological adherence to the tenets of the "early atomic periods" as numerated by Boyer. Mark Haas asserted in his 2005 book on international politics, it would be a mistake to interpret Reagan's decisions as strategically informed, but rather a renewed dedication to rigid ideology, which at times took on biblical proportions. In addition, new examinations by Dickson, Nadel, and Zeman, suggest that Reagan was not simply motivated by ideological methods but instead embraced a personal cocktail of religion and individualism, which guided his positions. Reagan had to traverse a slippery path as he used both Cold Warrior nuclear jargon to defend military spending and "out weapon" the Soviet Union, while adhering to religious prophecy in order to appease his fundamental voter base. It is no coincidence that Reagan delivered his "Evil Empire" Speech to the National Association of Evangelicals in Orlando, Florida (a state growing increasingly "Right" in the late 20th century), for here he was able to not only reiterate the religious chasm that separated the United States from the atheistic, monolithic regime of the Soviet Union, but could also propose the increase military budget to design the SDI, in order to defend our "children" from the growing godless juggernaut that was the Soviet menace. The "evil empire" speech, as it has come to be known, ended in a rousing standing ovation with over 3.5 million evangelicals in attendance. Only months later, Reagan would publicly disregard the TTAPS study (popularly known as nuclear winter theory) in lieu of more attention placed on military technology opposed to cynical, "liberal, fearful" scientists. Perhaps caught in the middle of this epic battle for global supremacy was Great Britain, which not only staged serious protest against the installment of American weaponry in the country, but also produced films such as *Threads*, which demonstrated how Western Europe was in the crosshairs of nuclear destruction and even depicted the apocalyptic landscape for generations to come.

Methodology on Cultural History

The methodology employed in this work derives from numerous cultural historians as well as popular culture scholars. It is also imperative to provide a concrete political narrative to examine these visual texts. One useful theory for understanding the symbiotic relationship between television and Cold War is offered by Alan Nadel. He writes,

“Whatever methodologies of cultural history may help clarify aspects of television’s appearance on the American scene, it is important to remember that the way it was organized and construed followed from specific industrial and legal outcomes produced in conflict, not consensus, and certainly not preordained. Equally we must recognize that these conflicts and their resolutions occurred under historically specific conditions, as did the televisual product produced by those resolutions. American television’s impact thus necessarily would have been different, had it not entered the public imaginary at roughly the same time as the atomic bomb, the baby boom, McCarthyism, suburbia and the Korean War; had it not entered the lives of a nation fixated on politically mandated normality and obsessed with nonconformists; had it not become the unifying common experience of a nation constantly on the watch, lest it blink and its unprecedented prosperity be stolen, unobserved by subversives.”⁴¹

Nadel goes on to assert that for Americans, television was the equivalent of Soviet brainwashing. Given Reagan’s brilliant manipulation of the medium, it is logical to examine the regeneration of the Cold War three decades later through the television lens. Even though network television offered possible scenarios of nuclear war because of contemporary Cold War objectives, Reagan helped to mitigate those fears by presenting himself as the quintessential American hero. He routinely “allowed” the media to capture images of himself holding the Olympic torch, honoring World War II veterans, and visiting farmers in the field, in sum perfect media opportunities that reflected a safe and conservative America.⁴²

Cultural theorists continue to understand how popular culture works as a political barometer for understanding cultural anxieties. John Fiske argues political tensions are often

⁴¹ Alan Nadel, “Cold War Television”, in *American Cold War Culture*, edited by Douglas Field (Edinburg University Press, 2005), 149.

⁴² Martin Plissner, *The Control Room: How Television Calls the Shots in Presidential Elections* (New York: Touchstone, 1999) 182.

played out in popular culture and entertainment. Looking at this period, from approximately 1976 to 1987, illustrates the connection between politics and mass culture and demonstrates how popular culture responded to escalating nuclear anxieties in the midst of growing anti-nuclear movement and culturally conservative politics. Television productions such as *World War III*, *The Day After* and especially *Threads*, questioned the doctrine of mutually assured destruction or alternatively preemptive strikes that would afford a qualitative, if pyrrhic, post nuclear victory. However pyrrhic the nuclear holocaust might be these aforementioned cultural representations still adhered to the official proclamations on the need for reselling the Cold War and escalating nuclear anxieties for political gain.

The hegemonic framework for understanding how popular culture affects politics offered by Nadel and bolstered by other neo-Gramscian cultural studies scholars offered by the Birmingham School is complicated by the challenges network television faced during the eighties. Although John Fiske presents a persuasive argument that television viewers are subordinate and dominated under the superstructure of Western hegemonic capitalism, scholars such as Jane Feuer help to complicate this assertion by suggesting that the eighties presents a moment of rupture for network broadcasting brought about by technological changes.⁴³ During these moments of crisis, the hegemonic process was resisted by viewers who desired to see even more self-reflectivity emanating from the small screen. The eighties represented one of these moments of network television rupture in which television became a vital part of individual identity and personal politics. Television technology ranging from the home video recording to the remote control, to much larger transformation of network television due to cable stations and satellite availability, all gesture toward an audience that is demonstrating more agency and self-identification during the decade. Stuart Hall offers an extensive framework for examining the

⁴³ John Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 4.

contradictory meanings that viewers make from visual text.⁴⁴ Hall's "Encoding, Decoding," theoretical model suggest that alternative interpretations often derive from the same visual television source. An example of this complicated relationship was television advertisements for the nuclear freeze movement. The nuclear freeze movement challenged the hegemonic hold on American viewers by offering a peaceful, communal alternative to the conspicuous consumption, militaristic ideology promoted by the White House and network television shows. Hall, along with other cultural studies scholars like David Morley, reminds historians to that audience reception can be measured on a variety of levels. Interpretation of television is not limited through the producers and profiteers of cultural products, but also by those cultural consumers who analyze how the reception of television messages through distinctions and identities such as race, class and gender. Central to this investigation is the idea that the television must also be examined as a Cold War device that at times offered a democratized space and also an instrument that American audience could manipulate to their liking.

Sources:

By analyzing and historicizing television commercials, network television news shows, and political discussions regarding made for television movies, nuclear winter theory, and the freeze movement, I am able to more clearly define the relationship between the networks and the White House and also consider the messages conveyed to television viewers. The Reagan Library has recently released a number of White House documents on popular media and the Cold War during his presidency. This collection includes specific White House documents on a number of made for television movies including *The Day After*, *Threads* and *Amerika*. The Reagan Library houses over 300 documents regarding the potential political threat *The Day After*

⁴⁴ Stuart Hall, "Encoding/decoding". In Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (Ed.): *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies, 1972-79* London: Hutchinson, pp. 128-38

might generate. In response to escalating nuclear freeze pressure and an increased attention to selling the Cold War project of freedom and democracy around the world, the United States Information Agency (USIA) produced a film entitled, “Soviet Military Power” designed to compliment the brochure of the same name and demonstrate how the Soviets continue to build up a menacing military power in violation of its agreement with NATO. According to the Director of the USIA, Charles Z. Wick in July 26, 1983 the film was intended to be viewed by virtually every top military leader in the country up to, and including, the President. In addition, the Reagan White House was prepared to spend up to 500 million dollars to launch a counter campaign that could combat the possible negative press generated by *The Day After*.

The archival holdings at Vanderbilt University’s Television News Archive help to demonstrate the inexhaustible relationship between the White House and ABC throughout the Reagan era. The archive has an extensive collection of ABC’s long-running *Nightline*, a news program that routinely engaged White House officials with topics ranging from nuclear arms, Communism, and most importantly the fear of nuclear war. One example of *Nightline*’s commitment to normative objectivity in journalism while adhering to anticommunism propaganda is the July 8, 1983 episode “Wargames and Reality,” which discussed the popularity of the film *Wargames* and more importantly the possibility of an accidental first strike against the Soviet Union. Cold Warriors such as Secretary of Defense Casper Weinberger and NORAD spokesman General Thomas Brant defended Reagan’s position of preventing nuclear war through peaceful deterrence and assured the American public that the fear of an accidental nuclear war was exaggerated by radical leftists clinging to “sixties liberalism”. In addition, the use of presidential campaign ads help to illustrate how the White House turned the national focus from nuclear issue towards a conservative future buttressed by peaceful deterrence. This is

evident in Reagan's 1984 campaign ad, "Morning in America," which illustrates the daily lives of white, suburban, god-fearing Americans that value freedom and democracy not global state-sponsored malfecence.

The promotion of the Reagan Revolution and the great thaw is illustrated through White House memorandums that presented the 1987 teleplay *Amerika* as a necessary depiction of the evils of Soviet occupation. These documents not only demonstrate the White House's continuous monitoring of network programming but also show how official responses were formulated to manage the reception of these made for television nuclear movies. In addition, network reporters, such as Sam Donaldson interviewed key members of the Reagan administration to specifically discuss the Cold War. This gives further credence not only to the idea of normative objectivity in television journalism but also presents the larger issue of mutual cooperation between the networks, corporate sponsorship and the White House, a long standing post-war tradition according to Bernhard.

Using these archival sources, as well as the televised archival holdings at the Museum of Television and Radio, UCLA's Film and Television Library, and The Museum of Broadcast Communication provide a more complete understanding of how the Reagan administration was responding to the creation of network miniseries that grappled with nuclear issues and the continuation of the Cold War. More specifically, television sources are used to demonstrate how the mass media presented the debate between nuclear freeze advocates from the Left and armament proponents from the Right. The archival holdings at the UCLA library provide an illuminating visual array of texts in which I can examine many of the assertions offered in this work.

The mass media offers a variety of sources from newspapers to televised Presidential speeches, which helps to explain how the public was interpreting the resuscitation of the Cold War. Print journalism is a vital source for this examination as well. Even though the popular press is clearly partisan, news magazines such as *Time* devoted a considerable amount of print to nuclear issues. In addition, the popular press provides more insight into the reaction of the global left to the geopolitical maneuvering of the United States and its perception of Ronald Reagan. The popular press, specifically print journalism such as *The New York Times*, also situates these case-studies within the larger framework of Cold War cultural history by reporting not only on network programming but politics, economics, and popular sentiment and dissent. Televised speeches are immediately followed by political pundits representative of both parties that then repackage Reagan's speeches and interrupt his words for the mass audience. This also demonstrates the media's continuous discussion of nuclear issues and Cold War fears. Placed in a larger context, this work continues to examine the transformative relationship between government, capitalism network television, and audiences during the eighties.

Chapter outlines

Chapter One explores American network television depictions of World War III and U.S.-Soviet interactions. The chapter uses the 1982 NBC made for television film, *World War Three*, as a case-study to examine the end of the age of détente and the reheating of the Cold War under Reagan. In addition, this chapter analyzed how the three major networks were presenting nuclear issues in terms of news programs as well as made for television productions. Chapter one places this film within the larger bipartisan debate between nuclear freeze activist and nuclear proliferation supporters. Thanks in part to celebrity endorsement for nuclear freeze, such as Paul Newman, and "mainstream approach" employed by the leadership of nuclear freeze like Helen

Caldicott, the issue of nuclear freeze energized millions of Americans to demand an immediate halt in the production of nuclear weapons. The political Right also had celebrity participation, most notably, the actor Charlton Heston, who publicly debated Paul Newman on the issue of the nuclear freeze resolution in 1982. With the fear of nuclear holocaust looming from all sides and potentially threatening American children, viewers began to experience the next wave of nuclear anxieties.

NBC's made for TV movie, *World War III*, was a modest commercial hit. Interestingly, this film is more inflammatory in its depiction of the superpowers' continued pursuit of nuclear annihilation. Robert Joseph, the screenwriter of *World War III* commented, "We see them moving, moving, moving, towards a war they believe will never happen...two civilized countries going through this dance macabre, this jingoism, never wanting war, saying it can't happen...then provoking each other to greater and greater excesses."⁴⁵ Chapter one provides the historic and political framework for understanding made for television films and uses this teleplay as case-study for arguing how television and Reagan officials intentionally misinformed the American public about the possibility of surviving a nuclear war because of confrontational Cold War objectives around the globe.

Chapter two begins with the cultural and political expansion of television technology. With the expansion of satellite television and the opening of pay-for-television networks, the audience had more options and agency to create an individualistic television experience. Furthermore, the line between fact and fiction was further obfuscated by the development of a twenty-four hour news cycle and infotainment. The example used in this section examines how ABC's news division decided to demonstrate how the White House operated during a nuclear

⁴⁵ Newman, 228.

crisis in a simulated special titled, “The Crisis Game.” Shown during *Nightline*, the four hour special presented real political in fake political roles. Reviews of the special suggested that ABC news was offering a public forum to democratize the interworking of the White House.

Arguably, however, this special highlights the conflation of news with entertainment, further blurring the line between fact and fiction on network television. Chapter two also examines NBC’s nuclear docudrama, *Special Bulletin*. In 1983 more films were produced about nuclear war than in any other year in cinematic history. As the first chapter explains, these films are emblematic of escalating partisan divisions between liberals and conservatives. In order to understand the cultural relevance of these films, it is important to note that these films garnered explicit political responses from the Reagan White House and moreover the producers of *Special Bulletin* used documentary-style formats to frame the narrative, thus further blurring the line between fact and fiction.

The film centers on anti-nuclear terrorists who threaten to detonate a homemade nuclear device off the coast of South Carolina. The story is conveyed entirely through the rubric of mock television news reporting. However the film appeared too realistic for American viewers and the network brass at NBC feared it might provoke a national panic. In order to prevent potential chaos, the network repeatedly informed the American audience that *Special Bulletin* was just a movie, not the actual prime-time news. Yet due to the film’s plot, which portrays scientists and ex-Pentagon official as anti-nuclear war advocates who confront the US government by threatening war to promote peace appeared too confusing for American audiences and garnered limited ratings. More than any other made-for-television nuclear event, *Special Bulletin* offers an astute critique of how network television creates fictional news as spectacle. This commentary of

television working to create spectacles for profits is a remarkable moment of self-analysis for commercial television.

The second chapter also explores how television technology was changing cultural and political expectations. Reagan's inclusion of technology was a way to mitigate Cold War fears is examined throughout this chapter. As his rhetoric explained, technology, specifically space-based defensive missile systems, would serve to protect the U.S. from Soviet nuclear missiles. In turn, this chapter discusses how the Reagan administration used technology as a political and cultural trope to distract viewers from more substantial nuclear issues. Furthermore, by tracing the famous three speeches of 1983 (Eureka college speech, evil empire speech and the Star Wars speech), we can see the evolution of his political rhetoric. Through this lens, it becomes clear that Reagan's image was changing into a peaceful rather than hawkish president.

Chapter three investigates the Reagan White House's response to the most controversial American nuclear melodrama, *The Day After*. More than any other made for television film of the 1980s, the 1983 ABC film, *The Day After*, provoked the most direct response not only in terms of audiences' reaction but also by the White House. Aired the same month as the ABLE/ARCHER scare, *The Day After* became a cultural touchstone for the mounting nuclear anxieties of the early 1980s, especially for the increasingly television suave generation X kids whom had not yet had that visceral nuclear war experience. *The Day After* graphically depicted the aftermath of a nuclear attack on Lawrence, Kansas. Confronted by scenes of death, radiation burns and sickness, Americans watched the debilitating aftermath of nuclear war in the heartland. Unlike previous nuclear television dramas, *The Day After* was an enormous success due in no small part of the firestorm of publicity that surrounded the film. On November 20th, *The Washington Post* predicted more than 50 million American would watch the televised

nuclear war. The newspaper went on to report that churches, college-campuses, and many grass-roots organizations were prepared to answer questions about the film. White House staffer Karna Small-Stinger received fifteen internal memos in the span of five hours after the airing of the television film. Perhaps even more revealing, the White House was so concerned about the possible political fallout of the film that it arranged for the Secretary of State George Schultz to appear in a special interview with Ted Koppel immediately following the broadcast. The post-*Day After* roundtable discussion presented a cavalcade of political figureheads including Henry Kissinger, Robert McNamara, William F. Buckley, Jr. as well as social activists such as Carl Sagan and Eli Wiesel.

The Day After is perhaps the most significant case-study for understanding the Reagan era Cold War images on network television because it ignited an unprecedented national debate on the subject of nuclear war. *The Day After* allowed all Americans to watch the unimaginable and to visually confront their own nuclear nightmares. The film attempted to tap into pre-existing nuclear war fears while also provoking wide-scale debates. *The Day After* brought to television the abstract political and scientific renderings of nuclear war and personalized them by providing human faces for the aftereffects of nuclear war. The film also provides a narrative framework for audiences to understand complicated political discourses. Instead of discussing nuclear weapons, disarmament or foreign policy in political jargon, the film democratized the issues of nuclear war by presenting them in a format most Americans could understand and more importantly discuss. One might not be able to describe NATO's first strike policy or the United State's Cold War history of deterrence, but anyone could discuss how *The Day After* made them "feel" about nuclear war.

Chapter four explores how American television portrayed the global left's response to America's role in regenerating the Cold War. As an accelerated arms race appeared imminent, a number of European countries, potentially caught in the cross-hairs of global-thermo nuclear war, questioned these militaristic strategies thus sparking a growing political activism emerging out of the possibility of World War III.⁴⁶ According to a 1984 report in *Congressional Quarterly*, the grassroots movement against nuclear weapons during the Reagan administration first emerged in Europe, with an estimated 100,000 activists marching through London's West End in 1981 then slowly drifted across the Atlantic to the United States. In June of 1982, over 750,000 demonstrators took to the streets of New York City to protest Reagan's nuclear policy. This event marked the largest protest in the city's history. Furthermore in December of 1982, over 20,000 British women peacefully protested the instillation of U.S. Cruise missiles at the Greenham Common Air Force Base. While the 1982 protest is noted for its peaceful demonstration, when the first U.S. Cruise Missiles did arrive in October of 1983, the political activists led a more aggressive campaign. Only days later, the Soviet Union announced its intention to increase its nuclear forces. It appeared that if the Soviet Union and the United States were indeed engaged in a combative arms race then the rest of the world would suffer the potential consequences of nuclear war.

This chapter examines the April 1983 CBS news special entitled, "The Great Nuclear Arms Debate," which presented an international panel of leaders discussing the deployment of nuclear hardware into Western Europe and the growing nuclear freeze movement in NATO countries. Hosted by retired CBS patriarch anchor Walter Cronkite, the special attempted to explain international nuclear policy in ordinary terminology. Opposed to other nuclear themed

⁴⁶ For more on the history of Western Europe's response to the Cold War and fear of the bomb see Jeremi Suri, *Power and Protest: Global Revolution and the Rise of Détente*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003).

Nightline episodes, CBS did not provide a live studio audience, nor did they directly engage the American public. The audience was introduced to Western European politicians from Britain to Western Germany however it was evident that the same debate regarding the effectiveness of nuclear deterrence theory versus the case for nuclear disarmament was just as problematic for international leaders. I argue that even though the CBS network intended to inform the American public on the growing anti-nuclear imagery emanating out of Western Europe it focused exclusively on the leadership, did little to inform the public or explain any real insight into NATO's position on the growing nuclear arsenal. Additionally, the network was criticized for not directly engaging the public compared to ABC news which often encouraged audience participation.

The Western European nuclear freeze movement had deeper roots and at the time deeper immediacy due to the division of Europe by the United States and the Soviet Union after World War II. Western European anti-nuclear activism focused primarily on protesting the deployment of U.S. missiles into allied countries like England, West Germany and even Belgium. With Reagan's decision to deploy weapons to England, a new wave of political activism mushroomed throughout Western Europe. This chapter discusses European nuclear activism and how it was depicted on American television. In addition, this chapter discusses the release of nuclear freeze theory, otherwise known as the TTAPS study, and how the White House and the Press discussed this hotly contested scientific theory, which discredited the assumption behind mutually assured destruction. Situated within the larger scientific, global view of American nuclear proliferation is the release of the BBC made for television nuclear holocaust film, *Threads*.

Like American television docu-dramas, *Threads* interweaves a conventional narrative with political voice-over narration by BBC journalist Paul Vaughan to add a layer of authenticity

to the movie. Unlike American network television's most controversial teleplay, *The Day After*, the BBC's nuclear television drama not only infused documentary style techniques but also detailed the geopolitical events leading up to World War III, including the United States' massive military build-up and its confrontation with the Soviet Union in the Middle East. The setting of the ultimate superpower showdown in the Middle East was not selected randomly but rather reminds viewers of how the United States and the Soviet Union have been embroiled in a bitter campaign to spread their respective influences into the region since 1945.⁴⁷ *Threads* also incorporated the newly discovered nuclear winter theory into its narrative by depicting how two generations removed from World War III are struggling to survive in the post-apocalyptic landscape that was once England. Although *Threads* was by far the most incendiary of all the made for television nuclear dramas of the 1980s, the Reagan White House offered very little rebuttal to the teleplay. The *New York Times* review of the film, printed Saturday, January 12, 1985, claimed that the telefeature was not a neutral discussion of nuclear disarmament, but a "candidly biased warning" about the effects of nuclear winter. *Threads* was shown for the first time in America on WTBS, the Turner Broadcasting Station, and the basic cable station at the time was only available in certain cable outlets around the country. Nonetheless, the film captures the anti-Reagan dissent projected by the global left and offers a political critique of Thatcherism in England. Placed within a larger context, it helps to explain how television was utilized by those on either divide of the political chasm to further politically driven Cold War agendas.

Chapter five begins with the landslide reelection of Ronald Reagan to the White House. Using the 1984 Presidential Campaign Commercials between Reagan and Democratic Nominee

⁴⁷ For more on immediate post-war engagement of U.S.-Soviet affairs in the Middle East, see John Foran's "Time, CIA overthrow of Musaddiq, and the Shah," in *Cold War Construction: The Political Culture of United States Imperialism, 1945-1966*, edited by Christina G. Appy, (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press), 2000.

Walter Mondale, I examine how Reagan presented his role as president as synonymous with American peace, prosperity, and optimism. Even as the Reagan Doctrine, a recapitulation of the Truman Doctrine, became the center-piece of America's foreign policy and the United States military became embroiled in civil wars from Angola to El Salvador, Reagan's language reflected a need to cooperate with the Soviet Union while fighting Communism around the globe and reclaim its masculinity at home. With the eclipse of the Late Atomic Period, the American public was challenged to conceive the Soviet Union in different ways. This chapter examines the 1984 Presidential Campaign Commercials, the historical context of the mini-series *Amerika* and the expansion of cable. Although the Reagan administration grew increasingly scrutinized with the televised proceedings of the Iran-Contra Affair, network television continued to use the mini-series as an avenue to explore political issues. The case-study investigated in the chapter is ABC's 1987 mini-series, *Amerika*. This heavy-handed, seven-part, fourteen-and-a half miniseries offers an unflinching portrayal of American life after a blood-less occupation by the Soviet Union. The argument proffered in the chapter suggests that ABC produced *Amerika* as a jingoistic political offering to the White House after the network was accused of promoting anti-Reagan sentiment in its enormously successful 1983 miniseries, *The Day After*. The network received an impressive amount of mail and phone calls about *Amerika* before it aired suggesting that the film would garner enormous ratings for the network. In addition, *Amerika* received more post-viewer reaction of any other ABC miniseries, including *The Day After*.⁴⁸ Situated within a larger political context, the 1987 mini-series is emblematic of not only the "liberal" backlash that denounced New Left politics, but also the triumphant of the Reagan conservative revolution.

By 1986, Americans were fully engaged in the brave new world of satellite and cable television. Part of the Reagan legacy is the expansion of cable channels and the deregulation of

⁴⁸ David Gergen File, OA116, Folder 32, Ronald Reagan Papers, Ronald Reagan Library.

network television which led to the cable revolution. The cable revolution reconfigured the traditional network news cycle that ran like the Associated Press. With the arrival of Ted Turner, cable audiences now had other television news options such as CNN and Headline News. The growing cable audience found niche channels that catered to the individual. In a larger context, television not only framed the late atomic period but also transformed audience identification opening up a new world of cable services that catered to individualism: an idea aligned with the Reagan presidency.

Reagan, in his second term, had powerful political motives for solidifying his place in history and in turn, beginning in 1985, Reagan opened negotiations with the Soviets. In late 1985, Reagan and Gorbachev met at a summit in Geneva and perplexed observers by their apparent willingness to engage in serious arms reduction discussions.⁴⁹ The next year, the two superpower leaders met again in Reykjavik and although the summit failed to resolve all looming nuclear issues it was a necessary step in the Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, which ordered the dismantling of long-and-short terms missiles in Europe. Ironically, as the United States was engaging in nuclear arms treaties for the first time since the SALT I treaty in 1972, the slogan, “better dead than Red,” was still very much alive in American popular culture.

Conclusion

Reagan, and other public figures in the mass media, presented the possibility of World War III in survival terminology and claimed it was necessary for maintaining geopolitical supremacy. Conservative politicians and pundits feared the antinuclear movement, in all of its cultural and political forms, as one that possessed the power to bring down the Reagan administration and with it reestablish a new political landscape of New Left liberalism. Although this fear proved unfounded, particularly with the landslide reelection of Ronald Reagan in 1984,

⁴⁹ Jenkins, 226.

the cultural cacophony of discontent with the militaristic agenda of Reagan's first administration was heard around the world, particularly in Western Europe. Just as the CIA sponsored organization, The Committee on the Present Danger, quietly galvanized its forces to regenerate the Cold War and President-elect Reagan moved to release American hostages in Iran, the global Left responded to the potential NATO deployment of Pershing and cruise missiles without much media attention.

This dissertation argues that television brought renewed attention and immediacy to nuclear issues, which at first appeared detrimental to Reagan, but rather as evident in his second administration, had the opposite effect. I argue that television, with its made-for-television movies, roundtable discussions, and network news, confused the American public into a national belief that Reagan would restore freedom from fear and secure American ideology. By 1985 Reagan had softened his rhetoric towards the Soviet Union and began advocating arms reduction. Perhaps the lingering effects of the Vietnam Syndrome was beginning to lift considering the considerable successes the United States was having in the clandestine installations of pro-U.S. regimes in Central America. Regardless of the Reagan administrations motives, the U.S. Congress began holding sessions regarding nuclear winter theory and by the end of 1985, nuclear winter was no longer viewed as a political threat.

The cultural preoccupation with nuclear war was reinforced with a renewed political and religious imperative of "beating" the Soviets, in every conceivable arena. Although American filmmakers were particularly astute in not asserting blame for the beginning of World War III, human hubris followed by human fallibility remained our collective Achilles heel. Even in the most horrific of American network television depictions of the post-apocalyptic landscape, particularly *The Day After*, human fallibility is as much to blame as presidential policy. Placed

with a larger context, investigating this time period contributes to the growing historiography on the conservative turn in American culture, politics and the historical significance of Reaganism.

Given the level of attention nuclear war was receiving in both official discourses, among scientists, journalists, and government officials, coupled with the amount of attention the media, particularly television, gave the topic, it appeared as if the possibility of nuclear war was occupying the political consciousness.⁵⁰ This new generation of Cold War discourse invited public participation not only in terms of voting, but also because Americans articulated their concerns over nuclear issues through America media. As writers like Jonathan Schell, along with nuclear scientists depicted the post-nuclear landscape as being much worse than the government had previously envisioned the Reagan administration rebounded by claiming to have the policy and technology to prevent such a catastrophe from ever happening. In addition, fictionalized accounts of nuclear war and its aftermath provided a multiplicity of ways of imagining the realities of nuclear war. The television films, such as *The Day After*, *Special Bulletin*, and *Threads*, were not only representative of the widespread nuclear fear, but also helped to bring the discourse on nuclear war from inside the situation room and into the public sphere. The nuclear debate was no longer confined to the Committee on the Clear and Present Danger, but was debated on television, and to some extent, democratized. Perhaps the cultural legacy of this time in Cold War history is that politics collided with the bomb on prime-time television. A nuclear apocalypse was indeed televised on all three major networks, multiple times, and through the medium's hallucitory powers of Technicolor persuasion a new generation of American became entranced by the bomb, but more importantly Americans awaited the arrival

⁵⁰ Boyers, 364.

of the cavalry of Cowboy conservatives who would champion the values of the Reagan Revolution and finally beat the Communist menace, all on television.

Chapter One: “The Rejuvenation of Cold War Fears: Reagan, Nuclear Freeze, and the Made-for-Television film *World War III*”

On January 31, 1982, NBC broadcasted its made-for-television movie, *World War III*, which examined the world on the precipice of a nuclear holocaust with the Soviet Union. Over the next two nights, viewers watched as Soviet troops infiltrated an Alaskan army installation in retaliation for an U.S. grain embargo against the USSR. The American president played by Rock Hudson, he is caught in a web of diabolical KGB plots, overzealous militarism, and inexperience in his position as leader of the free world. Near the end of the narrative, after the president is told that opportunistic KGB comrades have killed the inept yet peaceful General Secretary Gorny, the president forecasts the nuclear apocalypse by stating, “They have killed Gorny. They killed him because he stood for peace. I think they are going to come in, they are lying. We can’t wait. Their backfire bombers will not be turned back. God forgive me.”⁵¹ In the scenes that followed, a montage interweaves children from Moscow to Washington playing in the snow, parading in the streets, and attending schools. These everyday images of life are disrupted by the roar of aircraft in the background. As people from around the world look up to the sky, the sun erupts into a large mushroom cloud, and the screen turns to black. This bleak vision of the end of the world brought on by misinformation and hard-line commitment to Cold War orthodoxy ushered in a new era of nuclear anxiety brought on by the first Reagan administration, network television, and antinuclear activists.

⁵¹ *World War III*, written by Robert Joseph, directed by David Greene and Boris Sagal, aired January 31, 1982, NBC.

In the early 1980s, Americans were inundated with nuclear imagery. In light of the renewed commitment to maintain the strongest nuclear arsenal on earth, President Reagan not only presented nuclear war as an unfortunate byproduct of Soviet aggression, but also promulgated the notion of “winning” a limited nuclear war. The visibility of nuclear imagery in popular culture was one of the most remarkable features of the early 1980s. In the mainstream media, key Reagan administration officials’ cavalier and dismissive comments about nuclear war not only frightened Americans, but also democratized the issue by speaking of nuclear policies in the public sphere. The public discussion about nuclear war was inexorably linked to the early years of the Reagan administration. Television and the popular press provided a vehicle that invited Americans to participate in this open dialogue. The mass media produced a tidal wave of nuclear-themed articles, movies, and television programming that exposed this growing fear of a nuclear nightmare. The interplay between the media and the first Reagan administration created a culture of nuclear fears that engulfed Americans during the early 1980s.

This chapter examines how the mass media in conjunction with the Reagan administration and nuclear freeze activists presented nuclear-themed television news specials, television movies, and print journalism, which collectively helped to reignite nuclear anxieties in America. This investigation begins with an examination on how network television news and print journalism helped to bring renewed themes of nuclear news to American viewers. After Reagan’s election, the mass media pointed a sharp, critical lens on the newly elected president’s proposed military buildup and openly interrogated Reagan’s Cold War agenda. Additionally, as the nuclear freeze movement gained more support, it also garnered celebrity endorsements on both the left and the right. This section discusses how celebrities were used as mouthpieces to explain the issues of nuclear deterrence and nuclear proliferation. Using the 1982 made-for-

television film as a case-study, *World War III*, I argue that the film reflects the social and cultural fears generated by Reagan's commitment to militarism. This section examines how the movie interweaves a critique of inept government officials, while adhering to the thematic conventions of the made-for-television social melodrama. The narrative focuses not on the minutiae of everyday life, but on the private machinations of both the American political machine as well as the secret Soviet apparatus. The message of the film was more aligned with the post-Watergate cynicism regarding distrust of officials. Although the film was not interpreted as an overt critique of Reagan, it did remind audiences that miscommunication between the superpowers could lead to unintentional nuclear war. The nuclear freeze movement is examined to provide the counter-narrative to Reagan's call for an immediate military buildup. In addition, the nuclear freeze movement, a social activist-based organization that worked to end the production of nuclear weapons, became a viable political threat for President Reagan, as it gained popularity amongst middle-class white women, suburban voters, and liberal celebrities. Its message of protecting children and providing a safe world for the future increasingly became hard to combat by Republicans in 1982. As the nuclear freeze movement gained political support, the White House launched a two-prong approach that linked antinuclear supporters as far-leftist Communist and reestablished the historically proved record of deterrence policy. In addition, this section analyzes how the Reagan White House equated the growth of antinuclear activism in the United States with the expansion of the Soviet Union. Framed within this larger context, *World War III* mirrored the frustrations many Americans had about the government and provided the catalyst for those Americans who joined the cause for nuclear freeze. This chapter argues that the Reagan White House was locked in a symbiotic relationship with the nuclear freeze movement and that television networks played a crucial role in disseminating this message through both its news

divisions and original programming and helped to bring the nuclear debate into mainstream America.

The Rising Tide of Nuclear Fears: How Network Television, the Mass Media, Activists, and the Reagan White House Created the Late Atomic Period

The late atomic period, approximately 1976 to 1989, was an inimitable fusion of political, social, and cultural Cold War contradictions. Characterized in part by the colossal military buildup under Reagan, and by the groundswell of antinuclear activism growing in tandem with Reagan's nuclear policies, the late atomic period saw a renewed interest in nuclear-related issues. This heightened curiosity regarding the state of the nuclear world was evident in all aspects of the mass media. More specifically, network television productions routinely employed the doctrine of mutually assured destruction (MAD) while questioning the policy of deterrence to maintain peace between superpowers.⁵² These two U.S. nuclear policies were critiqued on network news shows and in the popular press, and also fictionalized in made-for-television movies and miniseries. Additionally, the late atomic period is also noted for the growth of the nuclear freeze movement, a grassroots interest group against nuclear proliferation, which attracted millions of people around the world under the banner of "peace" for future generations.

On June 12, 1982, approximately one million people gathered in Central Park and overflowed the streets of New York City to protest President Reagan's proposed military buildup. This demonstration marked the largest protest in U.S. history. The diverse coalition of activists and individuals rallied behind slogans calling for a "freeze" on the existing nuclear arsenal, a reversal of U.S.-Soviet arms policies, and the redirection of federal funds from the military to social programs. In the months before the protest, the nuclear freeze movement, an

⁵² Mick Broderick, "Is This the Sum of Our Fears?" in *Atomic Culture: How We Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*, ed. Scott C. Zeman and Michael A. Amundson (Boulder: University of Colorado Press, 2004), 127.

umbrella coalition of doctors, antinuclear activists, and social crusaders, was increasing in its number and its visibility in the mass media. The March 29, 1982, cover of *Time* magazine prominently featured a large mushroom cloud with the caption reading, “Thinking the Unthinkable: Rising Fear about Nuclear War.” The issue was filled with articles regarding nuclear disarmament, proliferation, and the rising climate of nuclear fear. The cover illustrated that out of the smoldering ashes of the once-bountiful planet, an ominous, demonic face appeared through the cloud of nuclear fallout, a face that personified humanity’s capacity to destroy itself. Like many other periodicals and network news outlets during the first years of the Reagan administration, the mass media extensively captured this nuclear debate with a renewed sense of urgency.

The Reagan administration’s use of television as the primary vehicle to engage the American public transcended the boundaries of previous Cold War administrations’ policies of nuclear silence. In the nascent years of the Cold War, even though nuclear imagery was prevalent in popular culture Americans were not as aware of classified nuclear war foreign policy decisions. For example, Robert McNamara, who served as secretary of defense under Kennedy and Johnson and also was the architect of mutually assured destruction, did not speak directly to the American people through the medium of television. In contrast, the Reagan White House staff routinely made the rounds on network news shows to explain the growing unrest about nuclear weapons, social activism, and Cold War saber rattling. Reagan’s first secretary of state, Caspar Weinberger, was a common fixture on network television shows, yet provided limited access to print journalists. During the 1960s, nuclear policy was not as present in the public discourse but rather tightly secluded within political or scientific circles. Ironically, throughout the Reagan years, McNamara was routinely asked to speak about the topic as an

advocate for maintaining a superior nuclear arsenal because of the effectiveness of MAD. The Reagan White House was deemed unapologetically hawkish in its plans to restore nuclear supremacy over the Soviet Union, even if that translated into White House officials having to restate nuclear policy on television for voters.

In addition, the Reagan administration's proposed military buildup proved to draw mass attention in the media and the public. The first television special on Reagan's newly constructed nuclear proliferation plan was a five-part CBS documentary on U.S. military policy, *The Defense of the United States*. Aired in June 1981, the program presented a bleak vision of the United States in the event of a nuclear war.⁵³ Hosted by Dan Rather, it ran on five consecutive evenings during prime-time hours, competing with ABC's highest-rated show, *Joanie Loves Chachi*.⁵⁴ In short, it was designed to attract a large audience. The documentary news special openly questioned Reagan's military proposals as well as the White House's cavalier rhetoric about winning a nuclear war. Statements made by government officials such as Charles Kupperman, executive director of the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency (ACDA) and a member of the Committee on the Clear and Present Danger (CPD), who described nuclear war as a "physics problem" that the United States could resolve and win, were openly challenged by Dan Rather.⁵⁵ Furthermore, Rather concluded the series by stating: "The nation is about to commit itself to the biggest defense spending buildup in our history... Yet, for a commitment of this magnitude, we have learned little debate about alternatives."⁵⁶

⁵³ David Meyers, *A Winter of Discontent: The Nuclear Freeze and American Politics* (New York: Praeger, 1990), 85.

⁵⁴ Alex McNeil, *Total Television Including Cable: A Comprehensive Guide to Programming from 1948 to Present* (New York: Penguin Books, 1991), 1058.

⁵⁵ Robert Scheer, *With Enough Shovels: Reagan, Bush, and Nuclear War* (New York: Random House, 1982), 98.

⁵⁶ Meyers, *A Winter of Discontent*, 122.

This overt political criticism from network news television was unprecedented in Cold War and television history. Thomas Powers, writing for the *Nation*, described it this way: “CBS made two essentially political decisions before commencing ‘The Defense of the United States,’ neither of them a big deal for a writer speaking to a small audience, but acts of independence for a broadcasting network. The first was to dwell on the consequences of nuclear war, the cost in human terms—not to touch on it in passing but to make it the point ... The second decision was to treat the Soviet Union as a great power like any other, not the source, but the other half of this great conflict.”⁵⁷ In the wake of CBS’s open criticism of the Reagan administration, other networks followed suit. On October 20, 1981, NBC’s primetime news featured the growing antinuclear movement in Western Europe and added that the protestors were responding in part because of the caustic remarks made by the Reagan administration. As a gesture of peace, Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger was sent to Scotland to ease the growing tensions. Large demonstrations rejecting military buildup were staged in many European cities throughout late 1981 and 1982, galvanizing approximately 250,000 in Paris, 200,000 in Rome, and more than 400,000 quiescent protestors in Amsterdam.⁵⁸ In a larger context, the networks’ commitment to covering these nuclear-centered events at home and around the globe with such immediacy reflects both the growth and mobilization of antinuclear activists as well as Reagan’s commitment to combat Communism. This symbiotic relationship would become part of the contradictory public discourse through Reagan’s first term.

Reagan’s staunch rhetoric was criticized not only by network news outlets, but also in the popular press. *Time* magazine ran a series of articles that openly challenged Reagan on his economic recovery plan in the midst of the 1982 recession and examined how the growing

⁵⁷ Thomas Powers, “Sticking to the Grim Point,” *Nation*, July 25–August 1, 1981, 86.

⁵⁸ Meyers. *A Winter of Discontent*, 75.

political influence of the nuclear freeze movement was associated with the military buildup. Attempting to explain the rise in antinuclear activism, *Time* described how the movement was propelled by Americans from different ideological and geographic places. The March 29 issue contained a quotation from Rabbi Alexander Schindler prophesying that, “nuclear disarmament is going to be the central moral issue of the ’80s, just as Vietnam was in the ’60s.”⁵⁹ The article goes on to proclaim that from the liberal halls of Chicago universities to the conservative South, Americans were agreeing on a need to halt the production of nuclear weapons. Although the article appeared partisan in its flowery depiction of the liberal movement, the final statement celebrated Reagan as the only president since Nixon who was strong enough on defense to negotiate with the Soviets.⁶⁰ The *New York Times* offered similar examinations of Reagan’s agenda both domestically and internationally and repeatedly framed these issues in an educational and historical context. Moreover, the *Times* openly critiqued Reagan’s policy on the economy and its inextricable link to the proposed military arsenal. A March 7, 1982, Gallup poll indicated that 41 percent of Americans believed that the Democrats were more likely to keep the United States out of World War III.⁶¹ Similar to what *Time* magazine revealed about the eclectic hodge-podge of Americans openly aligned with the movement, the *New York Times* stressed the South’s participation in orchestrating local chapters for nuclear freeze activities. The April 23, 1982, article featured in *Time*, titled “Nuclear Arms Protest Growing in Pro-Military South,” explained that the freeze movement had galvanized activists in Orlando, Florida; Atlanta, Georgia; and Austin, Texas.⁶² Over 600 members of local southern chapters even made the pilgrimage to march in Washington to participate in the Citizens’ Lobby for a U.S-Soviet Freeze.

⁵⁹ James Kelly, “Thinking the Unthinkable,” *Time*, March, 29, 1982, 34–39.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ “Gallup Shows Democrats Favored as Prosperity Party,” *New York Times*, March 7, 1982.

⁶² Hedrick Smith, “The Nuclear Freeze; New Analysis,” *New York Times*, April 1, 1982 23.

Writing about the southern activism in *Southern Changes*, Margaret Roach captured the sentiment that many other southerners had about the government. Bob Bland of the Little Rock's chapter of SANE was quoted as stating, "We've been dumped on by the Pentagon. Arkansas is completely expendable."⁶³ In response to Reagan's nuclear and military proposals, Bland offered the Titan missile field incident, where an explosion killed one airman and injured twenty-one others in 1980, and the use of Arkansas as storage space for nuclear waste as examples of a dismissive U.S. government. The article ends with Bland's political agenda stating, "We'll remove the arch-hawks in 1984."

Throughout 1982, top White House officials made television appearances on the three major networks to explain the need to build and maintain a superior American/NATO nuclear arsenal. On April 22, 1982, *Nightline* invited White House officials, politicians from West Germany and the Soviet Union, and activists from the nuclear freeze movement to engage in a live televised debate broadcasting out of Harvard University. The audiences consisted of concerned citizens, faculty, viewers, and noted live guests such as Henry Kissinger. Executives at ABC's news division selected that week for the live nuclear debate as it was claimed by nuclear freeze advocates as "Ground Zero Week" and commemorated the week with events across the country to demonstrate the American people's unflinching commitment to peace. Moderator Ted Koppel attempted to explain how nuclear freeze had grown in tandem with the postwar years; yet a visual montage of events, starting with World War II, the postwar boom, Watergate, and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, was not placed in chronological order by the editors of *Nightline*. What was most striking about the nuclear debate was Koppel's repeated request for politicians to employ simple language (thus avoiding nuclear jargon) so the live audience, as well as television viewers, could clearly understand the difference between the call

⁶³ Margaret Roach and Allen Tullos, "The Freeze Down South," *Southern Changes* 5, no.4 1983:11-14.

for a nuclear freeze and Reagan's plan for nuclear proliferation. Yet no guest was able to do so. When a member of the live audience asked Henry Kissinger if Reagan was responsible for the growing number of people around the world gravitating to the freeze, Kissinger, with an unfortunate accent reminiscent of the 1964 character "Dr. Strangelove," provided this response: "If we announce we will not use nuclear weapons, that in a sense is committing suicide or arsenal blackmail. If we say we will not use them first, we may be tempting a conventional defeat rather than use of weapons are not yet available."⁶⁴ After his remarks, Koppel and the audience appeared more confused. Koppel ended the debate with this editorial:

What is important is to begin thinking about the unthinkable. And talking about it in a manner that prizes the rational over the dogmatic. It is all too easy to characterize those who we do not agree with as warmongers, or Communist dupes. On the other hand, it is easy to reduce nuclear war to an absurdity... In the coming months, there will be a high number of marches and demonstrations... we on television will cover them. They are largely designed to be covered by television to register the highest emotional impact on the largest possible audience. It will be difficult to remember at times that the issue transcends opposition to nuclear war. Nuclear war has very few advocates... As Jonathan Schell recently pointed out, our dilemma, is that we can never eliminate the knowledge of how to build nuclear weapons. That will be with us for as long as we survive. Learning to live with that knowledge is our problem.⁶⁵

Koppel enumerated many important points in his concluding remarks. He reminded the audiences that television relies on the dramatics of politicians, activists, and celebrities to stay commercially bankrolled. Additionally, he aligned the network with a critique of Reagan's policies and clearly stated that the network would cover antinuclear events. Similar to CBS and other news outlets of 1982, the popular press was momentarily supportive of the freeze. Articles in the *New York Times* continued to place the freeze within a larger framework. Hedrick Smith's article, "The Nuclear Freeze; New Analysis," suggested that "on both right and left, the Reagan administration finds its strategic arms policies under challenge and feels compelled to mount a vigorous counterattack to try to hold together the consensus in favor of an arms buildup that was

⁶⁴ "Nuclear Roundtable," *Nightline*, April 22, 1982. Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

strong a year ago but now has began to unravel.”⁶⁶ Similarly, *Newsweek*’s first story on the freeze led with the drama of a disabled Vietnam veteran collecting signatures for the antinuclear movement despite his severe physical pain.⁶⁷ In turn, the Reagan administration was indeed countering a maneuver to “out-peace” the antinuclear movement, which became easier to criticize as the months went on, especially when celebrities began discussing the possible nuclear freeze amendment.

Celebrities were also publicly taking political stands on the Reagan military agenda. One example of celebrity endorsement of the diametrically opposed issue of Reagan militarism was an episode of *The Last Word*. Originally aired October 28, 1982, celebrities Charlton Heston and Paul Newman argued about Reagan’s military budget and nuclear freeze, as well as the subject of celebrities lending their cultural capital for politically partisan purposes. In the first debate, *The Last Word*, hosted by Phil Donohue live from Chicago and Greg Jackson broadcasting from California, the two Hollywood actors squared off via satellite on the topics of nuclear weapons and the upcoming national referendum on nuclear freeze. They each represented iconic Hollywood actors speaking for and to the generationally divided American audience. Paul Newman, who was also an iconic Hollywood symbol, rose to fame during the 1960s, and his famous portrayals of rugged, individual antiheroes resonated with baby boomers. Heston, like Reagan, spoke in a paternalistic, masculine, and authoritative manner, while adhering closely to the official GOP party line regarding nuclear freeze and antinuclear supporters. Heston asserted:

Next week Americans will vote on nuclear freeze amendment, a lot of voters feel that nuclear freeze will bring to the world the peace we all seek. This is too important for passion, I heard an actor, not Paul, supporting the freeze by saying no I haven’t read anything about it, I don’t need to, this is a gut issue. Yeah, indeed it is. But you can’t think with your guts. A nuclear freeze will not serve the cause of peace because it is un-negotiable, unequal and unverifiable. It would divert the energies of the American

⁶⁶ Hedrick Smith, “The Nuclear Freeze: New Analysis,” *New York Times*, April 1, 1982 23.

⁶⁷ “A Matter of Life and Death,” *Newsweek*, April 26, 1982, 20-26.

negotiations now in progress in Geneva where we are trying not just to freeze nuclear arms but to reduce them. A nuclear freeze initiative if passed would send a false message of weakness to the Soviet Union and will on the part of the American people. It would lock us into a position of strategic inferiority, which in fact hurts deterrence, which as Paul said has kept us safe for the last 37 years. This would increase the danger of the war we all fear.⁶⁸

In this impassioned plea to the American people, Heston ends with a quotation on fear made by Confederate general Stonewall Jackson. Though only two years older than Newman, in the public imagination, Heston was an icon of “the Golden Age of Hollywood” and reinforced the paternalism emitted by Reagan. Heston reminded the viewers of the dangers of the Soviet Union, the lessons the United States learned from World War II, and that the United States could not sit back and watch an expansionist Soviet Union with positioned nuclear weapons threatening any NATO ally or the United States. It was a matter of strategic importance to maintain the superior nuclear arsenal for it is the most proven method for peace. Most importantly, Heston framed the nuclear proliferation position more effectively than the people working inside the White House. Heston responded to Newman’s explanations and goals of the freeze as if Newman was a radical, new-left, fear-monger.

This debate continued the next night on *Nightline*. Koppel, with co-host Greg Jackson from *The Last Word*, invited the guests to once again engage the topic of the nuclear freeze referendum. In the opening of the debate, Jackson explained that Americans were engaging, participating, and responding to the national dialogue on nuclear arms. Jackson went on to reveal that over 184,000 American viewers called the previous night to register their opinion on the question of favoring a bilateral U.S.-Soviet freeze on nuclear weapons. According to Jackson’s estimates, over 100,000 viewers voted no with the “yes” vote calling for a freeze at approximately 79,000 calls. He reminded the *Nightline* audience that they were encouraged to participate in open forum with the two celebrities, who once again presented the opposing

⁶⁸ “Nuclear Freeze Proposal,” *The Last Word*, ABC, October 28, 1982. Ronald Reagan Presidential Archive.

political positions on nuclear weapons. In this installment of the debate, Newman stuck to the message of the nuclear freeze movement, a position that stressed the importance of keeping the world safe for future generations. Newman contended, “I am concerned because the United States and the Soviet Union are at the equivalent to one million Hiroshima bombs, 4 tons for every man/woman/child on the planet. I am concerned because our nuclear weapons policy is moving away from deterrence and moving toward the incredible proposition that we can fight and win a nuclear war. That is why I support a verifiable freeze on the production, testing, and deployment of arms on both sides... This vote is not a vote on an arms agreement, this is a message that Americans have not abdicated our democratic right to advise the President on matters of great importance.”⁶⁹

Although the topic of the conflation of celebrity news and infotainment is discussed more thoroughly in Chapter Two, these televised nuclear debates illustrate television’s ability to blur the line between fact and fiction. By broadcasting news programs and narrative nuclear programming interchangeably, American audiences were confronted with a visual array of information and a cacophony of pundits debating deterrence, the use of nuclear weapons, and a post-apocalyptic world. Through most scholarly accounts, these televised images did not alter the popularity of President Reagan yet they left an indelible mark on American popular culture and television became the educational framework for most viewers to understand the politics of the Cold War during the eighties.

World War III: Presenting the Nuclear Nightmare

As the movie opens, the caption read, “The Place: Alaska, The Time: In the Future.” The audience is introduced to bored soldiers in a military installation in the frozen state celebrating Christmas without their families this year. The dialogue opens with the soldiers discussing their

⁶⁹ “Nuclear Freeze Proposal,” *Nightline*, ABC, October 29, 1982. Ronald Reagan Presidential Archive

confined space. One soldier is about to end his tour of duty as another remarks, “I am hopelessly passive.”⁷⁰ As the radar signals, the mood suddenly changes, as the mildly passive, bored soldiers are called to respond to a potential military situation. The “hopelessly passive” soldier shoots the other American military personnel throughout the installation. As he lights a cigarette and surveys the collateral damage, he starts to type that the generator has malfunctioned but assures that the Alaska bunker is secure.

Just like Ronald Reagan, Rock Hudson portrayed the American president as patriarchal, masculine, and rugged. In a verbal exchange with an attractive female reporter, the president is asked about the problematic grain embargo against the Soviet Union. The former vice president discusses how he has assumed the presidency, comments on the fact that he was not democratically elected, and explains his position regarding the embargo. The president contends that he wants to lift the grain embargo against the Soviet Union to help American farmers, for the best defense against the Soviets was the strength of the American farmer. His rhetoric is quite Jeffersonian in content and mirrors the rugged individualistic leanings emblematic of Reagan. The attractive journalist then turns to what the president intends to do in response to the Middle East’s proposed oil embargo against the United States. She asks, “Could the Alaskan pipeline be the solution?”⁷¹ The movie borrowed from headline political subject matter, and American audiences recalled all too clearly the oil crisis from the previous decade. Placed in a larger geopolitical framework, the movie gestured toward the combustible temperament of U.S. foreign policy during the Reagan years. Since the Nixon administration, the United States had found itself caught in the quagmire of Vietnam, isolated in the Middle East since the Iranian Revolution, and fearful of Soviet expansion. Americans had learned of the growing anti-U.S.

⁷⁰ *World War III*.

⁷¹ *Ibid*

sentiment through network television. The made-for-television movie echoed many of these all-too-real political scenarios.

This narrative captured the anxiety over miscommunication, misinformation, and rigid adherence to Cold War orthodoxy. The president's inexperience was countered by his undaunted commitment to the American people. Additionally, Brian Keith's depiction of the inept Secretary General Gorny mirrored the right-wing notion that regardless of the innocuous figurehead, the larger threat was the Soviet apparatus orchestrated by fanatical revolutionaries. Although set in the near "future," the narrative borrows heavily from news making headlines such as the 1980 grain embargo, which was the motivation for internal strife occurring in the Soviet Union, as well as the KGB's decision to invade Alaska in order to control the flow of oil coming down into the United States. The movie depicted the Soviet Union as a place rife with social and political disorder, surrounded by chaos, and managed by hawkish Soviet aggressors. In comparison, it painted the United States as family-oriented, God-fearing, rational Americans attempting to do the "right" thing in the midst of political uncertainty. Embedded within the dialogue was a modest critique of the Reagan administration. Hudson skillfully portrayed President Thomas McKenna as peaceful, but one who found that geopolitical events were unfolding too rapidly for an informed response. Neither diplomacy nor mutually assured destruction could match the chicanery of the old-guard KGB. The Soviets had diverted the president's attention on the prospect of peace, as they assassinated their own premier. In the end, the United States was fooled one last time by the Soviets, who launched a first nuclear strike.⁷²

The most interesting thematic undercurrent of the film, and also the most widely incorporated in other made-for-television films of the time, was the emphasis on children. Stationed thousands of miles away from his family, Colonel Caffey often speaks about how

⁷² Todd Gitlin. *Inside Prime Time* (London: Routledge, 1994), 199.

heartbreaking it was to spend Christmas in Alaska, with other lonely military personnel. This theme also spoke to the growing message espoused by the nuclear freeze movement, most specifically by the Physicians for Social Responsibility: protecting the world for future generations. Implicit in that message was a narrative mixture of distrust in incompetent or unsuccessful diplomats with the complete annihilation of the world's future generations.

The narrative held tightly to the normative conventional themes that were formulaic of made-for-television social melodramas. One example was the heterosexual coupling of the quasi-famous television stars, David Soul and Cathy Lee Crosby. The sexual tension between Crosby, oddly miscast as high-ranking Major Kate Breckinridge, and Soul as Colonel Jake Coffey, reminded viewers that even in the frozen wilderness during a Soviet invasion, there was still time for Americans to find romance. This minor subplot flirts with another common theme of social melodramas: infidelity. Another staple conventional trope found in the film was the inclusionary and egalitarian image of the American landscape. The military was visibly integrated in terms of both African Americans and women employed by the U.S government, suggesting that the decades of movements had achieved some racial and gender parity. Director David Greene even paid homage to the iconic Cold War film, *Fail-Safe* (1964). Like the aforementioned Hollywood film, *World War III* ends with a montage of people from all ethnicities from all around the world looking at the missiles in the beautiful blue skies and hearing the sounds of military hardware pouring down from above, concluding with a last glance at the sun and then a fade to black. Just as *Fail-Safe* frightened Americans in the months after the Cuban Missile Crisis, *World War III* reminded audiences of the unthinkable consequences of miscommunication between the superpowers in 1982.

A surface reading of the film suggests that the film is apolitical in scope and context. Although the film ends in cataclysmic annihilation of the Earth, the powder-keg resulted from a mutual misunderstanding of events caused by bureaucratic interference. This interpretation, although valid, does not acknowledge the moments of political criticism offered by the hero, played by David Soul. In a verbal exchange with Soviet paratroopers, these two soldiers engage in a dialogue about how neither wants to be responsible for starting nuclear war. In turn, the American hero states that the two soldiers are just following orders from governments far away and with no real knowledge of the events that have unfolded in Alaska. The dialogue interrogated the difference between “people” and “politicians.” The narrative allows for moments of criticisms by showing two ordinary men, one American and one Russian, willing to negotiate, as opposed to the miscommunication between politicians with nefarious agendas. The citizenry was not to blame for this nuclear standoff; the viewers were innocent bystanders held hostage by rigid political orthodoxy. This criticism of militarism, Reagan, and political bureaucrats from both ideologies resonated with American audiences that had yet to recover from the political double shot of Watergate and Vietnam.

Given its production problems, convoluted story, and melodramatic acting, it is not surprising that *World War III* did not achieve the popular success NBC anticipated. However, what was more significant was that the movie captured the climate of nuclear fear engulfing the nation and that other networks wanted to emulate the nuclear made-for-television melodrama. Even as *World War III* was still in production, ABC announced its commitment to make a nuclear drama that explored the effects of a Soviet H-bomb on Kansas City (a concept that was dramatized in the 1983 miniseries *The Day After*). Overall, NBC’s narrative suggested that misinformation and miscommunication between superpower governmental agents could create

World War III. This sentiment that politicians were speaking in a threatening or misleading manner was a common critique of the Reagan administration in the early 1980s. Regardless of the movie's obvious shortcomings, it attempted to force viewers to face up to the potential implications of nuclear war. Furthermore, networks learned that if they linked their nuclear melodramas to network news broadcasts, they could generate enormous commercial profits. Moreover, the networked played host to the democratized and mainstream debate on nuclear war.

NBC's made-for-TV movie, *World War III*, was a modest commercial hit. The second part of the miniseries placed eighth in the Nielsen ratings, right behind ABC's *Three's Company* and CBS's successful spinoff dramedy, *Trapper John, M.D.*⁷³ A January 29, 1982 article in the *New York Times* reminded potential viewers of NBC's contention that the film "makes such a powerful antiwar statement we request you not to reveal the ending to your readers."⁷⁴ Interestingly, this film is more inflammatory in its depiction of the superpowers' continued pursuit of nuclear annihilation. Robert Joseph, the screenwriter of *World War III*, commented, "We see them moving, moving, moving, towards a war they believe will never happen...two civilized countries going through this dance macabre, this jingoism, never wanting war, saying it can't happen...then provoking each other to greater and greater excesses."⁷⁵ The *New York Times* was less forgiving in its review of the film asserting that "*World War III* is precisely the kind of entertainment that would generate a warm glow among the Right."⁷⁶ The movie gained a large market share and over the course of two nights viewers were switching over to *World War*

⁷³ *New York Times*, February 10, 1982.

⁷⁴ John J. O'Connor, "TV Weekend; Roosevelt and the New Deal Years," *New York Times* 1982.

⁷⁵ Newman, 228.

⁷⁶ John J. O'Connor, "TV Weekend; Roosevelt and the New Deal Years," *New York Times* 1982.

III from the competition.⁷⁷ Even though the Reagan White House did not issue an official denouncement of the film, executives changed the original future date of 1983 to 1987, due in part to the upcoming 1984 presidential election.⁷⁸ What remained evident was the administration's determination to counter the growing antinuclear sentiment and anxiety engulfing the United States and Western Europe.

Although it is difficult to gauge viewers reaction to the made-for-television nuclear holocaust, research into the relationship between television and public opinion had continuously suggested that media influence is not a matter of overt forms of persuasion, but a question of providing a context or working framework in which opinions are formed. Television had the capacity to provide viewers a rich informational climate, regardless of other information sources.⁷⁹ Conversely, the volume of coverage also makes a difference in framing complicated political debates for viewers. Throughout 1982, the popular press presented the freeze movement as a byproduct of Reagan's militarism. The number of magazine and newspaper articles increased dramatically. On its nightly news broadcast in March and April 1982, CBS ran over 28 stories on nuclear weapons protest in the United States. Additionally, television, attempting to capture the anxious nuclear mood of American viewers, presented nuclear scenarios without any larger historical context. Without much awareness, the networks discovered they could capture viewership by uniting the audience in fascination with pessimistic, trans-historical, external threats.⁸⁰ This inclusion of the social melodramas with apocalyptic disasters reflected a divisive shift in the made-for-television movie as well as in the mainstream dissatisfaction with the Reagan military program. Furthermore, the last images of the Earth before a cataclysmic nuclear

⁷⁷ Todd Gitlin. *Inside Prime Time* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 199.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Justin Lewis, "Television and Public Opinion," in *A Companion to Television*, ed. Janet Wasko (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), 440.

⁸⁰ Gitlin, *Inside Prime Time*, 97.

war scared viewers and reminded Americans that nuclear war could possibly occur for a number of political, ideological or even technological reasons. This haunting visual continued throughout the early years of the Reagan administration and galvanized activists on both sides of the political spectrum.

The Nuclear Freeze Movement

The nuclear freeze movement of the 1980s has its genesis in a number of social and political organizations that grew in tandem with the atomic age. According to David S. Meyers, the advent of the nuclear age drastically changed the context and scope of organizations that feared another world war, particularly a nuclear world war. He adds that peace movements maintained the same type of supporters and activists, mostly middle-class sympathizers, peace-church organizations, and the political left.⁸¹ Moreover, as concerns about nuclear war escalated with the Cold War itself, organizations such as the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) and the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) called for unilateral disarmament and linked their antinuclear message to other foreign policy issues of the 1950s.⁸² One of the more popular peace movements, the Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy (SANE), emerged as a vehicle to broaden the basis for antinuclear activism. Created in part by Norman Cousins, the editor of the *Saturday Review*, SANE advocated a worldwide inclusive nuclear test-ban.⁸³ However, the group most responsible for the growth of the freeze movement was the Physicians for Social Responsibility. The "call" for nuclear freeze galvanized peace activists from a number of different organizations.

⁸¹ Meyers, *A Winter of Discontent*, 138–39.

⁸² Russel Johnson, "AFSC Peace Work from the '50s and '80s," *Peacework*, September 1983; Donna Warnock, "Feminism and Militarism: Can the Peace Movement Reach Out?" *WIN*, April 15, 1982, 7–11.

⁸³ Meyers, *A Winter of Discontent*, 140.

In addition, Randall Forsberg, the chief strategist of the freeze, was convinced that the American middle class had to be mobilized in order to sell the message on nuclear freeze. The key to disarmament, according to Forsberg, was to articulate a clear, collective message of halting the manufacturing on nuclear war around which all spectrums of the peace movements could mobilize.⁸⁴ Speaking at rallies, teach-ins, and arms control symposia around the country, Forsberg argued for a mutual and comprehensive U.S.-Soviet freeze. Having co authored the 1979 work, *Price of Defense*, Forsberg argued that the United States could retain a strictly defensive nuclear posturing with half of the current number of nuclear weapons. By April 1980, Forsberg had drafted the official position of the nuclear freeze movement in the four-page document, *Call to Halt the Nuclear Arms Race*. The “call” for nuclear freeze marked a monumental transition in the antinuclear movement in that it demanded a halt to production, as well as testing and deployment, of all newly constructed nuclear weapons.

The freeze, under the leadership of Forsberg, maintained its “heartland image” by incorporating and accepting endorsements from Christian organizations, such as William Sloane Coffin’s Riverside Church, the Pax Christi USA, and the National Council of Churches.⁸⁵ However, the movement also became punctuated with problems-- the fear of centralization by an elite group, which was a lingering concern from participants of the New Left, to the claim that the message of the freeze was too narrow. Concerned that the freeze excluded minority social issues, the message was again debated in acrimonious floor debates. Carrie Burris of CALC (Clergy And Laity Concerned) stated, “A lot of us...felt that diluting the *Call* that way [to stress

⁸⁴ Frances B. McCrea and Gerald E. Markle, *Minutes to Midnight: Nuclear Weapons Protest in America* (London: Sage Publications, 1989) 98-99.

⁸⁵ CNFMP is a coalition of 55 groups founded in 1979 to work for disarmament, nonintervention and military conversion. Pax Christi USA, the Roman Catholic peace group headed by Detroit bishop Thomas Gumbleton, was founded in 1977 to bring the Church’s teaching on war and peace to the Catholic people. The Riverside Church Disarmament Program was started in 1978. A full-time staff was hired to develop a fifteen-week college and seminary course on disarmament, which was eventually taught all over the country. *Nuclear Times*, 1983, 16.

economic conversion to counter unemployment] would ruin the potential for outreach to a broader segment of the U.S. public and it might look like just another left wing radical group.”⁸⁶

In order to rebuke right-wing assaults, Forsberg insisted that the National Freeze locate its headquarters in St. Louis, Missouri and adopt the guiding principle of “national coordination” with “local self-determination.”⁸⁷

The wholesome image Forsberg attempted to create was further legitimized by the endorsement from the group Physicians for Social Responsibility (PSR). Like the National Freeze Campaign, the PSR was headed by a woman president, Helen Caldicott. As an internationally recognized leader of the antinuclear movement, she mirrored the image Forsberg outlined. Unaligned with any leftist group, Caldicott’s résumé read as the consummate professional. A renowned pediatrician and a professor at the Harvard University Medical School, she had left both positions to devote her time to the cause for nuclear freeze. The PSR organized thousands of sit-ins at American colleges and universities in the fall of 1981. Caldicott was also featured in the 1981 film, *The Last Epidemic*, which showed the consequences of a nuclear bomb dropped on San Francisco. The film was widely shown amongst the antinuclear movement and was also utilized as a mechanism for mass mobilizations. This domestic, female-led group of organizers, coupled with Reagan’s own statements regarding “winning” a limited nuclear engagement, frightened and mobilized not just the intellectual elite or concerned moms, but citizens across a wide social spectrum. In 1982, *Newsweek* reported, “The saber-rattling rhetoric of the President has prompted vast and growing numbers of mainstream Americans to look past

⁸⁶ R. Leavitt, *Freezing the Arms Race: The Genesis of a Mass Movement* (Cambridge, MA: Kennedy School of Government, 1983), 26.

⁸⁷ *Nuclear Weapons Freeze Campaign* 1981.

the technicalities of arms-control procedures to a simple, symbolic first step such as the freeze.”⁸⁸

An important strategy of the National Freeze Campaign was to flood the White House with letters that indicated the organization wanted to speak to the president directly. In the months leading up to the June 12, 1982 proposed march in New York City, Helen Caldicott sent numerous invitations to the White House for staffers to engage directly with groups, such as Physicians for Social Responsibility, who spoke of the medical consequences of nuclear weapons and war. As part of their non-biased political platform, Caldicott reiterated that their group was a “national, non-profit organization of more than 20,000 doctors, dentists, and members of the public, in every state of the Union, dedicated to professional and public education on the medical implications of nuclear weapons and their use.”⁸⁹ After repeated denials from the White House staff, the National Freeze Campaign distributed literature that explicitly countered Reagan’s assertion of surviving a nuclear attack. In a pamphlet entitled, “The Freeze is Not Enough,” the campaign explained how even when Reagan claimed he did not want nuclear war, his aggressive military build-up clearly demonstrated his plans for nuclear proliferation and not nuclear cooperation with the Soviet Union. Furthermore, the pamphlet enumerated the many times in our atomic history, such as the 1963 Partial Test Ban Treaty that banned only atmospheric testing of nuclear weapons, in which the government did “nothing to prevent the continuing arms race.”⁹⁰ Groups such as the Union of Concerned Scientists, Lawyers Alliance for Nuclear Arms Control, Physicians for Social Responsibility, and United Campuses to Prevent Nuclear War also constructed lists of nuclear accidents in the United States from 1950 to 1976, which showed the presence of nuclear exposure in every geographic region of America,

⁸⁸ *Newsweek*, 1982, p. 24.

⁸⁹ William Clark File, OA 1299 Folder 376, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

⁹⁰ Nuclear Freeze files, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

including Hawaii and Alaska. Furthermore, the National Action/Research on the Military-Industrial Complex (NARMIC) map series compiled data that demonstrated that every state in the Union was owned in part by the Pentagon, with Arizona leading as the nation's largest Pentagon-controlled state, with over 5 percent belonging to the Department of Defense (DOD).⁹¹ This generational extension of the "military-industrial" atlas of the United States included the states with the most companies doing nuclear research as well as the colleges and universities with military contracts around the country. All of this data suggested that an overwhelming military presence existed in every state of the country, and with this inexorable nexus between the military and private nuclear weapons manufacturers, all Americans needed was to ban together and their numbers could promote and demand peace.

Unfortunately in the early 1980s, media coverage on the nuclear freeze movement often did not clearly differentiate between the message of the movement and public displays of individuals championing the cause of nuclear disarmament. For example, the *New York Times* began its coverage in early September 1981 with a front-page story on Bishop Leroy Matthiesen's attempt to shut down a nuclear bomb facility in Texas. Bishop Matthiesen legitimized the movement, and the *Times* noted, "Some members of the movement are pacifists but many are not."⁹² Furthermore, like the *Times*, network television exposure of the movement legitimized the movement by focusing on its grassroots appeal.⁹³ The media covered this renewed fear of nuclear war with lively dramatic flair. The *New York Times* devoted more extensive coverage to an individual antinuclear protestor's 39-day fast as well as shadows painted on Wall Street to simulate the results of millions of victims of nuclear vaporization.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² *New York Times*, September 8, 1981, 1.

⁹³ Andrew Rojecki. *Silencing the Opposition: Antinuclear Movements and the Media in the Cold War* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 126.

Television news injected more theatrics and reported on a man climbing 26 stories of a 45-story building to hang a nuclear freeze poster. Network cameras also captured the arrest of a civil disobedient female protestor married to the Minneapolis chief of police.⁹⁴ The dramatics of the issue often obscured the political message of the freeze movement. Adding to the public debate on nuclear weapons and the implications of nuclear war was the release of Jonathan Schell's 1982 essay, "The Fate of the Earth." Originally published as a series in the *New York Times Magazine*, the popularity of the message, which urged the moral necessity of preventing nuclear annihilation, resonated with American readers.⁹⁵ Despite Schell's call to "reinvent politics," little political analysis appeared in the book. Ironically, as the peace movement became more visual, gained greater membership, and involved a mainstream dialogue, it was left open to overt right-wing criticism.

Beginning in 1981, the freeze campaign grew rapidly. As Reagan's rhetoric became more ominous, the movement became stronger. Unlike the atomic presidents who preceded him, the Reagan nuclear doctrine employed blunt language, stripped of ambiguity, and rooted in clinical optimism. What previous defense secretaries had purposely called "options," Caspar Weinberger said, "nuclear war fighting." Additionally, Secretary of State Alexander Haig openly spoke of firing a "warning shot over Europe" to deter possible Soviet expansion. This statement was an open invitation to freeze activists all over Europe to unite around disarmament.⁹⁶ Without any sense of irony, Weinberger selected August 9, 1981, the anniversary of the bombing of Nagasaki, to announce the manufacturing of the controversial neutron bomb. Even conservatives became concerned, especially in the midst of the comment made by Under-secretary of Defense T. K.

⁹⁴ Meyers. *A Winter of Discontent*, 131.

⁹⁵ Philip K. Jenkins, *Decade of Nightmares: The End of the Sixties and the Making of Eighties America* (Oxford University Press, 2006) p. 222.

⁹⁶ Frances B. McCrae and Gerald E. Markle. *Minutes to Midnight: Nuclear Weapons Protest in America* (London: Sage Publications, 1989), 105.

Jones, who said that surviving a nuclear attack included using a shovel and a hole in the ground.⁹⁷

The emphasis on what would happen to children if a nuclear holocaust occurred was one of the many national dialogues engaging Americans and network political pundits in 1982. The popular press focused on Helen Caldicott for a number of reasons, but mostly because she successfully spoke directly to middle-class women and appealed to their materialism and domesticity. This message that nuclear freeze was inextricably connected to the family attracted a number of different groups and fostered growing visibility in the popular press. The massive number of demonstrators and growing public support for a nuclear freeze amendment prompted a counterattack by the White House. Reagan agreed with the activists that nuclear war was “bad.” However, like others on the Right, he asserted that Americans involved in the campaign for nuclear disarmament were being manipulated by those who purported peace, but whose main objective was to cripple America.⁹⁸

The Reagan Response to Nuclear Freeze

Throughout early 1982, the Reagan White House spent considerable time orchestrating a formal response to the nuclear freeze movement. As stated earlier, the official party line from the White House was that peace activists threatened the U.S. by decreasing arms while opening up spaces of organization that Communists could infiltrate and exploit. This classic red-baiting echoed Reagan’s public anti-Communist stance cultivated since the fifties. As the Physicians for Social Responsibility, from its St. Louis main office, sent numerous letters to the White House attempting to gain face-time with the president, the White House media office provided a swift response to a growing antinuclear movement. Immediately following the announcements of the

⁹⁷ Center for Defense Information, 1983.

⁹⁸ Vladimir Bukovsky, “The Soviet Role in the Peace Movement,” in *The Apocalyptic Premise*, ed. Ernest W. Lefebvre and E. Stephen Hunt (Washington, DC: Ethic and Public Policy Center, 1982), 165.

Kennedy-Bingham bills, nuclear freeze resolutions that were intended to be introduced to Congress before the 1982 mid-term elections, Secretary of State Alexander Haig called a news conference to repudiate the freeze. In April of 1982, the State Department issued two reports on the peace movement. One report suggested that the World Peace Council (WPC) was instigating and supporting Communism and oppositional groups throughout the West. The second report held tight to belief that the Soviet Union was controlling antinuclear groups in Western Europe and other former war-torn NATO regions. The State Department reiterated that NATO could not be swayed by dissent.⁹⁹ In a memo to William P. Clark, June 22, 1982, the National Security Council summarized the administration's rejection of the "no-first-use" nuclear option in Western Europe out of the proven method of deterrence.¹⁰⁰ This declaration of "no-first use" jargon did not specify that the administration would not provoke and/or start a nuclear war, but it did not mean the superpowers had reached nuclear parity, nor would arms talks reassume if the Soviet Union did not reveal its actual nuclear capability. The message from the Reagan White House reinforced the efficacy of deterrence policy and openly slandered antinuclear groups as hand-maidens to larger leftist conspirators directed by the Kremlin.

Nuclear arms supporters, generally from the Right, often dismissed nuclear freeze activists as childish, naïve, and at worst, lingering marauders from the sixties. The political Right attempted to characterize the protests, along with members of the nuclear freeze movement, as hung-over radicals who openly congregated with Communists. Following in the tradition of right-wing red-baiting, Republicans repeatedly equated dissent and antinuclear activities with communism. The Right offered "proof" of this collaboration between freeze activists and Communists in an essay by Rael Jean Isaac and Ehrich Issac that asserted Soviet spies had not

⁹⁹ Meyers, *A Winter of Discontent*, 213.

¹⁰⁰ Memo, Sven Kraemer to William P. Clark, June 22, 1982, folder "Nuclear Freeze" box OA, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library

only infiltrated the freeze movement, but they had surreptitiously exploited the freeze to gain military dominance over the United States.¹⁰¹ This argument was “validated” in an essay written by Vladimir Bukovsky, a Russian writer living in exile, who substantiated the claims that the Soviets were aggressively dominating the Western peace movements. He warned that if the West continued its commitment to peace, it would “willingly or unwillingly” align itself with the rulers of the East.¹⁰² From the editor of the *Wall Street Journal* to Caspar Weinberger, to over thirty members of the Committee on the President Danger (CPD) now holding positions in the Reagan administration, the Right suggested that a freeze on nuclear weapons or any type of disarmament did not work under the current geopolitical climate, especially Soviet expansionists’ policies. Framed in this argument, the Right presented nuclear freeze movement as the possible catalyst for a Soviet invasion. The official GOP stance on disarmament was if the government was to disarm unilaterally, the U.S. would become vulnerable not only to a potential nuclear attack but also to Soviet occupation.

Despite these right-wing descriptions, the public image of the antinuclear movement consisted not of left-wing radicals, but rather of mothers begging aloof politicians to save the world for their children. This gendered message of the nuclear freeze was repudiated by the Right, suggesting that peace activists did not understand the implications of nuclear foreign policy and military maneuvers. The peace movement was a hodge-podge of celebrities, musicians, mothers, and scientists demanding a unilateral nuclear freeze. What was most problematic for the Reagan administration was engaging in the gendered debate regarding traditional American values and preserving the world for children. Thus, the dialogue became

¹⁰¹ Rael Jean Isaac and Erich Isaac, “The Counterfeit Peacemakers,” in *The Apocalyptic Premise: Nuclear Arms Debated*, ed. Ernest W. Lefebvre and E. Stephen Hunt (Washington, DC: Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1982), 139–64.

¹⁰² Ronald E. Powaski, *Return to Armageddon: The United States and the Nuclear Arms Race, 1981–1999* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 19.

stunted. Republican pundits spoke in military jargon, while peace advocates spoke of the rights of children to grow in a nuclear-free environment. Placed within a larger context, as nuclear issues became more visible in the mass media, the national dialogue on nuclear issues became overtly partisan, contradictory, and sensational.

Nuclear Freeze and the Threat of Soviet Aggression

It was a matter of strategic geopolitical importance that the U.S. government conveyed the Soviet Union as an expanding and struggling power, especially since the U.S. planned to deploy new nuclear hardware into Western Europe. The Soviets' replacement of its first-generation missiles in Europe in the mid-seventies strained détente and suggested that the Soviet's might launch a first strike. Conversely, the 1980 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and its support of Marxist regimes in Angola and Central America demonstrated their commitment to worldwide Communist revolution, according to conservatives. However, the Soviets shared a similar fear of the rhetoric and military reorganization occurring under Reagan. Even before the 1980 presidential election, the United States was mobilizing its military strength. On July 25, 1980, President Carter added to Soviet fears by proposing a new presidential directive, PD-59, which included an argument for fighting an extended nuclear war rather than attacking through use of the entire arsenal.¹⁰³ This position was popular amongst Republicans. During the 1980 presidential race, the Republican National Convention co-opted this nuclear platform and Reagan delivered the message of the pronounced Soviet threat.

The conservative call to rebuild the U.S. military arsenal began in the midst of the era of Cold War détente. Adamant Cold Warriors propelled by the "Vietnam Syndrome" were strategically aligning their forces to reheat the military contest with the Soviets. In response to mounting pressure from groups such as the Committee on the Present Danger (CPD), a group

¹⁰³ Richard Rhodes, *Arsenal of Folly: The Making of Nuclear Arms Race* (New York: Knopf, 2007), 346.

founded in 1976 with the sole aim of drawing attention to the escalating Soviet menace, numerous U.S. intelligence agencies concluded that the United States had calamitously underestimated impending Soviet military plans. Even if the Apollo missions had designated a win for the U.S. in terms of the space race, U.S. intelligence agents warned that the United States was losing the arms race. When Reagan assumed office in 1981, a litany of supporters calling for nuclear rearmament received appointments to Reagan's cabinet. Although many Americans strongly favored an arms control agreement with the Soviets, by 1980, the pendulum swung "right" toward higher defense spending evident through not only the landslide election of President Reagan but also Congressional Republicans. Neoconservative arguments about a frightening Soviet nuclear arsenal in the face of "American appeasement policy" effectively equated the Soviet regime to the rise of Nazism in Germany. This militaristic theory was propagated during the years of supposed détente, and a USIA (United States Information Agency) film, "Soviet Military Power," was produced and shown to NATO allies in order to demonstrate how successful the Soviet military apparatus had become during the seventies. USIA director Charles Z. Wick wrote, "the USIA produced videotape, 'Soviet Military Power,' designed to complement the brochure on the same theme and to demonstrate how the Soviets continue to build up a menacing military power has now been viewed by virtually every top military leader in the country up to, and including, the President."¹⁰⁴ As for the Soviets, their interpretation was that the U.S. was gearing for World War III.¹⁰⁵ According to the Soviets, President Carter had ended détente with his proposal of protecting the Persian Gulf and the larger

¹⁰⁴ Ronald Reagan to Nancy Searson, November 25, 1983, PR 011-175211-185664, Box, 13, Ronald Reagan Presidential Archive.

¹⁰⁵ Rhodes, *Arsenal of Folly*, 136–37.

American commitment of building more efficient nuclear hardware. Nuclear weapons scholar Richard Rhodes argues:

By the 1980 presidential election...the choice in foreign policy was that of the Carter administration, which favored the [MIRVed, ten war-head], MX missiles, the Trident submarine, a Rapid Deployment Force, a “stealth bomber,” cruise missiles, counterforce targeting leading to a first-strike capability, and a 5 percent increase in defense spending, and that of the Republicans under Ronald Reagan, who favored all of these plus the neutron bomb, antiballistic missiles, the B-1 Bomber, civil defense and a 8 percent increase in defense spending.

For the American voter, although perhaps unclear on the larger implications of this story line in the miniseries *World War III*, he/she understood that the U.S. and Soviet Union had already traversed numerous nuclear landmines by the end of the 1970s. The question remained as to what political party was willing to bring peace and prosperity since both Democrats and Republicans agreed over the need for massive rearmament.

With his landslide election in 1980, Reagan appointed this team of Cold Warriors with the task of “restoring the shattered American prestige and position around the world.”¹⁰⁶ This well-oiled conglomeration of Republicans would take a draconian position toward the Soviet Union and Communist-led governments in Central America, and launch a massive military expansion, all in the name of “beating the Russians.” After nearly two decades of arms talks under Presidents Nixon and Carter, the Cold War pendulum swung back to an era before détente. In subsequent campaign speeches, Reagan warned of the possible Soviet annexation of the Middle East, Latin America, and even spread into neighboring Mexico. Mirroring this position in 1980, Reagan ominously warned, “We now enter one of the most dangerous decades of Western civilization.”¹⁰⁷ Compared to the incumbent Democrat, President Carter, Reagan promised to secure nuclear superiority over the Soviet Union and restore the country to its providence.

¹⁰⁶ Stephen E. Ambrose and Douglas G. Brinkley, *Rise to Globalism: American Foreign Policy since 1938*, 8th ed. (New York: Penguin Publishing, 1997), 303.

¹⁰⁷ Fitzgerald, *Way Out There in the Blue*, 109.

Reagan stated that the United States had been through an era of “vallication, appeasement and aimlessness,” throughout the Carter years and as a result, “the Soviets had pulled way ahead.”¹⁰⁸ According to Reagan’s estimates, the Soviets had spent over \$240 billion more on defense than the United States, and in so doing it was no longer an arms race, but a potential win for the Soviet Union. For Reagan, his rhetoric suggested that the American voter had to decide the fate of the United States as a superpower or suffer the fate of the British Chamberlain policy which led to Nazi expansion before 1941. This specter of the horrors of World War II would prove a useful trope in the endorsement of Ronald Reagan in the 1980 presidential election.

Reagan advisors continually reiterated that the United States had the capacity to wage a protracted nuclear war against specific Soviet targets. In order to do this successfully, the White House promulgated the need for an extensive modernization of nuclear hardware, which would also double the size of the U.S. nuclear arsenal. This unprecedented nuclear buildup, coupled with Reagan’s rhetoric and his unwillingness to engage in arms talks, did much to heighten the fear of a nuclear holocaust. An NBC/Associated Press poll in December 1981 revealed that 76 percent of Americans believed that nuclear war was likely to occur within a few years.¹⁰⁹ Some even believed that nuclear war was inevitable. A 1982 poll showed that for the first time in Cold War history, a large proportion of Americans, 41 percent, believed that the Russians possessed a larger nuclear arsenal, while only 7 percent agreed that the U.S. has a superior force.¹¹⁰

In this midst of the discussion on the accuracy of nuclear weapons, the role of human fallibility has always served as a signpost of how vulnerable nuclear weapons were to mistakes. In the

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 110. See also Ronald Reagan speeches, March 20, 1980, Reagan Presidential Archives.

¹⁰⁹ Powaski, *Return to Armageddon*, 16–17.

¹¹⁰ R. Kramer, S. Kalick, and M. Milburn, “Attitudes toward Nuclear Weapons and Nuclear War, 1945–1982,” *Journal of Social Issues*, 39 (1983): 17.

early summer of 1980, on two separate occasions, the North American Defense Command Center indicated that the Soviets had launched a missile attack against the United State. Additionally, Soviet premier Yuri Andropov made a public announcement that the Reagan administration was preparing for a surprise first strike against the Soviet Union.¹¹¹ In traditional Cold War fashion, the KGB and its military counterpart, the GRU, would combine for the first time in Soviet history to become the largest intelligence-gathering program during peacetime. In response to Reagan's pointed words, Yuri Andropov would also test the Soviets' ability to mobilize under the code-named Project RYAN, an acronym derived from the Russian words for a surprise missile attack.¹¹² On separate occasions, radars belonging both to the North American Defense Command Center and to Soviet satellites, erroneously indicated that the other side had already launched a first strike against the other. Although all were mistakes, the fear that World War III could result from a technological mishap or failed computer equipment added more immediacy to the fear of a nuclear nightmare. Furthermore, these accidental blunders underscored how serious the situation had become between the superpowers. The public fear of nuclear war helped to propel the nuclear freeze movement and nuclear imagery on network television.

The nuclear freeze movement became a political fixture in the 1982 midterm election. In the fall of 1982, the nuclear freeze movement mobilized the largest referendum campaign in U.S. history. Over eleven million Americans voted for the freeze and won in nine of the ten states that placed the referendum on the ballots.¹¹³ Meyers also adds that support for a nuclear freeze was aided in part by the recession of 1982. In the midst of an economic recession, the Reagan

¹¹¹ Rhodes, *Arsenal of Folly*, 151.

¹¹² Ibid., 152.

¹¹³ Margaret Roach and Allen Tullos, "The Freeze Down South," *Southern Changes* 5, no. 4 (1983): 11–14.

rearmament program included more than \$20 billion to improve and protect the vulnerable aspects of the U.S. nuclear communication apparatus. For many Americans, this rearmament project seemed suspect in the midst of the economic recession. By most accounts, the economy worsened during the first two years of Reagan's presidency. Reagan's rearmament blueprint budget was funded by a \$35 billion cut for domestic programs. When asked about the cost of the project military arsenal at the expense of domestic programs, Reagan famously said, "The military is not a budget issue." Unemployment increased from an average around 7 percent under Carter to 10.7 percent in early 1982, and substantially got worse for women and minorities.¹¹⁴ Furthermore, organizations such as the United Auto Workers (UAW) and other Old Left unions shared the anti-Reagan sentiment espoused by the New Left or antinuclear activists. Economics and television brought immediacy to the problems facing increasing hostile anti-American sentiment. This emphasis on the failing economy, framed in the larger context of Reagan's bellicose rhetoric toward the Soviet Union and the use of federal funds to increase the nuclear arsenal, galvanized the nuclear freeze movement. Moreover, the central message of the freeze championed peace and the right to a nuclear-free future for children.

As for the White House, it would continue to recycle the same ten talking points, which ranged from the obvious, such as nuclear weapons are a concern and need to be discussed, to the tradition of deterrence through proliferation. Not until the famous March 1983 "Star Wars" speech did the administration finally out-peace the peace movement, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

¹¹⁴ Meyers, *A Winter of Discontent*, 58.

Conclusion

As the nuclear freeze movement gained political and popular support among voters, the Reagan White House worked furiously to construct a counter-narrative to mitigate collective fears of nuclear war. The strategy for winning public support was massive exposure on television to promote deterrence and nuclear armament. As Robert E. Denton Jr. writes, “the daily priorities were: network evening news, morning shows, Cable News Network, and local regional news programs. Details of the daily nature of government policy and foreign affairs were avoided. Photo opportunities were granted, but questions for the President were not allowed. Press briefings were held late in the day, reducing the time for network editing. By 1983 Reagan gave the press 194 interviews and 150 White House briefings from outside the White House.”¹¹⁵ Furthermore, by Reagan’s third year, the White House media staff constructed a new relationship with network news in which the executive branch wielded immense power. By 1983, Reagan’s television exposure was recreating the American television political experience. His presidential style expressed how people feel, not what they think. Like the medium of television, Reagan’s delivery and tone resonated with the television audience and created an intimate relationship between the president and the viewer.

Network television movies were a viable commodity in the early 1980s as the format of these narrative films explored social, cultural, and political issues. The narrative of *World War III* borrowed heavily from Cold War headlines and more specifically about U.S.-Soviet nuclear issues. Although the grain embargo was discussed in the national media, the divisiveness of this issue was one of great importance to both superpowers. As early as 1974, the Soviet Union

¹¹⁵ Robert E. Denton Jr., *The Primetime Presidency of Ronald Reagan: The Era of Television Presidency* (New York: Praeger, 1988), 71.

admitted that its economic collapse would be inextricably linked to the grain embargo.¹¹⁶ Furthermore, Nobel Prize-winning physicist Andrei Sakharov, in a series of memoranda published in the *New York Times* in 1968 under the title “Reflections on Progress, Peaceful Coexistence and Intellectual Freedom,” admitted a number of ways in which the Soviet Union lagged behind in the production of essential materials, including access to foodstuffs. Most specifically, the Soviets lagged in terms of computer technology that had the capacity to benefit the national economy and demonstrate technological prowess.¹¹⁷ In the television movie *World War III*, the audience bears witness to the private conversations of the men who control the nuclear arsenal, gesturing toward the ability of television to engage the public in global issues. Although the average viewer may not have known of the connection between the Soviet grain embargo and the U.S. military expansion, collectively, the major three television networks utilized these programs as ways of inviting audience participation and generating revenue. Additionally, the film’s use of the 1980 U.S. grain embargo adds to the miniseries commitment to illustrate social problems while also dramatize their political value. As the U.S. attempted to use its resource capabilities to withhold grain from the Soviets, as Carter stipulated in a speech in January 1980, as a way to discipline the Soviets for their 1979 invasion of Afghanistan, the Soviet people were suffering. Historically, this became the basis of not only the end of détente, but also the fictional narrative device to explain the riotous Soviet people as well as the blunder of the Soviet leadership. Although the initial political impact of the embargo embarrassed the Carter administration, it also helped to generate Cold War anxieties in that it strained delicate U.S.-Soviet relations. Escalating tensions with the Soviet Union, in addition to the environmental nuclear accident at Three Mile Island, helped to unite members of the nuclear freeze movement

¹¹⁶ Rhodes, *Arsenal of Folly*, 139.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 140.

and mobilize the “liberal” cause for peace. Again it is important to remember that the film *World War III* concludes with a nuclear holocaust, a montage sequence that begins with faces of children from around the world and ends with global thermal mushroom clouds, an ending that demonstrated little faith in government institutions.

World War III reflected an increased awareness of Cold War maneuverings as well as a distrust of government and corrupt political officials. The conservative Right repeatedly evoked imagery from World War II as an ominous portent of what might happen if the Soviets continued to expand their territory. During the 1980 presidential campaign, Reagan compared President Jimmy Carter to Neville Chamberlin and the policy of appeasement in regard to the arms race with the Soviets. What the antinuclear movements shared with the Committee on Clear and Present Danger (CPD), the covert and surreptitious right-wing group wanting to increase the U.S. nuclear arsenal, was the desire to bring awareness to the issues surrounding nuclear arms. Ironically, these opposition organizers would find Reagan and his advisors the perfect figureheads to politicize and discuss nuclear issues through the media. Ironically, both sides depended on Reagan and the mass media to bring these complicated issues into the mainstream. Ronald Reagan was the perfect advocate for the new conservative power bloc, and as he rode into Washington for his inauguration in 1981, he brought with him a cavalry of approximately thirty-one members of the Committee on the Present Danger, including the national security advisor, Richard Allen; the CIA director, William Casey; and the assistant secretary of defense, Richard Perle. For these major figures of the Reagan White House, their task was to make the rounds on network television news shows to reaffirm deterrence and the pernicious threat of the USSR. This national suspicion of the motives of the Reagan administration is captured in the

narrative and is also visible in print journalism, network news, and especially in the grassroots activism of the nuclear freeze movement.

World War III remained politically threatening to the White House, for it had the pathos to appeal to the postwar middle class. In the midst of callous remarks coming out of the White House, coupled with the growing membership, visibility, and liberal political association of the nuclear freeze movement, the film reminded viewers that average Americans had little control over nuclear annihilation. This televised reminder of the dangers of the contemporary nuclear reality helped to galvanize supporters of the nuclear freeze, and it also reshaped the White House's bellicose ideology. The president wanted peaceful deterrence, and he would learn, in the next year of his presidency, to out-peace the peace movement with televised rhetoric on the importance of protecting the world for children and preventing a nuclear holocaust.

The nuclear freeze movement would suffer a painful demise throughout the Reagan era. Even though public support of a nuclear peace remained high, public and political support began to wane for the movement in late 1983. Furthermore, with the 1984 campaign slogan "Morning in America," which depicted all-white, middle-class suburban, peaceful, consumer-oriented American voters safe from Communists, the dialogue on nuclear freeze began to change.¹¹⁸ The Reagan administration transformed its platform into a message that stated strong defense was synonymous with peace and prosperity. In short, the administration learned how to effectively out-peace the antinuclear movement by demonstrating the conservative commitment to protecting American children by invoking the fear of Communism and the effectiveness of deterrence. Even though historically mutually assured destruction (MAD) had arguably stabilized nuclear peace, it was a delicate balance that Cold War hardliners and overzealous

¹¹⁸ Meyers, *A Winter of Discontent*, 58.

militarism could disrupt—a visual message reiterated in the concluding scenes of NBC's *World War III*. Although, the media helped to bring attention to the wellspring of antinuclear activists, ultimately, the networks did not offer any real framework for understanding complicated issues. Policy issues such as nuclear proliferation were being openly discussed, not only by President Reagan, but also by celebrities such as Charlton Heston and Paul Newman. This type of network and media coverage, as this chapter argues, did little to educate the public on nuclear/Cold War-related topics but rather frightened or entertained American viewers with the terrifying fear of nuclear war. One cannot ignore, however, how the nuclear freeze movement did challenge Reagan's public policies and brought renewed attention to antinuclear activism. Furthermore, by looking at early explorations of network news on Reagan's military agenda and the nuclear freeze movements, it is evident that many Americans became willing participants who engaged television to become part of the debate. Not only were Americans watching nuclear themed programming, they were responding and actively articulating individual positions on these complicated nuclear issues.

Indeed, when one million Americans marched in protest of Reagan's nuclear policy on June 12, 1982, the Reagan administration, as well as the media, took notice. Although not as popular as other nuclear made-for-television films of the decade, such as *The Day After* or *Special Bulletin*, *World War III* remains an important teleplay because it marked the resurgence of made-for-television social nuclear melodramas. Additionally, the film still has cultural relevance, sparking American viewers to write reviews on the Internet Movie Database (IMDB). Most of these audience reviews reveal how personally affected these Americans were after they watched *World War III*. The complexity of the Cold War, with all of its many verisimilitudes, is perhaps too intricate for network television prime-time viewing, for it does not allow for a

thorough explanation of the implications of intercontinental missiles, or the American nuclear triad, or megatons. Even within the hours of prime time and news broadcasting, the geopolitical maneuverings of the superpowers, the complex message of nuclear deterrence, or even the distinction between nuclear freeze and nuclear disarmament became increasingly contradictory and unapologetically unclear. What television produced in the early 1980s were selected sound bites on nuclear weapons, offered by the antinuclear activists and Reagan officials, as well as celebrity activists who chimed in on political issues. Left out of the televised public dialogue was the real parity in the nuclear arsenals of both the Soviet Union and the United States. In addition, as network programming continued throughout 1982, the line between fact and fiction would become even more obscured. In January 1983, polls showed that Reagan's popularity rating had plummeted to 35 percent, the lowest midterm assessment of a president in forty years. Fewer than one in five Americans expressed confidence that the economy was improving. Yet Reagan, ever the optimist, retained faith that if America "stayed the course," it would prove its superiority to the world and regain its morality.¹¹⁹

As the decade proceeded, the three major networks would continue to employ the structure of the made-for-television format to examine complicated nuclear issues. In the next year, NBC and ABC would both produce made-for-television films that exploited escalating nuclear anxieties. The next two chapters continue to explore how these narratives are emblematic of the misinformation and conflicting ideas about nuclear war delivered by network television. Additionally, the second chapter discusses the beginning of the success of the Reagan Revolution, the cable invasion, and the transformation of the traditional television news cycle. Given the changing pace of network television, audiences were forced to consider different

¹¹⁹ Jules Tygiel, *Ronald Reagan and the Triumph of American Conservatism* (New York: Pearson, 2005), 136.

perspectives on nuclear war and challenged to confront their own complicated fears about living in the nuclear world.

Chapter Two: Blurring the lines between Fact and Fiction; *Special Bulletin*, Technology and Reagan

“THE FOLLOWING PROGRAM IS A REALISTIC DEPICTION OF FICTIONAL EVENTS. NONE OF WHAT YOU ARE ABOUT TO SEE IS ACTUALLY HAPPENING.”¹²⁰

In March 1983, NBC telecasted its nuclear-themed, made-for-television film, *Special Bulletin*, a fictional version of the threat of domestic nuclear terrorists in America. Only three after the broadcast, President Reagan addressed the nation during prime-time hours to discuss the urgency of the nuclear crisis with the Soviet Union. In only a few short sentences, Reagan called on the American viewer to support U.S. civil defense by aiding scientists and the military with their tax dollars for the construction of strategic defense technologies. Ultimately, Reagan believed, the summons for taxpayer money for space-based missile systems would make the escalating arms race with the Soviet Union “impotent and unnecessary.” Through network television, Reagan’s speech, more popularly known as the “Star Wars speech,” would recalibrate Cold War culture, calling on scientists and television viewers alike to aid in his vision of the defensive space shield, thus ending the need for nuclear disarmament and nuclear peace activists. For NBC, the arrival of the president’s announcement of space-based missile systems provided an interesting way of promoting its newest made-for-television nuclear-themed movie, *Special Bulletin*.

In concert with Reagan’s concerns about nuclear war, the teleplay offered a platform to discuss nuclear issues in terms of technology and radical activism. In *Special Bulletin*, a group of radical peace activists take hostages, including a live television crew, and threaten to detonate

¹²⁰ Edward Zwick, *Special Bulletin*, NBC, 1983.

over 900 nuclear warheads off the coast of Charleston if the U.S. government does not comply with their demands. To cover the thirty-six-hour standoff, a fictitious network (RBC) is constructed to show the events live, and through the use of satellite technology, the nuclear standoff is broadcasted throughout the country. As opposed to other nuclear-themed dramas of its time, NBC presented a controversial narrative that exploited social fears about nuclear war and offered a self-reflective critique of network broadcasting. The film borrowed heavily from topical events such as the Reagan administration's growing military arsenal and the nuclear freeze movement, as well as the role network television played in creating topical spectacles. The teleplay offers an interesting commentary on Reagan's ability to deflect the nation's attention from the actual immediate threats of international nuclear weapons and direct it toward radical Cold War scapegoats. Although the film is typically overshadowed by the colossal success of ABC's *The Day After* (1983), which aired in November of the same year, *Special Bulletin* is arguably one of the most important contributions to the canon of nuclear dramas due to its examination of the media and technology during Reagan's eighties.

This chapter examines the ways television technology complicated the existing interplay between the three major networks, the White House, and the viewer. Embedded in this analysis is the assertion that "technology" was depicted as an individual act of cultural and political agency. Individual technology from the remote control to the arrival of cable provided a rupture in the traditional relationship between the networks and viewers. Furthermore, nuclear technology offered a dramatic shift in Cold War politics by projecting nuclear anxiety into the atmosphere. However, the availability of television technology also obscured the line between fact and fiction as demonstrated on television, as present in political rhetoric, and as shown on network television through the growth of "infotainment." This cultural and political dependence

on technology bolstered the national belief in nuclear deterrence, which helped to transform Reagan's public image from that of a militaristic hawk to that of "the Great Communicator."

More specifically, this chapter examines the relationship between network television, the Reagan administration, and technology. This examination highlights how technology created the idea of new public spaces in the early eighties through the advent of network cable television. This section offers a brief analysis of the Reagan Boom, which is more cultural than economic in scope. This cultural prosperity was reflected in the changing television landscape, specifically with the advent of cable and the growing dependence on technology. This work examines the emergence of "infotainment," the curious *mélange* of political commentary, social issues, and celebrity culture, which accompanied the twenty-four-hour broadcasting format. The term "infotainment" does not have a consensus definition among media and television scholars, although it usually describes the blending of reality, fiction, entertainment, and some form of "news" however defined. What media scholars universally accept is that infotainment is a product of cable television, identity politics, and tabloid journalism.¹²¹ One of the examples is ABC's *Nightline*, "The Crisis Game," which featured actual political figures in a fictional nuclear situation. The four-hour production of "The Crisis Game" simulated a futuristic nuclear standoff with the Soviet Union, featuring former politicians as the current White House staff. This intriguing combination of scripted news and current affairs epitomizes the growth of infotainment and lends itself to cultural analysis. This blend of fact and fiction is most notably demonstrated in the 1983 made-for-television film, *Special Bulletin*. In order to analyze NBC's made-for-television nuclear narrative, one must also understand how American television served to heighten nuclear culture and technology in 1983. This made-for-television film was one of

¹²¹ Gil Troy, *Morning in America: How Ronald Reagan Invented the 1980s*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 128.

many nuclear-themed television events made in that year alone. However, the narrative also employed a critical lens on the role of television in creating social fear. The role of technology was also significant to *Special Bulletin* in that the fictitious scenario relies on satellite and remote technology toward which Reagan will gesture in his political rhetoric. The political ramifications of technology and infotainment are discussed with an exploration of the President Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), also known as the "Star Wars" speech. Based in part on science fiction and in part on actual technological innovation, the presentation of SDI offers an interesting platform to discuss how the idea of the space-missile system was more important than the logistics of building such a weapon. SDI also demonstrates the ways in which the Reagan administration employed ideas of "peaceful deterrence" in order to sell militarism to the American public. This blending of technological realities and scientific theory was very much in line with the advent of infotainment and Reagan's Strategic Defensive Initiative. Finally, the analytical lynchpin of this chapter suggests that television technology became an integral political and cultural device during the late atomic period.

Catering to the Individual: The '80s Emphasis on Technology

In 1982, *Time* magazine dedicated its annual "Man of the Year" issue to "the computer." Gesturing to the new world of computers, the article described how millions of Americans were acquiring and using these machines, from corporations and companies to schools and personal users. Additionally, because cable technologies became more successful in court due to deregulation, traditional notions of the television experience began to change. From VCRs, to cable, to the remote control, traditional network television came under assault by a number of significant technological innovations that would collectively break the network oligarchy and transform television identification. The VCR (video cassette recorder), coupled with cable, was

unapologetically revolutionary in its ability to redefine the quintessential American television experience.

By the late seventies, the technological invention of home video recording was available to the public in the machine known as “Betamax.” This device could plug into a home television set and duplicate the concurrent program. Sony marketed the device as follows:

Betamax connects to your TV and will record and play back on your own set. It's as simple to use as a cassette recorder or a clock radio. All you do is insert a Sony Home Videocassette, set the digital time and Betamax will record on cue. The Videocassette can be saved for viewing again or you use it to re-record another program. You can also watch one show and record another at the same time or Betamax will record while you are enjoying other pastimes. Suggested retail price including digital clock timer \$1745 (or less).¹²²

Along with home video recording, pay-for-television satellite television was also challenging traditional viewership. Cable television was alluring, as it catered to individual taste and offered a twenty-four-hour news cycle. On October 1, 1975, HBO (Home Box Office, Inc.) presented, “Thrilla in Manila,” a heavyweight boxing match between the controversial Muhammad Ali and the elder Joe Frazier. This unfiltered, brutal fourteen-round display of athleticism, won by Ali, was an enormous hit for the cable network. The struggling “pay-for-television” channel, as it was referred to at the time, utilized a series of satellites to broadcast the boxing match live from the Philippines. HBO became a trailblazer in the fight against the networks and its use of satellite communication. The concept came from thirty-three-year-old Charles Dolan, who argued that pay-for-television channels funded by private viewers would offset advertising costs and would avoid many of the problems of the commercial network television system. The success of the cable endeavor would depend on the specific niche market of viewers who wanted a theatergoing experience of home and extensive coverage of sports. By 1977, the network’s reliance on paying

¹²²Sony LTD, Advertisement, *Montreal Gazette*, October 28, 1976, 17.

customers paid off as the cable network turned its first profit.¹²³ In short, “HBO quickly became an incredible cash cow ... eventually outstripping in profitability the all-important magazine.”¹²⁴

Cable stations made their individual marks on the televised public by appealing to niche markets. In 1979, the all-sports station ESPN emerged as a network exclusively for the sports fan. In addition, MTV (Music Television Videos), the idea of twenty-seven-year old Mississippian Robert Pittman, targeted the specific suburban, Generation-X audience. This capturing of the viewership of a new generation gestured toward cable television remaking itself as a vehicle for identity and self-reflection. Similarly to Ted Turner, Pittman wanted to dominate the capitalist market; to that end, he not only launched the cable network, but also revived Six Flags Amusement Park and, more importantly, helped to build the corporate juggernaut AOL–Time Warner.¹²⁵

Arguably one of the most significant changes of the decade was the emergence of cable news stations, which shifted the traditional network television news cycle. In the early eighties, the entire television medium was changing because of the popularity of cable television and the introduction of Ted Turner. Turner, a self-created media giant from Atlanta, sued the three networks as well as the Reagan administration in 1981 over equal access to the White House press corps for his Cable News Network (CNN). Accordingly, Turner’s lawsuit, coupled with Walter Cronkite’s retirement as lead anchor on CBS’s *Evening News*, advanced cable’s legitimacy as a credible television alternative to network news. The cable news sleeping giant during this time, CNN offered twenty-four-hour, around-the-clock coverage beginning in June

¹²³ Gary Edgerton, *The Columbia History of American Television* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 301.

¹²⁴ George Mair, *Inside HBO: The Billion Dollar War between, HBO, Hollywood and the Home Video Revolution* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1988), 26, 30–31, 53.

¹²⁵ Troy, *Morning in America*, 128.

1980.¹²⁶ Turner openly mocked the networks and boasted that his network functioned like the Associated Press, presenting constant updates, raw news footage, and promoting Turner's other capitalistic pursuits such as TBS (Turner Broadcasting Station) and his professional sports team, the Atlanta Braves. Although Turner criticized the news magazine programs such as *20/20* and *60 Minutes*, his creation of CNN and Headline News, with their punctuated sound-bites and access to a multiplicity of satellite reports stationed around the country, contributed to the conflation of news and entertainment. This not only destroyed the traditional news cycle, but also cut into the profits of the three major networks and further fragmented the traditional viewing audience.

Television technology followed a cultural trajectory similar to the Reagan era. In its infancy, the cable station encountered resistance by the three major networks because of profits and the availability of technology. However, along with the Reagan administration's record of deregulation, cable advocates like Ted Turner championed the newly reconfigured public sphere as democratized spaces. With this new technology, satellites transformed American television audiences and their dependence on the Big Three networks for broadcasting and information.

For a small percentage of Americans, the new world of cable television reflected a renewed prosperity analogous with the Reagan boom. Despite the pessimism brought by nuclear freeze activists and the media in the first two years of Reagan's presidency, by the end of his first term, patriotism and the joys of consumer capitalism enticed Americans more. Commenting on the importance of the year, historian Gil Troy explains, "1983 the great economic boom—the baby boom boom, the Reagan boom—began. It was a boom of service jobs, not manufacturing, of the Sun Belt and silicon chips, not the Rust Belt and smokestacks. It was also a boom with its

¹²⁶ Troy, *Morning in America*, 127.

own cultural institutions and accents.”¹²⁷ The American viewer, and eventually the voter, would experience the growing wave of “optimism” espoused by President Reagan and internalized by the public evident by the landslide 1984 Presidential election.

The Development of News as “Infotainment”

As Walter Cronkite gracefully resigned as America’s leading voice in network news in 1982, it signaled the beginning of a new era in network television news. CBS selected Dan Rather as lead evening news anchor. Rather gained national recognition during the Nixon years and his investigation of Watergate, which brought a greater sense of skepticism as opposed to Cronkite’s patriarchal, slant to the nightly news. Although CBS’s news division would continue to gain viewers with Rather at the helm, the ABC news division was reinventing itself. Under the leadership of Roone Arledge, the ABC news division moved forward by creating several new shows with innovative formats, such as *Nightline*. Additionally, in 1981, Arledge courted David Brinkley away from NBC, after a thirty-eight-year career with the network, and created *This Week*, which became the number-one Sunday morning news show.¹²⁸ By the end of the decade, ABC News was accruing profits of over \$70 million.¹²⁹ The increased profitability of network news, coupled with the advertising dollars generated from the made-for-television movie, created a unique genre of social realism television specials throughout the 1980s. The conflation of broadcast news and broadcast network programming transformed the lens through which audiences interpreted and received political issues. As Reagan’s first term continued, it became increasingly hard to delineate narrative representations of political issues from network television’s presentation of the news.

¹²⁷ Troy, *Morning in America*, 117.

¹²⁸ Edgerton, *Columbia History of American Television*, 292.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 293.

In 1983, ABC presented a special event that intermixed the lines between fact and fiction in a number of significant ways. The November 23 episode of *Nightline*, entitled “The Crisis Game,” showed a four-hour simulation of actual government officials reacting to a fictitious Soviet invasion of Iran, and promoted it as a public service event. In an extraordinary display of fact and fiction, ABC assembled a cast of former Washington insiders to show to the public how the White House might respond such a nuclear situation. The cast included former U.S. senator Edmund S. Muskie as the president, while former secretary of defense James R. Schlesinger appeared in the simulation as the secretary of defense. Additionally, Clark M. Clifford, another former secretary of defense, portrayed the secretary of state. General Edward C. Meyer, who had recently retired as U.S. Army chief of staff, played the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. They sat around a table, under a presidential seal, along with other officials, and pondered the response to a Soviet invasion of Iran.¹³⁰ After providing a brief explanation, host Ted Koppel assured the audience that this is not a real crisis, but a fabricated rendering of events of what might happen.

The “Crisis Game” was set in the future, 1985, following the fictional death of the Ayatollah Khomeini, and Iran is in a state of unrest. Soviet forces are helping to develop a leftist faction. Iran is bankrupt because of the eight year Iran-Iraq war and the U.S. is aiding anti-leftist groups. Although there is Soviet unrest in Eastern Europe, the real site of contention remains the Middle East and the Persian Gulf. The crisis continues for twenty-five days in May, with the Soviet Union deploying more than 250,000 soldiers to the Persian Gulf region.¹³¹ As the Soviet troops flood the region, hawkish cabinet members discuss the nuclear option, only to be dismissed by the president. After the National Security Council orders an air strike over the

¹³⁰ John Corry, “‘The Crisis Game’ Simulates War Debate,” *New York Times*, November 22, 1983, TV, 48.

¹³¹ “ABC’s ‘The Crisis Game,’” November 23, 1983, Museum of Television and Radio.

USSR, negotiations begin between the two superpowers, and the Soviets retreat from the area. By the end of the four-hour production, peace is restored and the crisis is successfully quelled.

The *Nightline* special intended to share with the public the private conversations and options which different officials might discuss in the White House. The program claimed to “demystify” the decision-making process by showing officials debating different diplomatic and military scenarios while the audience also hears Ted Koppel and *New York Times* reporter Leslie Gelb adding running commentary to the officials’ actions. This public invitation into the “Situation Room” democratized and also complicated ideas about government officials. In an article in *Time* magazine, one columnist pondered the issue of politicians acting as politicians and, conversely, actors becoming politicians.¹³² Reviews of the *Nightline* production in the *New York Times* and in *Time* pointed to the realism presented in the special and even commented that it provided a nice civics lesson and public service to the American people.¹³³ However, for all of its insider offerings, the program was notable for its blending of fact and fantasy in a monumental way. Not only did the network manipulate current events, but its use of politicians simulating current Reagan White House officials was unprecedented in network broadcast history. Furthermore, this “crisis” did not cover the issue of domestic nuclear terrorism, but rather carefully situated the conflict in conventional Cold War terms. This foray into the realm of fictional news mirrors the growth of infotainment as well as the televised presidency of Ronald Reagan.

The idea of news as infotainment is not unique to this examination; however, technological innovations coupled with sensational stories created a new format for holding

¹³² Guy D. Garcia, “People,” *Time*, November 28, 1983, 34.

¹³³ Kurt Anderson, “New Theater of War,” *Time*, December 5, 1983, 37. See also Corry, “‘The Crisis Game’ Simulates War Debate,” 48.

national dialogue. Throughout the postwar period, networks were conscious of their duty to provide public affairs programming but were equally aware of the corporate sponsorship necessary to sell the news to the people. Although alternatives to network programming were expanding, including the configuring of cable networks and home video recorders, the majority of Americans still used television as the primary medium of understanding current issues and affairs. The creation of *60 Minutes* (1968), CBS's long-running news magazine television show, changed the format of news broadcasting by offering visual editorials on popular politics and events. This blending of popular entertainment and political analysis helped to blur the line between fact and fiction. The two other networks, NBC and ABC, also created news magazine shows such as *20/20*, which legitimized specific anchors, like as Barbara Walters, as objective and investigative reporters who asked "complicated" questions. However, even with so-called objective, respected network anchors and journalists, the format of news magazine shows meant the inclusion of a number of segments that created news as entertainment. From segments on the White House announcement of the Strategic Defense Initiative, to a segment on pop music sensation Michael Jackson, the idea of blending news and, more culturally, mass-marketing-driven "pseudo-documentaries" built an innovative space on which the entire American viewing audience could receive social and political news as well as information on recent popular-culture figures or events. This format allotted little context, education, or time for substantive discussion.

Special Bulletin: The-Made-for-Television Movie's Critique of Network News

Part of the creation of news entertainment was the inclusion of the audience as active participants engaged in the national dialogue. In NBC's made-for-television film *Special Bulletin*, the audience was placed in the role as the observer as well as a hostage to the teleplay. The narrative openly challenged the audience to decide which side they are on and which

characters are most identifiable. In addition, the teleplay challenges the audience to reexamine their political identity as well as the viewers' relationship with network news. The film asked the viewing audience to examine the role the media played in creating the unfortunate destruction of one of America's oldest cities. Are the viewers, with their unquenchable desire for apocalyptic imagery, responsible for the nuclear blast? Did the media create outlets for nuclear "terrorists"? How does technology contribute to the dire plot? The teleplay engages viewers by posing these larger questions in the narrative and in doing so, brings heightened immediacy to the film.

Promoted as "a realistic depiction of fictional events," the speculative melodrama *Special Bulletin* was shot on videotape and staged in real-time as a late-breaking news event. The story concerned a group of antinuclear activists who take hostages off the coast of Charleston, South Carolina. The group demanded the immediate disarming of 968 nuclear warheads located in the Charleston area; if the government does not meet the threat, the activists will detonate their own nuclear device. Written by Marshall Herskovitz and directed by Edward Zwick (who would later famously collaborate on the successful ABC series *Thirtysomething*), the film received six Emmy award nominations. Initially airing on March 20, 1983, the broadcast was accompanied by repeated disclaimers by NBC, assuring the audience that what was occurring on television was only fiction. Nonetheless, the production was so authentic, from fake commercials, soap-operas, and other fabricated previews of upcoming RBC television events, that thousands of American viewers called the network, demanding information on the siege of Charleston.¹³⁴

As the narrative opened, approximately one hour after the Coast Guard boarded an unknown vessel at Charleston dock, the audience is introduced to the fictitious network, RBC. This network, like the Big Three American networks, invited the American audience to

¹³⁴ Associated Press, "Around the Nation; Film on Nuclear Incident Alarms Some Viewers," *New York Times*, March 21, 1983, A12.

participate in the hostage situation as willing participants. The narrative engages the theme of news as spectacle as it creates a title for the hostage crisis. By the second day of the nuclear standoff, RBC introduces the story as “Flashpoint: America under Siege.”¹³⁵ Just as nervous Americans had participated in the nightly updates on the hostages in Iran in 1979 with ABC’s *Nightline*, viewers had become more accustomed to receiving world news with new immediacy thanks to satellite transmissions and international network news anchors.

Additionally, the movie highlights the personal affection and identification viewers felt toward lead network anchors. In *Special Bulletin*, the network anchorpersons are John Woodley, played by Ed Flanders, and Susan Myles, portrayed by Kathryn Walker. Anchor Woodley is considered a representation of the real Walter Cronkite on the fake network. Just as Cronkite had reached the apogee of his career throughout the traumatic decades of the sixties and seventies and became the patriarchal voice and ratings giant for CBS, Woodley’s age and role as lead anchor positioned his character as the “objective,” voice of reason in this nuclear nightmare. Additionally, the role of co-anchor, Susan Myles, was also based on the familiar face of ABC’s Barbara Walters. Hired away from NBC for a highly publicized \$1 million contract, Walters became the first woman to co-anchor the network nightly newscast, *ABC Evening News*.¹³⁶ Even though these lead RBC anchors drew from real-life familiar network anchors, as the events in Charleston unfold, we start to see how the network struggles to explain with investigative objectivity the larger implications of the nuclear standoff in the Southern city.

Central to the teleplay is the use of documentary-style photography. The narrative interweaves handheld/steady-cam shots in which the audience becomes familiar with the nuclear terrorists and uses the traditional photographic style to shoot the network anchors. As the director

¹³⁵ *Special Bulletin*, written by Marshall Herskovitz, directed by Edward Zwick, aired March 20, 1983, NBC.

¹³⁶ Edgerton, *Columbia History of American Television*, 291.

changes camera and editing styles, he forces the audience to routinely acclimate to the rapacious world of network news and its ability to stream live footage from around the country through satellite technology. This results in continuously jolting transitions, from the live hostage situation in Charleston, back to the anchors at the New York news headquarters, to various other reporters strategically located around the country. Technological changes, including the use of satellites to position reporting around the world and carry live footage to the audience, are integral to the narrative, as it exposes its viewers to a number of different perspectives for the audience to identify. Because *Special Bulletin* is presented in a documentary/live news format, the anchors from the network in New York to the local affiliate anchors in the studio try not to editorialize on the situation; rather, they provide the viewers with constant updates from the reporter and cameraman taken hostage. As stated earlier, the nuclear terrorists are activists for peace, although they are a collective of sixties radicals and activists reminiscent of the Weather Underground.

The narrative captures the interesting interplay between the peace movement and the notion of nuclear terrorism. In the teleplay, the terrorists consist of two scientists, Bruce Lyman (David Lennon) a former strategic-weapons planner for the Pentagon, and Dave McKeeson (David Rasche), who built the homemade nuclear device; an African American radical similar to Angela Davis; a nervous housewife ostensibly from the peace movement; and an ex-con. This eclectic group of nuclear terrorists challenges the viewers to redefine the image of “nuclear terrorists” as well as the peace movement. The “nervous housewife,” a white middle-class woman representative of a grassroots nuclear freeze activist, has no real knowledge of the enormity of the situation until the network points its lens on her. The black radical woman, now a nuclear terrorist, reminds the viewers of sixties activism and radicalism. However, the

masterminds of this domestic nuclear threat are former Pentagon scientists, who possess the technology and the knowledge to use state-sponsored weapons against the citizenry it professes to protect. An unnamed president stands for Reagan, and the narrative posits the notion that the government drove these men to terrorism and then depicts the executive response as overconfident and callous, pushing the situation to a perilous precipice. The nuclear terrorist standoff in Charleston becomes more complex as the news coverage unflinchingly continues from around the country. While on television addressing a nervous public, government officials offer to cooperate with the terrorists; however, a SWAT team ultimately kills the group, but not before the group detonates the nuclear warheads, obliterating the historic site that was Charleston.

In the early 1980s, the three television networks were in a bitter ratings war and developed large-scale original productions to garner viewers. However, the production of *Special Bulletin* brought internal strife to executives at NBC. Wanting to compete with the highly anticipated November ABC nuclear social melodrama, *The Day After*, some NBC executives argued that the teleplay would capture the immediacy of nuclear issues while also capturing high ratings. According to NBC's news president at the time, Reuven Franks, "The only concern of NBC news was that *Special Bulletin* might have been confused with a news bulletin. We agreed on various steps to ensure that the average viewer will not be misled in that way."¹³⁷ NBC network executives had legitimate concerns that the audiences would interpret the film as live network coverage, with concerned citizens calling the local Charleston affiliate of the network to discern what was happening. The medium's ability to manipulate and transpose information is critically important, in that unlike any other media, television is instructed to entertain and

¹³⁷ Quoted by Howard Rosenberg, "NBC: A House Divided Over *Special Bulletin*," *Los Angeles Times*, March 18, 1983, 1.

educate the American public. The network openly challenged the audience's objectivity and abilities to discern fact from fiction. This approach to the topic of nuclear weapons was perhaps too immediate and confusing for the American viewer watching in their home in light of historic Cold War fears.

Cleary, NBC executives as well as other network and Hollywood insiders understood escalating nuclear anxieties. In fact, 1983 was remarkable in that more films were made about nuclear fears than in any other year in cinematic history. The film *Wargames*, which depicted the horrors of nuclear war and technology run amuck, was a triumphant cinematic success. However, the difference between watching nuclear horror on screen in the theater was that the viewer literally walked away from the visual site of the destruction. In contrast, *Special Bulletin* brought to life this nuclear standoff in such a familiar network news fashion that the audience is forced to ask if these fictionalized events are true or just "television." NBC presented some thirty-one messages proclaiming the fictitiousness of *Special Bulletin*. In Charleston, South Carolina, the scene of the fictional nuclear disaster, the word "fiction" was permanently superimposed on a corner of the screen. This did not spare the local Charleston NBC affiliate station from receiving hundreds of mostly negative phone calls. The made-for-television film *Special Bulletin* became a visual reminder of the power of television in its ability to blur fact and fiction and interlace personal fears with the political ramifications.¹³⁸

In the end, however, *Special Bulletin* focused less on nuclear war and more on the awesome power of network television. Television, as a national medium, handles crisis as if the

¹³⁸ Tijiani El-Miskin, "Special Bulletin: Transitional Disavowal," *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, 1986, 72–76.

coverage of the event were more important than the story itself.¹³⁹ The incorporation of the network into the story is underlined when a presidential staffer issues a statement that the terrorists' demands will be met, but does so only as a ploy to distract the terrorists while the government plans a military assault on their tugboat, which is shown by the camera cutting off. A deeper investigation into this type of analysis offers a unique critique of network television, often not explored by television producers. In this film, as the audience becomes more entangled in the nuclear showdown occurring in the South, the viewing audience at home is left to ponder the ferocious appetite of the American viewer. Thanks to television technology, anchors and commentators who help to frame the news and educate the public become secondary to the terrorists and hostages who have access to live television audiences around the country. The audience sees visual evidence that the local anchors have no idea about the government's true agenda on capturing the terrorists. Furthermore, the imagery of a fake network broadcasting a nuclear hostage situation on a real network pushed the boundaries of fact and reality, an interesting byproduct of Reagan, cable, and infotainment. Critics have equated *Special Bulletin* with Orson Welles's live 1938 radio cast of *The War of the Worlds*; however, considering its historical context and the beginning of the twenty-four-hour cable news format such as *Headline News*, one can read the teleplay as a portent of the televised infotainment future to come.

The most chilling aspect of *Special Bulletin* was that, after a few days, the story no longer dominated the headlines; the memory of Charleston and the victims of nuclear terrorism are now replaced with "in other news." This commentary on the power and vapid nature of network television was a controversial critique for NBC to posit, especially for a made-for-television. The teleplay suggested that the Reagan White House is willing to sacrifice a certain number of Americans in an event to adhere to executive policy. Furthermore, the film implies that the

¹³⁹ Newman, Kim. *Apocalypse Movies: End of the World Cinema* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1999), 204.

Reagan administration is willing to kill nuclear freeze advocates in order to maintain Cold War orthodoxy, as well as to obfuscate the newly constructed, televised position on negotiation with nuclear terrorists. Once again, we see how television was utilized as the medium in which commentary, capitalism, and corporate culture collide and engage the masses to participate in popular discourse. Finally, as the movie slowly concludes, it reminded the real network audience that the media has moved on to the next big news event. Again, an educational framework for understanding why Charleston now resembled Hiroshima is never given, but rather what is offered is an exciting, new, titillating story. The line between fact and fiction, and the role the networks and the Reagan administration played in constructing network news, were openly challenged by network television.

The theme of scientists engaging in nuclear terrorism was a significant component of the teleplay in terms of the peace movement and larger Cold War politics. Nuclear terrorism was a facet of the later atomic period, after the Yom Kippur War and as more countries were building nuclear weapons and using nuclear energy. A level of distrust, not only in the bureaucrats that stack the government but the scientists who engineer nuclear weaponry, pervaded popular culture. Looking back to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, to the discovery of uranium, the idea of man playing "god" and becoming the "creator," is an archetypical theme in popular literature and culture. Yet with the emergence of nuclear technology, the scientists are placed under a sharper microscope. Scientists occupied a curious, dualistic position in the public imagination. Furthermore, in Reagan's America, scientists who did not either adhere to Cold War orthodoxy or engage in the project of space-based missiles systems should be regarded with suspicion by the American people.

In the early 1960s, research about network television affiliate stations suggested that prime-time network viewership was dependent on the popularity of local news programs. Thus, if an affiliate wanted a viewer's and commercial attention during peak prime-time, network hours, the affiliate would have to produce greater, more marketable local news. A research analyst for NBC noted that viewers did not "watch a program" as much as they "watch television."¹⁴⁰ This realization brought remarkable changes both for the networks and for the audience. Even though the question of television serving as a hegemonic device is certainly an important concern, the enormity of that interrogation is larger than the scope of this examination. For Americans who "watch television" news, particularly the audience that does not delve into other mediums such as print or radio journalism, they rely more on what television scholars call the "cult of personality," in which audiences identify with certain network anchors. s. Before the Big Three networks lost their oligarchy on television, a survey comparing the three major network anchors of the decade—Peter Jennings of ABC, Tom Brokaw of NBC, and Dan Rather of CBS—suggested that differences were based on demographic identification. According to the same survey, "Jennings is at his strongest among women, 25–64 years old, middle-class viewers and whites; Brokaw is at his strongest among men, those 65+, lower and upper-class viewers and whites'; Rather enjoys surprisingly strong support among 18–24 years old, many of them minorities."¹⁴¹

This rather major aspect of audience identification and reception suggested that viewers become loyal to an anchor, the network, and also local affiliates. This loyalty became questionable when it is compared to commercial sales. Network television depends on advertising dollars from corporations, who are now presenting the news through an identifiable,

¹⁴⁰ Andrew Calabrese, "The Trade in Television News," in *A Companion to Television*, ed. Janet Wasko (Malden, MA: Blackwell: 2005), 277.

¹⁴¹ Ibid

commercial, appealing network anchor. However, the phenomenal escalation of pace of gathering news sources since the 1970s and the ability to capture live shots on handheld camera, dramatically and irreversibly transformed television news. With live shots and the supplementing with news from “on-site” reporters, the context for understanding the event has also narrowed. In 1968, the average sound bite on network television was forty-three seconds; by 1988, sound bites of politicians dropped to approximately nine seconds.¹⁴² This dramatic decline in actual time spent understanding complicated jargon replaced the context with commentary. Technological advance brought a truncated aspect to network journalism. Furthermore, the use of sound-bites and shorter news stories contributed to a larger misunderstanding between fact and fiction on television.

The “Star Wars Speech”: A Cultural Milestone in Infotainment Television History

In March 1983, President Reagan addressed the nation via television to discuss the current status of the Cold War and the issue nuclear proliferation. Outside of the public eye, the White House media staff had constructed an oral blueprint to transform Reagan’s image from a militaristic hawk to a president of peace. The “Star War” speech, as it will come to be known, marked a transition in Reagan’s ability to present a solution to the nuclear freeze movement and the unimaginable consequences of nuclear war. As described in Fitzgerald’s work, *Way Out There in the Blue: Reagan, Star Wars, and the End of the Cold War*, Reagan’s political ideology drew from a variety of different conservative threads. His belief in American exceptionalism buttressed by Manifest Destiny somewhat resembled Theodore Roosevelt’s foreign policy in terms of Latin America. Just like Taft, Reagan contended that small government coupled with lower taxes translated into more money for the “common man,” which appealed to Midwestern

¹⁴² Andrew Cabrese, “The Trade in Television News,” in *A Companion to Television*, ed. Janet Wasko (Blackwell: MA, 2005), 277.

conservatives. Finally, Reagan's foreign policy was nothing less than a recapitulation of the Truman Doctrine.¹⁴³ As a conservative, Reagan assumed the role of shepherd to America's lost flock. Reagan's Cold War orthodoxy had not changed in thirty years—a staunch anticommunist, he would use every tool in America's arsenal to fight the “red menace” and he had not flinched in this political adherence since the 1950s.

Reagan's 1982 START (Strategic Arms Reduction Talks) speech at Eureka College, his alma mater, marked a transition in the media's depiction of the White House. Fearing that the national exposure of the nuclear freeze movement served to damage the president's hope of a two-term presidency, the White House employed a new schematic on how to publicly respond to growing antinuclear protestors around the world. The START speech had two central political objectives: to act as a public-relations campaign that would repackage the president as a man of peace who shared an interest in arms control, and to cripple the Soviets' ability to maintain nuclear parity with the United States.¹⁴⁴ Knowing the Soviets feared space-based nuclear weaponry, National Security Advisor Robert McFarlane, along with Manhattan Project scientist Edward Teller and other “Cold Warriors,” began to explore the strategic military value of space-based missile defense systems. Teller contrived one idea that included an X-ray laser that would destroy the Soviet Union's missiles as they emerged from silos. The idea of strategic defensive delighted President Reagan, who was intrigued by the notion of biblical Armageddon in the form of nuclear warfare and felt imbued to save Americans from an apocalypse while continuing to

¹⁴³ Frances Fitzgerald, *Way Out There in the Blue: Reagan, Star Wars, and the End of the Cold War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 76.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 181–82.

adhere to the proven method of nuclear deterrence.¹⁴⁵ The START speech did not go unnoticed by the Soviets.

In many ways, the presidential speeches of 1983 often confused the Soviets. They interpreted the START speech as rhetorical aggression by the president. Furthermore, his speech to the National Association of Evangelicals in Orlando, Florida, March 8, 1983, warned the Soviets that the United States was committed to moral superiority as well as nuclear arms. Calling the Soviet Union “the evil empire” because of his perception of the Communist adherence to atheism, Reagan emphasized that the need for more nuclear weapons was not just a matter of parity, but rather was the ultimate struggle between “good and evil.”¹⁴⁶ This assertion met with rousing applause by the Christian audience, who agreed the issue of nuclear arms was secondary to the God-less aspirations of the Soviet Union. However, liberal U.S. politicians feared the “evil empire” speech would preclude further disarmament diplomatic summits with the Soviets, or worse, provoke “Soviet insecurities” to the point of strategic nuclear warfare.¹⁴⁷

Following the “evil empire” speech, Reagan’s next televised speech was more conciliatory than many expected. On March 23, 1983, Reagan delivered the televised speech in which he addressed a number of nuclear issues concerning the American public. Reagan admitted the United States needed to engage in more productive dialogue with the Soviet Union. In the same speech, Reagan also restated his commitment to peace by expressing the hope that one day nuclear weapons would be “banished” from the earth.¹⁴⁸ Singularly dismissing the wealth of callous statements made by his advisors over the last two years, President Reagan

¹⁴⁵ David Meyer, “Freezing Out the Opposition: The Reagan Presidency,” in *Silencing the Opposition: Antinuclear movements and the Media in the Cold War* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 146.

¹⁴⁶ Presidential speech, March 8, 1983, *Public Papers of the President: Ronald Reagan, 1983* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1983), 342.

¹⁴⁷ Mona Charen, *Useful Idiots* (Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, 2003), 11–13.

¹⁴⁸ Television address, March 23, 1983, *Public Papers of the President: Ronald Reagan, 1983* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1983), 439–43.

stated, “Our only purpose—one which all people share—is to search for ways to reduce the dangers of nuclear war.”¹⁴⁹ What Reagan presented to the American people did more than just repudiate the nuclear freeze movement; it revealed a new weapon that promised peace for the U.S. against Soviet nuclear weapons. This new policy initiative exploited the weakness of the Soviet military apparatus and also appealed to the American electorate. It was a treatment for the Cold War and, if implemented correctly, could change the course of U.S.-Soviet relations forever. This came to be known as the Strategic Defense Initiative, or SDI. This speech and space-based concept dramatically transformed the Cold War and situated the context of militarism literally to the stratosphere.

Criticisms as well as adulation immediately followed the televised description of Reagan’s space-based missile system. The program, which critics caustically referred to as “Star Wars” for both its pecuniary and science-fiction qualities, had immediate political ramifications. If successful, the U.S. space-based system would be able to dominate the entire world, and would also force the Soviets into financial ruin by trying to maintain parity with the U.S. military arsenal. For the Soviets, this was interpreted as evidence of American Cold War aggression. Furthermore, the Soviets felt uneasy about the announcement of this extraordinary technology as new American land-based missiles were currently arriving in Europe. As for the American public, Reagan’s televised patriarchy and comforting words of a world free from nuclear weapons without losing to the Soviet Union restored a belief in the power of American presidency and scientific prowess. Furthermore, as some scholars have argued, SDI represented a turning point in America’s relationship with President Reagan. Through SDI, Reagan both shared information with the Soviets and embraced the liberal view of a nuclear-free world. One

¹⁴⁹ Television address, March 23, 1983, *Public Papers of the President*, 439–43.

indication of how Reagan was outpeacing the peace movement was that by April 1983, nearly one month after the SDI speech, attendance at antinuclear demonstrations had declined, and the number of magazine articles written about nuclear weapons had dropped significantly.¹⁵⁰ In short, SDI became the public relations boost that helped to transform Reagan's image as a Cold Warrior to a "Great Communicator."¹⁵¹ From a media standpoint, Reagan's announcement of SDI turned the nation's attention away from domestic issues and toward technology and scientists. The idea of space-based missile systems, as described by President Reagan, also placed the immediacy of nuclear war not in terms of presidential foreign policy, but as the focus of American scientists. According to Reagan, it was the job of the scientists and scholars to determine the mechanics and physics of such a protective weapon, while it was his job to speak about how this bright atomic future makes antinuclear activism obsolete.¹⁵² Reagan's fantastic idea about an invisible shield protecting Americans, rather than engaging in arms negotiation with Soviets, certainly shifted the national discourse from heightened geopolitical tensions to the bright future of space-based technology. Although this idea presented safety from international nuclear weapons, SDI did not address the issue of domestic terrorism.

Reagan's call for the scientific community to utilize their expertise for SDI proved quite problematic. For many nuclear physicists, this idea was completely implausible. By the fall of 1983, the Office of Technology Assessment (OTA) directed a study to explore space-based missile defense systems. Under the leadership of Harvard professor and former systems analyst for the Department of Defense (DOD), Dr. Ashton Carter, the experts gathered data, including full access to classified information, in order to examine the range of technological possibilities

¹⁵⁰ Meyer, "Freezing Out the Opposition."

¹⁵¹ For a number of ideas on the impact of the Strategic Defense Initiative, see Meyer, "Freezing Out the Opposition," and Rhodes, *Arsenal of Folly*.

¹⁵² Lou Cannon, *President Reagan: The Role of a Lifetime* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991) 332.

of space-based defense. According to the OTA study, the probability for a near-perfect defense system “was so remote that it should not serve as the basis of public expectations of national policy on ballistic missile defense.”¹⁵³ The OTA report was immediately countered by former Los Alamos physicists led by Gregory Canavan, who claimed that the investigation was ripe with “technical errors, unsubstantiated assumptions, and conclusions that are inconsistent with the body of the report.”¹⁵⁴ Moreover, the former Los Alamos scientists went on to personally attack Dr. Carter, claiming the report was politically biased and endangered Americans with his explanation of national-security, classified information. This scientific divide over the possibility of SDI pitted former atomic scientists such as Canavan and Edward Teller against more “pacifist” nuclear scientists such as Carl Sagan.

Furthermore, the Reagan White House continued to sell this idea to the American people by regularly appearing on network news shows. Appearing on NBC’s *Meet the Press* on March 27, 1983, Caspar Weinberger applauded the efforts of the president and the White House and explained to the American viewers that SDI would offer full protection from any Soviet nuclear strike. Weinberger asserted, “what we want to try to get is a system which will develop a defense that is thoroughly reliable and total ... I don’t see any reason why that can’t be done.”¹⁵⁵ As more scientists and experts participated in the national debate, the Reagan White House continued to dismiss all negative assessments and emphasized the need for specific space-based technological defense systems. General Abrahamson, director of the Strategic Defense Initiative and former NASA advisor, framed the debate in a larger context of American patriotism and nationalism. In response to the notion that it was impossible to build a space-based missile

¹⁵³ Fitzgerald, *Way Out There in the Blue*, 246.

¹⁵⁴ Janne E. Nolan, *Guardians of the Arsenal: The Politics of Nuclear Strategy* (Basic Books: New York, 1989), 89–139

¹⁵⁵ Fitzgerald, *Way Out There in the Blue*, 243.

defense, Abrahamson remarked, “I don’t think anything in this country is impossible ... We have a nation which indeed can produce miracles.”¹⁵⁶ For Abrahamson, who had worked with NASA since the first manned-flight mission into space, not only was the success of SDI uniquely and indelibly American, but its naysayers were dismissing the entire foundation of American progress. Interestingly, this type of rhetoric espoused by Reagan staffers echoed the president’s emphasis on the frontier and cowboy wisdom, even in terms of science and nuclear physics.

Unfortunately, the popular discussion on SDI conflicted with the majority of the scientific community. The TTAPS study, conducted by an international group of scientists, theorized that even a limited military engagement using nuclear weapons could lead to global, environmental devastation. At the height of Reagan-era rhetorical militarism, scientists outlined a number of new environmental, atmospheric, and climatic effects that would result from nuclear blasts. In an article in *Science* magazine titled “Long-Term Biological Consequences of Nuclear War,” twenty prominent international scientists argued that the controversial theory of nuclear winter redefined and examined the aftereffects of nuclear war. Nuclear winter theory hypothesized that a persistent lack of sunlight, subfreezing temperatures, and high levels of ultraviolet radiation would render the geographical terrain almost uninhabitable. Subsequently, the logical conclusions derived from nuclear winter theory pointed to an inescapably bleak future. The theory asserted that agriculture would deteriorate by exposure, thus leaving the survivors to scavenge for food. This study provided a forecast of the potential effects on human and ecological systems for up to ten years after nuclear war. According to the study, by the end of the first year a loss of agricultural support forced humans into a position of scavenging for food.

¹⁵⁶ Fitzgerald, *Way Out There in the Blue*, 243.

As the theory continues, epidemics, pandemics and a loss of government support would cripple society, which would last for indefinite period of time.¹⁵⁷

This description of the post-nuclear scenario did not correspond with FEMA's civil defense plans that included a manageable postwar design. Moreover, the postwar survivalists' image conjured up in this article left an indelible imprint in the minds of its readers. After more than twenty-five years, the cultural imagination of total human annihilation from nuclear war was given more immediacy in the early 1980s when scientists, policy makers, and social activists offered contradictory images and information about nuclear issues. Not surprisingly, the apocalyptic imagination soared with the arrival of nuclear winter theory.¹⁵⁸ Nuclear war films, particularly made-for-television network dramas, began adopting doomsday scenarios of gradual or inevitable genocide caused by miscommunication or human error, such as *Special Bulletin* (1983), *The Day After* (1983), *Threads* (1984), *Population One* (1986), and *When the Wind Blows* (1987).

Reagan's idea of an invisible shield in the atmosphere fit nicely within his ideal of America. He espoused optimism, responded to narratives, and believed in the promise of American exceptionalism. The individual was the hallmark of the Reagan era, and pessimism was equated with liberalism. However inconceivable by the scientific community, the satellites that were orbiting the air were already received by cable viewers. Just as the individual cable viewer came to define him or herself by identifying with niche cable stations, Reagan

¹⁵⁷ Paul R. Elrich, John Harte, Mark A. Harwell, Peter M. Raven, Carl Sagan, George M. Woodwell, Joseph Berry, Edward S. Ayensu, Anne E. Ehrlich, Thomas Eisner, Stephen J. Gould, Herbert D. Grover, Rafael Herrera, Robert M. May, Ernst Mayr, Christopher P. McKay, Harold A. Mooney, Norman Meyers, David Pimentel, and John M. Teal, "Long-Term Biological Consequences of Nuclear War," *Science*, 23. Dec. 1983, p. 1295.

¹⁵⁸ Prior to this theoretical announcement, films such as *World War III* (1988) portrayed the end of the world in a finale montage similar to *Fail Safe* (1964), whereas post-nuclear winter theory films such as *Red Dawn* (1985) demonstrate conventional war in the United States with invading Communist troops employing strategic nuclear strike zones.

championed the efforts of individualism and the joys of consumer capitalism. Additionally, as impossible as SDI might be, Reagan again sold the viewing public on the idea of peace through the most remarkable peace weapon ever conceived. This connection of technology and new use of space helped to persuade American viewers and voters that this idea of SDI might serve as the antidote to nuclear war. What the SDI lacked was protection from domestic terrorism. Although this defensive weapon offered Americans agency against Soviet nuclear aggression, it would not prevent the nightmarish scenario of domestic terrorists using nuclear weapons against their fellow Americans as depicted in NBC's *Special Bulletin*.

As scholars continue to examine the influence of the Star Wars speech, one argument put forward by historians such as Garry Wills asserts that the Cold War presented a platform that expanded the powers of the executive branch, thus altering the balance of constitutional power that existed before the atomic age. If such a proclamation is correct, then Reagan not only mobilized this executive power, but also employed populist language to appeal to the uninformed voter and television viewer. As for the impact of the Strategic Defensive Initiative on the television viewer, scholars continue to debate if Reagan actually believed in the possibility of this defense weapon. At the time, journalists and Congress proved they knew what Reagan thought of the reality of this complicated weapon by publishing a wellspring of articles on the topic and appropriating \$3 billion that the White House requested for the program.¹⁵⁹ In his memoirs, Reagan wrote, "I never viewed SDI as an impenetrable shield ... but if it worked and we then entered into an era when the nations of the world agreed to eliminate nuclear weapons, it could serve as a safety-value against cheating—or attacks by lunatics who managed to get their hands on a nuclear missile."¹⁶⁰ This interesting admission of Reagan's acknowledgment of the

¹⁵⁹ Fitzgerald, *Way Out There in the Blue*, 264.

¹⁶⁰ Reagan, *American Life*, p. 608.

impossibility of SDI mirrors the conflation of fact and fiction indicative of television. Opposed to other forms of mass media, television was charged with both entertaining and informing the public. Given this monumental task, the media is given the responsibility of explaining politics and global events to the American public. For viewers, this ongoing manipulation on conventions invariably blurred and produced politics for public consumption. Even if Reagan knew that SDI was impossible, his ideal defensive weapon became emblematic of a nation dependent on technology and vulnerable to misinformation.¹⁶¹ Moreover, cable television audiences and the growing number of interested American households gaining access to cable television stations demonstrated the real power of satellite technology. SDI may have been a Cold War construct, but it also worked to legitimize existing satellite television capabilities that American audiences were eager to consume. If “Star Wars” could protect Americans, it could also cater to the individual and the growth of new spaces for public discourse.

Additionally, Reagan served as the perfect spokesman for the Strategic Defensive Initiative. Just as the former actor sold GE to the American public in the early days of television, Reagan delivered Americans a unique blend of imagination and technological promise. His ability and ease with the medium speaks to his use of narratives and stories to explain complicated events. By 1983, Reagan promulgated a strategy to win the Cold War: a space-aged, computer-controlled defense missile that could shoot Soviet missiles before they reached their target.¹⁶²

Again in Reagan’s world, the minutiae or details of the project were less important than what the SDI would produce—a world freed from the possibilities of nuclear war. This national contrivance worked as a way for many Americans to mitigate their growing nuclear fears, synonymous with the first two years of Reagan’s presidency.

¹⁶¹ Feuer, *Seeing through the Eighties*, 82.

¹⁶² Walter Lafeber, *America, Russia and the Cold War, 1945-2000*, updated 9th edition (New York: McGraw Hill, 2004), 319; Robert Scheer, *With Enough Shovels* (New York: 1982).

Conclusion

From the creation of home-video-recording equipment to the explosion of popularity in pay-for-television cable stations, to presidential speeches promising that technology could rid the world of the fear of nuclear war, technology promised a new future for Americans. Additionally, technology transformed the traditional network television news cycle. Twenty-four-hour news offered sound-bites in seconds rather than standard four-minute news segment. This transformation dramatically altered the way American viewers understood, interpreted, and received television news. However, television technology also expanded the boundaries of traditional news by using remote anchors and satellite affiliates from around the world, helping to provide for more informative reports of global and domestic affairs. Collectively, network television executives feared that many Americans could be confused by dramatized, nuclear-themed programming. The examples of *Special Bulletin* and “The Crisis Game” underscore how problematic network television had become in terms of discerning fact from fiction. In the case of *Special Bulletin*, NBC went to great lengths to remind the audience that what was occurring on the fake network, with fake commercials and fake news anchors, was not real. Even with over thirty reminders given to the audience throughout the broadcast of *Special Bulletin*, the local Charleston, South Carolina, affiliates received hundreds of concerned calls asking if the city indeed faced a nuclear hostage crisis.

As for politics, Reagan’s three major speeches investigated in this work—Eureka, “Evil Empire,” and especially SDI—were constructed to effectively mitigate nuclear freeze activists and also to reaffirm the policy of nuclear deterrence. The Strategic Defensive Initiative was hyped as a weapon that, if implemented properly, would make nuclear war impossible. Unfortunately, the issue of domestic terrorism did not enter into this particular defensive

weapon; yet the rhetorical attack against peace activists had the intended consequence of equating peace activism with the New Left movement of the sixties.¹⁶³ For Republicans gearing up for a national election year, *Special Bulletin* reinforced the notion that leftist radicalism, even if it appeared innocuous, threatened nuclear deterrence and the moral superiority of Ronald Reagan.

The lynchpin between accessibility to these new technological advances and SDI is not purely academic in scope. For the privileged white-collar yuppie class cultivated by Reagan's economic policy, the ideas of satellite or cable television, home video recording, and niche channels opened up this new world of television viewing. Similarly, Reagan's approach for peace through superior technological might, as outlined by SDI, promised a world free from nuclear war. Alternatively, the dependence on technology to bring these promises to fruition, either in space or in the American home, relied deeply on capital and wealth. This is one of the many contradictions of the Reagan Revolution. From SDI to pay-for-television stations, if Americans wanted to reap the rewards of technological innovations, they would have to pay for them. Cable and satellite may have offered an alternative space separate from network television, and they also may have contributed to a redefinition of the public sphere, but they also fragmented viewers. Furthermore, the reconfiguration of the traditional news cycle brought on by CNN and the continuous format of network news magazine shows continued to blur the lines between fact and fiction.

Special Bulletin is not the only nuclear-themed made-for-television event of 1983, as ABC and the White House spent more time prompting and preparing for the November live broadcast of *The Day After*. Yet the visual and textual lines on television between reality and

¹⁶³ Andrew Rojecki, *Silencing the Opposition: Antinuclear Movements and the Media in the Cold War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 148.

fiction were becoming increasingly blurred. *Special Bulletin*'s relentless pursuit of a network's next big story, similar to ABC's creation of *Nightline* in the wake of the Iranian hostage crisis, speaks of the direction in which network television news broadcasting was headed in the 1980s. Furthermore, the nuclear terrorists demanded a live plea on television to explain their agenda, thus once more underlining the use of the medium as a space of political hostage and negotiation. *Special Bulletin* is the most obvious example of this confusion. The audience is forced to rely on network anchors, sponsors, and remote satellite access in order to gain knowledge of the growing nuclear situation created by anti-American, nuclear freeze activists who once worked in the Pentagon. This intense dramatic situation cannot be covered by the popular press as events are unfolding by minute to minute. Additionally, ABC's presentation of "The Crisis Game" on *Nightline*, which fabricated a nuclear standoff with the Soviet Union by using real politicians as the actual White House staff, further obfuscated the line between reality and fiction. Collectively, the "Crisis Game" and *Special Bulletin* worked to misinform the public because they were so visibly close to actual political events.

Throughout 1983, all three major networks continued to present documentary and fact-based narratives to the public in the banner of "social realism." More troubling, however, was the continued intermixing of fact and reality, and this did not go without commentary. A *TV Guide* commentary on the docudrama asserted, "too many people, I fear, think these fictionalized movies are true, too many people, I fear, are forming—and then transmitting—their final impression of the major social and political events of our time on the basis of fictionalized movies, rather than on the basis of historical fact."¹⁶⁴

¹⁶⁴ *TV Guide*, 1987, 12.

Although the “Star Wars” speech repositioned Reagan as a president of peace, the next made-for-television nuclear war would challenge the audiences to reconsider their opinions on Reagan, the nuclear freeze movement, and the realities of World War Three. The next chapter examines how visual and media fear provoked by the 1983 ABC movie, *The Day After* and examines the ways in which the White House attempted to rebuke the film and ensure a successful 1984 Presidential election. However, the line between fact and fiction was challenged by *The Day After* as the imagery became a cultural representation of the Cold War for a new generation of Americans.

Chapter three: Preparing for the Fallout; *The Day After* and the Reagan Reaction

Perhaps the only adequate treatment of nuclear war would be two hours of a totally blank screen in prime time. But who would sponsor it?¹⁶⁵

On Sunday, November 20, 1983, the American Broadcasting Company aired the made-for-television film *The Day After*, and an estimated 100 million viewers watched the annihilation of America due to cataclysmic nuclear war, making it the second-most watched program in American television history. Weeks prior to the premiere of the film, ABC began an intensive promotional campaign aided in part by extensive coverage in the popular press. The publicity surrounding *The Day After* was nothing less than a national event garnering cover stories in *Newsweek* and *TV Guide*, along with comparable segments on popular news shows like *Good Morning America*, *60 Minutes*, and *Today*. Furthermore, in the nights leading up to the November 20 airdate, news shows such as *Nightline* featured prominent political figures acting as mouthpieces for different opinions on the state of the nuclear freeze movement, nuclear

¹⁶⁵ Paul Boyers, *By the Dawn's Early Light: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), 362.

disarmament, and the deployment of nuclear hardware. Given the level of media attention and promotional blitz surrounding the film, it appeared as if the entire country was willing and ready to watch a fictitious war played out on prime-time television.

According to Brandon Stoddard, the president of ABC at the time, “the film provided an unrelenting and detailed view of three nuclear explosions and what the effects might be on ‘average’ American citizens, far removed from political origins or explanations.”¹⁶⁶ But rather than remaining politically innocuous, *The Day After* proved a hotly contested political issue. In addition, after the original broadcast, ABC aired a news special hosted by Ted Koppel to answer questions about nuclear war and remind viewers that what they previously viewed on television was a narrative film on nuclear war, not real news coverage. ABC issued a “Viewer’s Guide” and distributed it to libraries, schools, and religious groups across the country. For the weeks surrounding the original broadcast date, it appeared as if the American public was saturated with nuclear discourse.

Since the 1950s, American audiences have enjoyed a steady stream of Cold War films that attempted to illustrate the perils of the atomic age. From the science-fiction creature features of the 1950s, such as *Attack of the Crab Monsters* and *Them!* which scared audiences with mutated beasts, to the doomsday films of the 1960s, like *Fail-Safe* and *Dr. Strangelove*, that terrified audiences with atomic technology and human hubris, American audiences were entertained, titillated, and curiously intrigued by atomic destruction. Yet by Reagan’s second presidential term, television had remade the Cold War narrative into a social melodramatic made-for-television format capable of capturing the immediacy of factual geopolitical events. According to Kim Newman, author of *Apocalypse Movies: End of the World Cinema*,

¹⁶⁶ Stephen Farber, “How a Nuclear Holocaust Was Staged for TV,” *New York Times*, November 13, 1983, A1, A34.

“Television had long since replaced the theatrical film as the principle source of effective fictions. As a mass medium, television combines the visual appeal of the movies in their heyday, the immediacy of newspapers, and the potential informational content of printed book.”¹⁶⁷ Much of the scholarly work on atomic culture has focused almost exclusively on film; however, television proved a formidable medium for presenting nuclear war scenarios.

Most specifically, the format of the made-for-television film provided an effective canvas to show both the prewar life of the characters and overlay that with post-nuclear war realities. Nuclear war teleplays are an interesting amalgamation of melodrama, character studies, disaster, and realistic renderings of serious social topics. The majority of narratives that incorporate nuclear themes either demonstrate the political turmoil that embroils America into a nuclear war, such as 1982’s *World War III*, or radicals attempting to use weapons for overtly political reasons, as in *Special Bulletin*. Rarely did the narrative delve into the problems of how one survives a post-nuclear world. This emphasis on demonstrating both the pre-and postwar lives of ordinary characters living in a radiation-poisoned world served to rework the atomic narrative.

This work begins by examining the official Reagan White House response to the presentations of *The Day After*. More than any other social made-for-television drama, the Reagan White House prepared a campaign that would counter any support for liberal opposition the film was predicated to generate. The onslaught of nuclear-theme issues on network television—*World War III*, *Special Bulletin*, and more—mobilized the White House to construct a media plan that would explain the administration’s nuclear policy clearly to the public, using television as the conduit. This public position on nuclear war demonstrated how significant the Reagan White House viewed network television and its relationship with the American voters.

¹⁶⁷ Kim Newman, *Apocalypse Movies: End of the World Cinema* (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 2000), 227.

Second, this chapter analyzes both the cultural and political significance of the film. Placed within a larger context, the film is emblematic of the ideological chasm between the peace movement and Reagan-era conservatives. The final scope of this chapter examines how the ABC network maneuvered through political pressure, corporate fears, and public concerns about the most anticipated made-for-television film about nuclear disaster in television history.

ABC's extensive promotion of the television event as well as its response to the larger implications of the narrative's content is of great importance to this examination. More than any other network, the ABC news division went to great lengths to use its highly rated program, *Nightline*, to reframe the geopolitical events of Reagan's militarism. For example, the night following the premiere of *The Day After*, *Nightline* presented, ABC's "The Crisis Game," to demonstrate how the White House would respond to a nuclear crisis with the Soviet Union. This chapter discusses the multiple ways in which the ABC network presented an official narrative disseminated from the White House in the wake of the potential political fallout of *The Day After*. In this larger context of television history, this chapter examines the interplay between network television, the Reagan White House, and the television audience.

The Day After

The film, set in Lawrence, Kansas, the geographical center of the United States and home to many missile silos, attempted to present a realistic account of the effects of nuclear war on ordinary Americans. The opening scene was a montage of shots of day-to-day life in Lawrence and its surrounding areas. The audience watched children playing in a park, workers in a mill plant, and students attending class at the university, as well as lovers engaged in intimate movements. The audience realizes that this opening scene was meant to provide a glimpse into

the ordinary lives of people like the viewers. These characters were not aware of the imminent danger that awaited them. The director, Nicholas Meyers, developed the plot for the crisis to lead to nuclear holocaust, not by showing government leaders discussing the immediacy of the military situation, but by showing people passively gathered around television sets. In addition, Meyers chose to allow the audience to receive the same information that the characters in the film received, at the same time they received it, thus heightening the audiences' identification with the characters.¹⁶⁸

As the political situation becomes direr, the characters grew increasingly concerned by the televised news. However, they go on with the minutia of their lives. The audience became intimate with the film's main characters. The central character was Dr. Oaks, a middle-aged heart surgeon (played by Jason Robards) who lives in Kansas City with his wife. Lawrence, Kansas, the academic heart of Kansas, lies approximately thirty miles away. The majority of the narrative revolved around two families: Dr. Oaks and his wife, as well as the Dahlberg family, who lived on a farm forty miles outside of Kansas City. As the film opens, the Dahlberg patriarch (portrayed by John Cullum) was preparing for the wedding of his oldest daughter Denise, played by Lori Lethin. Other characters include Joe Huxley, the voice of the political left and a professor at the University of Lawrence, portrayed by John Lithgow, along with Steve Guttenberg, who plays a medical student from the university taken in by the Dahlbergs in the fallout of the war.

The film interweaved all of the scenes of daily life with the various news reports of political events that revealed the impending war. In an interesting scene, Dr. Oaks and his wife reminisce about how the current political divide between the U.S. and the Soviet Union was

¹⁶⁸ Patrick Mannix, *The Rhetoric of Antinuclear Fiction* (London: Bucknell University Press, 1992), 137.

similar to the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962. The couple recalled how in 1962, they were in bed together watching the story unfold on television, and took comfort in how they had survived that incident and would survive another. Further information on the impending crisis was provided to television viewers through dialogue between some of the college students and local patrons, outlining theories from the Democratic and Republican parties. . The audience begins to slowly empathize with the characters, who, mirrored on television, realize that nuclear war was becoming a foreseeable reality.

Then, the bomb came. The bomb sequence lasted approximately four minutes and was edited to shock, terrify, and emotionally ravage the viewers. At first, Meyers presented the effects of the initial attacks on the downtown areas of Kansas City, the entire city; then the effects on its citizens including Dr. Oaks's daughter, who was immediately eviscerated. Not only were they incinerated, these characters were literally vaporized, their skins disintegrating off their skeletons until finally they disappeared completely. Buildings flew apart, glass shattered and fell onto the streets, and bridges collapsed causing massive damage to the city's infrastructure. Meyers incorporated stock footage of actual bomb tests from the U.S. Army to heighten the effect of the initial blast. He intended for the audience to be shocked by the bomb's ability to completely decimate an entire city and even strip human flesh off the bone.

But the bomb sequence was only the beginning, the critical moment between the pre-and postwar American landscape. The survivors, those in Lawrence, had to struggle with the immediate and obvious problems of post-nuclear life. Thousands were injured, and the technologies on which America had grown so dependent were no longer available. Patrick Mannix, author of the scholarly work on antinuclear fiction, offered this assessment:

The implications are obvious: civilization, as dependent as it is on electronic technology, will not survive even the most personally harmless effects of nuclear war. We are left to imagine how many will die because the medical equipment has failed. We are also largely left to imagine the other effects in society of this breakdown of technology. At night city streets will be lit, if at all, by the uncertain glow of fires. Police cars, like all other equipment relying on electric components, will be rendered useless. Refrigerators will cease, and food will spoil. Even water supplies will be limited by the failure of electric pumps.¹⁶⁹

This loss of everyday consumer culture, to which Americans had grown accustomed and on which they depended throughout the postwar era, was something the viewer had to imagine in his or her own mind. The film created an atmosphere in which the viewer had to imagine how they could survive a nuclear war and what tools might be used to preserve the human body. This was an important commentary to make, as this is where the teleplay diverges from most antinuclear drama in that it attempted to present a realistic postwar landscape. It challenges the viewers to imagine life without the simple essentials provided by the government, such as water and even medical care. But more than just this change in the way Americans would have to reconsider necessities, the survivors had to confront the social and psychological changes that nuclear war brings to the average citizen. Doctors at the Lawrence University Hospital discuss radiation levels and pontificated about when it was safe to “go outside again.” This also suggested that the first responders, such as medics, doctors, fireman, nurses, and police officers, were neither informed nor trained in nuclear survival skills. This point of contention, of civil preparedness, was a political issue for Reagan as he stressed that the U.S. was not engaging in civil defense measures in parity with the Soviet Union.

According to Kim Newman’s analysis of the film, after the bomb was dropped, the film struggled to retain optimism with the grim realities of nuclear holocaust overshadowing any

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 139.

sense of hope.¹⁷⁰ However, a closer reading of the film reveals that the narrative never loses its optimism. The film “struggles” to retain its providence. But this optimism was draped in the confidence in the American people to rebuild, not the government. The film displayed faith in the American people through its characters’ continued struggle to survive and to move through the daily minutiae of activities, despite feeling increasingly hopeless due to a disconnect with government officials or any news about the situation. The film highlighted the American viewers’ dependence on network news for basic survival information, a commentary that revealed the complicated relationship between technology, government, and preservation in postwar America. The film relied on the strength of the characters to retain their faith in humanity over any other ideology. This depiction of ordinary Americans struggling to survive in a post-nuclear holocaust world marked an important shift in the cultural depiction of the Cold War.

In spite of cataclysmic damage to the physical and social construction of American life, the teleplay of *The Day After* envisioned many of its social intuitions remaining partially intact due to the commitment of the American worker. Doctors continued to provide services to their patients, even without any technological assistance. Lawrence citizens continued to attend make-shift church services, even though most congregates suffered from radiation sickness. Bands of survivors came together and formed refugee camps. The Dahlberg family displayed an enviable amount of compassion by opening their miniscule fallout shelter to the young medical student (Steve Guttenberg). All of this underscored a continued effort to rebuild some semblance of society, law, and order in the midst of nuclear chaos and a lack of communication from government assistance. Unfortunately, some lawlessness did occur: Mr. Dahlberg was killed by

¹⁷⁰ Newman, *Apocalypse Movies*, 139.

squatters who either wanted his land or wanted his food. Yet even in the final scene of the film, when Dr. Oaks journeyed back to ground zero, Kansas City, to be with his deceased wife, he was embraced by fellow survivors-squatters, who joined him in a sad gaze at the radioactive rubble that used to be his home. The survivors, even as they witnessed the widespread destruction and death and sickness that ravaged their once bountiful country, never lost their hope and faith. Humanity and strength prevailed until the end. This display of humanity's ability to self-preserve in a time of crisis resonated with American audiences in that the viewer had come to identify with one of the many characters.

This is not to suggest that the Lawrence survivors did not suffer horribly, as most slowly died due to radiation sickness. One might even suggest that Meyers attempted to exploit one of the most terrifying fears of the nuclear age: the fear of radiation. The mysterious poison had never adequately been explained or discussed by government officials. In one scene, Lori, the daughter whose wedding was interpreted by World War III, cannot bear the claustrophobic space of the Dahlberg's fallout shelter for another moment and runs outside in a field peppered with white radioactive fallout. Lori cannot understand that even though the sky was blue and the sun was shining, the air was poisoned with deadly levels of radiation. Afterward, the audience bears witness to Lori's struggle with the radiation; her hair thins, she begins to hemorrhage, she grows tumors, and the medical infrastructure could do nothing to save her. Other characters, such as nine months pregnant hospitalized patient played by Amy Madigan, awaited a similar fate. As for Dr. Oaks, his initial position, on the highway miles away from ground zero in Kansas City, allowed him more time to help save the remaining population of Lawrence and travel back to his beloved family to witness a wasted landscape. He too grows pale and bald, develops sores, and eventually collapses.

Overall, Meyers refrained from sensationalizing the horrors of radiation sickness in comparison to other films of its time period. Perhaps the executives at ABC made this decision for him. Many speculated that this reluctance to include more graphic imagery crippled the realism of the film. In a review from *American Film* magazine, world-renowned French cinemaphile Marcel Ophuls asserted that the scenes of actual destruction were “woefully inadequate, naive, and almost clumsy ... *The Day After* cannot possibly compete with the vicarious thrills of gratuitous violence, precisely because its intentions are honorable.”¹⁷¹ Ophuls continued with the rhetorical question: Could any presentation, even one with gritty realism, capture such an important event? Perhaps gritty realism was an unrealistic and unattainable goal for any filmmaker depicting World War III and nuclear holocaust. However, as the previous chapter argued, from the network’s perspective, was less important than attaining realism perhaps was not as important to the network as retaining viewers and corporate sponsorship. Perhaps executives at ABC, including Nicholas Meyers and Brandon Stoddard, and the American television audience, were ready to be “entertained” rather than confront the graphic realities of post-nuclear apocalyptic life. After all, if the viewer considered all the possible fictional scenarios of nuclear war, viewers would recognize that it was possible for the U.S. government to provoke, escalate, or even begin a third World War. The dramatic and apolitical elements of *The Day After* suggest that American audiences of the 1980s preferred to be entertained by a diluted version of nuclear war rather than to confront the horrors and their own responsibility in the denotation of nuclear weapons.

The audience, as well as the characters they are meant to resemble, never really know what side started the war, or which side deployed nuclear weapons first. This was intentional on

¹⁷¹ Marcel Ophuls, “After *The Day After*,” *American Film* 10, no. 2 (1984): 36.

the part of ABC executives, who wanted to stress the “apolitical” message of the film. ABC president Brandon Stoddard stated, “I don’t think audiences will be able to find a political statement. It does not say there should be less nuclear bombs or more nuclear bombs. We do not deal with the cause.”¹⁷² Regardless of the critical issue of causality, one of the survivors, Dr. Joe Huxley (John Lithgow), an academic at the ruined university, found an old radio and heard the president make the following announcement: “There is at the present time a ceasefire in the Soviet Union. During this hour of sorrow, I wish to assure you that America has survived this terrible tribulation. There has been no surrender, no retreat from the principles of liberty and democracy for which the free world look to us for leadership. We remain undaunted.”¹⁷³ This statement on the stalwart commitment of the government to ideology over humanity is a rather larger commentary on the faith in institutions to handle the aftermath of such awesome destruction. Yet, the audiences drew ambiguous messages from the film’s conclusion. The makers of the film left essential elements of causality and governmental orthodoxy unexamined. The audience was left to ponder if the war is still continuing? What about other survivors? Would there be a national recovery program? Would the government come to the rescue? Was the inclusion of the president’s message a prerecorded telecast made at an earlier time that automatically aired after a nuclear strike began, just as mentioned in Edward Zuckerman’s work on civil preparedness and defense? Whatever the intention, the film did include some ominous clues about its vision of the post-nuclear war world. As the audience sees, Professor Huxley continued to try to communicate with other survivors from around the country, even though it becomes more evident that no one is responding to this call. There might be no national recovery. Thus, all the official civil defense measures of post-nuclear planning, including citizen

¹⁷² Newman, 231-232.

¹⁷³ Quotation from the ABC made-for-television film, *The Day After*, directed by Nicholas Meyer, 1983.

displacement, taxes, and even immediate needs were rendered into another remand of pre-holocaust life. The film ends with the following epilogue: “The catastrophic events you have witnessed are, in all likelihood, less severe than the destruction that would actually occur in the event of a full nuclear attack against the United States. It is hoped that the images of this film will inspire the nations of the Earth, their people and their leaders, to find means to life after the fateful day.”¹⁷⁴ Hiding under the banner of apoliticism, the film still rallied behind the slogan of the nuclear freeze campaign and the White House: to prevent the world from suffering from a nuclear war.

Although *The Day After* received mixed reviews in the popular printed press, it achieved unqualified success by network television standards. The advertisers, who were apprehensive about sponsoring the film since its inception, came away from the film with record television exposure.¹⁷⁵ Not only did the teleplay garner astronomical ratings for the ABC network, crushing their competition in the November sweeps, but the film made an indelible imprint on the minds of the American television audience and became another avenue for Americans to discuss their feelings about America’s nuclear arsenal and become active participants in the nuclear discourse.

The film serves as an important cultural touchstone for a myriad of reasons. First, in the weeks leading up to the original broadcast date, the news media was saturated with stories detailing the coming of ABC’s depiction of a nuclear war on television. In addition, many officials worried that the film would be too terrifying to watch, and under pressure from a number of agencies, ABC issued a parental advisory that children under twelve years old should

¹⁷⁴ Quotations from *The Day After*, 1983.

¹⁷⁵ Diane Mermigas, “‘Day’ Aftermath: Sponsors Pull Coup,” *Advertising Age* 28 (November 1983): 1.

not watch the film unsupervised.¹⁷⁶ Furthermore, the nuclear devastation presented in the film was unprecedented for American television viewers. Over twenty years later, many viewers can still vividly recall watching the film on television. One viewer wrote, “I first saw this film at the age of ten, and it frightened me more than I can adequately describe. When I saw it again at the age of twenty-seven it still frightened me.”¹⁷⁷

The Day After was not the first made-for-television film to confront the subject of nuclear holocaust. However, *The Day After* was significant because it ignited a wave of national debate on the subject of nuclear war. *The Day After* allowed all Americans to watch the unimaginable and to visually confront their own nuclear nightmares. The film attempted to tap into existing nuclear war fears, while also provoking wide-scale debate. The teleplay brought to life the abstract political and scientific renderings of nuclear war and personalized them by providing a human face for the aftereffects of nuclear war. The film also provided a narrative framework by which Americans could engage in the complicated debate. Instead of politicians discussing nuclear weapons, disarmament, or the imperative of foreign policy using indecipherable military jargon, the film democratized the issue of nuclear war by addressing it in a melodramatic format that more Americans could understand and, more importantly, discuss. The average American might not be able to describe NATO’s first-strike policy or the ideological orthodoxy behind deterrence, but any American viewer could discuss how *The Day After* made them feel. What impact the film would have on American politics and the Reagan White House would be chronicled by the White House media staff, particularly David Gergen and Michael Deaver.

¹⁷⁶ Glenn Collins, “The Impact on Children on ‘The Day After,’” *New York Times*, November 7, 1983, B16.

¹⁷⁷ For more viewer comments see the following website: <http://us.imdb.com/CommentsShow?85404>.

The Day After rejuvenated the national debate over the possibility of nuclear war. Once-abstract political and scientific concepts such as “survivability” and “limited nuclear exchange,” usually the jargon of the upper echelon of the American military-industrial apparatus, now entered into the American vernacular. In the wake of *The Day After*, the issue of nuclear war and the question of survivability became debated in a myriad of public spheres, from churches to schools, and network news outlets. Historians have yet to determine the precise impact of the film, so important questions remain unexamined. What counter-narrative did the White House present to the American public on the effectiveness of deterrence? How did the White House media staff react to the network interest in this subject? Did the film change the way Americans perceived the dangers of nuclear war? What is the significance of the film in terms of Cold War culture? To answer these questions, one must first examine what politicians and activist groups were suggesting about the film before and after its broadcast in November 1983.

A month before *The Day After* aired, bootlegged copies of the film began to circulate around the nation’s news media and political groups. These advanced screenings served as one of the primary factors that made the film a national event. The mass media created a firestorm of political speculation around the film, prompting spokespeople from either side of the political arena to take a position on the movie. The New Left understood the film as a crucial wake-up call to Americans to reawaken the goals of the antinuclear campaign. Antinuclear activists set up teach-ins, distributed informational literature, and launched a project called “800-NUCLEAR,” an advertising outlet that urged viewers to join grassroots efforts to freeze the production of nuclear weapons.

The Right also reconfigured a national rebuttal to the idea that all Republicans, including President Reagan, were hawkish ideologues. In September 1983, before an advanced screening of the film, the *National Review* ran a story about how the film defended the U.S. policy of deterrence. Later, after receiving a copy of the made-for-television film, the *National Review* condemned the teleplay as a piece of leftist propaganda that ignored the realities of the Cold War and Communist aggression. William F. Buckley Jr. sarcastically suggested that the network was attempting to frighten American voters by airing a film “showing what would happen if bubonic plague hit an unprepared America.”¹⁷⁸ This quip on the dramatics of network television also shifted the focus from nuclear war to national disaster and recovery, two very different social issues. Not to be outdone by liberal antinuclear activists, advocates from Young Americans for Freedom picketed ABC headquarters in New York. Furthermore, Jerry Falwell instructed Moral Majority members to pressure local ministers to denounce the film to congregates and even threaten a boycott of companies paying advertising space on the network during the broadcast. Ironically, the White House, along with the growing cacophony of right-wing voices, lobbied the network to provide ample airtime for the White House to offer a framework to understand the narrative imagery and help to delineate between fact and fiction.

ABC’s Official Presentation and Response of *The Day After*

For months in advance, the Reagan White House prepared for post-*Day After* ripples. On November 19, one day before the broadcast, the *New York Times* reported that the Reagan administration had begun to launch a counter-campaign to the network depiction of nuclear war by increasing efforts to demonstrate the effectiveness of nuclear deterrence. According to freeze scholar David Meyer, “conservative forces argued that allowing the possibility of a nuclear

¹⁷⁸ William F. Buckley Jr., “ABC Loves Peace,” *National Review*, November 11, 1983, 1437.

attack on Lawrence distorted the fact that nuclear deterrence worked.”¹⁷⁹ Republicans feared that a dramatization of the horrors of a post-nuclear world would galvanize support for the Democrats supporting the freeze and even hinder Reagan’s chances of winning a second presidential term. According to an article in *U.S. News and World Report*, the White House was very much concerned that the antinuclear movement would “capitalize” on the dramatics rather than the politics of the larger message.¹⁸⁰ To appease the media consultants at the White House, ABC House would present a live political discussion with Secretary of State George Shultz to appear on the post-broadcast news special.

In the months leading up to the broadcast of *The Day After*, ABC prepared for the fallout the film might bring to the network. In the public press, the network was being accused of demonstrating the failures of deterrence. An article in the *National Review* from October 14, 1983, suggested that the network, “spent seven million on a film that reinforces the Soviet political goal and helps to generate an ignorant public hysteria at a time when calm resolution to preserve a credible deterrent is called for.”¹⁸¹ In addition, *Time* magazine also commented on the stirring debate about the film. In an October 24 article, *Time* summarized the film and provided a preview of the nuclear imagery the viewer could expect as well as breakdown of the positions on the film from the political Left and Right. Ultimately, however, *Time* gestured to the wellspring of films capitalizing on and also generating nuclear fears. The article stated that “Paramount already has a movie in the pipeline called *Testament*, about one family trying to survive a nuclear blast. One of the hottest commercial novels due next spring is *Warday* ... Apocalypse has clearly

¹⁷⁹ David S. Meyer, *A Winter of Discontent: The Nuclear Freeze and American Politics* (New York: Praeger, 1990), 132.

¹⁸⁰ Joseph From with James M. Hildreth and Orr Kelly, “The Day after ‘*The Day After*,’” *U.S. News and World Report*, December 5, 1983, 29–31.

¹⁸¹ *National Review*, October 14, 1983, 21.

become something more than the fate that looms just over the horizon line. It may be the growth industry of the '80s.”¹⁸²

To dispute accusations of bias, ABC decided to air a roundtable discussion after the immediate broadcast. Although the direct correspondence between White House officials and network executives was limited, a memo from Charles Wick, director of the United States Information Agency (USIA) to the American Broadcasting Company, dated October 7, 1983, provided an interesting guidepost in understanding the actual cooperation between the network and the Reagan administration. In his memo, Wick offered the participation of Robert McNamara, Carl Sagan, William F. Buckley, Vice President Bush or Caspar Weinberger on a panel that would feature “a balanced, objective discussion.”¹⁸³ Wick also suggested that the live audience at the roundtable discussion would “contain people of strong opinions but will be restricted by Ted to questions.”¹⁸⁴ Not only did the network court many of the same talking heads suggested by Wick, the network also distributed 400,000 “study guides” that were sent to schools and churches nationwide. This suggests that the White House was going to great lengths to control the message and reaction of the film for American viewers. However, the study guide was also politically divisive as it included books closely related to the antinuclear movement, including those by Dr. Helen Caldicott and Jonathan Schell.¹⁸⁵ Even in the midst of the controversy and accusations of leftist leanings, the network was able to procure the advertising revenue needed to produce the film, in the midst of a conservative call for a national boycott of the film.

¹⁸² *Time*, October 24, 1983, 86.

¹⁸³ Memo, David Gergen File, 11627, October 7, 1983, Ronald Reagan Presidential Archives.

¹⁸⁴ Memo, USIA to ABC executives, David Gergen File, 11627, October 7, 1983, Ronald Reagan Presidential Archives

¹⁸⁵ Joseph From with James M. Hildreth and Orr Kelly, “The Day after ‘*The Day After*,’” *U.S. News and World Report*, December 5, 1983, 29–31.

The Offering of “Viewpoints” on *Nightline*

The ABC network, consistently insisting that the film contained no political agenda, immediately followed the original broadcast of the film with a special news panel to discuss and perhaps dispel some of the issues raised in the film. Hosted by well-respected ABC news correspondent Ted Koppel, the roundtable discussion featured panelists such as Henry Kissinger, Robert McNamara, Carl Sagan, Elie Wiesel, William F. Buckley, and Lt. General Brent Scowcroft. The panel brought together an interesting combination of past political operatives and current military and social pundits. Sagan represented the new school on nuclear science, while Kissinger and McNamara continued to applaud the military effectiveness of nuclear deterrence. Wiesel was the only panelist to confront the irrationality of nuclear weapons and vocally reject such worse-case scenarios as mutually assured destruction as a framework for nuclear safety. Conspicuously absent from the panel was a spokesperson for the nuclear freeze movement.¹⁸⁶

The program began with Ted Koppel reassuring the American public that what they had just seen on the network was not real—it was the work of network fiction. In a move similar to Peter Finch’s character in Sidney Lumet’s 1976 classic film, *Network*, Koppel suggested that viewers look out their windows and see for themselves that America was still a nation unblemished by nuclear war. Koppel then turned the discussion to arms reduction and engaged in a dialogue with Secretary of State George Shultz, whose avuncular status as a statesman was meant to ameliorate any percolating anxiety provoked by the made-for-television film. Speaking via satellite to the secretary of state, Koppel asked a series of questions regarding arms reduction, the policy of deterrence, and the types of problems Americans would have to confront in the

¹⁸⁶ Meyers, 132.

event of a nuclear war. Shultz's response did not deviate from the official White House *Day After* response scripted by White House media strategists.

As Koppel turned the dialogue over to the panelists, each provided predictably scripted answers to Koppel's question and never strayed from their partisan beliefs. William F. Buckley Jr. denounced the film, as he had previously in print, claiming it debilitated American military standing and criticized ABC's promotion of the film as apolitical, when clearly according to Buckley, the political design of the film was a "cause militant."¹⁸⁷ Although Koppel asked each panelist how America might best avoid such a nuclear nightmare, the discussion repeatedly came back to the historical success of nuclear deterrence. Robert McNamara, exhibiting an academic comfort with the subject matter but discomfort in front of the camera, initially asserted that the American people did not understand the theoretical underpinnings of deterrence and how it protected against a doomsday scenario. As one of the architects of mutually assured destruction, McNamara spoke about the complex interplay between government, policy, and nuclear armament, and most significantly, he suggested that Americans could not understand the geopolitical power of nuclear weapons. Similarly, Kissinger, appearing rather annoyed by the entire panel and live studio audience participating in the discussion, claimed that "simple-minded programs (such as *The Day After*)" only caused irrational panic in the populace. He went on to add that nuclear disarmament was necessary, but only to an extent, because if "the Soviet Union gets the idea that the U.S. has morally and psychologically disarmed itself then the precise consequences we are describing here will happen."

¹⁸⁷ Quotations from the ABC Special, *View Point*, "Day After: Perils of Nuclear War," released on MPI Home Video, 1983.

The presence of McNamara and Kissinger was important for a number of reasons, many of which are contradictory. Kissinger was remembered by the American people as a vital diplomat that negotiated détente and peace in the Middle East, yet his relationship to the former president Nixon left Americans uneasy with his academic pontifications. As for McNamara, he was a fixture throughout the Cold War political landscape and in the aftermath of Vietnam, he was routinely asked to speak of the effective policy of nuclear deterrence. This did not situate McNamara as a member of the political right or left, but rather as a symbol of the ultimate Washington insider, a man who had engaged in diplomatic situations with Nikita Khrushchev and John Kennedy in 1962, and who now was available to explain his political insights with the American viewing public.

When Koppel addressed Carl Sagan, the newly crowned poster child of nuclear winter theory and known as an anti-Reagan scientist, it was only to discuss nuclear fallout. Sagan was never asked questions regarding nuclear proliferation, disarmament, or his position on the nuclear winter theory. Rather, Sagan explained the theory of nuclear winter and its immediate policy implications and went on to add that even a small-scale battle could cause the earth to become crippled by deadly poisoning. In one of the few lighthearted moments, Koppel interrupted Sagan as he was describing the cataclysmic effects of nuclear winter and noted that the country was already depressed because the film. The American people, Koppel quipped, did not need a more dire illustration of the post-nuclear landscape. Buckley openly challenged Sagan and nuclear winter theory and claimed that ultimately, the focus should always stay on the policy of deterrence. Since Soviet scientists agreed about the effects of nuclear winter on the planet, Buckley claimed, the Soviets would never use weapons of mass destruction.

Only the words of panelist Elie Wiesel, a World War II Holocaust survivor, brought the discussion down from the theoretical and political level and repackaged the dialogue in ordinary vernacular and human terms. Wiesel suggested that the Jewish Holocaust had taught humanity an important lesson that it must not forget: “what is imaginable can happen.”¹⁸⁸ He observed that people could not understand such abstractions as nuclear megatons, space-based missile defense systems, NATO military exercises, nuclear physics, or complicated military jargon; they only knew that they were scared of the awesome destructive power of nuclear war. Prophetically, Wiesel proclaimed that he did not worry about the superpowers using nuclear weapons, but that he did worry about the smaller nations who would not have a national discussion on network television, whether or not it was right to use them. Wiesel urged that the real nuclear threat could arise from rogue nations who would not hesitate to use nuclear hardware for limited tactical strikes.

Clearly, what Wiesel forecasted was a message that the nuclear freeze movement, both home and abroad, had also attempted to emphasize. Wiesel’s commentary on the media working as a watchdog to prevent global malfeasance intimated that the networks were complicit in disseminating important government events to the American viewing public. He spoke of a more worrisome nuclear scenario that World War III between the superpowers, and he urged the network media to inform the public as much as possible on global events to prevent the “unimaginable” from happening again.

This panel discussion was significant for a number of reasons. First, it clearly illustrated that those involved in past presidential administrations, such as McNamara and Kissinger,

¹⁸⁸ Quotations from the ABC special, *View Point*, “Day After: Perils of Nuclear War,” released on MPI Home Video, 1983.

articulated the language of nuclear deterrence and legitimized its effectiveness by stating that it has prevented nuclear war. Second, the audience witnessed the unbridgeable chasm between the political minds and those from the scientific or humanistic side of nuclear issues. Both Sagan and Wiesel suggested that the world of the 1980s, the largest nuclear arsenal in history, needed to dramatically reprioritize and disarm. The issue of disarmament for future prevention was the message that Sagan and Wiesel emphasized. In contrast, McNamara, Kissinger, and Buckley were all highly critical of the value of the film and asserted that the film illustrated the need for nuclear armament and deterrence. The experts did not change their opinions after watching the film, nor did they engage in any consciousness-shifting debate.

The final aspect of the panel discussion worth noting—something that Marcel Ophuls also noted in his review of *The Day After*—was how completely out of touch the panelists were with the American people. Ophuls called Kissinger’s appearance on the panel “a view from the terrace.”¹⁸⁹ These men were asked to join in a panel discussion in order to quell the fears the American public might have after watching the nuclear-horror drama on television. The real criticism of the panel was the obvious disconnect between the panelists and the audience. The panelists suggested that Americans were too incompetent to understand the intricacies of foreign policy or nuclear megatons. All the panelists agreed that no one wanted nuclear war, but the panelists, except for Wiesel, could never really explain to the American public how nuclear war was prevented. Nor could the panelists interact with the in-studio audience. These political insiders, men of tremendous political power, felt assured that America would not suffer such a melodramatic and horrific fate. Only Wiesel, after claiming he knew nothing of nuclear strategy and exhibiting human vulnerability, was able to make a human connection with the audience.

¹⁸⁹ Ophuls, “After *The Day After*,” 38.

Wiesel became not only the voice of reason in a room full of egos, but the voice of concerned Americans.

In a *New York Times* article following the broadcast of the film and the panel discussion, the newspaper reported that both the movie and the discussion entertained and misinformed the average viewer. According to the article, a public school teacher who watched the film with his history class said many of his students found the panel discussion more informative than the movie. Others disagreed, claiming the post-film roundtable was more disturbing than the actual movie. One seventeen-year-old girl interestingly remarked, “If the panelists couldn’t agree with each other, how they ever agree with the Russians?”¹⁹⁰ In another survey, viewers were asked if the panel discussion helped to clarify the issues raised in the film, and approximately 68 percent of those polled agreed that the post-film discussion was helpful.¹⁹¹

Over twenty-five years later, it remains difficult to determine how viewers received the film. Until *The Day After*, no other television program in American television history had received so much advanced publicity. Furthermore, no made-for-television film had ever received such enormous ratings. At the time, the film was noted as the second-most watched made-for-television in history, surpassed only by the 1977 ABC mini-series, *Roots*. Moreover, no other made-for-television network film had ever incited such divisive national attention. In the days that followed the original broadcast, ABC executives maintained the film contained no political agenda and advocated no political party or legislation. Interestingly, the film did not inspire American viewers to become more involved in antinuclear lobbying efforts, nor did it

¹⁹⁰ Glen Collins, “Students Voice Fear and Hopelessness in Talks the Day After *The Day After*,” *New York Times*, November 22, 1983, A26.

¹⁹¹ Guy E. Lometti, “Broadcast Preparations for and Consequences of *The Day After*,” in *Television and Nuclear Power*, ed. J. Mallory Wober (Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing Corporation, 1992), 16.

ignite a change in American political identification. However, what does remain a cultural touchstone is that *The Day After* attempted to illustrate the horrific worst-case scenario of nuclear war for the American viewers..

A number of subsequent academic studies designed to gauge how viewers interpreted *The Day After* offer unique insight into the relationship between television and audience reception. The immediate polls indicated that the film had little effect on foreign policy or the president. Conversely, the film did not foment a groundswell of support for the campaign for nuclear freeze. In a poll conducted by the Warner-Amex Qube cable television network, of the 5,500 viewers surveyed following the original broadcast, only 13 percent believed nuclear war was inevitable. Of those surveyed, 49 percent said they still supported nuclear arms control, while 12 percent claimed the film inspired them to “now support” arms control. In terms of supporting an increase in U.S. arms, 29 percent reported that they “now support[ed]” strengthening nuclear arms, while 6 percent said they “now supported” a nuclear buildup.¹⁹² Additionally, the *Washington Post* conducted a 1,500-person national survey both before and after the broadcast and the numbers from the survey suggest that film had little to no effect on the image of President Reagan, his policies, and, most importantly for the coming presidential campaign year, his approval ratings.¹⁹³

This data does not insinuate that the film did not disturb viewers—it just did not motivate the kind of political activism that the media envisioned it would. The polls were designed to evaluate whether or not Americans were changing their political ideals after watching the film. An exhaustive study conducted by Stanley Feldman and Lee Sigelman of the University of

¹⁹² Ibid., 6.

¹⁹³ Barry Sussman, “Freeze Support Grows Slightly after War Show,” *Washington Post*, November 23, 1983, A1, A8.

Kentucky, the film did not tarnish the Reagan presidency. According to the study, attitudinal changes on politics were predicated on the educational level of the viewers. Among the highest-educated viewers, the film led to a minimal increase in a belief that the Reagan administration's policies were leading the country toward nuclear war. Those with a lower level of education (defined in the study as viewers who had a high school level diploma or its equivalent) became more supportive of higher defense spending, tough positions toward the Soviet Union, and Reagan's handling of foreign affairs.¹⁹⁴

The Official White House Response to *The Day After*

The White House had prepared for the potential political ramifications of ABC's made-for-television movie for months prior to the film. Their strategy was to saturate network television with appearances by cabinet members who repeated that peaceful deterrence was the empirical reason as to why a third world war had never occurred. The Reagan White House had become at odds with the nuclear freeze movement and in a letter to Edwin Meese, John Hvasta of the American Public Research Council wrote, "we can fight the 'Freezenicks'—because we know that the Soviets cannot be trusted."¹⁹⁵ This allowed the White House media staff to combat any possible political threats that the film may generate through a three-prong strategy of (1) reinforcing the efficiency of deterrence, (2) portraying nuclear freeze supporters as New Left liberals, and (3) increased visibility of White House staffers on television that would speak of nuclear peace through militaristic strength.

¹⁹⁴ Stanley Feldman and Lee Sigelman, "The Political Impact of Prime-Time Television: *The Day After*," *Journal of Politics*, 47, no. 2 (1985): 576.

¹⁹⁵ Letter, Edwin Meese File, 1333767, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

An early version of the film was given to the White House and other selected venues for advanced viewing. ABC initially intended *The Day After* to be shown in the spring of 1983, but pushed it back to November due to its building controversy. On November 4, the senior officials in the White House met to discuss the film. Staffers such as David Gergen, George Keyworth, Bruce Chapman, and others discussed how best to address the growing media spectacle.¹⁹⁶ A number of public affairs strategies were utilized by the White House. In a memo to Robert McFarlane and David Gergen from senior officials, the following actions or strategies were openly discussed including how each different department could approach the film. The adopted plan consisted of two parts; a pre-airing and post-airing response.

The pre-airing strategy, in which the White House media office estimated that twenty million Americans would view the film, projected that public opinion “vis-a-vis [sic] our strategic nuclear and arms control policy will be negative.”¹⁹⁷ In addition, the pre-air plan also stressed that “we must be careful, however, not to over-react to the film or seem overly anxious before it airs. We should be somewhere in between—on the job, calm, sympathetic, and opposed in principle to fear-evoking entertainment.”¹⁹⁸ The media specialists predicted that local network affiliates would “localize” the story for their particular audience, and many requests for government officials to respond to imminent questions were already being processed by the White House. The pre-airing approach urged every member of the Reagan administration, of the Republican Party, and all conservatives to survey the national news landscape in order to prepare for specific types of questions, especially those related to nuclear foreign policy and militarism. The pre-airing memo anticipated how the film would shape national discourse. Issues such as the

¹⁹⁶ Memo, David Gergen File, ND016 AT, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

¹⁹⁷ Letter, Public Affairs Plan, ‘*The Day After*,’ Edwin Messe File, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

recent report on the effects of nuclear weapons on the atmosphere, and to the Cuban Missile Crisis, and “how close we were” to having a nuclear war in 1962 were expected by the White House. In addition, the White House media office offered a brief that provided “samples of public and media reactions to the film thus far,” before the broadcast date of November 23. In an article from the *National Review* from October 30, 1983, ABC was praised in its efforts to support nuclear deterrence through the showing of the film. The article states, “the producers at ABC obviously want to impress upon us just what might happen if our deterrent becomes unconvincing, tempting the Soviets to treat Lawrence, Kansas, as it if were a Korean airplane.”¹⁹⁹ In an advanced showing to the *Washington Times*, Reed Irvine suggested that instead of the movie bolstering support for deterrence, the movie “is bringing joy to the hearts of the advocates of nuclear freeze and other anti-nuke types on the eve of the deployment of Pershing II and cruise missiles in Western Europe.”²⁰⁰

The White House hoped that network television would provide a more sophisticated, balanced approach to nuclear issues and cited an October 23 episode of the CBS *Sunday Morning News* as an example of fair coverage of events. . Evidently, the pre-airing public affairs plan had as its first objective to:

Run up to the time of the airing, November 20. Its objective is to get people to question the propriety of the film—to question whether fear-provoking entertainment on the subject of nuclear war is in our society’s best interest. In hand with that criticism, we could express the hope that the film causes more people to become interested in the President’s arms reduction efforts and support them more vigorously.²⁰¹

¹⁹⁹ Commentary, *National Review*, October 30, 1983, 27. For more information on the Soviets’ accidental shooting of Korean airliner KAL-007, see Richard Rhodes, *Arsenals of Folly: The Making of the Nuclear Arms Race* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf,) 2007.

²⁰⁰ Reed Irvine, *Washington Times*, October 18, 1983.

²⁰¹ Memo, Public Affairs Plan, 8. Edwin Messe File, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

The principal players in the media affront on the implications of *The Day After* were most notably Caspar Weinberger, George Shultz, George Keyworth, and Robert McFarlane. Talking points were distributed to all major players in the media blitz surrounding *The Day After*. The talking points included how to prevent nuclear catastrophe, most notably the emphasis on deterrence and arms control as the most effective strategies for avoiding nuclear destruction. In addition, the White House media office stressed that officials should discuss “peace through strength,” which was coded language to begin talking about Reagan’s Strategic Defense Initiative. All of these talking points alluded back to the same idea of the Soviet Union as an expansionist, aggressive, atheist state that clung to the feral ideology of Marxism. Additionally, the statements constructed by media staffers emphasized the importance of reiterating that the U.S. government, under Reagan’s leadership, was more willing to engage the Soviets in more arms negotiations than ever before, using the example of the START talks in Geneva, the INF talks in Geneva, and negotiations in Vienna.²⁰²

Although these talking points may appear obvious for seasoned Cold Warriors from the White House, the administration was asked to speak publicly on *The Day After* for months and even weeks before the broadcasting. This cacophony of voices filling network news was the pre-airing strategy orchestrated by the White House. A cursory glance at the administration’s presence on network television prior to *The Day After* premiere include: Ken Adelman on NBC’s *Meet the Press*; Richard Perle on ABC’s *This Week*, CNN’s *Evans and Novak*, and CBS *Sunday Night Network News*; Richard Burt on CNN *Crossfire with Braden and Buchanan*; Franklin Miller (of the Department of Defense) on WRC Radio and National Public Radio; and many

²⁰² Ibid.

others.²⁰³ Finally, the pre-airing phase also connected with print journalists who agreed with the administration, such as Patrick Buchanan and Rowland Evans, as well as with local Republican activist groups like the Citizens for America, who sent packets of talking points and position papers on the administration's arms control efforts and deterrence strategy to Congress. The Republican National Committee was also prepared to focus on these same talking points if necessary. From the perspective of the White House media office, the key to the pre-airing phase on *The Day After* was to promote a media counteroffensive of their own, one in which the administration in no way appeared threatened, defensive, or afraid of ABC, the movie and especially the horrific nuclear destruction the film displayed in a live broadcast.

The post-airing phase somewhat resembled the pre-airing phase. An advance screening of the film was shown to the Pentagon, the Department of Defense, and the State Department, along with the White House. Key officials from these departments were asked to draft standard letters to anticipate the larger volume of public mail that would flood the White House. The media office also commissioned a poll to measure the public's reaction to the film. Additionally, the president was scheduled to conduct a press conference on the day after the broadcast. President Reagan would not address the film specifically, but his presence would be ready to reassure and provide a rational response to the wave of emotional confusion brought by the film. However, the post-airing strategy remained flexible; it would depend "on the extent of public reaction to the film and would come into full play to quell a large outpouring of anti-nuclear sentiment."²⁰⁴

Even if the Reagan White House wanted to avoid the political and cultural ramblings of a made-for-television movie, the national buzz was too electric for the White House to avoid. On

²⁰³ Ibid.

²⁰⁴ Memo, Public Affairs Plan, 15, Edwin Messe File.

Monday November 21, KABC Talk Radio 79 in Los Angeles devoted fourteen hours of its programming on questions concerning the nuclear controversy of *The Day After*. The title of said fourteen-hour segment was “The Day After the Day After,” and the president of the station invited President Reagan to speak to the audience during the broadcast. In a memo to the White House, the director of the station even emphasized how Nancy Reagan had appeared on the station earlier in the year promoting her book.²⁰⁵ Even early on, numerous media outlets extensively covered the story, most interviewing the film’s director Nicholas Meyer, high-profile politicians, and White House insiders. In an October 13, 1983, segment of *All Things Considered*, NPR’s Susan Stamberg interviewed director Meyer about the film and also the citizens of Lawrence, Kansas, where the film took place. As the segment began, one man who attended a special preview of the film offered by the network to the Lawrence community admitted, “The movie scared me, very badly. It was nothing I hadn’t known before, but seeing it in front of me, seeing other people going through that scared me deeply ... I’m hoping this gets past the censors. I’m hoping ABC has the guts to put it on.”²⁰⁶ As for any underlying political propaganda the film contained, Meyer replied thusly:

Well, I think that the movie—it is a cautionary fable, I suppose. I likened it at one point to a giant public service announcement. It does not take a political stand. It does not deal with generals or politics or global strategies. It does not suggest that we arm or disarm. What it does is it attempts to show nuclear war from a point of view of regular Americans. And in that sense, the film is not ultimately about Lawrence; it’s about everybody. And everybody I think also includes the Soviet Union. It’s supposed to be sobering. And it is also supposed to supply vivid imagery to those words we read and throw around so that we have become completely inured to their meaning of fallout and shelters and megatons, and so on. Our movie tries to update things so we can all get a handle on what all those mean.²⁰⁷

Ibid.

²⁰⁶ “The Effects of Nuclear War,” *All Things Considered*, October 13, 1983, Library of Congress. .

²⁰⁷ Ibid.

In this short exchange, Meyer highlights a number of important points. He acknowledges how *The Day After* addressed the plight of the average person versus the private conversations of politicians (such as NBC's *World War Three*) or the issue of disarmament (like NBC's *Special Bulletin*). When asked by NPR's Stamberg as to why the film was generating such "hullabaloo" in light of previous nuclear holocaust films like *Dr. Strangelove* or even television's *Special Bulletin*, Meyer elaborated that *The Day After* is "a very literal-minded film that just takes a kind of plodding look at the before, during and after with a camera that never blinks."²⁰⁸

However apolitical the narrative might be in construction, the White House interpreted the film as politically bothersome. In an October 23, 1983, broadcast of the *CBS Sunday Morning News*, television journalist David Culhane reported on the content of *The Day After* in a segment called, "Cloud over Kansas." Culhane framed the film in the larger context of the White House plan to deploy new missile systems into Western Europe and how the Soviets were reacting to the nuclear build-up. Culhane says, "All across America, in Kansas, people try to understand. Relations between the United States and the Soviet Union are now at one of the lowest points in history: Afghanistan, Poland, Central America, the Korean civilian airliner shot down by the Russians, the arms talks stalled." According to Culhane, the filming of the movie had created a fervor of activism among the citizens of Lawrence, Kansas. Antinuclear groups, especially those affiliated with the University of Kansas and the nuclear freeze, were gaining new members since the movie was premiered locally. Conversely, conservative pro-defense groups who screened the film called the film "left wing propaganda that will generate hysteria and an emotional rather than rational approach to nuclear questions."²⁰⁹

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

²⁰⁹ David Culhane, "Cloud over Kansas," *CBS Morning News*, October 23, 1983.

Culhane attempted to situate the broadcast of the film within the larger geopolitical context of the planned U.S. deployment of nuclear missiles into Western Europe in the upcoming weeks and wondered how the film would help shape public opinion on the issue of nuclear proliferation. President Reagan responded to this unique timing of *The Day After* with nuclear deployment in Western Europe with “the Soviets are going to negotiate seriously. There is a great propaganda effort going on their part now because their target is—they’ve been encouraged by some of the demonstrations that they’ve helped organize around the world.”²¹⁰ To Reagan, the nuclear freeze activists and peace proponents were misguided marauders of the liberal sixties. In order to combat this type of New Left Liberalism, the Reagan White House consistently paraded the thirty-eight years of nuclear peace produced by peaceful deterrence. Additionally, Reagan’s idea of Communism precluded him from seeing any of their motives as anything other than malicious in scope. Thus, the United States had to take a zero-option, hard-line position with the aggressive, expansive Soviet Union in Western Europe, in Central America, in the arms negotiations, in their diplomatic relationship, and most importantly, with a larger nuclear arsenal.

In the months leading up to the broadcast, the White House kept a close eye on how the media was shaping the debate about *The Day After*. Although the ABC network and the producers and director of the film continued to declare the film was not leftist propaganda, the White House dismissed these claims, along with the network’s decision to broadcast the film in November rather than May 1983, as evidence that the film was an vehicle to disrupt the deployment of the Pershing II missiles in West Germany. An internal memo to Edwin Messe stated, “the fact remains that on December 2nd, *The Day After* will open in thirty movie theaters throughout West Germany, just a few weeks before the scheduled installation of American

²¹⁰ Ibid.

missiles on West German soil. Why? The West German film distributor told CBS reporter Bradley, ‘By releasing *THE DAY AFTER* now, we hope that we can change the minds of people in our government about the missiles while there’s still time.’²¹¹ The White House felt confident that writers, producers, and ABC executives were all giving contradictory statements about the film, while the administration and its supporters adhered tightly to the scripted responses prepared by key officials. For example Ed Hume, writer of *The Day After*, was quoted as saying, “It’s sympathetic with disarmament. I’m alarmed by the state of our defense policy, if you will. I think things are out of control, and I’m scared.”²¹² Additionally, Alfred Schneider, vice president in charge of broadcasting standards for ABC gave this quotation to the *New York Times*: “graphically you are showing the core of the argument of those who are for a nuclear freeze.”²¹³ Director Nicholas Meyer gave an interview with *Newsweek* days before the original airing in which he cloaked his efforts within the larger context of civil responsibility. He stated, “We’re going after those who haven’t formed an opinion. The most troublesome aspect of the nuclear issue is that people can’t bear to think about it. So we reach a sinister point where we treat the bombs as acts of faith, as if somehow God built and controls them. All I want is for the movie to inspire debate. From debate comes consensus—a consensus we will all hopefully have been involved in.”²¹⁴

In anticipation, the White House was also offering counter statements to the popular press. The White House’s official position on the film was that despite the statements of all those involved in the film, the message leaned toward the political left. Not wanting to give any

²¹¹ Memorandum to Ed Messe, from Jay Keyworth, *The Day After* Plan, November 18, 1983, 116286. Ronald Reagan Presidential Archives.

²¹² Quotation by Ed Hume, *60 Minutes*, November 13, 1983.

²¹³ Quotation from Alfred Schneider, *New York Times*, August, 3, 1983, A9.

²¹⁴ Quotation from Nicholas Meyer, *Newsweek*, November 21, 1983, 37.

political credence to the rumor that the White House was dissatisfied or threatened by the film, David Gergen, director of communications for the White House, provided this quotation to the *New York Times*:

I am not saying we welcome the film ... It is powerful and very graphic, but it leaves unanswered the central question: How do we prevent this catastrophe from happening? (Invoking one of the scripted talking points circulated by the White House media office) Viewers could feel that government doesn't care and that it is cavalier to their needs. It is important that they have perspective on what has been done and is being done to reduce the risks.²¹⁵

For the White House media office, ABC-TV was attacking the policy of deterrence. Throughout the fall of 1983, print journalism from the *New York Times* to the *National Review* offered quotations from disarmament groups that the film was a \$7 million advertisement for the antinuclear movement. John Fisher, president of the American Security Council, attacked ABC-TV in an article in *Time* magazine by exclaiming, "clearly someone associated with the production has a significantly different perspective than we do ... this movie says deterrence has failed, and that's a political statement."²¹⁶ Furthermore, the long-time conservative columnist and political pundit William F. Buckley also criticized ABC's position that the film was apolitical. In the *National Review*, Buckley argued, "two references are made to Soviet concern over the deployment of Pershing missiles. One, a fragment of a radio broadcast, quotes a Soviet official as saying that it was 'the coordinate movement of Pershing II launchers that provoked the original Soviet action.' That's ABC's idea of not politicizing a film."²¹⁷ Peace activists as well as some local Democratic leaders staged teach-ins, demonstrations, and vigils to support the film. Clearly, the claim that the film was apolitical was disputed by both the Right and the Left, the latter co-opting the imagery of nuclear disaster to bolster its agenda.

²¹⁵ Quotation from David Gergen, *New York Times*, November 17, 1983, A18.

²¹⁶ Commentary by John Fisher, *Time*, October 24, 1983, 33.

²¹⁷ William F. Buckley, *National Review*, November 11, 1983.

In the aftermath however, *The Day After* did not produce the political problems the White House anticipated. In a study from the Office of News and Public Affairs out of George Washington University, the conclusion was “ABC’s *The Day After* had no immediate effect on attitudes toward nuclear war or defense policy.”²¹⁸ Furthermore, Professor William C. Adams wrote that the immediate report indicated that out of the random sample of 928 viewers from around the country, some interviewed right before the movie and half polled directly after watching it, no major changed occurred in views on the likelihood of nuclear war; that no major shift was evident that suggested viewers were more interested in nuclear freeze; and that Reagan’s image did not suffer from the movie. Professor Adams concluded, “Our evidence is that *The Day After* failed to change existing views on the horror of nuclear war, the need for mutual arms control, and the strategy of deterrence.”²¹⁹

As for the White House, the campaign to reelect President Reagan constructed its own rubric to gauge national reaction. In a memo from the campaign committee to David Gergen, the White House reported that during the live broadcast of *The Day After* on November 20, 1983, between the prime-time hours of 8:30 and 11:30 p.m., operators received 596 calls. The White House operators were also given a script to respond to callers and instructed to ask, “Do you think President Reagan is on the right track in trying to reduce nuclear weapons?” Over 299 callers responded with yes. In another telling sign for the campaign committee, callers demonstrated a support not only for peace but also for the president, a tactic that would be employed in the 1984 election, promoting President Reagan as the “peacemaker.”²²⁰

²¹⁸ Letter to David Gergen, “Nationwide Survey by G.W. Professor Finds No Fallout from *The Day After*,” Gergen File, Ronald Reagan Presidential Archives.

²¹⁹ Ibid.

²²⁰ Memo from Dick Wirthlin, “*The Day After*,” David Gergen File, ND019, Ronald Reagan Presidential Archives.

Subsequent studies and analyses of the film were submitted and given to the White House. An Abt Associates survey, conducted before and after the broadcast of the film, found that of the 60 percent of those interviewed who watched *The Day After*, there were no significant changes in attitude regarding the likelihood of nuclear war or their chances of surviving one.²²¹ Abt Associates conducted the survey in two waves and selected random respondents in three areas, Boston, Kansas City, and rural Nebraska. Respondents were asked if the United States should help defend West Germany by threatening the use of nuclear weapons. Over 73 percent said no. Interestingly, when asked if the film prompted viewers to take political action, over 64 percent reported they had no new agenda to build a shelter or even to write the president about their concerns. These surveys also helped to gauge public opinion for the upcoming 1984 presidential campaign. Question fourteen asked viewers after the broadcast, that if the 1984 presidential election were held today, and the Republican candidate was Ronald Reagan and the Democratic candidate was Walter Mondale, over 53 percent of respondents supported Reagan. When asked why ABC decided to air the movie, over 25 percent of those surveyed answered that the network showed the gory film solely to make a profit.²²² Some of the results presented in this study suggested that viewers were not swayed as easily by the media campaign that accompanied the film.

National criticism about the film, especially in print media, suggested the real failure of the film was its lack of context. A review in *Time* magazine suggested, “the chief failing of *The Day After* was that it did not offer much in the way of substantive information.”²²³ The review went on to state that the film captured America’s collective nuclear anxiety but offered no way to

²²¹ Report, “‘*The Day After*’ Did Not Change People’s Mind, but It Did Get 100 Million Americans’ Attention,” November 25, 1983, 1333767 Edwin Meese File, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

²²² Ibid.

²²³ *Time*, December 5, 1983, 39.

mitigate these notions, even for those who watched the 75-minute “*Nightline: Viewpoint*” panel discussion after the movie. *Time* concluded its analysis by suggesting that deterrence and the willingness of the White House to maintain parity with the Soviet Union constituted the only path to preventing nuclear war. Republican congressman from Illinois Henry Hyde wrote an op-ed piece printed in the *Chicago Tribune* on Monday, November 21, 1983. The article, titled “What The Day After Missed,” surmised that the film treated this graphic topic of nuclear peril in a shallow and superficial manner. Hyde states, “By showing how bad the war would be and not addressing the question of how to prevent the war, the film induced and, in fact, consciously dramatized a feeling of helplessness and despair.”²²⁴ By all accounts, President Reagan was also saddened by the film, but his optimism in the strength of space-based missile systems and the deployment of the Pershing II demonstrated his desire to end nuclear proliferation through strength not disarmament.

Conclusion

Almost thirty years later, the maelstrom of political and social discourse generated by a made-for-television movie appears comical. The imagery presented in *The Day After* did capture the nation’s attention and furthermore, the film became a visual text for both sides of the political spectrum to claim that it legitimized deterrence and disarmament. Political pundits charged that never before had a made-for-television movie openly questioned presidential policy. The White House’s pre-airing and post-airing plans for gauging public opinion called for complete saturation of the administration position on nuclear war. In preparation for negative press, the White House media staff requested high-level officials to make appearances on numerous network news shows and place op-ed pieces in major print news outlets. Rather than smarmily

²²⁴ Henry J. Hyde, “What The Day After Missed,” *Chicago Tribune*, November 21, 1983, section 1, p. 19.

dismissing the film as left-wing propaganda, the White House presented the official political narrative to counter potential political problems for President Reagan.

By examining the copious amount of White House documents on the film, it is evident that the Reagan administration interpreted the film as politically damaging for the president. Going further with this analysis, one can argue that the White House helped to create and generate nuclear anxiety as much as the film itself. Yet considering the serious nature of the film, coupled with the film's graphic imagery of Americans disintegrating into tiny piles during a nuclear blast, the administration had to present a strong, united message to the television public. Clearly for the 100 million Americans who watched the film, it remains a cultural touchstone of the nuclear anxieties that were rejuvenated during the first years of Reagan's administration. For American network viewing audiences, *The Day After* stands out as the most graphically realistic post-nuclear portrayal ever broadcast on American television. Unlike its made-for-television counterparts, such as *World War III* (1982), *Special Bulletin* (1983) and *Testament* (1983), the narrative of *The Day After* focused on ordinary people struggling to survive in this new post-apocalyptic world. The focus on the individual, rather than the government or social institutions, demonstrated the network's commitment to social realism and loss of faith in institutions, a prominent characteristic of the made-for-television formula.

Moving into the 1984 presidential campaign, *The Day After* would linger as a visual reminder of the contradictory nature of nuclear deterrence. However, , the film did little to change public opinion. The post-*Day After* panel discussion was arguably a larger spectacle than the film itself, offering scripted answers that echoed the White House's pre-airing talking points. Panelists such as Eli Wiesel and Carl Sagan gained minimal access to the audience, being

overshadowed by the conservative chorus of Kissinger, Brent Scowcroft, and William F. Buckley. Atomic scientist Edward Teller would also offer in print and television news that the only way to prevent nuclear war was by “building a defensive system,” alluding to the Strategic Defense Initiative presented by Reagan in March 1983. The film had the unique ability to transcend pundits’ expectations of how the public would react to the nuclear apocalypse shown on television. Although the film, along with other nuclear narratives exhibited throughout the year, certainly whetted the national appetite for nuclear holocaust, it did not, however, alter the public’s perception of Reagan or his policies.

In many ways, the media blitz surrounding *The Day After* distracted the public’s attention away from real-life Cold War nuclear situations. From the Soviets’ involvement in the obliteration of Korean Air Lines Flight 007, in which all 269 passengers were killed including 60 U.S. citizens and one U.S. congressman, to the October U.S. invasion of Grenada, where a failed left-wing regime that Reagan had long feared would spread Communism throughout Central America left the country in disarray, to the NATO Able Archer exercise 83, in which the Soviets interpreted the NATO test command-and-control procedures as a potential first-strike, the White House relied on television to persuade public opinion. These aforementioned nonfiction, Cold War close calls, although covered by the popular print press, did not achieve as much attention on network television news as *The Day After*. Nonetheless, the White House would continue to recycle nuclear deterrence as the mechanism that maintained peace. Even in the year that gave us the Strategic Defense Initiative, the invasion of Grenada, and discord in Eastern Europe, many people remembered the year through the imagery presented in *The Day After*. Although the White House devoted a great deal of effort to constructing an antidote to *The Day After*

nightmares, the film ironically helped to bolster Reagan's image as a peacemaker, rather than a hawkish militarist who would eventually spend \$60 billion on missile research.²²⁵

In the final analysis, the film and the White House's and ABC's reactions vis-à-vis public opinion transcended traditional notions of television reception and political identification. Seemingly at odds, the White House and ABC benefited from the success of the nuclear-themed televised event. For ABC, the film garnered enormous ratings and outstanding advertising revenue, solidifying ABC's position as a made-for-television powerhouse. But the White House also benefited from the film, not only from the perspective of Reagan's reelection in 1984, but also in terms of how the media staff gained control of the nuclear fear by making officials more accessible through network television news. Even though the film was and still is the most graphic in terms of network television nuclear history in the United States, it resulted in a media maelstrom constructed by networks, the White House, and the media writ large. In conclusion, the legacy of *The Day After* was more important than its story.

The next chapter will focus on the Western European reaction to the nuclear imagery pouring out of American popular culture. This reaction resulted in the BBC's presentation of *Threads*, a postapocalyptic made-for-television film that, for many viewers around the globe, made *The Day After* appear optimistic and cartoonish compared to the brutal realism shown to British audiences. Additionally, unlike any American-made network nuclear movie, *Threads* included an exploration of the theory of nuclear winter, a dire forecast that predicted an inhabitable planet in the event of global nuclear war.

²²⁵ Frances Fitzgerald, *Way Out There in the Blue: Reagan, Star Wars, and the End of the Cold War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 498.

Chapter Four: *The Great Arms Debate, Threads, and Nuclear Winter Theory*

In an urban society everything connects, each person's needs are fed by the skills for many others, our lives are woven together in a fabric, but the connections that make society strong also make it vulnerable.²²⁶

In 1984, BBC World Enterprises aired the made-for-television film, *Threads*, a fictional “documentary” that unrelentingly tackled the subject of nuclear war. Similar to its American counterpart *The Day After*, *Threads* focused on the effects of nuclear war on ordinary citizens. Yet the teleplay was dissimilar in that it relies heavily on the environmental breakdown for two generations after World War III. Due to its graphic realism and shocking intensity, *Threads* came closer than any other film to representing the full horrors of nuclear war and its aftermath on television. Moreover, politically, the film captured the mood of the Western European peace movement and the reaction of Reaganism by the political left. The title referred to the interdependency of the various and assorted elements that construct society and the vulnerable links that can easily be severed and ultimately destroyed. Although the scope of the global response to Reaganism is beyond the parameters of this study, the BBC's production of *Threads* suggests a shared nuclear anxiety that mirrored American fears.

Compared to American television atomic dramas of the eighties, the BBC offered a distinctively different approach to the made-for-television nuclear theme. Even though the narrative of *Threads* resembled *The Day After*, this teleplay demonstrated that American network television relegated atomic dramas to a specific format that either adhered to total nuclear destruction or offered some space for optimism about a world after nuclear war. In comparison, the BBC presented a nuclear drama that fearlessly forecasted ordinary citizens navigating an atomic world without any government resources, information, civil aid, or even help from

²²⁶ Opening quotation from *Threads*, directed by Mick Jackson, written by Barry Hines, 1984, BBC.

family. For all the civil defense planning of the post-atomic world, the story examines how the ordinary lives of people are helpless to the effects of nuclear war. This comparison with American network television is important, in that Reagan tried to present nuclear weapons as analogous with American exceptionalism, while the BBC's made-for-television movie challenges the U.S. ideal of survival and critiques American nuclear policy.

This chapter does not profess to examine the entirety of postwar and atomic British broadcasting. It does, however, provide an examination of how British television framed a renewed interest in nuclear weapons in the context of growing NATO militarism. Such an examination offers important insight into the national discourse generated by the Reagan administration. One of the reasons to examine the BBC production of *Threads* is to establish a framework for understanding the complicated interplay between broadcasting and government. As other television scholars have argued, the first "generation" of twentieth-century mass media was inextricably linked to national identities, histories, and political orthodoxy. For the BBC's viewers, as well as members of the antinuclear movement that grew in numbers throughout Reagan's first term, the film demonstrated British vulnerability of being an NATO ally. The specter of World War II lingers large in this teleplay, because it visually reminds its viewers of the destruction rendered by the Nazis and the so-carefully-crafted forty years of uneasy postwar peace. This chapter argues that *Threads*, in comparison with *The Day After*, presented a more graphically disturbing and pessimistic narrative that placed American foreign policy as the reason for the nuclear war. Unlike the ABC-TV network's repeated claims of presenting an apolitical story of nuclear war survivors, the BBC's commitment to graphic realism, from the physical landscape to the effect on humanity, suggests the network did use the film as visual critique and commentary on American Cold War policy. Additionally, just as American

audiences never knew “what side” started the nuclear exchange, in *Threads*, British audiences were told that escalating nuclear tensions were mounting in the Middle East due to an American showdown with the Soviet Union over oil.

This chapter begins with an examination of how American network television news presented the precarious position of Western European countries in the midst of scheduled nuclear weapon deployments. In order to understand how American audiences understood this geopolitical problem, I start with an analysis of an April 1983 CBS news special entitled “The Great Nuclear Arms Debate,” which presented an international panel of leaders discussing the U.S. deployment of nuclear hardware into Western Europe. This special, hosted by retired CBS anchor Walter Cronkite, attempted to situate American nuclear policy in global terms. Throughout the news special, the audience sees a similar generational divide amongst international leaders that reflects domestic politics.

More than any other made-for-television program of its time, *Threads* provides the most visually terrifying imagery depicting life in a postapocalyptic world. This dedication to graphic realism is demonstrated through the documentary-style editing as well as the story, which shows the effects of nuclear fallout and radiation up to three generations after the nuclear war. This chapter also argues that *Threads* became such an important film because it captured the immediacy and vulnerability that many citizens of Western Europe felt as the Reagan era began and the commitment to rebuild the NATO nuclear arsenal intensified. Moreover, by examining the content of the film, I compare *Threads* with its American counterpart *The Day After*, broadcast almost one year earlier and shown on the BBC. This comparison is needed for a variety of reasons, but most importantly because it underscores how *The Day After* did not

capture the types of social and political decay demonstrated in *Threads*. In addition, the BBC version included many of the environmental effects proffered by the theory of nuclear winter.

Before the appearance of nuclear winter theory, most postapocalyptic narratives focused on the immediate aftermath of nuclear war, such as physical and emotional reactions, as much as the search for resources. *Threads* stood out as a made-for-television docudrama that integrates this doomsday scenario of nuclear winter into the narrative. Moreover, the narrative offers an unique insight into the postapocalyptic world by demonstrating how World War III would affect the people living this radiation-laden existence for three generations into the future. Not only does the film provide a “realistic” counter-narrative for post-survivalist films such as *Mad Max*, the *Terminator* series, or the voluminous number of B-movie science-fiction films that depict futuristic urban combats, but it also situates the “post-survivalists” as victims, not heroes. In addition, in comparison with *The Day After*, the BBC’s production of the documentary-nuclear melodrama is also intricately tied with England’s position as a country potentially caught in the crosshairs of a third world war.

Finally, one needs to place the film within the larger context of Reaganism and Thatcherism to understand how, even when faced with social and political opposition, the reigning ideology was conservative in scope. Accordingly, a number of nations encountered conservative social and economic movements, most notably occurring in Great Britain, the United States and Canada. With antinuclear activism more pronounced in Western Europe as a result of the proposed U.S. deployment of new nuclear hardware into the region, citizens across the continent began to re-imagine the legacies of the Second World War, as well as to forecast their countries as potential casualties of a superpower showdown. In this capacity, the narrative of *Threads* was much more incendiary than American network made-for-television dramas.

Additionally, television continued to invoke nuclear anxieties by presenting these fictional, yet realistic, accounts, which did not have the political effects anticipated by pundits but did possess the visual imagery to terrify a new generation with the horrors of living in a nuclear world.

The Great Nuclear Arms Debate

The idea that Western Europe was caught in the middle of a larger ideological war between the superpowers was a topic discussed in both the public and private spheres. On American network television, in April 1983, CBS presented *The Great Nuclear Arms Debate*, where long-beloved anchorman Walter Cronkite hosted a ninety-minute discussion with neither a live-in-studio audience nor celebrities, just former and current politicians, to discuss the building and deployment of new NATO military installations in Western Europe, such as the Cruise and Pershing II missiles. The scope of the CBS news special was an attempt to clarify the positions for and against the scheduled U.S. deployment of new nuclear hardware into Western Europe and to help the American audience understand the immediacy of this controversial event. In his opening remarks on the program, Cronkite explained Reagan's zero-zero option, meaning the Americans would remove all nuclear hardware only if the Russians did. The Soviet Union rejected this negotiation tactic, and as Cronkite stated, "Europe is once again, as it has been since 1946, stuck in the middle."²²⁷ The program began with a brief history of the Cold War shown through visual images from the Second World War, to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, up to the issue of the great American nuclear triad. The four experts discussing the issue of American military deployment were Henry Kissinger, Michael Heseltine, Egon Bahr, and Paul Warnke, former member of the U.S. Department of Defense. All four panelists were experienced members of U.S.-USSR relations and negotiations.

²²⁷ *The Great Nuclear Arms Debate*, April 23, 1983, CBS. R-1706, audiovisual tapes, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

According to the news special, the creation of the Pershing II missile meant it would take eight minutes for U.S. nuclear warheads to reach the Soviet Union, and since the Cruise aircraft flew under radar, it was conceivable that a nuclear war would begin and end in a matter of minutes.²²⁸ Heseltine, secretary of state under British prime minister Margaret Thatcher, who was more popularly known as a self-made-millionaire status and a leading politician in the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, stated that the United States should proceed with new weapons in Europe. Borrowing from the horrors of World War II, he insisted that the Soviet Union posed an aggressive, expansive threat to the West, and that the best policy in defending against the Soviet Union was NATO military strength, which had kept Western Europe safe since the Second World War.

Panelist and Social Democrat Egon Bahr, live via satellite from West Germany, offered the dissenting opinion on U.S. plans for more effective nuclear weaponry at the literal front of the Iron Curtain. In his public declarations, he described the precarious position of Germans in terms of both NATO and the Soviet Union. According to his data, 86 percent of West Germans favored NATO, and 65 percent of people opposed the new NATO arms in West Germany. Bahr went on to explain that the West German people would be the first to be damaged in any skirmish between NATO and the Soviet Union in Europe, not the United States.²²⁹ The extent of Soviet nuclear capabilities was also discussed and debated amongst the panelists, concluding with a consensus that more negotiation between NATO and the Soviet Union was needed, but not if it made the United States appear weak in the eyes of the USSR.

By all given accounts, the news special did little to inform the public or explain any real insight into NATO's position on the "growing Soviet arsenal." In his closing remarks, Cronkite

²²⁸ Ibid.

²²⁹ Ibid.

said he would leave the outcome of the debate up to the audience and perhaps to history.²³⁰ The use of seasoned politicians who spoke in dry, complicated jargon, coupled with the absence of audience participation precluded real audience participation among the panelists in the dialogue over NATO nuclear deployment. Furthermore, even the appearance of Walter Cronkite was not enough to gain widespread viewership, as the special was crushed by ABC's successful Saturday night prime-time lineup of *The Love Boat* and *Fantasy Island*. Interestingly, the special was aired on the BBC4 during its Nuclear Week, which aired the last week of May 1983, and it also received a great deal of criticism there for its political exclusivity. Professor and CND member Michael Pentz wrote of the program, "This non-debate showed yet again that the exclusion of serious critics of NATO policy from 'the nuclear debate' is depriving the public of its right to know and judge an issue of vital importance to its security and survival."²³¹

Like the American networks, the BBC also began directing full attention to nuclear-themed dramas and news shows, and incorporated the theme in broadcast programming. As in the United States, British public opinion was very much divided on the issues of nuclear weapons, the role of President Reagan, and NATO. In data collected after the BBC's presentation of *The Day After*, British audiences overwhelmingly agreed that the United States should not deploy new weapons into Western Europe, but also did not trust that the Soviet Union was open to negotiations. Furthermore, the BBC did not offer a full investigation into the growing public objections against these weapons, but instead presented the movement against nuclear weapons, Thatcher, and Reagan as docile, feminine, and idealistic.²³² The BBC presented the antinuclear movement, even when it staged demonstrations on NATO military bases, as

²³⁰ Ibid.

²³¹ Michael Pentz, *Guardian*, April 27, 1983.

²³² John Eldridge, ed., *Glasgow Media Group Reader, Volume 1: News Content, Language and Visuals* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 395.

peaceful and undisruptive. This perhaps represented the conservative tone of both broadcast networks and the policies of the governments for which they serve. Along with Ronald Reagan, Margaret Thatcher helped to alter Great Britain's political landscape by becoming more conservative, market-driven, and capitalistic in scope. Thatcher joined Reagan in his assault on big government, unions, and social welfare programs. Many critics in both the U.S. and Great Britain feared the conservatism that both countries exhibited on a political level, as well as the lack of space on television for counter-narrative or oppositional objections to policy makers.²³³

However, in a larger context, network television continuously covered the Cold War through the most immediate of mediums and also transformed the ways in which audiences imaged the postapocalyptic landscape. The BBC production of *Threads* was not the first time the network depicted the immediate aftermath of nuclear war. At the height of the Cold War, Peter Watkins produced, directed, and wrote the teleplay *The War Game* in 1965. Employing a documentary style, including newsreels and interviews, the film depicts the chaotic devastation of a nuclear strike. *The War Game* reminds the audience that it is a preconceived narrative of possible events; however, the film stresses that an initial nuclear blast has already happened, without warning or without explanation. The film was famously banned by sponsors who described the teleplay as "too horrifying for the medium of broadcasting."²³⁴

The format of *The War Game* offered a documentary-style account of events approximately four months after a Soviet nuclear strike. The film placed Great Britain as a casualty in the Cold War as the Soviet Union has joined forces with Communists in China, Vietnam, and Eastern Europe in a demonstration of Communist solidarity around the globe. Similar to the real events of the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Soviet Union demanded the immediate

²³³ Gil Troy, *Morning in America: How Ronald Reagan Invented the 1980s* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 173.

²³⁴ Kim Newman, *Apocalypse Movies: End of the World Cinema* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 153.

withdrawal of NATO forces in Western Europe, and after a superpower showdown, the Soviet Union, believing the United States has already launched a preemptive strike, decided to use its nuclear arsenal against Britain. The controversy surrounding the realism depicted in both *The War Game* and *Threads* demonstrates the complicated interplay between government, corporate sponsorship, and the medium of television. These two BBC made-for-television films contributed to the larger representation of the Cold War during the 1980s. Reagan's commitment to combating Communism, coupled with the struggling Soviet Union, created a renewed interest in atomic culture and nuclear destruction, which produced atomic narratives on British television as well as in America.

***Threads*: Nuclear Horror for a New Generation**

The film was set in the industrial town of Sheffield, England, a predominantly working-class town where people worried more about the economic downturn of postwar Britain than the antinuclear movement. Furthermore, the characters in the film were completely unaware of the daunting military stalemates that threatened their existence. The plot revolved around two working-class families, the Becketts and the Kemps, struggling to survive in the aftermath of a third world war. The audience is first introduced to Ruth Beckett and James Kemp and their respective families. Like *The Day After*, the teleplay examines the minutiae of their lives while also demonstrating that the British families are just as dependent on television to receive and interpret the international news. As the audience meets the young couple, Ruth and James, they are parked on a scenic cliff overlooking Sheffield. While they discuss the kinds of intimate issues that are the domain of young, restless youths, the audience hears an announcement on the radio discussing a military standoff in the Middle East. As the camera fades away, the audience knows that the startling news report did not alter the romantic plans of the young couple. Soon after, as

the military standoff in the Middle East escalates, viewers learn that Ruth is pregnant, and the young couple discusses this new personal crisis.

Unknown to the majority of the population of Sheffield, the town, situated approximately seventeen miles from the Royal Air Force base, doubles as a government communication center and in all likelihood could be a military target. The audience has learned, through a voice-over narrator similar to Walter Cronkite, that Soviet tanks had entered Iran, its motives unknown, but most likely to prevent Western oil supplies from leaving the region. These military scenes provided an interesting and revealing juxtaposition between television news and ordinary, daily life. Even the reporter's warning of impending war, and news reports issuing an alarming amount of unrest, made little difference to the residences of Sheffield, particularly to the newly pregnant Ruth. This commentary on both the dependence of postwar British viewers on television for framing complicated military issues as well as the intimation that people are too self-involved also mirrored the apathy of Americans.

Compared to *The Day After*, in which the viewer is never made aware why the nuclear war begins, the British audience is kept abreast of the unfolding military standoff. Because of this slew of news disseminating from the television, much of the dialogue in the first part of the film demonstrates ordinary citizens attempting to discern and discuss the imminent war. The Kemp family discusses whether they need to get supplies from the store, or whether it is possible to build makeshift shelters as instructed in the nationally distributed manual "Protect and Survive," covering British civil defense measures. Simultaneously, panic erupts in the streets, creating an atmosphere of lawlessness. During this part of the film, the audience watches British bureaucrats, responsible for the managing emergency measures. The chief executives of

Sheffield make arrangements with other local officials to invoke emergency accident plans, but it becomes clear that the officials had begun to panic.

The director of the film, Mick Jackson, deliberately juxtaposes the personal with the political issues of nuclear war. The “primary” plot of the film depicts characters coping with the aftermath of nuclear war; however, the “background” of the film consists of the international events, which provide the dramatic tension for the film. The documentary-style filming and editing added not only to the interconnection between the personal and the political, but to the line between fact and fiction. As in *The Day After*, the audience awaits the bombing to begin, even though the characters seem unaware and ill prepared for the impending global war. Several scenes contain elements that anticipate the shock of the bomb; whistles scream, alarms rumble, the sound of aircraft overhead, the ferocious jolt of a tea kettle. But all of this non-diegetic sound, dramatic techniques were employed to arouse the tension and anticipation for the audience. Jackson’s decision to delay the initial attack and instead interweave a personal and political narrative also provided an opportunity for subtle political and social commentary. First, it underscored how easily political events might spiral out of control. *Threads* does not skirt around superpower tensions that were prevalent in the Middle East during the early 1980s. Secondly, the film revealed that even though international events were reported by networks and every possible media outlet, the characters were still more involved with their own lives than in world events. However, after the bomb, the political aftermath rapidly overwhelms the personal narrative of the characters.

The bomb sequence in *Threads* is quite extraordinary. The scene begins with the electronic brightening of the screen followed by a series of quick shots, all filmed in complete silence, another dramatic style, intended to terrify and captivate the audience, until the last blast

wave hits in a deafening explosion. According to Jackson, he relied on stock footage of nuclear weapon tests to heighten the realism of the film. Although the bomb sequence was horrific, it paled in comparison to the postwar scenes, which become increasingly harder to watch due to its visually wretched atomic landscape. After the nuclear bombs are employed, Ruth leaves her parents in a futile attempt to find James, the father of her unborn child, who perished instantly in the explosion. As she walks around the radioactive rubble, the audience observes the devastation through Ruth's eyes. She sees, as the audience vicariously experiences, burning buildings, scorched survivors, rubble covered in gray smoke, saturated in permeating radioactive haze. Ruth remains the audiences' guide through this postapocalyptic world. The audience experiences the devastation of her hometown and breakdown of moral order when neighbors are unrecognizable and officials are no longer present. It is through the character of Ruth that Jackson demonstrates how immediate and irreversible life would become in a post-nuclear world.

The film continues ten years after the nuclear war. In a sense, *Threads* illustrates the nuclear trajectory of three generations and explores how each generation confronted different nuclear obstacles. The first generation, the Kemp parents, represented the first Cold War generation: those who had survived World War II and the onslaught of German air raids, suffering the immediate effects on sustained conventional bombings. Ironically, the older generation, who had survived the physical assault of the Second World War, would quickly die after the initial attack of World War III. The second generation, who were indeed the principal protagonists, were born into an established nuclear world; the main character Ruth personifies the nuclear anxieties of the Reagan era and has to survive in this new environment characterized by the fatal aftereffects of nuclear poisoning, such as cancers, freezing climatic temperatures, and

starvation. The story of the third generation, which included Ruth's daughter, was arguably the most frightening. Over ten years after World War III, the surroundings of Sheffield are redesigned and resemble a primitive Europe, peppered with illustrate savages who exhibit little linguistic ability, with no semblance of culture, society, or family, and who lacked the communication skills necessary to bond with one another. Nuclear fallout and the inescapable climatic harshness cursed this third generation. Jackson leaves the audiences wondering if a fourth or final generation, in which the audience only sees a glimpse, was already doomed, grotesquely disfigured, will have little chance of survival.

One of the more remarkable features of the teleplay is its interest in the physical environment and the fate of the natural world after a nuclear war. Central to the narrative was the dramatization of the severe climactic changes wrought by nuclear fallout. According to the research of contemporary scientists, such as those involved in the TTAPS study, the earth would be ravaged by firestorms, irreversible climatic changes, and contamination of its food and water supply would be contaminated. Accordingly, this teleplay was not a disaster or apocalyptic movie nor was it the work of science-fiction fantasy. As the credits revealed, many scientists as well as academics were consulted in order to make the film as scientifically accurate as possible. This included integrating the theories postulated by nuclear winter theorists such as Carl Sagan.

Jackson was careful to include "nuclear winter" theory into his depiction of postapocalyptic life. Unlike *The Day After*, this film explored both the environmental and humanistic aspects of nuclear war up to ten years after the war. Screenwriter Barry Hines incorporated many of the environmental torrents forecasted by nuclear scientists. In the landscape illustrated by Hines and Jackson, the postapocalyptic world was characterized by a decline in temperature to merely twenty-five degrees Fahrenheit. Sunlight could not penetrate the

armor of dust and smoke that covered the atmosphere. Not only did the survivors of the nuclear holocaust have to traverse the freezing, dark, radiation-laden physical terrain, but they also had to process the psychological imbalance that would follow such a horrific scenario. As a result, life became a quest for sustenance, for basic necessities, a far cry from the modern conveniences of postwar England.

The filmmakers wanted to offer a realistic portrayal not only of the destruction and death caused by nuclear war, but also the effects on social structures, particularly the family. Hines contended:

There would be survivors of course. But many would have hideous, untreated injuries, and then there would be sort of Third-World-cum-medieval peasant agriculture. There could be barter, learning of manual skills, a new language among kids because there wouldn't be the standardizing influence of schools, newspapers, and television. And I can't imagine loving parents. As soon as kids were big enough, they would work and fend for themselves. The generation that would follow would be brutal, stunted both physically, emotionally, and mentally. There has been a rather optimistic belief maintained by officials in Europe and America that after the first few weeks' survivors are going to come out of their shelter, gung-ho, like the Seven Dwarfs with picks over their shoulders and set off to work to rebuild Britain. But even after the bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, when the Allies poured money to rebuild the cities, there was no psychological improvement for survivors.²³⁵

This commentary, explicitly stated by the writer of the teleplay, indicates his interest in the growing threat of nuclear war as well as an understanding of the nuclear freeze movement and the power of narrative television. His focus was on exposing the postwar atomic mythology that surviving a nuclear war was possible with the aid of a civil defense pamphlet issued by the government. Furthermore, this exploration of the third generation of a postapocalyptic society was a new display of atomic culture. As the third generation grew older in the harsh and unimaginable environment, in which Ruth's daughter became a scavenger with little communication skills, the audience witnessed what it must be like for these forgotten children.

²³⁵ Newman, *Apocalypse Movies*, 238.

Unlike Ruth, who, after surviving a nuclear war, bonded with her newborn baby even in the midst of cataclysmic destruction, Ruth's daughter, in one of the most horrific scenes in the entire film, could not bear to face her badly disfigured, stillborn child. The rejection of her daughter, one critic argued, "[s]uggests a deterioration of the line of human continuity. Radiation from the bombs has attacked the most delicate thread that ties civilization together: the line between one generation and the next."²³⁶ She did not possess maternal instincts of any kind, and it was the utter lack of humanity, and lack of natural communication instincts, that the filmmakers underscored in this scene. Humanity and civilization was lost forever.

Unlike *The Day After*, the BBC production of *Threads* confronted the topic of nuclear war and its aftermath with an unrelenting commitment to scientific realism. Both films were "docudramas" that purported to illustrate the "stark realism" of nuclear war. Yet the documentary-style production employed by the creators of *Threads*, including the use of grainy film stock of U.S. atomic explosions, the incorporation of print news as a narration device with the inclusion of statistical information and typewriter sound effects, and also the news reporter voice-over narration, proved more effective in presenting a realistic portrayal of life after nuclear war.

Yet it was not only the documentary style of *Threads*, or simply the film's commitment to scientific realism, that provided the film with its credibility. The differences between these two films were also linked by the varying emphasis on melodramatic elements in the respective parts of the story set before and after the nuclear exchange. In each film, before the onslaught of nuclear explosions, the audience was asked to identify with the daily minutiae of everyday life, such as marriage, pregnancy, family skirmishes, and even the daily expenses of living. Once this identification is secure with the viewers, the central characters were shown to suffer and die, left

²³⁶ Patrick Mannix, *The Rhetoric of Antinuclear Fiction* (London: Bucknell University Press, 1992), 167.

the audience to feel even more emotion about this nuclear scenario. Jackson developed a compelling fictional story by depicting the effects of nuclear war on two middle-class suburban families in England, most central being the character of Ruth, whom the audience meets on the precipice of discovering her pregnancy. She becomes the only character in *Threads* to survive the nuclear war. Nicholas Meyer, the director of *The Day After*, also wanted to depict the effects of nuclear war on ordinary people, but he chose to do so via the emotional route of lack of official communication. Meyer allowed the audience to receive the same information about the impending war just as the major characters learned of the news in the narrative. He wanted to condition the audience to feel the same sense of imminent danger that the characters felt. By contrast, in *Threads*, the audience knowingly anticipated the nuclear war as they are told through the device of news facsimile of the escalating problems occurring in the Persian Gulf. After the nuclear attack, Jackson maintained only one character that would survive and focused on Ruth's postapocalyptic, lonely existence. Essentially, the post-attack portion of *Threads* became a story about humanity's struggle to survive, as opposed to *The Day After*'s struggle to find other survivors and symbols of civilization.

The director's emotional assault on the audience continues well after the initial nuclear blast. He used graphic imagery to depict the physical devastation on the landscape while also playing close attention to the devastating impact on the human body. Jackson showed the effects of radiation poisoning on the bodies of the characters. In comparison, *The Day After* director Nicholas Meyer also represented the harmful effects of radiation poisoning on the human body but in a much less overt manner. Similarly, although both made-for-television movies show a nuclear blast, *The Day After* offered the following glimmer of hope to the film: "The catastrophic events you have witnessed are, in all likelihood, less severe than the destruction that would

actually occur in the event of a full nuclear strike against the United States.”²³⁷ Alternatively, in *Threads*, while there was never any doubt that the imagery presented was diluted or dramatized, the representations serve as the visual and narrative counterpart to contemporary ideas on nuclear winter theory.

Another interesting point of comparison between *The Day After* and *Threads* lay in their depictions of the continuation of life after war. *The Day After* focuses on the immediate aftermath of nuclear war—chaos, lawlessness, a lack of communication with the government, and health issues. The television audience sees the impact of nuclear war on the characters’ lives, and because the scope of the narrative extends only a few weeks into the future after the war, the audience is forced to consider the question of the destruction of human civilization and humanity. But in *Threads*, given its generational structure, the audience has no choice but to watch how civilization and humans would forage, scramble, and fight to survive in a postapocalyptic world. The audience watches not only how the characters navigate through this new nuclear-infected world, but also the interworking of human relationships. *The Day After* offered a glimpse of the aftermath on a few individual archetypical characters—the doctor, the farmer, the professor, and a nine-month-pregnant woman, but they are all removed from the chaos to some degree. In a sense, *The Day After* invites the viewer to identify with the multiple ways in which one of these characters reacts to nuclear war. In contrast, *Threads* offers the audience unflinching views of the long-term effects of nuclear war and forced the viewers to consider the lengths one might go in terms of survival.

Both films investigate the question of human struggle and self-preservation in a postapocalyptic world. But unlike *The Day After*, *Threads* offered little hope for the future. This was a counter-narrative to the Reagan mediations on nuclear deterrence through proliferation.

²³⁷ Ed Hume, *The Day After*, directed by Mick Meyers, ABC Television Productions, 1984.

Threads presented the wellspring of antinuclear activists of Western European citizens caught uncomfortably in the crosshairs of a nuclear showdown between the superpowers, which was ongoing since 1945 but had roots even further back through the entire twentieth century. This representation of nuclear winter theory was much more aligned with scientists, ecologists, and even activist academics such as Carl Sagan. He quipped, “*Threads* is everything *The Day After* promised but didn’t deliver.”²³⁸ In the conclusion of *Threads*, humans would have to adapt to the new environmental realities, and that devolution of civilization and society would create significant changes in human behavior. The loss of culture, loss of language, a return to a gathering, nomadic culture, and the inability to connect with a maternal instinct all symbolized the transition from a pre-nuclear world to the post-nuclear world. If *The Day After* offered the optimistic, American, sanitized version of life after nuclear war, then *Threads* was the pessimistic, BBC, Western European response to *The Day After*.

Because *Threads* was a BBC production, it received little American network news coverage. The *New York Times* simply issued a warning to viewers about the graphic content of the film after the cable station TBS, owned by CNN/Headline News juggernaut Ted Turner, announced it would air the film in early 1985.²³⁹ Yet contemporary commentary also made it clear that the film had a tremendous impact on audiences, both British and American alike. According to one measure of reception, examining rating figures, *Threads* garnered nearly seven million viewers in England, approximately 14 percent of the population, when the film was originally broadcast on the BBC. Many British viewers, prior to watching *Threads*, watched *The Day After*, which aired in Britain soon after it was broadcast in the United States. It premiered

²³⁸ Toni A. Perrine, ed., *Film and the Nuclear Age: Representing Cultural Anxiety* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1998), 167.

²³⁹ Sally Bedell Smith, “TV Notes; *Testament* and *Threads* to Depict the Aftermath of Nuclear War,” *New York Times*, November 24, 1984, 1, 45.

December 10, 1983, on the Independent Television channel, a growing cable outlet that consistently received high ratings. Additionally, nearly 63 percent of *Thread*'s viewers claimed they had also watched *The Day After*. Perhaps as a result on this audience overlap, numerous studies inquired into how audiences' reacted to nuclear blasts on television and tried to explain how it affected the average viewer.

According to one study, of the 63 percent of viewers who tuned in for both nuclear apocalypse made-for-television movies, eight out of ten reported that *Threads* was the better film. Among those who preferred *Threads*, seven out of ten claimed that the American version was too "glossy" and that *Threads* was more believable. Barry Hines, the writer of *Threads*, suggested that British audiences found *The Day After* too "American" because it "portrayed an American experience."²⁴⁰ Instead, British audiences responded more favorably to both the realism and the narrative's attention to scientific accuracy and detail. Furthermore, British audiences applauded the director's decision to use unknown actors rather than the parade of stars that made up the cast of *The Day After*.

Kim Newman, in his analysis of the film in terms of nuclear dramas, argued that *Threads* was far more overtly political than *The Day After*. The narrative engages a number of different political themes, such as Ruth's interaction with nuclear freeze activists, workers on strike due to the decline of oil production in the Middle East, and the civil defense measures offered by the government. The film also criticizes the inability of the local government of Sheffield to handle the gravity of a situation should a nuclear bomb detonate. Newman wrote, "we see county councilors in their bunker beneath the townhall, failing to keep the city running and finally dying

²⁴⁰ Barrie Gunter and M. Svennevig, "The Impact of Nuclear Fiction on Britain: The Day After and Threads," in *Television and Nuclear Power: Making the Public Mind*, ed. J. Mallory Wober (Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing Corporation, 1992), 61.

of radiation poisoning.”²⁴¹ Furthermore, a torrent of lawlessness and anarchy pervades the town and countryside, which includes looters executed for stealing food, military personnel abandoning their duties to form rogue militia groups to scavenge for food, and armed guards ready to shoot any citizen who attempts to steal supplies. The emphasis on the utter anarchy and incivility of ordinary people is not seen to this graphic extent in *The Day After*. Such scenes of chaos and desperation illustrated that the national government’s plans and the infrastructure could not protect, much less provide for its citizenry in the case of a nuclear attack. This open criticism that the elected officials and other bureaucrats would also perish is aligned with the nuclear freeze movement.

Any made-for-television social melodrama that purported to confront “realistic” and “controversial” topics was likely to be attacked and heralded by all sides of the political spectrum. Also, because these topics were framed on television, the language of the issue also became democratized in the public sphere. Thus, films are inherently political as they work as conduits for disseminating national political issues. Despite the obvious political message of *Threads*, the executives in charge of production, as did the creators of *The Day After*, claimed the movie was apolitical. Barry Hines, the film’s writer, attempted to clarify the film’s murky message by saying, “[the film] wasn’t propaganda. It was even handed.”²⁴² Viewers were also asked if their political opinions changed after they watched *Threads*, and eight out of ten viewers reported the film did not alter their political ideals. Only one in twenty said that the film made them believe that nuclear disarmament was the answer, and interestingly, only a small number of

²⁴¹ Newman, *Apocalypse Movies*, 237.

²⁴² Quotation from Barry Hines, interview by Paul Binnon, <http://www.the-snu.co.uk/threads2.htm>.

the viewers surveyed claimed they were frightened by the film or that they felt compelled to become more politically active.²⁴³

Even though it is difficult to gauge reception and the impact *Threads* made on its viewers, we can attempt to access the result by examining what viewers recall or have written about the film. Retrospectively, Internet viewers have mused on how this British television event changed their lives. Many recalled that the original broadcast of the film made an indelible imprint on their lives, which suggests that the film maintains its political and cultural relevancy today. Comments on Internet Movie Database typify the effects the film had and, in some cases, still have on its viewers. Many of these comments originated from viewers in Sheffield, England, where the film takes place, as well as viewers from the United States, where the film had acquired somewhat of a cult following:

I remember, like most of my friends, seeing this film on TV when I was younger. We all got back to school the next day and the whole place was awash with talk of *Threads*. Seeing places destroyed where you actually go, like the scene on the Moor where the shoppers go into panic at the sound of the siren, and saying "I was there on Saturday," Woah! People really were scared that it could happen at any time. The scary thing is I suppose it could.²⁴⁴

Nothing on television has disturbed me as much as *THREADS*. There is so much shock to the viewer in this docu-drama that it's difficult to pick the most disturbing aspect of this nuclear holocaust scenario ... The reason *THREADS* wins over its rivals for the crown of "Nuclear Holocaust King" is its depiction of The Nuclear Winter, though it's done rather unsuccessfully by sticking a dark filter over the camera, but at least it's mentioned in depth unlike the awful *THE DAY AFTER*, and unlike *TDA* we're shown the months and years after the war where the survivors have to cope with an ozone layer or coherent language. These survivors are truly the unlucky ones.²⁴⁵

Threads is one of the most powerful, important movies ever made ... This movie will stay with you for the rest of your life. Some of the images are so haunting that you might easily get nightmares from them ... Anyway, I recommend seeing this movie, and if you go to local church, school, or university, see it as often as possible. It's just stupendous,

²⁴³ Gunter and Svennevig, "The Impact of Nuclear Fiction on Britain," 6.

²⁴⁴ For this and other comments on the film: <http://imbd.com/CommentsShow?90163>.

²⁴⁵ Ibid.

and it's more important than anything else that people be aware of the issues raised here.²⁴⁶

These ordinary reviewers are significant for a number of reasons. All of those who respond in hindsight to the film are doing so almost twenty years after the initial broadcast. This suggested that the film has tremendous cultural and political significance. Furthermore, using views by ordinary audiences also speaks to the film's attempt at authenticity and realism. *Threads* focus on ordinary people's reaction to the horrific nightmare of nuclear war, and the ways in which it continues to resonate with viewers around the world is significant. As opposed to focusing on exclusively high-brow criticism, these ordinary, unsolicited recollections of the film offer a more interesting perspective on not only the atomic imagination and memory, but also the power of the television medium. The majority of the comments posted on Internet Movie Database are positive readings of the film. However, unless specifically stated, we cannot assume all viewers watched the original broadcast of *Threads* in Britain in 1984. Many reviewers admitted watching *Threads* at home on VHS, again demonstrating the changing dynamics of technology, politics, and culture.

Because the film relied on documentary style for framing the precipice of nuclear war, the stalemate in the Persian Gulf between the Soviet Union and the United States, many of the viewers expressed their political opinions because of the political imagery in *Threads*. One reviewer claimed the film served as a cautionary tale to British policy makers, urging them to find alternative sources for fuel, such as hydroelectric power or windmills. Another reviewer aligned more closely with conservatives, agreeing that the narrative mirrored a genuinely aggressive and expansive Soviet Union that was using its occupation of Afghanistan to get to the Persian Gulf. Yet regardless of whether viewers interpreted this film as propaganda for the right or the left, it is striking how many viewers warned that even in the post-Cold War era, nuclear

²⁴⁶ Ibid.

war is still imminent. If for no other reason, many ordinary citizens of the United States and Britain received this film as politically significant rather than a simple, celluloid relic of Cold War drama.

Nuclear Winter Theory

For many viewers, *Threads* represents the most graphic of postapocalyptic films. Its attention to scientific detail and graphic realism, as well as the filmmaker's decision to depict life for more than ten years after World War III, presented the untold yet essential story of the survivors of a nuclear holocaust. *Threads* illustrates that no amount of preparation or ideology or government structure can repair society once the threads become loose. There can be no redemption in a post-apocalyptic society. The objective of *Threads* is to show that humanity and the world would not survive the nuclear winter.

Before the appearance of nuclear winter theory, most analysts who seriously studied the effects of nuclear weapons understood that there would be many unanticipated impacts. For example, in the aftermath of the atomic explosions on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, scientists discovered that the atomic radiation unleashed by the detonation had unforeseen effects on human reproduction and genetics. After the 1954 testing of the hydrogen bomb in the Pacific Ocean left Japanese fishermen, scientists found that these fishermen as well as Micronesian islanders, infected with radioactive fallout. These events caused public concern and even led to the first significant arms control treaty between the Soviet Union and the United States, known as the Limited Nuclear Test-Ban Treaty of 1963. Furthermore, a 1975 research report sponsored by the U.S. government revealed that a series of nuclear explosions had the potential to deplete the ozone layer, thus exposing the earth to an uninhabitable amount of ultraviolet radiation from

the sun.²⁴⁷ Yet even with burgeoning scientific evidence emerging on these and other unpredictable effects of nuclear war, the Reagan administration did not integrate this theory into their policies on nuclear war.

Even before the dire predictions of nuclear winter theory became part of the official discourse on the post-nuclear world, U.S. government-sponsored studies produced back in the late 1970s had made bleak predictions of the likely scenario following a nuclear attack. According to one study, “of the 70,000 people in this area during the non-working hours, there will be virtually no survivors. Fatalities during working hours in this business district would undoubtedly be much higher ... Individual residences in this region will be totally destroyed, with only foundations and basements remaining.”²⁴⁸ Though this quotation sounds much like a scene from *Threads*, this description of unforeseen nuclear devastation comes from the 1979 report entitled *The Effects of Nuclear War*. At the bequest of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, the Office of Technology Assessment published this report to explore the possibilities surrounding a nuclear attack on both the United States and the Soviet Union. The purpose of this report was to provide the needed information for policy makers, including predictions of what levels of devastation nuclear weapons would cause for citizens. According to the OTA’s acting director, Daniel De Simone, this study intended to provide a more comprehensive account of the effects of nuclear war than what had been reported to the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations a few years earlier. The report also attempted to answer questions raised in a 1975 report, *Long-Term Worldwide Effects of Multiple Nuclear-Weapons Detonations*, which

²⁴⁷ *Long Term Worldwide Effects of Multiple Nuclear-Weapons Detonations* (Washington, D.C.: National Academy of Sciences, 1975).

²⁴⁸ Office of Technology Assessment, *The Effects of Nuclear War* (Congress of the United States: Washington, D.C., 1979), 2.

addressed questions of whether a large-scale nuclear war would produce irreversible effects on the global environment.

In subsequent years, a steady stream of official and popular literature continued to be produced that similarly explored and drew attention to the effects of nuclear war and the government's plan for nuclear preparedness. In 1984, for example, L. W. McNaught published *Nuclear Weapons and Their Effects*, which was essentially a textbook for soldiers on the effects of nuclear weapons and what protective measures might be taken in a nuclear battlefield. Two years later, the U.S. Army Sergeants Major Academy published a similar work that revealed the army's preparation for a myriad of futuristic, nuclear hostile environments, including nuclear war.²⁴⁹ Both of these works assumed a nuclear attack was survivable and provided potential techniques to aid in that survival. These publications fell very much in line with the official policy coming out of the White House that not only was deterrence effective, but that civil defense awareness was paramount for surviving a nuclear holocaust.

In 1983, however, *Science* published an article that not only contradicted the Reagan administration's survivalist beliefs, but also left an indelible impact on Cold War history. In an article entitled, "Long-Term Biological Consequences of Nuclear War," coauthored by over ten prominent, international scientists, the aftereffects of nuclear war were examined and redefined by the controversial theory of nuclear winter. A nuclear winter would be defined as the number of new environmental, atmospheric, and climatic effects that would accompany large-scale nuclear blasts. This theory postulates that the earth would suffer from persistent lack of sunlight, which would bring subfreezing temperatures and high levels of radiation trapped inside the atmosphere. The logical conclusion of nuclear winter theory points to an end of civilization and

²⁴⁹ U.S. Army Sergeants Major Academy, *ANCOC Common Core: NBC Reading Book*, 1985. This work provides many interesting insights into the army's preparation, including fallout shelters, how to monitor radiation levels, and what an individual soldier can do to protect himself.

environmental collapse. The theory contended that agriculture would be crippled by nuclear war, thus creating devolution of survivors who scavenge for food, which was depicted in *Threads*.

The study even provided a forecast for the potential social effects on humans and the ecosystem for up to ten years following a nuclear war. The study states that by the end of the first year, the following changes would have occurred:

Loss of agricultural support would dominate adverse human health impacts. Societal systems could not be expected to function and support humans. With the return of sunlight and UV-B, widespread eye damage could occur. Psychological stresses, radiation exposures, and many synergistic stresses would continue to affect humans adversely. Epidemics and pandemics would be likely.

Additionally, the study goes on to suggest that the next decade in a post-nuclear holocaust world would be climatic stresses that would limit factors for rebuilding and human recovery. This worst-case scenario, as presented by the coalition of scientists involved in the TTAPS study, was the focus of *Threads* and offered an astonishing glimpse into an apocalyptic future.²⁵⁰

Following the publication of the landmark nuclear winter theory published in *Science* magazine in 1983 (known popularly as the TTAPS study), government officials scrambled to determine how this new finding would affect existing foreign policy. A *New York Times* article published in the summer of 1984 reported that the federal government was embarking on its own \$50 million scientific study regarding the validity of nuclear winter theory. According to the article, if the scientists determined that the theory was valid, then, the Pentagon claimed, new questions regarding national security would need to be answered. The article also revealed that there was some discrepancy within the scientific community regarding the severity of these nuclear winter effects. Dr. Edward Teller, developer of the hydrogen bomb and nuclear spokesmen for the Reagan White House, claimed the attempts at predicting the effects of nuclear winter were premature. Additionally, Dr. George A. Keyworth, the scientific advisor to President Reagan, suggested that more evidence was needed before the government could fully embrace nuclear

²⁵⁰ John M. Teal, "Long-Term Biological Consequences of Nuclear War," *Science*, 23 Dec. 1983, 1295.

winter as a concrete theory as opposed to scientific speculation.²⁵¹ Yet by February 1985, the nuclear winter studies budget had melted from \$50 million to a meager \$5.5 million. According to subsequent articles in *Science* magazine, the scientific study had a hard time finding economic support from the government agencies and was no longer a priority for the White House. Not only did the project lack crucial funding, but some academic scientists feared that since the research budget was dwindling, the funds would be allocated only to government laboratories, and the full effects of nuclear winter in independent laboratories and studies that projected counter-conclusions would not be considered.²⁵²

Beginning in March 1985, a number of congressional subcommittees were formed, and a series of congressional hearings were held, to determine both the plausibility of nuclear winter theory and how it would affect strategic defense agendas, such as the Reagan administration's Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), otherwise known as "Star Wars." These reports underscored how the official discourse on nuclear winter was becoming highly politicized. With the loss of a national support for the nuclear freeze movement, many Americans embraced Reagan's optimistic design for future defense and rejected the negative assumptions of nuclear winter theory. The implications of nuclear winter theory also inherently frightened Republicans in Congress, because their recommendations might challenge the Reagan White House and refute "Star Wars" as the program that promoted nuclear peace.

In March 1985, one of the earliest committees to discuss nuclear winter theory gathered together. A collection of delegates from numerous committees—such as the House Representative Committee on Science and Technology, Subcommittee on Natural Resources, Agricultural Research and Environment; and the Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs,

²⁵¹ William J. Broad, "U.S. Weighs Risk That Atom War Could Bring Fatal Nuclear Winter," *New York Times*, August 5, 1984, A1, A40.

²⁵² R. Jeffery Smith, "'Nuclear Winter' Feels Budgetary Chill," *Science*, February 22, 1985, 924–25.

Subcommittee on Energy and the Environment—convened to discuss the hot topic of “nuclear winter.” In his opening remarks, Morris K. Udall, chairman of the Subcommittee on Energy and the Environment, set the course for a highly politicized debate by asserting:

Before we begin, I want to say that it troubles me that we were nearly into the fifth decade of the nuclear era before our military planners explicitly accepted the potential destructiveness of the climatic effects of nuclear war. Such effects, it is now believed, could rival the damage resulting from the familiar effects of blast, fire and fallout. It is worth reflecting upon the consequences of the attack by our Strategic Arm Command upon the Soviet Union in the late fifties and sixties. At that time, by all appearances, we possessed an overwhelming superiority; our military leaders had reason to assure the President that the United States could attack the Soviet Union and expect little to no retaliation. If on the basis of such advice, the President had decided in time of crisis to launch an attack, our targeting doctrine, I have been told, would have led to the detonations of thousands of megatons over Russian cities. The result would have extended far beyond destruction of Soviet society. Some scientists now believe that such an attack would very likely have created climatic changed in the Earth’s northern hemisphere. Had this happened, our own society might have been destroyed even if the Russians had not been able to launch one weapon ... We should, for example, be skeptical of promises that a Star Wars defense will allow a move away from a strategy of mutual deterrence based on fear of annihilation. Star Wars, we are told, could make possible a strategy based on defensive systems. As desirable as this might be in principle, it is unlikely to work out in practice. In fact, by its nature, Star Wars would probably do more to create tensions than to reduce them.²⁵³

What is most striking about Udall’s statement is not only his wholesale rejection of Star Wars, but also his attempt to provide a historical perspective for looking at the possibility of nuclear holocaust. He expressed how in the nascent years of the Cold War, we had the potential to destroy civilization, and this responsibility irrevocably has changed the global power. In *Threads*, the audience watches annihilation and suffers in the aftermath of a nuclear world. Throughout this discussion on nuclear winter, delegates such as James H. Scheuer kept returning to the subject of nuclear deterrence and how nuclear winter theory imposed new realities on arms control. Scientists such as Carl Sagan joined Scheurer in presenting prepared statements to the

²⁵³ *House Committee, Joint Oversight Hearing on Nuclear Winter, Congressional Quarterly, March 1985, 3–5.*

panel regarding the White House's staunch position and unwillingness to accept nuclear winter theory as scientific fact.

The majority of the hearing was devoted to the March 1 release of a report released by the Department of Defense (DOD), which, in the words of Representative Timothy E. Wirth from Colorado, continued to, "downplay substantial scientific research, historical evidence, and knowledge ... on the potential severity of nuclear winter."²⁵⁴ Although the report issued by the Pentagon accepted nuclear winter theory as valid, according to an article in the *New York Times*, the DOD had nevertheless concluded that the theory had no "great policy implications for the Reagan Administration and that its weapon modernization programs and its quest for an antimissile shield in space were still 'fundamentally sound' ways of deterring nuclear war."²⁵⁵ Because the DOD contended that the development of nuclear winter theory had no direct policy implications, Representative Wirth and others, such as Carl Sagan, accused the Pentagon of partisan politics. Sagan and Wirth both argued that the Pentagon's refusal to accept the realities of nuclear winter theory was due to its commitment to support Reagan's SDI and also the president's decision to increase U.S. nuclear capabilities.

Wirth also noted that "deterrence" was, in effect, an "old policy"—the only nuclear defense policy the Pentagon and the United States had ever known. Throughout the history of the Cold War, postwar presidents relied on the theory of deterrence and mutually assured destruction both to prevent nuclear attacks as well as to assure the citizenry that an increased nuclear arsenal was the only way to prevent a third world war. The Republicans appearing before the House subcommittee merely concurred with Wirth's assessment of the Reagan administration's determination to continue to rely on deterrence and proliferation. Moreover, according to the

²⁵⁴ Ibid.

²⁵⁵ Wayne Biddle, "Pentagon Agrees Nuclear Warfare Could Block Sun, Freezing Earth," *New York Times*, March 2, 1985, A1.

political Right, nuclear winter theory only heightened the effectiveness of nuclear deterrence policy by making its possibility more abhorrent. Richard Perle, assistant secretary of defense, told the committee: “We believe what we are doing with respect to strategic doctrine and arms control is basically sound and our acceptance of the nuclear winter theory does not make it less sound ... There is no shred of evidence that our current doctrine is not the best policy to prevent nuclear war.”²⁵⁶

Richard Perle’s position revealed that the Republicans continued to defend deterrence because it was based on the premise that it was possible to survive a tactical nuclear war. Thus nuclear weapons were simply conceived as bigger bombs. Even Reagan defended the arms buildup on the assumption that nuclear bombs differed little from conventional weapons. According to nuclear winter theory, however, even a limited nuclear engagement posed a significant risk of climatic catastrophe. Nuclear winter theory repudiated the assumption of surviving a tactical nuclear exchange. The suggestion that even tactical nuclear warfare could generate a series of climatic effects that would result in nuclear winter invalidated the position Reagan had adopted at the beginning of his first term. In an interview from October 16, 1981, Reagan reportedly remarked that a tactical exchange of nuclear weapons could be used in the “field” without it leading to an all-out nuclear assault.²⁵⁷ The presentation of nuclear winter theory concluded that even a small nuclear exchange would have the potential to cause irreversible environmental effects. Ultimately, a partisan House committee concluded that the only way to ensure that nuclear winter never becomes a reality was to dramatically reduce the

²⁵⁶ House Committee, Joint Oversight Hearing on Nuclear Winter, 3–5.

²⁵⁷ Grant Burns, *The Nuclear Present: A Guide to Recent Books on Nuclear War, Weapons, the Peace Movement and Related Issues, with a Chronology of Events, 1789–1991* (London: Scarecrow Press, Inc.. 1992), 505.

number of weapons between the superpowers. This contention was in direct opposition with the White House plan to funnel millions of dollars to military defense proposals such as SDI.

The March 14 congressional report stands alone as one of the only reports that took issue with the Pentagon's reluctance to engage the nuclear winter debate with any sense of urgency, while also advocating for a dramatic reduction in arms. Subsequent reports, including the 1986 report issued by the U.S. General Accounting Office entitled "Nuclear Winter: Uncertainties Surround the Long-Term Effect of Nuclear War," took a very different position. This report examined scientific and policy implications of nuclear winter by investigating relevant literature on the subject coupled with research from prominent members of the scientific and policy-making committee. Unlike other reports, this report neglected to provide scientific information about loss of plant, animal, or human life due to nuclear winter, and ignored the evidence concerning survivors suffering from radiation and fallout. In contrast, the General Accounting Office's report concentrated on the question of whether the existing policy of deterrence was sufficient to include this new nuclear imperative. The answer was simple. According to the report, too many "uncertainties" surrounded nuclear winter to necessitate a change in strategic policy.²⁵⁸ Not only did this report support the SDI, but it also asserted that nuclear winter theory would only strengthen the nation's dependence on deterrence. Perhaps more revealing, the report stressed that "there is no indication that the nuclear winter issue has affected Soviet policies, strategy or force structure."²⁵⁹ In short, the General Accounting Office's report negated the March 1 congressional report suggesting an arms reduction, and asserted that nuclear winter theory warranted more scientific investigations before the Reagan administration changed its policy on deterrence.

²⁵⁸ U.S. Accounting Office, *Nuclear Winter: Uncertainties Surround the Long-Term Effects of Nuclear War: Report to Congress* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1986), 26–29.

²⁵⁹ Ibid.

Though conservatives claimed that Soviets were not discussing nuclear winter theory, Soviet scientists were already discussing the plausibility of this new component to the atomic world. Some international scientists postulated that the development of this most horrific of human scenarios would bring together fragmented peoples under the umbrella of peace for the first time since the U.S. bombing of n Hiroshima in 1945. Soviet scientists published an English-language book in 1985 that warned people around the globe about the devastating consequences of nuclear winter. In the book, titled *The Night After: Scientists' Warning* in an interesting nod to the ABC made-for-television movie, Soviet scientists employed charts, diagrams, scientific jargon, mathematical equations, and even ethos to convey to readers the horrors of nuclear war and its immediate and continuous partner in destruction, nuclear winter. Not only would there be changes in the atmosphere due to a nuclear war, leading to long-term climatic consequences, but the ultimate danger of nuclear winter lies in the capacity to threaten the evolution of mankind on Earth.²⁶⁰

Compiled from a series of papers, lectures, and other relevant documents produced by Soviet scientists and others behind the Iron Curtain, this work utilized scientific voices to argue for peace and the prevention of nuclear war. While these reports were highly scientific and saturated in technological jargon, they still elicited an emotional response from its readers by focusing on the human costs of the war, which were not wedded to any ideology or country or political stance. In a statement address to both Yuri Andropov, the chairman of the Soviet Union, and Ronald Reagan, president of the United States, at the Third Congress of International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War (June 1983), the Soviet scientists emphatically asserted:

²⁶⁰ Yevegeni Velikhov, ed., *The Night After ... Scientists Warning: Climatic and Biological Consequences of a Nuclear War* (Moscow: Mir Publishing, 1985), 44.

The first and greatest of all nuclear illusions is the assumption that nuclear war is simply one of many alternatives facing humanity, and that nuclear war is but conventional war with magnified consequences. The world stands at the edge of an abyss: humanity now has the technical means for its own destruction. An all-out nuclear war would kill hundreds of millions of people instantly. World civilization would be devastated, and the future of those surviving the immediate blast would be in doubt ... The general policy of nuclear deterrence has held hostage vast populations of innocent people. It has led to an ever-accelerating arms race. It threatens our children's hope of the future. It weakens our struggle against poverty, famine and illness. It has fostered war-fighting doctrines, which increases the risk of nuclear conflict.²⁶¹

The Soviet scientists employed the same rhetorical style of speaking about the consequences of nuclear war for children, an antinuclear image invoked by activists since the early 1950s. The Soviet scientists echoed much of the language of the nuclear freeze movement, yet their scientific theories forecasted new, innumerable effects of nuclear radiation as yet unknown by the international scientific community. Although this was the same sentiment presented by nuclear freeze activists around the globe, the acceptance of nuclear winter theory by Soviet scientists offered a potential scientific space to begin easing tensions between Andropov and Reagan. Evident in a statement by Soviet scientists, as well as some congressional democrats, was the shared assumption that nuclear winter theory might serve as a bargaining chip to bring both superpowers to the table to seriously begin nuclear arms reduction.

Throughout the 1980s, scientists published an endless number of reports, essays, books, and articles on the effects of nuclear war and used all available data to construct the hypothetical physical topography and environmental landscape of the postapocalyptic nuclear world. With the development of nuclear winter theory, the postapocalyptic environment appeared more uninhabitable than before and the environmental effects were more irreversibly catastrophic than once postulated. But that was just the beginning. By the mid-1980s, the theory of nuclear winter was examined by psychologists, sociologists, and others who investigated how survivors would conceive of humanity's role in the radiation-laden world. According to scientists Owen Greene,

²⁶¹ Ibid.

Ian Percival, and Irene Ridge in their 1985 work *Nuclear Winter: The Evidence and the Risks*, nuclear winter would cause a collapse even in the “idea” of humanity. According to this work, human survival would depend on biological or evolutionary instincts and our willingness to adapt to the nuclear winter environment. People inside the targeted areas, they predicted, “would become psychologically numbed, completely withdrawn and apathetic, and they would be in the worst possible state to face the additional rigors of nuclear war.”²⁶² As for the people outside of the prime target zones (ground zeroes) or target nations, once they regained their senses and overcame the immediate anarchy that was sure to ensue, people would have to contend with a shortage of food, contaminated drinking water, and an assortment of medical problems with little or no help from government institutions or any social organizations. In short, it would be a return to the most primitive of civilizations, as imagined in *Threads*.

Again, the scientists offered some suggestions that might stop the earth from arriving at its nuclear conclusion, and once more questioned the policy of deterrence. According to these authors, part of the problem with nuclear deterrence policy and mutually assured destruction was the assumption made by NATO and Warsaw Pact members that a nuclear war can be “won” like conventional wars. Nuclear winter theory revealed that everyone was at risk irrespective of geographic or ideological position. Furthermore, the second problem with deterrence was the certainty of human fallibility, in the form of accidents, misinformation, or hostile coups, all human scenarios imagined from *Dr. Strangelove*, *Fail-Safe*, *The China Syndrome*, *World War III*, *Special Bulletin*, and *Threads*. Every type of human error in the contentious late atomic age could generate a chain of events that would cause worldwide destruction.²⁶³ Clearly the answer

²⁶² Owen Greene, Ian Percival, and Irene Ridge, *Nuclear Winter: The Evidence and the Risks* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1985), 129.

²⁶³ *Ibid.*, 160.

would be the global commitment to disarm, and like other scientists, these authors hoped that the threat of nuclear winter would become an important platform to spark a national dialogue and perhaps even frighten Cold Warriors into erasing the threat of nuclear weapons from the human consciousness.

In many of the scientific representations on nuclear winter, the use of the empirical data was employed to illustrate the need for additional social responsibility in the wake of global devastation. This approach is evident in the 1986 work, *The Long Darkness: Psychological and Moral Perspectives on Nuclear Winter*. This work includes essays contributed by prominent scientists such as Stephen J. Gould, Carl Sagan, and Robert J. Lifton—many of the same scientists who developed the theory of nuclear winter. This work stated that its purpose was not to scare readers, but to awaken readers out of their slumber of complacency and force them to confront the real threats and anxieties that surround nuclear war. So what were the psychological threats of nuclear war? According to Robert J. Lifton, the threat of nuclear war was too much for the human imagination to even comprehend.

In his article, “Imagining the Real: Beyond the Nuclear ‘End,’” Lifton delved into the depths of the human psyche in an attempt to determine why mankind had the potential for self-destruction, while also inquiring as to why humans were numb to the same potential of this most awesome of all human constructions. He began with the bombing of Hiroshima as the most striking example of the psychological response to an impending encounter with the death and destruction brought by the atomic age. Lifton then provided narrative accounts of Hiroshima survivors and the kinds of imagery and thoughts that survivors recalled during the attack. Lifton went on to argue for individuals, no “particular symptoms, action, or pattern of behavior” were

symptomatic of the threat of nuclear war.²⁶⁴ Rather, nuclear fear might be defined as the absence of hope, the fear of death, the fear of losing loved ones and family members, the fear of radiation and contamination; in short, an intensified fear of the unknown was the symptom of nuclear anxiety.

In a related article, John E. Mack considered how nuclear fears actually worked to protect existing policy on deterrence. In his article, “National Security Reconsidered,” Mack offered a variety of theories that might explain why the Reagan administration refused to fully acknowledge the long-term, global implications of nuclear war. Mack determined that the methods devised to measure the effectiveness of national security were constructed by the same military and political personnel who still exhibited behavior of what he called a “pre-nuclear mentality.” By this, he meant that the Reagan administration spoke of nuclear weapons and nuclear warfare as if it were analogous to conventional wars.²⁶⁵ Similarly it was this dependence on “pre-nuclear mentality,” he argued, that was truly frightening to the American public, particularly its children and young people who were not able to make heads or tails of the survivability of nuclear war. Children were confused as to whether or not to be concerned that their youth might be cut short by a nuclear holocaust, or whether they should believe the official proclamations that nuclear deterrence did actually prevent nuclear war.²⁶⁶

Mack provided a variety of explanations for why the Reagan administration did not appear fearful of nuclear war. Whereas those who opposed U.S. policies on nuclear weapons stressed the worst-case scenarios, the Reagan administration and its supporters stressed “life would continue as usual” theory and emphasized the “uncertainties” surrounding nuclear winter

²⁶⁴ Robert J. Lifton, “Imagining the Real: Beyond the Nuclear ‘End’,” *The Long Darkness: Psychological and Moral Perspectives on Nuclear Winter*, ed. Lester Grinspoon (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986), 91.

²⁶⁵ John E. Mack, “National Security Reconsidered,” in *The Long Darkness: Psychological and Moral Perspectives on Nuclear Winter*, ed. Lester Grinspoon (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986), 109.

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 110.

theory. In addition, the Department of Defense justified the development of more sophisticated weapons, such as smaller missiles (Pershing II) and more accurate warheads, which, they postulated, would eliminate the amount of smoke, dust, and fires that would create a nuclear winter. Another possible reason that the government clung so tightly to deterrence, Mack proposed, was that deterrence provided the psychological illusion that the government was still in control of these dangerous weapons after failing to prevent other nations from gaining access to the atomic formula. According to Mack, there could be no security in a nuclear world, and the reality of this notion was too unbearable to comprehend. This, Mack argued, leads people to believe that it was not the deterrence policy that was important, or conversely, the plausibility of nuclear winter theory. Rather, what was important was the collective American belief in the power of the nation-state and executive decision makers. If the American public believed the United States was powerful and dominant and wielded tremendous influence over others, then it was the power of that convincing that provided comfort, not government institutional programs or platitudes.

In an interesting report entitled *The American Policy after Crisis: Cohesion or Collapse?* the Center for Strategic and International Studies examined the probable responses to an array of societal traumas, including immediate basic survival, long-term recovery and the possibility of national restoration after a nuclear war. Rather than exploring the atmospheric or climatic effects of nuclear war or relying on the same data about radiation zones, this study attempted to explain how government institutions would continue to stand in the aftermath. Instead of scientific data, this study imagined a post-nuclear America with no capital, no pandemics, and no nuclear winter. In this study, the post-nuclear world's most devastating effect was the loss of nationalism. This study recommended that further action was needed to preserve national culture

in the case of cataclysmic nuclear war.²⁶⁷ Although culture is an important component of human civilization and the loss of culture in any way is tragic, it is worth noting that while other studies discussed the plausibility of nuclear winter theory and actively urged Congress to integrate nuclear winter theory into foreign and military policy to save humanity from this brand of environmental hell, this particular report submitted that the United States must preserve its nationalism first, an example of the Beltway's rejection of nuclear winter.

By 1986, it was blatantly clear that nuclear winter theory would neither change or alter the Reagan administration's decision to increase the U.S. military arsenal nor curb any plans for building strategic defensive initiatives. Although many scientists urged Congress to reduce nuclear weapons, wrote articles on the dangers of nuclear winter, and repeatedly explained the global environmental consequences wrought by nuclear weapons, the U.S. government under Reagan declared the Soviets had no interest in reducing its nuclear arsenal because of the possibility of nuclear winter. When one examines the official representations on nuclear winter, the U.S. government appeared characteristically optimistic in its belief that it could both prevent nuclear war, and that in the event the nuclear war became inevitable, nuclear winter was simply a theory designed to weaken the United States.

The unintended outcome of nuclear winter theory was that it became another justification for nuclear proliferation, not a reduction in arms. Many scientists, especially those affiliated with the political Left, advocated for nuclear disarmament; while scientists associated with the Reagan administration, such as Edward Teller, although not completely repudiating nuclear winter theory, claimed nuclear disarmament was not the key to preventing a nuclear war. Scientific advocates for the Reagan administration argued that only more sophisticated weapons

²⁶⁷ David Williamson Jr., *The American Policy after Crisis: Cohesion or Collapse?* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, Georgetown University, 1986), 15.

systems, like SDI, would end Soviet nuclear aggression. More importantly, however, the literature examined reveals an unbridgeable chasm between the scientific writings on nuclear winter, which presented a very bleak picture for the future of humanity, and the official proclamations made by the White House, which continued to submit that nuclear winter would not happen because nuclear deterrence policy prevented a third world war.

Perhaps, as John E. Mack asserts, the possibilities of nuclear war were too horrific for Americans to believe, so we chose to embrace the notion that government would protect us from possible annihilation. Or perhaps, as Robert J. Lifton concluded, imagining the end of humanity because of nuclear war is too much for humans to even process rationally. Either way—whether one believes the U.S. government prevents nuclear war via its national security policies or through the development of futuristic defensive measures—it is apparent that the U.S. government's official line on nuclear war was that even though a nuclear war might not be winnable, the United States would not lose. The impending nuclear holocaust might be too horrific for Americans to imagine, yet for people potentially caught in the crosshairs, nuclear winter theory offered an outlet to express a collective voice of anxiety and frustration over the unwavering commitments of the United States and the Soviet Union to perpetuate the Cold War.

Conclusion

As many television productions attempted to present graphic realism of nuclear war, no other made-for-television movie presented life after a third world war in more striking detail than *Threads*. The BBC has an interesting history addressing this topic, including the 1965 production of the made-for-television film *The War Game*, which also presented how in the immediate weeks after a nuclear strike, British society and political structures would begin to completely dismantle, while chaos, anarchy, and bureaucratic hoarding would overcome all proposed civil

defense measures. So inflammatory was the film's representation of the failings of the British government that the BBC decided not to air the film due to high levels of corporate and political pressure. *The War Game* was finally aired in 1985, in the midst of yet another wave of British anxiety regarding its geographically vulnerable position between the superpowers.

. Although *Threads* offers one of the most controversial and horrific visual representations among all the other made-for-television nuclear dramas of the time period, the teleplay used a unique blend of documentary-style editing techniques, real nuclear blast footage, and news updates as well as family melodrama to frame its message.. In addition, the film goes to greater lengths to inform the public on the problems of survivability. Like its BBC predecessor, *The War Game*, *Threads* wanted to show how the nuclear fallout would have immediate effects, such as looting and governmental betrayal, as well as long-term, generational effects, such as the end of human communication and compassion.

Moreover, the narrative captured the precarious position of the citizens of Western Europe, a topic extensively discussed by antinuclear activists as well as concerned citizens of many countries. As Walter Cronkite pronounced in *The Great Nuclear Arms Debate* on CBS, the early 1980s positioned Western Europe in the epicenter of a growing international debate over nuclear weapons, the effectiveness of nuclear deterrence, and the expanding U.S. nuclear arsenal occurring under President Reagan. CBS did not provide the only example of network prime-time news specials to explain international nuclear issues. On December 28, 1983, NBC News offered an hour long prime-time broadcast to also clarify the anti-Reagan sentiment emanating out of West Germany. Hosted by Marvin Kalb, the news special examined the growing German nuclear anxiety.

The film *Threads* portrayed a number of horrific scenarios from the initial chaos and lawlessness that would accompany a nuclear blast, to the collapse of government, the destruction of the natural world, and finally a collapse of social communication and civilization. This type of postapocalyptic rendering left an indelible imprint in the minds of those who watched the broadcast and also presented British citizens as powerless victims in a superpower showdown over oil in the Middle East. These all-too-real scenarios were omitted in ABC's most watched and successful nuclear made-for-television drama, *The Day After*. The BBC, and the film's writer Barry Hines, could assert a more pointed critique of the Reagan military buildup because the proposal called for an arms increase in Western Europe, which in turn created more heightened nuclear anxieties for citizens of these countries. Although the complicated interplay between the Thatcher administration, the BBC, and audiences is not explicitly discussed in this chapter and is large enough to encompass its own separate work, the production of *Threads* does demonstrate the network's commitment to bringing nuclear-based dramas to British audiences in both *The War Game* (1965) and *Threads* (1984). Interestingly, in both the United States and Great Britain, political pundits warned that both television products would dramatically alter the political landscape of both countries, with experts warning that these films could cause irreversible damage to the executive leaders, conservative party members, and galvanize the public into one large antinuclear mob. This did not happen in Great Britain or the United States. These films did not spark a worldwide movement against nuclear war, nor did either of these television narratives take down conservative leaders like Ronald Reagan or Margaret Thatcher.

This fear that television productions could trigger mass movements across the globe offers an interesting commentary on how important the medium of television is for the public. However, it is also notable because data collected in the post-airing analysis on both films

revealed that although most citizens reported a desire to end nuclear proliferation, citizens were still too fearful of the Soviet Union to truly engage and persuade its leaders to emphasize nuclear disarmament over nuclear proliferation. Furthermore, these studies complicate theories on audience reception in that the television viewers do not interpret their position as passive or easily swayed by propaganda. Although the large topic of audience reception was not explicitly addressed in this chapter except for editorials, it is clear that television is not simply an instrument for state-sponsored propaganda as argued by many media critics. Nor is television the great transmitter for spreading democracy. What is evident is that television can bring to life many of these complicated political situations that allow for viewers to actively participate in the larger debate on issues like nuclear weapons in some capacity. Even with the problematic design of television, in terms of political interference and corporate sponsorship, television experiences are often accompanied by an increase in social interactions, which in turn shapes a sense of belonging and identity in society.²⁶⁸

The development of nuclear winter theory had a number of important implications, most specifically its challenge to official U.S. civil defense measures, which argued that citizens could survive a nuclear war with enough pre-war preparation. Although President Reagan called on the scientific community to help develop space-based missile systems that would eliminate any fears of nuclear attacks on the United States, some scientists were already forecasting a much more dire post-nuclear landscape that also challenged the Reagan administration. Even though the theory was debated in a number of congressional hearings, by 1986, the Congress had adopted the position that nuclear winter theory necessitated U.S. dependence as a strategy to ensure

²⁶⁸ Peter Dahlgren, *Television and the Public Sphere: Citizenship, Democracy and the Media* (London: Sage Publication, 1995), 19.

nuclear exchange never occurred. Furthermore, after the publication of the TTAPS study, other works on the psychological and social effects of nuclear war filtered into the public sphere.

Although *Threads* is usually discussed as one of the major nuclear-themed docudramas of the eighties, scholars rarely discuss the film's legacy as a visual counter-narrative to *The Day After* and the teleplay's inclusion of nuclear winter theory. The BBC production of *Threads* serves as an important visual touchstone in a number of ways, but its representation of nuclear winter theory is also significant. For many viewers, even if they were unfamiliar with the theory or unaware of the larger debate surrounding the theory of nuclear winter, the teleplay visually displayed many of the effects discussed in the TTAPS study. From the lack of sunlight, to people scavenging for food in a barren world, to the psychological damage shown in the inhumanity of the survivors, viewers now had a visual framework for understanding the long-term effects of nuclear winter. Furthermore, this unflinchingly realistic depiction of the lifeless postapocalyptic world offered an alternative to both Hollywood and American network television nuclear-themed dramas, which often omitted science in favor of melodrama.

In the next chapter, I examine the 1987 ABC miniseries *Amerika*, which attempted to offer a realistic television rendering of life in the United States after ten years of Soviet occupation. Although the miniseries does not engage the topics of an actual nuclear war, nuclear winter theory, or the issue of survivability, the telefeature does suggest that the fear of Communism was still very real and less understood by the American public.. In contrast, the American public understood even less about our postwar enemy than ever before by Reagan's second term, even as diplomatic relations between the United States and Soviet Union were reprioritized by 1985. As Western European audiences began to see the internal collapse of the Soviet Union in Eastern Europe, American viewers were offered a melodramatic, narrative

account of Soviet occupation. This miniseries would not only generate another firestorm of debate about the political effects of a network television miniseries, but it would also challenge the network's objectivity as some critics charged that *Amerika* was an fourteen-hour propaganda film that celebrated Cold War ideology rather than informing the public with any real information on the Soviet Union.

Chapter Five: Cold War Representations in Reagan's Second Term

For the February sweeps of 1987, the ABC television network presented a weeklong miniseries on the effects of Soviet occupation on ordinary American life. The resulting program, titled *Amerika*, was the latest production by ABC that used the miniseries format to explore social and political problems. In their newest and longest Cold War-themed narrative, which took place in the future (1997), the Soviet Union came to occupy the United States through a bloodless coup, enlisting the United Nations, corrupt politicians, and sixties leftist activists as internal allies for taking over the country. This miniseries would generate more publicity and pre-broadcast hysteria than any other Cold War narrative in television history. Objections to the content of the miniseries came from every conceivable political affiliation, from the American left and right, to even international objections offered by the Soviet Union. Although the miniseries did not achieve the enormous success that *The Day After* became for the network, it reveals many of the political contradictions emblematic of Reagan's second term as president.

This chapter begins with the landslide reelection of Ronald Reagan to the White House. In Reagan's second term, his language toward the Soviets became more conciliatory. Even as the Reagan Doctrine, a recapitulation of the Truman Doctrine, became the centerpiece of America's foreign policy, and the U.S. military became embroiled in civil wars from Angola to El Salvador,

Reagan's political language reflected a need to cooperate with the Soviet Union while fighting Communism around the globe and reclaiming patriotism at home. With the eclipse of the late atomic period, the American public was challenged to conceive of the Soviet Union in different ways. Although the Reagan administration grew increasingly scrutinized by the media, specifically with the televised proceedings of the Iran-Contra Affair, network television continued to use the miniseries format as an avenue to explore political issues. This case study investigates ABC's 1987 miniseries *Amerika*. This heavy-handed, seven-part, fourteen-and-a-half-hour miniseries offers a portrait of American life after occupation by the Soviet Union. The argument proffered in the chapter suggests that ABC produced *Amerika* as a jingoistic political offering to the White House after the network was accused of promoting anti-Reagan sentiment in its enormously successful 1983 miniseries *The Day After*.²⁶⁹ The network received more mail and phone calls about *Amerika* before it aired suggesting that the film would garner enormous ratings for the network. In addition, *Amerika* received more post-viewer reaction than any other ABC miniseries, including *The Day After*.²⁷⁰ The miniseries also offers a visual and contextual commentary on what Americans "think" Communism is and imagines how this scenario would affect all Americans, from the small farmer to the U.S. president. Amidst the controversy surrounding the miniseries, however, the narrative employs the Reagan and Republican definitions of liberalism and social activism as the avenue for the Communist takeover of America. Situated within a larger political context, the 1987 miniseries is emblematic of not only the "liberal" backlash that denounced New Left activism and politics, but also the triumph of the Reagan conservative revolution.

²⁶⁹ John J. O'Connor, "TV View: 'Amerika' Slogging through a Muddle," *New York Times*, February 15, 1987, TV, 32. See also *Television and Nuclear Power: Making the Public Mind*, ed. J. Mallory Wober (Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing Corporation, 1992), 29.

²⁷⁰ David Gergen File, OA116, Folder 32, Ronald Reagan Papers, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

Using Reagan and Mondale network television commercials as primary evidence, I argue that Reagan's image of America reflected the wants/desires of American consumer capitalism rather than offer any real context or depth for understanding the larger geopolitical functions of the White House. In contrast to the bleak, however realistic, vision of the American condition captured in the Mondale ads, Reagan's cowboy conservatism appealed to the average voter, and in so doing altered the course of the decade. Scholarly investigation of these presidential commercials is needed because of the success of Reagan's "Morning in America" campaign as well as the decline of New Left liberalism. In addition, Reagan's televised rhetorical style highlighted the past and continuing achievements of Americans. His national speeches were more ideological than specific, yet the message was clear. Throughout the campaign, Reagan not only openly conflated liberalism, the New Left, the Old Left, Democrats, and social activists into one larger umbrella term for the "liberal" political position, but used these terms interchangeably. In Reagan's idealized America, hope was restored and the imagery of a superior America percolated amongst an optimistic citizenry brought back to life from the Republican conservatism. Dissenters were ignored by the popular television narratives and news, who found higher ratings in sensational stories of murders and celebrity scandal. Even though the sixties were romanticized in terms of popular music, films, and iconography, politically, the conservative assault on New Left liberalism continued throughout the decade. Although the culture wars and debates over identity politics remained televised news staples, the prevailing public image of Americans on network television consisted of conservative, suburban, middle-class, white Americans.

What is most fascinating about *Amerika* was not only its overt patriotism but also how the film represented the politics of network television. Not only was the film emblematic of the

early triumph of the Reagan Revolution, it also demonstrated how that revolution was intrinsically linked with network news. The miniseries commented on a number of important political situations—from the ideological, such as the threat of Communism blossoming in Central America; to the academic, in terms of revisionist history; to the joys of consumer culture, such as McDonalds. The film presents the message that Reagan’s optimism, however flawed, offered a better alternative than the fear and pessimism proffered by the liberal Left. This is ultimately the “imagined” landscape of the narrative. This message that the United States is superior to communism, or even that the tenets of left-wing supporters could lead to the downfall of popular American values, was heavily impressed onto the viewer.

With the decline of the network oligopoly, not only did the network news style change, but it also transformed network programming writ large. Now the three major networks were not only competing with HBO, Showtime, and the Fox by 1986, in terms of the conventions of network scripted programming, but they also increasingly followed the 24/7 news formats of CNN and Headline News. Part of the Reagan legacy is the expansion of infotainment, and the deregulation of television and the cable revolution remain the hallmarks of the era. By 1985, a new generation of viewers was offered a buffet of visual images through cable niche stations, choices from individuals could demonstrate their lifestyle, politics, and even religious beliefs. This chapter surveys a number of television programs that both reinforced the Reagan view of hope in America as well as social melodramas and infotainment shows that offered a dark portrayal of the Reagan years. This fragmentation of the audience mirrors the disconnectedness Americans were exhibiting by 1987. With network news focusing on the Iran-Contra Affair, American audiences were challenged to digest the problems of the Reagan administration and the commitment to fighting Communism, while also seeing the decline of the Soviet Union. In

the larger context, television not only framed the late atomic period but also democratized cable space by engaging the viewer directly which became one of the benchmarks of the Reagan Revolution. In the larger context of television history, the medium was experiencing its own revolution by 1987 with the expansion of cable and the emergence of new television channels that catered to niche-audience demographics. The cable revolution, as discussed in this chapter, would transform audience identification, while also destroying the three major network's television monopoly on viewers, opening up a new world of pay-for-service television that catered to individual tastes and ideas.

In Reagan's second term, the White House, network and cable television, and popular culture writ large glorified the American consumer and the splendor of capitalism. The 1984 presidential convention commercials, the 1987 made-for-television epic *Amerika*, and the emergence of cable, demonstrate how images superseded factual information by the end of the Reagan years. The ways in which American audiences interpreted, ingested, understand, and receive the news and information transformed rapidly in the Reagan era, and a new generation of Americans depended exclusively on television for all information. This monumental transformation in television as the primary medium for information was also commercial in scope and thus dependent on the individual viewer for financial solvency. Moreover, these three examples are also symbolic of the glorification of consumption analogous with the Reagan Revolution. From the 1984 presidential campaign, to popular images of the innocuous yuppie on network television such as Alex P. Keaton of *Family Ties*, to the slick melodramas of prime-time shows such as *Miami Vice*, *L.A. Law*, and *Thirtysomething*, televised images of America celebrated the wealth of the economy and the spoils of individual success, particularly amongst

the professional class. This scripted narrative of the American eighties reflected the political and cultural aspirations of President Reagan and the White House.

During the 1984 presidential election, Reagan characterized domestic problems as a byproduct of America losing its superpower standing due to the nature of the Vietnam syndrome. When Reagan addressed these issues on television, whether in presidential addresses, commercials, debates, or speeches, he combated negativity with religious and patriotic rhetoric that assured Americans that God and faith were the tools that would rebuild America. Thanks to the brilliant media strategy under White House Chief of Staff Michael Deaver, who helped to repackage the president's image with the Eureka and Star Wars speeches, the president was now a symbol of peace and able to decode any subliminal Communist messages from left-wing movements to the crack-baby epidemic, the source of the evil was the same: Left-wing radicals in Central America following orders from the Kremlin. This re-envisioned and packaged concept of the Cold War allowed Reagan to wrangle a tighter grip on public support for U.S. involvement in Central America. In true Theodore Roosevelt fashion, the triumphant reelection of Reagan recapitulated the notion of frontier conservatism and American exceptionalism in Central America. Like his Cold War presidential predecessors, Reagan shifted the locus of his doctrine to fighting Communism in Latin America, and in turn created a more global democratic crisis. According to Reagan, faith was under attack. America was threatened domestically by the devious left-wing radicals, either Soviet, Marxist, Islamic, or terroristic in nature. The solution was adherence to conservative politics and "traditional" family values. The underlying domestic problems that came to define the mid-1980s, such as the drug epidemic, poverty, and AIDS, did not exist in Reagan's portrayal of suburban America, nor was they discussed in the 1984 presidential campaign.

It's Morning in America: The 1984 Presidential Campaign

Reagan's campaign to recapture the presidency in 1984 was nothing more than a media assault on New Left Liberalism and anti-nuclear activism. In Reagan's first term, he and his staff had applauded the arrival of the cavalry to restore America's glory, yet the literal hardware to install this dream was paid for by the federal taxes of the working class. Furthermore the persistence of antinuclear activists around the world threatened the immediate placement of nuclear weapons that would "defend" rather than "agitate" relations with the Soviet Union, according to the Reagan White House. The White House strategy to reelect the president in 1984 focused on denouncing the objectives of liberals, both Old and New, as well as presenting a serene, middle-class America freed from all agitators both foreign and domestic alike. By examining these presidential television commercials, one has a better idea of how the 1984 presidential election became a political and public relations victory for the White House.

Historians from all different perspectives have long noted the significance of network television to the success of presidential campaigns. Since the televised debates between Kennedy and Nixon in 1960, network television has played an active role in framing presidential images and creating democratized political rhetoric. The impact of how much network television executives can orchestrate, sway, or even brainwash viewers is still debated among scholars. However, current scholarship suggests that television does repackage presidential candidates and does create a different relationship with candidates that did not exist prior to television's existence. There are a number of different methodological traditions in which to gauge television representations, but as media scholar Peter Dalhgren reminds us, "from the standpoint of the public sphere, there is a need for continual monitoring of what goes on in the media, analyzing specific cases and routine representations, while at the same time it is important not to lose sight

of the larger, more theoretical issues.”²⁷¹ Network television framed some social movements as more important, while most alternative or oppositional civic media had difficulties in the contacts with the media of network television. As for examining viewer reception, pioneering media theorists suggest that the command of the television medium contributes to the success of presidential campaigns and agendas. Thus it is fair to claim that network television helped to frame the upcoming 1984 election for the voting citizenry. And as Reagan won the election by a landslide, one can safely declare that the victory is owed in part to the successful television commercials.

NARA Commercials 1984

An extended version of the “Morning in America” campaign was shown to delegates at the Republican National Convention and also broadcasted to viewers through network coverage of the convention. In this longer version, the message of the commercial emphasized the abilities of the entire Reagan Cabinet and applauded the efforts of staunch conservatives during the first four years. Reflecting back over the last three years, Reagan, George H. W. Bush, and George Shultz all physically represent an ease in their positions within the West Wing and an ease as to where the country was at that time, as opposed to the tumultuous Watergate and Vietnam eras of decades past.

The screen reads January 20, 1981, and the clip shows Reagan’s inauguration to the presidency interlaced with momentary images of a suburban paperboy, suburban white-collar men going to work, of blue-collar workers walking to the factory and of the Boy Scouts. The audience sees the glorious, unparalleled architecture of Washington, D.C., and the splendor of the waving American flag. Reagan’s voice-over narration declares, “Yes it was quite a day. A

²⁷¹ Peter Dahlgren, *Television and the Public Sphere: Citizenship, Democracy and the Media*. (London: Sage Publications, 1995). 16.

new beginning.” Commenting on the enormity of the oath that he took as president to uphold the Constitution and protect the citizens of the United States, Reagan says, “You know, you don’t really become president, the presidency is an institution and you have temporary custody of it.”²⁷² The audience then sees Reagan alone in the Oval Office working, and again his voice describes the appearance of the president verses the reality of the White House. Reagan’s narration states, “I know the image is it is a very lonely job and you are out there all on your own for everything that has to be decided or done. But that is not quite true.” The camera then shows Reagan surrounded by elite Cabinet members, Cold Warriors, staunch Republican allies who were a visible presence on television during his first term. Reagan remarks, “I have always believed that the people around you here are meant to be here, to contribute. And you know the best counsel the opinions, sometimes varied opinions, in opposition or approval to whatever is being discussed, you are hearing these honest views from very capable men and women, who have given up so much, so many of them in their private lives to come here and serve. You don’t feel alone.”²⁷³ Going even further with this theme of exalting the virtues of his advisors, Reagan asserts, “I believe the vice president George Bush is more involved in policy matters and government in general here in the executive branch than any other vice president, probably, that we have ever had.” The voter watches Reagan walking with Bush, hearing the vice president explain how over the last four years a renewed America has emerged, one that has hope and is less divisive than in the previous two decades. This image of Bush as a peacemaker is marked by Fredric Remington’s famous statue *Bronco Buster*, which sits in the Oval Office, a visual reminder of the past glory of the United States. Bush comments that ordinary citizens repeatedly tell him how they feel a sense of peace for the first time in years. This commercial democratized

²⁷² National Archives and Records Administration, Mondale/Reagan Political Commercials, 1984, ARC: 54571.

²⁷³ Ibid.

the Oval Office and offered accessibility to government players that harkens back to Jacksonian democracy of the nineteenth century. A clip of an American worker in a factory who speaks directly to the camera supports this theory that Reagan has restored dignity and “respect to the White House for the common man.” A collection of testimony from African American men, ethnic women, and white workers confirm this newly empowered Reagan patriotism. Using Lee Greenwood’s patriotic anthem, “Proud to be an American,” as an editing device, the commercial presents viewers with montages of the great vistas of America, from the skyscrapers of New York City to the heartland of the Midwest. In Reagan’s America, everyone is united and at peace.

Reagan is seen embracing the troops in South Korea, praying with them, eating with them, talking to them. He remarks that every American should be proud of the men and women on the “front lines of the frontier for peace,” suggesting that the Democratic and nuclear-freeze objections to the military are now over. In Reagan’s America, service men and women are respected and thanked by ordinary citizens on the streets, again an insightful contrast to images of the sixties. Furthermore, in an additional testimonial, a woman remarks on Reagan’s ability to engage the people. She says, “I think he is just dog-gone honest. It’s remarkable. He’s been on television, what have I heard twenty-six times, talking to *us* about what he is doing. Now that’s ... he’s not doing that for any other reason than to make it real clear.” And as she addresses the camera, her eyes start to tear up, and she states, “If anyone has a question about where he’s headed, it’s their fault ... Maybe they don’t have a television.”²⁷⁴ This insightful statement reveals the unique connection Reagan cultivated with Americans through the medium of television. Additionally, Reagan’s accessibility is put on display for the voters, demonstrating

²⁷⁴ Ibid.

that his commitment to the military is personal and his relationships with this staff, advisors, and the people is uncompromised by liberal objections.

Invoking the specter of World War II, which Reagan did quite frequently, his narration addressed the commitment for Social Security and to the generation that defended America with unabashed honor during the Second World War. However, instead of explaining just exactly the ways in which the Reagan administration would actually lower inflation and pay for both the growing military and the growing senior citizen population, Reagan presented his biography as an example of good government. His Irish ancestry connects him with the blue-collar working class, not Old Left union supporters; his deep Christian commitment resonated with the skyrocketing number of voters that identified with the Christian Moral Majority all over the country; and finally, his unflinching admiration for his wife and marriage appealed to the pathos of voters who identified closely with the importance of family values above all else. As the camera shows Reagan walking on a ranch, hand in hand with Nancy Reagan, he tells the story of how they met in California, and how her patriotism and support helped to provide the strong Republican motherhood-inspired virtue for his civil service. He quips, “She’s been my first lady before she stepped into the White House.”²⁷⁵ Nancy Reagan’s achievements are highlighted, such as her commitment to children with disabilities, the elderly, and the anti-drug “Just Say No” crusade. Viewers are shown the live televised assassination attempt of Ronald Reagan and he explains how his entire staff was with him in the hospital. Gesturing to the audience that his age and his health were not real issues that would preclude his reelection, Reagan’s recollection of his assassination attempt is of a cowboy rising from the horizon, one who will survive and brings peace through strength and stands strong yet free. Ending with clips of Reagan’s nomination as the Republican Party candidate, Ray Charles plays “America” as both the Reagan’s and the

²⁷⁵ Ibid.

delegates rejoice with thunderous applause and cheers as balloons and confetti pepper the convention hall.

Reagan's narration was populist in tone and dialect; he speaks directly to the common citizen in a calming, patriarchal tone. His confidence is overwhelming, and his presence and charisma infectious to his growing conservative, suburban voter base. His command of the television voice-over was cultivated in the late 1950s when he used to occupy the role of spokesman for General Electric. His command and ease at being America's spokesman helped to solidify his position as president. In addition, the way in which Reagan connected to the individual viewer is remarkable in that he had the ability to speak directly to one person through the camera. Reagan transcended traditional notions of the private sphere by offering Americans the idea of public agency. The individual received his words as if he or she engaged in a conversation with Reagan, a gift of rhetoric that was unrivaled by any challenger in 1984.

In contrast to Reagan's romantic version of America, Mondale presented a decisively different narrative of those previous three years. Mondale's 1984 Democratic Convention commercial begins with the same appeal to the electorate's pathos with a montage of children, explaining with optimism and hopes their dreams for their future. Similar to Reagan's staff, his media staff understood the importance of presenting children as symbols of hope to voters throughout America. This emphasis on children and optimism is one of the hallmarks of the eighties in terms of political capital. As Mondale walks down any given wooded path in America, he also provides a brief biography of himself, although his delivery lacks Reagan's confidence and enthusiasm. He appeared more uneasy, less comfortable in front of the camera. Although he used the same thematic approach as Reagan, invoking the Horatio Alger myth of "rags to riches" in America, the imagery in the commercial is less produced, less stylized, and

more flat. The audience then watches a collection of clips that demonstrate how Mondale is gaining popularity in states all over the country, including the South such as Alabama and Florida. Yet there is no sound other than the roar of an airplane. The audience hears no anthem, no Ray Charles, no Lee Greenwood, no comfortable patriotic music that appealed to the common man.

In the continuous montage, Mondale is shown in photographs with iconic sixties activists such as Jesse Jackson, pictures with union workers, campaign rallies, and still photos of speeches. He is shown opening a watermelon in blue jeans, again as a device to connect with the common man; although compared with Reagan, Mondale's image is reminiscent of Jimmy Carter and the malaise of the late 1970s. His attempt at populism becomes insignificant compared to Reagan's impenetrable cowboy-narrative constructions. Mondale speaks of the importance of family and asks a young relative if she is more hopeful with Reagan as commander in chief, and she immediately answers no. Next, a nondescript narrator states: "Whether it is with his family or on the job, Walter Mondale is real."²⁷⁶ The commercial goes on to retell of Mondale's experience in the Senate and how he was chair of the Senate Subcommittee on Children and Youth where the famed anthropologist Margaret Mead famously asserted, "As our children go, so goes the nation."²⁷⁷ According to the narrator, Mondale became the "children's Senator," helping to establish Head Start and other Great Society programs constructed under the Johnson administration. In still photographs, Mondale is seen with a beard during the 1960s, as well as with ethnic children from around the country. As opposed to Reagan, Mondale speaks of the imperative of education and learning as well as research and application. In Mondale's America, he speaks to victims of nuclear spills and surveys the

²⁷⁶ Ibid.

²⁷⁷ Ibid.

damage of women and children who died from toxic exposure in 1981. The narrator explains Mondale's commitment to the environment, to fighting pollution, and to protecting America for the children's future. The images shown are of a bleak American landscape saturated by a fledgling economy, dilapidated homes, and abandoned cars in the Rust Belt of America. The Mondale argument becomes that he, much more than Reagan, has a political record that demonstrates his commitment to protecting the children of America, but because of Reagan's policies, "eight thousand toxic waste communities still stand."²⁷⁸

In contrast to Reagan's collection of Cold Warriors gathered around in the Oval Office, Mondale's advisors are young, casually wearing ties, not suits; one top advisor is African American, while another is a white woman, images that can easily be associated with liberal Democrats. The narrator stresses that Mondale is an expert on economic policy, debunks the theory of "trickle-down" economics, and openly challenges Reagan's assertion that the economy is solvent and prosperous for all Americans. Mondale is surrounded by books rather than iconic American symbols, again suggesting his attempt to provide an educated context for understanding his political positions. As Reagan speaks of hopes and dreams, Mondale speaks of how corporations and the wealthy are given tax breaks while the average citizen earning \$30,000 a year carries the weight of the taxes. Mondale states that he wants a fair economic policy for the worker, not false hope and charges that Reagan will cut more Social Security, Medicare, and other social programs that help the common American. Furthermore, Mondale is depicted as the consummate American diplomat, working with other foreign nations such as China for fair trade and human rights. More importantly when it comes to the issue of nuclear peace, Mondale is presented as the candidate for the nuclear freeze and open negotiation with the Soviet Union; the narration remarks, "As president, Walter Mondale will be working to prevent war." The

²⁷⁸ Ibid.

commercial ends with a montage of natural vistas of America from the ocean to the national forests and parks of all different ecological life, capturing the glory of the natural world. Again, it is important to note the stark comparison to Reagan, not only in the language that Mondale employs, but how the commercial attempts to present his political and senatorial record as a man commitment to families, the environment, and maintaining peace. The last montage is not a popular song that the audience can sing along to but rather a quite symphonic tune that accompanies the natural landscape. According to the NARA, television executives decided that the 1984 Democratic National Convention campaign commercial was too controversial for network television and did not air the Mondale presidential commercial during the Democratic convention.²⁷⁹

From “Morning in America” to a Cold Warrior for Peace, 1984–1987

By 1987, much of the patriotic zeal that reelected Reagan as president had begun to lose momentum. Pollsters reported that the public’s confidence in government had returned to the historic low it had been in 1980.²⁸⁰ In terms of the Cold War, Reagan was now at a pivotal moment. The president’s emerging cooperation with Soviet secretary general Mikhail Gorbachev was transforming Cold War politics. Gorbachev, who was elected to the position of secretary general by the Politburo in 1985, was also receptive to greater cooperation with the United States, even though the country was heavily embroiled in the Strategic Defense Initiative as well as aiding right-wing movements in Central America. Early in their relationship, Reagan mocked the claims that his foreign policy was too simplistic as he quipped to Gorbachev: “Roses are red, violets are blue. Stay out of El Salvador and Poland too.”²⁸¹ Despite having called the Soviet

²⁷⁹ Ibid.

²⁸⁰ Gil Troy, *Morning in America: How Ronald Reagan Invented the 1980s* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 236.

²⁸¹ Ibid., 261.

Union the “evil empire” in front of a group of evangelical preachers in 1983, by his second term, Reagan’s language and approach toward the Soviet Union became more conciliatory and ushered in the final phase of the Cold War. Although the scope of the “great thaw” is much larger than this investigation, it is worth noting that this change in Reagan’s position is debated amongst scholars who claim that he was either a true visionary or unbelievably naive.²⁸² Additionally, as we move further away from the Reagan years, scholarly interpretations of both the American president and Gorbachev are increasingly reexamined, particularly since the death of President Reagan in June 2004. What scholars universally accept, however, is that the Reagan administration constructed and implemented a working negotiation strategy with the Soviet Union, which prior to 1985 was unprecedented in Cold War history.

This is one of the triumphs of the Reagan Revolution: that President Reagan’s political ideology, policies, and even legacy were inexorably linked with anti-Communism, and by 1985, the anti-Communists engaged in actual diplomatic negotiations with the Soviet Union. This dissertation has shown how the White House media staff was able to transform Reagan’s image as a hawk, through the 1984 presidential campaign and his defeat of the nuclear freeze movement, and to repackage his reputation as a peaceful president. For example, meeting in 1985 in Geneva, Reagan and Gorbachev agreed in principle on a 50 percent cut in strategic forces and a reopening of cultural exchange programs with one another.²⁸³ This meeting was more symbolic than substantive, however, as it did demonstrate a new era of cooperation in terms of nuclear weapons than throughout the post-war years. In turn, the Soviet Union faced its

²⁸² For more recent material on the final phase of the Cold War, see Walter Lafeber, *America, Russia and the Cold War, 1945-2000*, updated 9th ed. (Boston: McGraw Hill, 2002); Joseph Cirincione, *Bomb Scare: The History and Future of Nuclear Weapons* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007); Richard Rhodes, *Arsenals of Folly: The Making of the Nuclear Arms Race* (New York: Knopf, 2007); Troy, *Morning in America*; and Garry Wills, *Bomb Power: The Modern Presidency and the National Security State* (New York: Penguin Press, 2010).

²⁸³ Lafeber, *America, Russia and the Cold War*, 339.

own complex foreign and domestic problems and encountered resistance in Eastern Europe and Afghanistan. Gorbachev represented a new Soviet generation that was freed from the shackles of Stalinism, and his policies of *perestroika* (restructuring) and *glasnost* (openness) were met with “Gorby fever” around the world. He was given the honor of *Time* magazine’s Man of the Year in 1987. Even though the two superpower leaders were actually negotiating and the Reagan Revolution underway, the uncertainty of the Cold War and misinformation on the Soviet Union was still very evident in the United States.

American popular culture, however, continued to exploit nuclear anxieties by producing a myriad of cultural products emblematic of the country’s commitment to fighting Communism around the globe. Reagan’s aggressive foreign policy in Central America and the Middle East coupled with his infectious patriotism captured Cold War imaginations. One example is the repackaging of the Hasbro toy G.I. Joe as a cartoon series, *G.I. Joe: A Real American Hero*, which began a twelve-year syndication run in 1982. Similarly, Hollywood produced a steady stream of action movies, including *Red Dawn* (1984), *Invasion USA* (1985), *Rambo—First Blood II* (1985) and *Commando* (1986), that capitalized on Cold War fears while adhering to the Reagan Doctrine. As for network television, nightly news broadcasts presented stories on Cold War skirmishes occurring in Angola, Nicaragua, Lebanon, El Salvador, and Afghanistan as well as the civil unrest occurring behind the iron curtain. Prime-time audiences were also enjoying the exploitation of the Cold War in network series such as the *A-Team* (NBC, 1983–1987), *Scarecrow and Mrs. King* (CBS, 1983–1987), and *Miami Vice* (NBC, 1984–1989), which blended the detective narrative with the geographic proximity to Central America in a platform for a variety of stories that commented on the Reagan doctrine.

The made-for-television movie and miniseries were still used as means to grapple with social and family issues such as incest in *Something about Amelia* (1984), teen suicide (*Surviving*, 1985) and child abuse (*Child's Cry*, 1986). The ABC television network continued to find tremendous success by making epic miniseries throughout the decade such as *The Winds of War* (1983), *The Thorn Birds* (1983), *North and South* (1986) and *War and Remembrance* (1988). By 1986, the popular press began to report on ABC's Cold War-inspired miniseries *Amerika*, which depicted how ordinary Americans would live under Soviet occupation. This miniseries, it is argued, did little to educate the American viewer about life behind the iron curtain; nonetheless, the show remains a cultural milestone in that it is also the last miniseries of the Reagan era to generate old Cold War fears.²⁸⁴

Preparing for *Amerika*: The pre-airing media campaign

In the months leading up to the premiere of ABC's *Amerika*, many critics openly questioned the network's motivation for undertaking such a politically "ambitious" original production. Some speculated *Amerika* was a symbolic gesture for the political disruption brought by the 1983 made-for-television movie *The Day After*. Many critics at the time seriously questioned the intent of ABC, pondering the actual message of the film as it remained unclear and contradictory for its fourteen-hour run. In addition, this chapter asserted that the miniseries did more to misinform and confuse the American viewing audience rather than explain Soviet occupation or even the ideology of Communism by focusing more on the melodramatic events of various characters. Although the miniseries was promoted as a realistic portrayal of Soviet occupation, the narrative echoed the Reagan position that New Left activism was an instrument manipulated by the Kremlin. This assertion that the United States was occupied by Soviets

²⁸⁴ Isabel Wilkerson, "Where 'Amerika' Hits Closest to Home," *New York Times*, February 21, 1987, Special Edition, Arts section, 19.

because of a lack of patriotism was offensive to politicians, veterans, activists, and viewers who collectively objected to this negative presentation of the American people. Moreover, because it was criticized for its overt jingoism, the miniseries was deemed by many as a fourteen-hour public apology to the White House from ABC executives for provoking public concern with *The Day After*.²⁸⁵ Accordingly, scholars assert that how in comparison with *The Day After*, the anti-Communist message of *Amerika* was given priority, freed from real political pressure, and permitted to saturate the network.²⁸⁶

In the months prior to the February 15–22, 1987, broadcast of *Amerika*, the film generated a wealth of criticism and media interest. Similar to *The Day After*, pundits on both sides of the political spectrum objected to the content of the teleplay as it related to the Reagan administration's policies, relations with the Soviet Union, and nuclear weapons. Although the miniseries does not include any atomic imagery, it is important to include it in the larger canon of nuclear-themed films, as it presents a futuristic United States under Soviet occupation. This Cold War narrative also contained an important political message: the Soviets did not need nuclear weapons to occupy America, as they were aided by the United Nations, Communist allies from Central America, and sixties liberal activists whose collective lack of patriotism served as the mechanism that allowed for the Communist occupation. Again, it is significant to remember that by 1987, most Americans received the majority of their information on global events through television, which was also changing due to the increase of cable channels and the transmission of news segments due to the twenty-four-hour format.

²⁸⁵ John J. O'Connor, "TV View: 'Amerika' Slogging through a Muddle," *New York Times*, February 15, 1987, TV, 32.

²⁸⁶ J. Mallory Wober, ed., *Television and Nuclear Power: Making the Public Mind* (Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing Corporation, 1992), 30.

On January 2, 1987, *ABC Evening News* aired a four-minute segment on the controversy that the miniseries, while still in production, was generating from all sides. A spokesperson for the Soviet Union, Georgi Arbatov, considered “*Amerika*” offensive, especially in terms of the graphic scenes of drug use, alcoholism, and the sexual harassment of women by Soviet men of power. Additionally, the United Nations also interpreted the miniseries as globally hostile not only to the United Nations, but to the thousands of UN peacekeepers deployed around the world. A voice from the political left, Jeff Cohen, opined that *Amerika* was the “right-wing’s ultimate paranoid fantasy,” as it provided another reason for the American voting/viewing public to continue to follow the failed policies of President Reagan. Finally, the segment ends with *Amerika* executive producer, writer, and director David Wrye, who expressed amazement at the reaction and found it ironic that groups throughout the United States and the Soviet Union are so interested in preventing the miniseries, even though most objections came from groups who had yet to see the finished product.²⁸⁷

The idea for the teleplay is credited to ABC executive Brandon Stoddard, as well as political insider Bud Stein, who allegedly questioned why ABC was so concerned with nuclear destruction during the production of *The Day After* and suggested it would be more informative for Americans if they watched their country under the thumb of the Soviet Union. Echoing their public statement on the production of *The Day After*, executives at ABC claimed the film did not contain any political message, but rather was an investigation into how the Soviet Union would affect Americans. Wrye stated that “the intent of the mini-series and the way the mini-series functions is not anti-Soviet, and, indeed, has virtually no foreign-policy implications.”²⁸⁸

²⁸⁷ *ABC Evening News*, January 2, 1987, Vanderbilt Television News Archive, Record Number 105475, Vanderbilt University.

²⁸⁸ John Corry, “Jumping the Gun on ‘*Amerika*,’” *New York Times*, January 25, 1987. D18

However apolitical the miniseries claimed by those involved in the production, the teleplay was causing a firestorm amongst political pundits from all sides. Lisa Belkin of the *The New York Times* wrote:

“*Amerika*” the mini-series—at 14 1/2 hours, it is, if nothing else, a very large piece of prime time—is now the source of great controversy. “*Amerika*” bashes the Soviet Union; it doesn’t bash it enough. It slanders the United Nations and threatens world peace; no, it is a fictive work about totalitarianism. At the moment, liberal to left sentiment is running most strongly against the ABC mini-series, although moderate to right-wing criticism is coming up fast. Battlements are raised. The sound of apocalypse is heard. Somewhere an enemy is lurking. Still unclear, however, is the direction of the enemy attack. Will “*Amerika*” be a rightward thrust, plunging us into cold-war paranoia? Or will it turn left, lose its nerve and excuse an imperialistic Soviet Union? In fact, nobody knows, including the most prominent of the critics. Nobody actually has seen “*Amerika*.” It’s the idea they don’t like.”²⁸⁹

Belkin went on to write how the film had created so much controversy that ABC produced a promotional videotape for corporate sponsors and political/social activist groups. This promotional film included interviews from the cast, crew, and producers, all of whom confirmed the need for making such an ambitious miniseries.

Objections to the proposed miniseries emerged from every angle. The United Nations wanted a better portrayal of UN peacekeepers and hired a media consultant to work with ABC or face potential legal issues.²⁹⁰ Additionally, activists on the left argued that the depiction of the Soviet Union was too harsh and could damage U.S.-Soviet relations. Critics on the right asserted that the film did not do enough to represent the terrors of totalitarianism. Even the Soviet Union objected to how the network teleplay depicted the interworking of the Soviet state apparatus. According to the official network response, ABC was incorporating all of these issues into the finished product, and even in late January with a February release date, the network was still

²⁸⁹ Lisa Belkin, “‘*Amerika*’ Is Besieged on All Fronts,” *New York Times*, January 24, 1987. D21

²⁹⁰ Corry, “Jumping the Gun on ‘*Amerika*.’” *New York Times*, January 25, 1987. D18

editing the miniseries, suggesting that the objections to the teleplay as reported in the media influenced the final product in some way.

The network spent nearly \$40 million to bring the epic series to viewers, but the network also depended on corporate sponsorship that was waning in the midst of the *Amerika* controversy. In late January 1987, the *New York Times* reported that Chrysler, the auto giant then run by captain of industry Lee Iacocca, decided to pull its money out of the miniseries. Americans would see no commercials for Chrysler during the fourteen-and-a-half-hour telecast. This ushered in a wave of fear that other corporate sponsors would pull out of the project, leaving ABC in a precarious position. A former United Nations worker and Chrysler stockholder had began a letter-writing campaign in opposition to the broadcast and called for a nationwide boycott of the miniseries.²⁹¹

Not only was the network saturated with oppositional mail from Americans, but the Soviet Union also became a vocal opponent of the miniseries. In the media blitz that preceded the broadcast, Soviet ambassador Alexander Palladin appeared on network news shows and openly criticized ABC-TV for its harsh presentation of the USSR. In a two-and-a-half minute segment that aired on CBS *Evening News* with Dan Rather, Palladin remarked on the range of anti-Soviet imagery emerging out of Hollywood. His position on *Amerika* was the film continued the tradition of *Rocky IV* and *Rambo*, which did not educate the American people on the Soviet Union but rather fostered more misinformation and miscommunication amongst the superpowers.²⁹² Similarly, on January 17, ABC's *World News Tonight* with Peter Jennings aired a four-minute segment on demonstrations against the film at the United Nations as well as the position by the Soviet foreign ministry about how the miniseries could lead to a serious decline

²⁹¹ Ibid.

²⁹² CBS *Evening News*, January 13, 1986, Vanderbilt Television News Archive, Record No. 30625, Vanderbilt University.

in U.S.-Soviet relations and, more importantly, an immediate response in the form of limiting the access of ABC News to broadcast out of Moscow. The segment included a response by ABC executive Brandon Stoddard, who acknowledged that the network took Soviet objections seriously, but stated that the miniseries was a prime-time, fictionalized narrative, not a program designed by the ABC news division. Both the ABC network and the White House took a similar position that the United States did not “bow down” to Soviet censorship.²⁹³

In a February 21 article in the *New York Times*, Isabel Wilkerson reported that along with leftist groups that opposed the content of the film, former Washington insiders also expressed displeasure with the narrative’s depiction of politicians and the United Nations. According to the article, three former secretaries of state, Alexander Haig, Edmund Muskie, and Dean Rusk, along with two former national security advisers, Robert McFarlane and Brent Scowcroft, and the former chief delegate to the United Nations, Jeane Kirkpatrick, collectively signed a letter of protest against *Amerika* and delivered it to ABC headquarters in New York. The collective objection made by Washington insiders, former Reagan officials, and prominent Republicans who signed the letter were the portrayal of UN peacekeepers as brutal handmaidens of the Kremlin. Along with partisan/activist groups on the left and the right, this letter called for an informative panel after the completion of the broadcast that would answer questions from the viewing audience, in a format similar to the post-*Day After* broadcast.²⁹⁴

Ironically, an internal memorandum from the White House suggests that the administration was more concerned with Soviet censorship than domestic pressure. In a time of negotiations with the Soviet Union, both in Geneva and in Iceland, the White House media staff feared that the miniseries might stall relations between the two countries. In a memo to Pat

²⁹³ *ABC World News Tonight*, January 17, 1986, Vanderbilt Television News Archive, Record No. 98998, Vanderbilt University.

²⁹⁴ Wilkerson, “Where ‘*Amerika*’ Hits Closest to Home.”

Buchanan, Don Eberly offers “talking points” to the White House communications director regarding how the ABC miniseries should not influence the “spirit of Geneva.” He writes, “As one who was present at the summit, I can assure you that I found no evidence that the renewed sense of cooperation and trust that was clearly present there would require the American television networks to consult Soviet opinion in their programming, and face threats of outright blackmail for failure to comply ... in the spirit of Geneva, you may want to propose to your Soviet counterparts a policy of mutuality; we won’t tamper with their propaganda services that masquerade as new programming if they don’t tamper with our free press.”²⁹⁵ This statement suggests that the White House had sufficient evidence to reason that the miniseries might jeopardize U.S.-Soviet relations; however, the administration was more concerned with the international objections rather than domestic opposition.

The White House received a great number of personal letters, memos, and commentaries about what the media staff should do in response to the growing controversy. A group of elementary school children flooded the White House with letters asking the president to cooperate with the Soviet Union for the good of future generations of children around the world. Some children even asked the president how he planned to prevent Soviet occupation of America, as seen in the miniseries. Mirroring a similar commitment to help the US contain Communism after the theatrical release of *Red Dawn* (1984), which also depicted a Communist invasion, a group of YAF (Young Americans for Freedom) from the University of South Carolina pledged a commitment to use all available tactics to fight Communism if it were to happen in the United States.²⁹⁶

²⁹⁵ Memo to Pat Buchanan, “ABC Mini-Series ‘Amerika,’” Kojelis, Linas: Files OA 8631, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

²⁹⁶ Memo to Linas Kojelis, “YAF for America,” from Young Americans for Freedom, File OA 8632, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

On February 4, 1987, the White House Media Office received a memo from the Freedom Federation, a conservative think tank and right-wing activist organization, which enumerated the strategies “the left” was using to promote the film with the help of representatives from the Soviet Union.²⁹⁷ The memo states that an ad hoc organization, known as “Equal Time,” was forcing ABC to host a panel discussion after each episode of the mini-series in which the “left-wing” point of view would be presented to the American people. Most notable on the panel would be nuclear winter activist and leader Randall Forsberg and activist/politician Andrew Young. Additionally, the memo warned that antinuclear activists, such as local chapters of SANE and Mobilization for Survival, among others were sponsoring conferences around the country to explain the miniseries in an attempt to galvanize support for Democrats. More objectionably, the group “Educators for Social Responsibility” wanted to explore the meaning of patriotism in a nuclear world along with “Media Productions of L.A.,” which, according to the report from the White House, was using the film as a pretext for bringing Soviet filmmakers and television officials to meet the Hollywood entertainment industry. The Freedom Federation recommended that conservative groups should be encouraged by the White House to mobilize in a campaign to refocus the public’s attention on the essential points made by the series: “those of Soviet expansionism and human rights abuse.”²⁹⁸

In terms of how conservative groups would mobilize, the Freedom Federation reiterated five major talking points, which echoed many of the talking points discussed during the 1983 controversy over *The Day After*. The first point restated that a Soviet occupation was not unrealistic, since the USSR was “the most successful imperialist power in history.” The second

²⁹⁷ Memo to Linas Kojelis, “ABC mini-series ‘Amerika’” Kojelis, Linas: Files OA 8631, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

²⁹⁸ Memo to Linas Kojelis, File OA 8631, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

point addressed the controversial depiction of the United Nations. According to the Freedom Federation:

Over the past fifteen or twenty years, the United Nations has become increasingly hostile to the United States and to the values of the free world. During this time, the Soviet bloc, along with its allies among Third World and Arab nations, has used U.S. agencies to harm U.S. interests. For example: the U.N. welcomed PLO terrorist chief, Yasser Arafat, to the General Assembly; it passed the libelous “Zionism is Racism” resolution; UNESCO mounted a concerted campaign aimed at undermining press freedom around the world ... While the series’ depiction of the U.N. may be imaginary, it reflects the organization’s marked anti-U.S. posture.²⁹⁹

Clearly, the miniseries portrayal of the United Nations was not the central concern of the

Freedom Federation. Yet, leading into the third point, the organization warned that *Amerika* might rejuvenate public support for disarmament that could jeopardize the U.S. nuclear arsenal.

The fourth point harkened back to the premise of the miniseries, a bloodless Soviet coup.

According to the report, this idea was also a dangerous reality for Americans to understand in

that the USSR had come to occupy land from Eastern Europe to Nicaragua, not through direct military encounters, but through proxy takeovers and the support of internal terrorists’

organizations. Finally, the report concluded that the real answer for preventing this nightmarish

scenario from actually happening was to “help those fighting the Soviets and their proxies in

Afghanistan, Angola and Nicaragua to regain their freedom.”³⁰⁰

The Freedom Federation was organizing its own audience groups in cities across the country including Chicago, Boston, Houston, and many others. Just like their leftist counterparts, the Freedom Federation also requested equal network time to present the conservative view of the miniseries to the American public. The organization launched its own media campaign with the help of William F. Buckley of the *National Review* and the *Wall Street Journal* as part of the conservative strategy to use the film as a “pretext” to persuade the public that the United States

²⁹⁹ Ibid.

³⁰⁰ Ibid.

needed to continue its support of right-wing governments in Central America by aiding the “contras.”³⁰¹ Just how the American public would respond to the film was still hypothetical, as ABC continued to edit the film until the February 15 broadcast. But thanks to the outstanding publicity surrounding the film, it appeared as if the miniseries on Soviet occupation would unite the American public as viewers at least for the first week of February.

An Analysis of the Miniseries “*Amerika*”

After much political speculation, *Amerika* debuted 15 February 1987. Situated ten years into the future; the Soviet Union now occupies the United States. In a bloodless coup that began with an electromagnetic pulse that disrupted military and civilian communication, the KGB has already installed a puppet regime in the White House that is orchestrating an even larger plan than U.S. occupation. The opening scene is reminiscent of the beginning of *The Day After*. The audience sees the glorious vistas of the Midwest, the farmlands, the rolling hills, a distant rainbow in the background. Although the scenery looks like contemporary America, after a woman jogs up to a man on any mainstream in the country she says, “Dasvadana,” or hello in Russian.

The audience is introduced to the Communist equivalent of urban life, which sets the visual and narrative tone. The first real scene of American life under Communism is in Chicago, where actors are performing a second-world, sedated version of *The Fantasticks* and the audience looks like Eastern Europeans in drab, featureless clothes, representative of the Soviet Second World. As the narrative unfolds, the audience slowly learns how the Soviet invasion took place. The narrative presented a conspiracy-themed Soviet occupation, who utilized the United Nations, corrupt politicians, and the sixties leftist radicals as tools for American occupation. In a

³⁰¹ Kojelis, Linas: Files OA 8631, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library.

slow pace, the viewer learns how the United States has dealt with the loss of its independence to Soviet invaders. A full-scale war was never started by the USSR but rather Communists used leftist sympathizers and the United Nations to aid a bloodless coup. American private ownership was replaced with Stalin-era collectivization as Americans were stripped of their possessions, while bloated, greedy Soviet bureaucrats enjoyed the fruits that capitalism harvested. The narrative fluctuates from the dangers of cities to the hiding places and secret spaces occupied by Americans in relocation camps. Although some American homes still contain important artifacts from the past, such as medals from the U.S. government and personal items of note, the Soviets expanded their empire in America in the same manner that Stalin seized land in the USSR during the 1930s. As for ordinary Americans, they either complied with Soviet dominance or were relocated to camps. Once again evoking the evils of the Second World War, Americans under Soviet rule were subjected to the same horrors as Holocaust victims and those who protested Nazi occupation.

The miniseries also explored the minutiae of everyday life. Even though the topography of the country appears the same, the American people no longer enjoy the benefits of consumer capitalism. Instead of grocery stores catering to the individual needs of the consumer, Americans now wait in long food lines only to receive tomatoes and soy cakes. To maintain occupation, the Soviets established gulags or relocation camps patrolled by the UNSSU (United Nations Special Service Unit), who have unlimited power in their ability to victimize Americans. The UNSSU soldiers, wearing uniforms that are reminiscent of both the Nazi SS as well as real UN peacekeepers, torch and pillage houses, run over innocent Americans with large Soviet tanks, and rape local women (although this is not explicitly shown). Overall, the UNSSU are able to wreak havoc without much opposition. Those American patriots willing to fight, they are

collected, tattooed with a tracking number, and reeducated on the Soviet version of history in order to survive.

The miniseries stars Kris Kristofferson, who plays Devin Milford, a former sixties radical who was a liberal presidential candidate running for president before Soviet occupation. The audience watched Milford leaving the Communist rehabilitation prison camp. After six years in a Soviet camp, Milford is secluded in the middle of Nebraska, now part of a collective of five states known simply as “the Heartland.” Milford argues with his father, who openly blames “the sixties” generation for the occupation. Meanwhile, the Kremlin has larger plans for occupied America. It intends on breaking up the country into twelve sections, leaving the “Heartland” to under the command of Milford’s former college roommate Peter Bradford, played by Robert Ulrich. In typical social melodramatic fashion, Bradford’s wife is torn between her love for her husband, love of country, and love of Milford. As part of Milford’s parole, he is isolated from his children, who live in Chicago, and he makes a desperate attempt to kidnap his oldest son to aid in the rebellion and ignite a war of American independence.

As the narrative continues to unfold, the audience learns that the Soviets have even larger plans for America, which are not revealed to American politicians in a lame-duck, symbolic position like Bradford. Rather than following the KGB orders of “the final solution” for Americans, which involved the nuclear destruction of strategic cities around the country, the leading Soviet general, Samanov, asks the remaining members of Congress to officially and ultimately disband their third of the American government. When members of Congress refuse to disassemble, Samanov threatens to blow up Washington, D.C. employing conventional social melodrama narrative style, Samanov is conflicted by his own love of pre-occupation American values and cultures and orders from the Kremlin that he commit suicide instead of directing a

nuclear strike. Meanwhile, demonstrations led by Milford back in the “Heartland” are met with violence and brutal force by the Soviets and the UNSSU, who are finally encountering a true revolution by the American people, who banded together under Milford’s leadership and their renewed sense of patriotism. In action scenes, American militias, costumed in jeans, flannel shirts, and automatic assault rifles, now wage a guerilla war on the Communists. For the viewer, the success of Milford’s revolution is never revealed, although the audience assumes the revolutionaries are successful based on the final images of Milford in mid-celebration.

The audience thus sees a large generation gap, in which the Great Depression/World War II generation blames sixties activists, such as Kris Kristofferson, as the real reason for the decline of freedoms and liberties in the United States. This criticism of the sixties is very much aligned with the Reagan administration, which cast an extremely negative light on New Left Liberalism during the 1984 presidential campaign. Furthermore, the miniseries also engages conventional melodrama aspects, focusing on sexual identity, gender inequality, and violence. In one scene, a desperate American teenager is inspired to lose her virginity in the midst of the growing grassroots movement to defeat the Russians. Again, we see the network juggling the political content along with the social melodrama emblematic of the time period. The narrative has no defined beginning, middle, or end and unapologetically jumps from social commentary to political editorials without any explanation. From montages of American heartland images, to images of children in Soviet schools, to the exile camps, to a night club where teenagers are incited to riot, the majority of the narrative is concerned with interpersonal dynamics and familial relations. This disjointed construction of the narrative, interweaving the political and the personal, created space for audience identification with the characters; but more importantly, the fractured narrative presented an abbreviated and uninformed representation of Soviet occupation.

Considering the mini-series is fourteen and a half hours long, it is important to examine specific scenes that capture the complicated currents of the narrative. For instance, in one scene, students in an elementary school history class are recalling the American narrative they have learned under Soviet occupation. In these “revisionist,” “Soviet-inspired” historical narratives, one child speaks of the American imperialist past in terms of conquering and killing Native Americans and rather than celebrating the achievements of the Founding Fathers, students are taught American imperialism and conquest. In a later scene, the same child addresses a political gathering, which looks eerily similar to a Nazi Party rally, and states:

We are the voice of the new generation ... the destructive ways of the past are gone. We'll replace them with our vision for the future. The party will lead us to a new age. There are those who have tried to stop this new age. They are the corrupt reminder of the past. They have tried to confuse us with the idea that the old America was a good country. We know that lie. History teaches us that lie. We are grateful to our Soviet brothers who have saved the world from destruction and we can now join them in a world of Socialist brotherhood. Everyone will go to school, everyone will have a job, and everyone will be equal. No one will exploit or be exploited. And all of those who oppose this wonderful vision will be crushed.³⁰²

This critique of the American past as expansionist, aggressive, and imperialist falls in stark contrast to the consensus historians of the 1950s as well as President Reagan, who believed in optimism and the American dream. Additionally, the assertion that worldwide Socialism would bring equality is used as a narrative commentary on the problematic social activists of the 1960s, whose cause of identity politics and flirtations with Marxism brought about Soviet occupation, according to the narrative.

So bleak was America under Soviet occupation that a shared will to expel foreign occupation becomes the impetus for the rebellion against the Soviets, although the audience never sees the real fruits of the American Revolution against Communism. The images from President Reagan's “Morning in America” campaign of happy, healthy consumer Americans

³⁰² *Amerika*, written, directed, and produced by Donald Wrye, ABC-Films, 1987.

united under God is in stark contrast to the landscape under Soviet occupation. In its place is the harsh “reality” of Soviet occupation, a place that values the collective over the individual, a government wrought with corruption and malfeasance, and a culture that rejects individual identity. Reagan routinely expressed the values of individualism and identity and would publicly state on television how one of the greatest strengths of the American people is its differences. However, the loss of the individual and the subjugation of Soviet indoctrination illustrate the dismal nature of Soviet occupation, according to the ABC-TV network. Interestingly, critics of the film echoed a similar message that the “graphic realism” the miniseries attempted to portray was unfortunately ill-informed and inaccurate in scope, and that the idea of presenting this type of scenario to the American people as “realism” was comical.³⁰³ The entirety of the television event gestured toward the idea discussed in the press that ABC needed to present a more patriotic Cold War mini-series to the American people, one that adhered more openly with the Reagan administration.

The Cable Revolution: Representing the “Individual” on Cable

In opposition to the depiction of Soviet occupation curbing freedom and choice on ABC, television was rapidly becoming democratized throughout the 1980s. In many ways, the cable revolution was predicated on the deregulation of television under Reagan and also the expansion of cable around the country. For those who could afford it, television offered new representations that appealed to the individual consumer. Cable represented the joys of consumer capitalism in that the cable stations provided an identity to each specific viewer. As conservatives criticized the identity politics of the sixties, cable offered a cultural space for individuals to define themselves in the Reagan era outside of bipartisan politics. From the colossal success of the Music Television Video channel (MTV) to the triumphant success of the Nashville Network,

³⁰³ Flora Lewis, “Foreign Affairs: ‘Amerika’ the Dull,” *New York Times*, February 20, 1987, D14.

television audiences were gaining more choices and identifying the niche broadcasting for specific regions, races, and generations. However, audiences were also becoming more fragmented due to technology. This transformed the traditional relationship between network television, the Reagan administration, and the use of television as an instrument of news and entertainment. Moreover, the emergence of cable captures this moment of rupture, when the networks began to seriously lose their original programming audiences to specific, niche cable channels catering to the individual. This moment of potential democratization of television space transcends previous scholarly interpretations of audience reception.

The decade began with three major networks (ABC, NBC, CBS) monopolizing over 90 percent of the prime-time American audience.³⁰⁴ By the end of the eighties, these three networks fought to maintain only 60 percent of that audience. The other 40 percent of viewers were now equipped, through the expansion of satellite dishes and cable service, to watch a seemingly limitless number of networks that catered more to the individual subscriber. New developments included the expansion of syndicated programming; for instance, shows such as *The Brady Bunch* and *Bewitched* found their way back on television, after decades of being off the air. Most notably, between 1976 and 1980, most of the major cable channels were established, including ESPN, CNN, MTV, USA Network, and CBN (Christian Broadcasting Network), and these received sizeable audiences while offering an alternative from the conventional programming present on the three major networks.³⁰⁵ Moreover, cable stations tapped into niche markets in the same ways that the three major networks attempted to program for specific audiences. Examples of niche cable channels included CBN, which became the mouthpiece for the Moral Majority; Nickelodeon, a channel dedicated exclusively to children's programming and more specifically

³⁰⁴ James Walker, *The Broadcast Television Industry* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1998), 31.

³⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 32.

to a white, suburban audience; BET (Black Entertainment Television), which offered a variety of programs from news to original series that was tailored to the African American viewer but also created by African Americans; FNN (Financial News Network), which targeted the upper-middle-class, white-collar audience; and the Weather Channel.³⁰⁶ By the end of the decade, cable would continue its growth through niche channels and self-promotion and evolve into a television alternative that catered to urban viewers, suburban viewers, and everyone in between and offered more channels than ever before, with better visual clarity. The rise and expansion of the cable television industry is one of the hallmarks of the Reagan Revolution.

With the cable revolution, new ideas about audience reception and audience identification began to change. As the three networks' monopoly on television declined, Americans who possessed the means to utilize new television technologies were offered an amazing new world of choice, which echoes the joys of consumer capitalism as applauded by President Reagan. Audiences also used these niche channels as vehicles to explain their concerns, agency and beliefs. One of the strongest examples of this type of audience identification is the success of the "I want my MTV" campaign, which featured artists such as Madonna, the Police, and David Bowie among others shouting this tagline on the phone to "the cable provider." Just like ABC had found a loyal audience in the emerging baby boom suburban audiences of the immediately post war decade, executives at MTV tapped into the suburban, Generation-X audience by using sixties grassroots promotions. When the admired artists said, "Pick up your phone, call your local cable operator, and demand your MTV," suburban teenagers responded. MTV became a

³⁰⁶ Gary R. Edgerton, *The Columbia History of American Television* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 301–2.

cultural and financial juggernaut that would influence all aspects of television programming, both on and off cable.³⁰⁷

Pioneering scholarship into the issue of audience reception reveals there are a multiple of ways that audiences receive and interpret television imagery and content. More examinations of the success of MTV are needed for a variety of reasons, from the cultural to the financial to the issue of audiences constructing new relationships with cable niche stations that are peddling in identities for the suburban voter. According to one account by 1984, “with advertising revenues of one million dollars a week pouring in, with an audience of twenty-two million youngsters between twelve and twenty-four, MTV was the highest-rated basic cable network.”³⁰⁸ As the vanguard leader of the cable revolution, MTV expanded its programming from music videos into television shows, news, and celebrity entertainment. This type of slick broadcasting and niche marketing produced a generation of youth that defined their identities through MTV as well as other channels. As the decade went on, the cable giant was criticized and blamed for creating a generation obsessed with materialism and possessing short attention spans. Regardless of the negative criticism, by the end of the eighties, many critics would recognize MTV as the era’s “most influential cultural product.”³⁰⁹ Just as the baby boomers became synonymous with identity politics of the sixties, Generation X became tantamount to cable and the Reagan Revolution that conquered television.

Conclusion

The 1984 campaign is remarkable in that it offered two strikingly different positions on the status of America at the time. In Reagan’s America, the country was brimming with

³⁰⁷ Troy, *Morning in America*, 129–32.

³⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 129.

³⁰⁹ Steven D. Stark, *Glued to the Set: The 60 Television Shows and Events That Made Us What We Are Today* (New York: Free Press, 1997), 244.

optimism and hope and prosperity had been restored by the collection of seasoned Cold Warriors who made up the presidential Cabinet. In addition, Americans were shown enjoying the fruits of consumer capitalism. In stark contrast, the political and economic realism offered by the Mondale campaign appeared too dismal for the voting public.

It is imperative to remember that throughout the campaign commercial for Ronald Reagan's reelection, he never directly outlines or explains any upcoming executive policies. It was a produced narrative of Reagan's America, where content and depth is less important than image, faith, and optimism. The governmental issues debated on television and in the press are not addressed. What Reagan offered was a glowing homage to Americans rather than an educated framework for understanding complicated issues.

In opposition, Walter Mondale presented a very different account of Reagan's presidency. He argued that Reagan had weakened America's geopolitical standing by not engaging in diplomatic discussions with the Soviet Union. Moreover, he claimed, Reagan's fiscal commitment to the military was bleeding the American taxpayer to the point of decimating the middle class. In stark contrast to the Cold Warriors and older politicians that constituted Reagan's advisors, Mondale surrounded himself with a younger staff while also having a woman, Geraldine Ferraro, as his vice presidential candidate. In Mondale's America, the real problems facing the nation included the lack of union protection for American workers, an assault on social programs such as Social Security and Medicaid, and the destruction of the environment.

Although both commercials were extensively shown in parts on television, this chapter argued that Reagan's command of the television medium helped to sell his optimism to the American people, who rewarded him with a second term in the Oval Office. In addition, as

Reagan appeared calm, rational, and at ease in the White House, the Reagan campaign painted Walter Mondale as a New Left sixties radical, who personified the trappings of liberalism. Mondale was shown as an angry demagogue, focusing on everything that was “wrong” with America. While the Reagan campaign offered visual images of suburban workers carpooling to work and devoted Christians celebrating in church, the Mondale campaign attempted to capture the “realities” of “trickle-down” economics by showing unemployed workers, the dilapidated physical environment of the Rust Belt, and the poor and elderly underclass, all ignored by the Reagan administration. As factual as Mondale’s campaign might have been, and arguably was, the American audience/voter responded more favorably to the positive images proffered by Republicans.

The conservative idea of representing American life under Soviet occupation through the network television mini-series offers great insights into the cultural fear of Communism and the ways in which America were misinformed about the Communist system. In many ways, the scenes from the miniseries such as the “revisionist history class,” or hometown parades with flags of Lenin/Lincoln, remind the viewers of what constitutes “America” in contrast to Communism and attempts to explain some of the ideological differences between the superpowers. The Reagan image also plays a large part in terms of viewer identification. For the Reagan White House, the film represented the infectious threat of Communism and it also promoted the wars against leftist groups in Central America. The film suggests that the lack of patriotism was the reason for the success of the Communist invasion, yet the will of American farmers and true “Americans” would lead to us back to freedom and democracy. Although the miniseries clearly places blame on American liberals, the production is representative of how television misinforms the viewing public. In addition, using this network production as a case

study for Reagan's second term allows for further analysis of the interplay between network television and the government. The Reagan White House idealized the nuclear family, moral fortitude, and patriotism, while the fictional collapse of the United States was caused by the lack of moral fiber and unwillingness to disengage from nefarious machinations for the United Nations. Even though the Chrysler Corporation pulled its advertising dollars out of the miniseries and Moscow threatened to limit the network's access to Moscow television affiliates, this miniseries serves as an excellent example of how the network took an extreme stance against the Soviets and aligned itself with the White House.³¹⁰

Similarly, ABC captured the nation's attention before the broadcast, generating an incredible amount of sensational press surrounding the film. In many ways, the waves of objections and opposition to the miniseries is more important than the film itself because of the fears and anxiety the film provokes, especially in light of the increasing attention on the Iran-Contra situation. ABC's original version of the narrative was never brought to the small screen; however, given the level of pressure the network encountered from a variety of political and social forces, one can argue that the film served as a fictional sacrifice to the White House for making *The Day After*. In contrast, *Amerika* was a celebration and glorification of patriotism as well as an attack on sixties liberals.

One of the strongest examples of the celebration of America during the 1980s was the cultural obsession with television technology and the ability to transform the traditional viewer experience. Not only did cable break the stranglehold on the three major networks' command of television viewers, it also brought about new ways of conceiving television as a whole. For example, in the early 1980s, millions of Americans discovered CNN, which challenged the conventions of network news by offering twenty-four-hour news segments and unknown news

³¹⁰ Peter J. Boyle, "Chrysler Pulls Ads from 'Amerika.'" *New York Times*, January 28, 1987, D37.

anchors. The first measure of CNN's success as an alternative to network news came in January 28, 1986, when millions of students in classrooms around the country tuned into the cable news network to watch the launch of the space shuttle *Challenger*, which included schoolteacher Christa McAuliffe as one of the crew. Seventy-three seconds into the broadcast, American triumph turned into tragedy when the spacecraft exploded in the blue sky over Florida. For CNN, this horrific event solidified the cable news outlet as the network that brought continuous coverage of immediate events to air, without altering scheduled programming. Furthermore, in 1987 CNN offered round-the-clock coverage of the eighteen-month-old girl, popularly known as "Baby Jessica," who had fallen into a well in Midland, Texas.³¹¹ Once again, the cable news outlet incorporated more direct, immediate attention to the story with direction to limit the editorial comments made by reports and let the images tell the story. This format challenged the conventional scope and role of network news divisions, as once constructed. Invariably, the emergence and popularity of CNN would forever alter the way Americans interacted, received, and understood the idea of television news.

In addition, the amazing success of niche cable channels such as MTV, CBN, ESPN, and TNN, to name a few, brought new changes in audience identification. Tapping into niche demographics, cable not only offered an alternative to the three major networks but also provided a new generation of Americans a way to find their identity. For example, MTV targeted the young, suburban audience because MTV creator Robert Pittman believed music was a tool used by kids and teenagers to identify them.³¹² Furthermore, for Americans who identified with the conservative right or identified themselves as Christians, cable catered to this demographic as well, with the Christian Broadcasting Network. From the growth of BET to TNN, cable

³¹¹ Edgerton, *The Columbia History of American Television*, 339.

³¹² Troy, *Morning in America*, 128.

television became a medium for identification in terms of generation, politics, interests, news and even religion. The bright future of cable television and the incredible pace of its growth is one of the greatest successes of the Reagan Revolution.

Although the Reagan administration was pleased by the presentation of *Amerika* on ABC, by most accounts, the \$40 million production of *Amerika* did not receive the ratings anticipated by the network. Perhaps because of the maelstrom of controversy evoked prior to the broadcast of the first episode, the ratings for the miniseries waned after the second night. Although the first episode of the miniseries was widely viewed by audiences, by the second night American audiences were watching CBS's presentation of the Miss America pageant and NBC's special episode of *Remington Steele*. Many of the reviews of the film commented on the same issue: the narrative was dull and uninspired. A review in the *New York Times* suggested that part of the problem with *Amerika* is that it offered no actual information on the interworking of the Soviet regime, nor did the film educate the American public on the history of the Soviet Union. Even though the ABC network marketed the film as a realistic portrayal of American life under Soviet occupation, the emphasis on social melodramatic conventions, such as sexual assault, infidelity, and family intrigue, obscured any solid context for illustrating the stated mission of the film. Most critics agreed that the miniseries was made for the White House as a network apology for heightening nuclear anxiety with the 1983 made-for-television movie *The Day After*. Similarly, while both ABC broadcasts provoked initial controversy, the post-broadcasting data revealed that each respective made-for-television movie did little to change or even sway public opinion regarding the Reagan administration, the Soviet Union, or the Cold War writ large. This is not to suggest the film did not change cultural or social ideas about Communism. If anything, the film underscores what American considered to be the one of the horrors of the Second

World: the lack of consumer choices. One reviewer noted, “It’s as though the idea of foreign occupation was thought up, nothing more was invented, researched, characterized beyond wooden stereotypes. There isn’t even the beginning of the wild fantasy dreamed up by Lt. Colonel Oliver North and his White House supporters in the Iran-contra affair. Now that’s a thriller, full of the kinds of fascinating insights into the workings of government behind rhetoric and bureaucratic ritual.”³¹³ Interestingly, the network was criticized for making Communism dull, which was not an official White House talking point, but one that reinforced American capitalism the administration’s agenda.

This type of empty, contrived propaganda, which pinpointed the American people’s complacency as the reason for the success of the Soviet occupation, was dismissed by critics who wrote of *Amerika* as propaganda for the ABC network, not even for the American people who tuned in to watch. Since the original version of the miniseries was never aired due to a wellspring of pressure from every discernable political position, it is safe to assume that the final product was continuously reedited and lost some of its original commentary due to the overwhelming political pressure. But, from the perspective of the White House, the public debate surrounding the miniseries worked to divert the public’s attention away from the Iran-Contra scandal that presented a genuine threat not only for President Reagan and Republicans but also to the American people’s trust in government institutions.³¹⁴ The fourteen-hour production proved to reinforce the public’s perception of Reagan as a leader of peace, as well as promoting Cold War orthodoxy. Even though the United States and the Soviet Union were entering into the Great Thaw of the Cold War in the late 1980s, the lingering mistrust of the “Russian other” remained

³¹³ Lewis, “Foreign Affairs: ‘Amerika’ the Dull.”, *New York Times*, February 20, 1987, D14.

³¹⁴ For more on the Iran-Contra scandal, see Wills, *Bomb Power*; Troy, *Morning in America*; and Philip Jenkins, *Decade of Nightmares: The End of the Sixties and the Making of the Eighties America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

constant and a fear of miscommunication continued. Due to television, however, Reagan's image presented him as the Great Communicator and the man who ended the Cold War.

Conclusion

In many ways, the idea for this dissertation is unconventional in both the approach to the topic and the supporting research. The impetus for examining the Cold War during the Reagan years through the lens of network made-for-television movies and miniseries is the result of watching *The Day After* in 1983 and becoming instantly afraid of nuclear war. Almost thirty years later, it is hard to gauge the impact of these nuclear-themed narratives; however, they live on as important cultural and political benchmarks that in many ways follow the trajectory of the Reagan presidency. Furthermore, network television works as the primary medium for understanding Reagan's transition from a Cold Warrior to the U.S. president considered "the Great Communicator."

This work relied heavily on visual sources, including network films, news programs, nightly news programs, and more. These materials are problematic in that the visual effect of the seeing a nuclear weapon detonate is considerably diluted by the written word. Even though describing nuclear war and weapons is inherently problematic, the sources collected from various archives help not only to bring these images to life, but also to illuminate a larger framework for understanding the final decade of the Cold War. Additionally, I used the primary documents retrieved in the Reagan Presidential National Archives to prove a number of arguments present in this work. I was limited in my research by two factors: (1) lack of access to documents; and (2) limiting the documents to those that directly discussed television. Although the Reagan Archive is still tightly protected in terms of access, the wealth of documents on *The Day After* alone speaks to the seriousness with which the White House monitored this potentially

inflammatory and political damaging made-for-television event in 1983. These documents also present a number of challenges for this researcher, not only because of restrictive access, but also because they complicate questions surrounding the nature of presidential intervention in television. Although this is a rather recent phenomenon for postwar presidents, television, especially by the Reagan years, was not a simple propaganda device. The Reagan Archive also contains numerous documents from conservative groups, such as the Freedom Federation, that flooded the White House with memos and documents about how to combat negative images on television. The Reagan Archive houses a wealth of information on the nuclear freeze movement and offers insight into how the White House responded to the group.

Previous academic investigations have examined the ways in which network television grew in tandem with the Cold War. In a look at television during the early fifties, Nancy Bernhard provides examples of direct government interference on news programming.³¹⁵ From CBS's *See It Now* to NBC's *Meet the Press*, many early television news programs were designed to present on current affairs and employed objective reporters to offer viewers more insightful, substantive information. In 1951, NBC-TV received over twelve million viewers to a seven-part series entitled *Survival*, which highlighted official U.S. civil defense measures. A review in the *Saturday Evening Post* described the television special this way: "If you think a falling A-bomb means the end of everything, this remarkable report may change your mind."³¹⁶ In the historical case of *See It Now*, which ran on CBS from November 18, 1957, to July 7, 1958, lead anchor Edward R. Murrow famously challenged the ringleader of the Second Red Scare, Joseph McCarthy, even under reported official and network pressure to move on to another topic. For

³¹⁵ Nancy E. Bernhard, *U.S. Television News and Cold War Propaganda, 1947–1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 1–2.

³¹⁶ Paul Boyer, *By the Dawn's Early Light: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 325.

American viewers, Murrow was perceived as an objective reporter, diligently tackling corporate and government Goliaths for the public good. However by the next decade, the Kennedy White House had named Murrow to head the United States Information Agency (USIA).³¹⁷ The main charge of the USIA was to distribute and produce American Cold War cultural propaganda around the world. Murrow, as head of this foreign cultural agency, contended that it was not Communism people feared, particularly in developing third-world nations, but rather economic and political instability. His agenda was to promote a real dialogue between government officials and broadcasters to construct international documentaries that would benefit all people of the “Free World.” Bernhard, Boyer, and other scholars have all asserted that network executives were intimately involved with government officials, and this type of interplay complicates how corporate television works, especially in terms of the Cold War.

Although the three networks transmitted Cold War messages to the American public throughout the fifties, network attention dwindled in the aftermath of the Cuban Missile Crisis. The 1962 nuclear showdown between the United States and the Soviet Union over the Cuban Communist government’s possession of Soviet nuclear warheads serves as the apogee of the official cooperation between the government and network executives. On the morning of October 22, 1962, White House press secretary Pierre Salinger requested access to network prime-time hours for the president to address the nation. As Americans tuned in to watch ABC’s *Stump the Stars*, viewers heard an announcement that the program would not air. Instead, American audiences heard President Kennedy speak of Soviet nuclear weapons found in Cuba and that this nuclear repositioning was not acceptable. As described by Gary Edgerton, “it was

³¹⁷ Michael Curtin, *Redeeming the Wasteland: Television Documentary and Cold War Politics* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1995), 87.

the first time television was used as a forum for international diplomacy.”³¹⁸ Furthermore, in the aftermath of the Cuban Missile Crisis, the White House press secretary offered each network one reporter and one hour, to engage the president about the event. Taped in the Oval Office, Kennedy fielded interviews with three reports as network executives Bill Lawrence of ABC, Sander Vanocur of NBC and George Herman of CBS watched from the sidelines. Broadcasted in December 1962, Americans watched as the president effectively answered provocative questions about the nuclear standoff. But what was less known was how much the White House had orchestrated the journalistic inquiry.³¹⁹ The Cuban Missile Crisis marks an interesting point in terms of Cold War and network television history. For U.S. policy makers, the 1962 event would spark a new commitment to diplomacy, and for network television, the television lens no longer pointed as brightly on nuclear-themed programming.

This is not to suggest that television omitted Cold War-themed broadcasting from the airwaves. Yet after the viewing the world on the brink of nuclear war in 1963, the networks relegated Cold War programming into action, science-fiction, or farcical programming. In his work on Cold War broadcasting on network television in the sixties, James Coon examines how network shows such as *Rocky and Bullwinkle* (1961), *F-Troop* (1965), and *Get Smart* (1965), all employed Cold War-era themes under the guise of comedy. He argues that opposed to network programming of the fifties that presented American audiences with more documentaries and news specials on the threat of Soviet expansion, network shows like *Get Smart* parodied secret agents as well as the entire Washington-based counterintelligence apparatus.³²⁰ This inclusion of

³¹⁸ Gary E. Edgerton, *The Columbian History of American Television* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 227.

³¹⁹ Ibid.

³²⁰ James Coon, “Sixties Entertainment Television and Cold War Discourses” (PhD diss., Bowling Green State University, 1994), 10–15.

more brevity and comedy, according to Coon, was a reaction to the Cuban Missile Crisis as well as the shift in national focus on domestic issues and the Vietnam War.

Network television would bring back nuclear issues to news formats and to a new generation of television watchers by the late seventies. For Generation X, the term that describes Americans born between 1968 and 1981, images and ideas about the Cold War were received exclusively through the network television medium. In contrast with older Americans, Generation X knew less about the Cold War and had not experienced the immediacy in which television could evoke nuclear anxiety. This is not to suggest that Generation X had no knowledge of nuclear culture, as Hollywood produced a wide range of nuclear-themed films throughout the sixties and seventies. However, television is a different medium, especially with the conflation of news and entertainment that emerges in the late seventies. In 1979, as a result of the March 28 nuclear accident at Pennsylvania's Three Mile Island nuclear power plant and President Carter's growing frustration with the Soviet Union, network television repackaged nuclear-themed programming for a new generation of viewers. Most notably, it is the images from made-for-television films such as *The Day After* that will become cultural touchstones for an entire generation whose only knowledge of the Cold War came directly from television.

This pronounced emphasis on nuclear-themed programming was the last phase of the Cold War. For American audiences of the eighties, the issue of nuclear weapons saturated network programming, from scripted made-for-television films such as *World War III*, *Special Bulletin*, and *The Day After*, to nightly news segments about nuclear freeze, to even scripted/fictional news such as "The Crisis Game." This level of media attention did create a renewed climate of nuclear fear that lingered until the official collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Although the late atomic period is arguably the most active era of the Cold War in terms of

visual culture, global activism, the expansion of nuclear weapons to other countries, and the collapse of the Soviet Union, it is also arguably the least explored by scholars. A cursory look at the late atomic period under Reagan alone chronicles the largest military budget expansion of the postwar era (1981), the largest political demonstration in American history (1982), the adoption of the nuclear freeze resolution by the House of Representatives (1983), and the most-viewed nuclear apocalypse movie in network television history (1983), as well as the signing of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, the most comprehensive nuclear negotiation treaty between the United States and the Soviet Union, signed in 1987. Any one of these events should be examined independent of one another; yet collectively, they illustrate a larger point about the significance of the decade, particularly for Cold War historians.

Over the last thirty years, television has reinvented itself in significant ways. The collapse of the major three networks control of national viewership in the eighties, the availability of multichannel cable and global satellite technologies, changes in regulation policies and ownership rules along with new types of personal home-recording video systems, all contribute to transformations in the ways we “watch” television. As the cable and broadcast networks struggle to compete for audiences, new program forms emerge and are emulated by other television markets. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, in response to changes in the industry, policy, technology and audience viewing habits, network television revitalized its schedules and targeted specific groups, especially the suburban youth and elderly, with new program types. The emergence of the Fox network in 1986 is emblematic of this transformation. The network’s first venture was *The Late Show Starring Joan Rivers*, which debuted October 1986, and was created specifically to lure viewers away from *The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson* on NBC. Although the Joan Rivers’ version barely lasted a year, Fox continued to plunder the three major

networks audience base by engaging in niche programming. Beginning in April 1987, the network introduced audiences to a more subversive type of family situation comedy in the form of the unapologetically dysfunctional, *Married ...with Children*. This depiction of the contemporary American family was far removed from the positive images offered by NBC's *The Cosby Show*, and ABC's *Family Ties* and *Growing Pains*. However, Fox continued to deliver alternative programming by introducing American audiences to comedienne Tracy Ullman as well as the still-running, cartoon, satirical family, *The Simpsons*. Originating as a vignette on the *Tracy Ullman Show*, the success of this cartoon family was soon spun off as its own half-hour animated series in 1989. Emerging as *the* new network of the late eighties, Fox branded itself as the network for hip programming. Included in the new Fox pantheon of shows was Keenan Ivory Wayans's *In Living Color*, featuring an ensemble of African-American actors and comedians, as well as the network for youth-oriented series, such as *21 Jump Street* and *Beverly Hills 90210*.³²¹

Fox would continue to find success in the growth of infotainment broadcasting, a similar pattern seen on ABC, NBS and CBS. Three network shows specifically demonstrate the Fox network's commitment to creating inexpensive, reality-based shows that dealt with immediate issues and blurred the lines between fact and fiction. The tabloid newsmagazine show, *A Current Affair* (1987), became a hit for the network offering a daily dose of sensational stories on lurid crimes, sex and celebrities. *America's Most Wanted*, premiering on Fox in February 1988, became one of the most popular series on the network. It presented factual information on wanted fugitives as well as fictional reenactments of crimes left unsolved and unprosecuted. By

³²¹ Gary R. Edgerton, *The Columbia History of American Television* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 304.

July 1989, the series became the first Fox program to rank first in its time slot.³²² More than any other Fox reality show of the era, *America's Most Wanted* invited, encouraged and even demanded audience interaction, asking individual viewers to become de facto deputies and marshals helping to aid the authorities in the pursuit of dangerous criminals. The network even repackaged the scripted, dramatized police show into a new reality format. Fox's reality/documentary themed, *Cops*, invited audiences to participate in the actual pursuit of criminals by placing the home viewer at the scene of police inquiries. This series was shot from the point of view of the actual police officers on the ground with camera crews following and documenting police in the office, on stakeouts, drug-raids, and to a lesser extent, officers beginning and end their shifts. This look at real law enforcement officers on and off the job resulted in modest ratings for the network but helped to solidify Fox as America's fourth major broadcast network by 1990.³²³

Just as the introduction of the Fox network was representative of the changing television landscape of the 1980s, by the end of the decade the big three networks CBS, NBC, and ABC had each created individual niche identities with American viewers. Since the beginning of the postwar era, CBS had worked to legitimize its news division from Edward R. Murrow, to Walter Cronkite, to Dan Rather. The network continued to dominate the airwaves throughout the early seventies and eighties not only in terms of news but also serial productions such as *M+A+S+H* and *Dallas*, both of which achieved iconic status and loyal viewership for the network. In addition, NBC struggled in the eighties to produce shows and news segments that rivaled CBS. By the 1984 season, NBC premiered an original family situation comedy that would also achieve outstanding ratings and generate a huge audience with *The Cosby Show*. Furthermore by the end

³²² Alex McNeil, *Total Television: A Comprehensive Guide to Programming from 1948 to Present* (New York: Penguin Books, 1991), 41.

³²³ 2000 Report on Television, 18.

of the eighties, NBC dominated television with sit-coms such as *Family Ties*, *Cheers*, and the *Golden Girls*. Interestingly, NBC produced on onslaught of family orientated programming for a variety of suburban audiences from Generation X to baby-boomers who found comfort and identification with the characters. Throughout the postwar television period, ABC branded its network as the channel committed to family programming, sports, and news. The network broadcast ABC's *Wild World of Sports*, created *Nightline* in the midst of the Iranian Hostage Crisis, and produced some of the most widely viewed made-for-television movies of the late seventies and early eighties with *Roots* (1977) and *The Day After* (1983). At the decade's end, with the introduction of Fox and its commitment to subversive humor and "realistic" programming, American audiences had more viewing choices and in turn demonstrated their own agency by identifying with individual shows rather than a network brand.

The decade is filled with iconic imagery captured and recycled on American network television. From Reagan's assassination attempt (1981), to *The Day After* (1983), the Geneva Summit (1985) to Reagan's public declaration to Gorbachev regarding the destruction of the Berlin Wall (1987) to the televised proceedings of the Iran-Contra hearing (1987), collectively these images present the visual trajectory of not only the Reagan administration but also a televised history of the Cold War.

Reagan's final years in office are in stark contrast to the genesis of his presidency. By the end of his second term, Reagan expressed a personal and ideological willingness to engage "the evil empire," that produced positive result. His belief in American exceptionalism and "Star Wars" terrified and helped bankrupt the Soviet Union. This is not to suggest that Reagan's cooperation and presidency alone brought an end to the Cold War but coupled with the scope and

success of the Gorbachev Revolution the era of cooperation among the two existing superpowers marked the end of Soviet occupation from East Germany throughout Central Europe.

As the decade begins, television news and print journalists alike are much more interrogative of President Reagan and his case for investing millions of tax-payer dollars to rejuvenate the U.S. nuclear arsenal. From the media's interest in the nuclear freeze movement to the prime-time inquiries into Reagan militarism, mass media writ large was more openly critical and hostile to the administration. However, as the decade moves on, particularly after Reagan's reelection in 1984, the television news industry becomes much passive in its depiction of the President and his administration's policies. Furthermore, television in the eighties presents these moments of rupture in the traditionally established connections between government, the three major networks, and American viewers. These points of rupture include the post-*Day After* roundtable discussion that invited audiences to participate in a live-televised discussion with US officials on the topic of nuclear war. This invitation to the American public to engage in official nuclear discourse can be interpreted as a moment of democratized television space where ordinary Americans demonstrated their agency, voice, and collective concerns.

As for network television news and programming, it followed a similar trajectory of Reagan's eighties. Upon his arrival, his military budget increase was met with more overt criticism. CBS's news presentation of "The Defense of the Nation" interrogated the new administration's key policies and its effect on domestic programs. In addition, celebrities were joining the growing nuclear freeze movement, whose image and wholesome activism was embraced by the mass media in 1982. By the beginning of 1983, the eighties zeitgeist of "personal technology" and the "yuppie" captured the attention of Americans were who seemingly entranced by the bright future of personal technological items that radiated

conspicuous consumption. As for television, social realism had taken on new dimensions with the expansion of cable and the transformation of network news. Late-night news shows such as *Nightline* and the twenty-four-hour coverage by Headline News and CNN changed the public reception to television segments. By the end of the decade, CNN would dominate television news and become the leading news outlet during the 1991 invasion of Kuwait. This melding of fact and fiction and even the problematic nature of network news instantly creating sensational stories due to technological advances in the medium is best exemplified in the rise of infotainment and a cultural fixation on wealth and the lives of the rich. By the end of 1985, after Americans watched *The Day After*, *Special Bulletin*, “The Crisis Game,” and for some, through the expansion of cable, even *Threads*, there was not only a political, but a cultural need to move away from atomic issues. By the end of the decade, the networks were mired with cultural representations of Reagan’s idealized America such as *Family Ties*, *Growing Pains*, *L.A. Law*, *Thirtysomething*, *Moonlighting*, and *Cheers*. Additionally, First Lady Nancy Reagan made television and presidential history with her appearances as herself promoting her anti-drug domestic agenda campaign, “Just Say No!” on a number of family-oriented television shows. This movement away from the nuclear social melodrama format implemented in *World War III*, *The Day After*, *Special Bulletin*, *Threads*, and even *Amerika* was notable, and it gestures toward a change in network programming. Although the made-for-television movie and the commitment to social melodrama still remains, by the end of the eighties, all three networks would decrease the production of the social melodrama in exchange for more news tabloid shows, or even with the creation of the Lifetime network (1984), which would gender the social melodrama as its niche marketing scheme, promoting itself with the tagline “programming for women.”

More scholarly work is needed to investigate the link between television technology and democratized space. With the inclusion of cable and home television technology, the individual can create a distinctive viewing experience that represents agency and even democracy. Additionally, one of the major transformations in the television format is the development of tabloid-news broadcasts or “vox-pox” talk shows, defined by a media personality heading the program by the creation and engagement of some type of public forum. “Vox-pox” shows such as *Phil Donahue Show* (1970), *Jerry Falwell* (1971), *Jesse Jackson Show* (1990), and *Oprah* (1986) directly engaged in-studio guests and the larger American audience to participate in a public forum on social issues. The notion that these types of public forums allow for agency and democratized spaces challenges conventional theory of television working as a one-sided mass medium that dictates public opinion. The popularity of tabloid news shows ushered in a new feeling of inclusivity by viewers. Conversely, the feeling of inclusivity by viewers also alters the entire design of public opinion polls and how they are used by politicians, mass media journalists and pundits to explain public policy. Infotainment programs unapologetically interweave the “entertainment” segments with varying degrees of seriousness and have steadily become more popular since their inception. Some scholars contend that this transformation in television has undermined most traditional notions of objective journalism.³²⁴ Nonetheless, the cultural connectivity offered by this “news” format has an emulsifying effect in that the individual feels as if they can participate in larger, democratized discussions by simply watching television, another aspect of the scholarship that needs more exploration.

No discussion on the relationship between television, the Cold War, and American viewers is complete without reiterating the significance of Ronald Reagan as the first television president. Reagan himself became a visual political emissary between entertainment and

³²⁴ Dahlgren, *Television and the Public Sphere*, 56–57.

politicians. He was the embodiment of the melding of Cold War issues within the mainstream discourse. Reagan's resume, consisting of Hollywood actor, SAG union president, HUAC supporter, and then California governor, charmed the press and his years in Hollywood cultivated skills of delivering emotional monologues. Early in his political career, he aligned his political agenda within the conservative right that conceived the Soviets as untrustworthy allies nor could they interpret student-oriented New Left politics as anything less than comical delinquents devoid of real substance. Reagan's record reflected that he would fight Communism both home and abroad and utilize television to disseminate the message that Soviet sympathy would not be tolerated. Some scholars have argued that Reagan was an image of the times, the ultimate media-constructed fantasy of unlimited wealth and unparalleled visual pleasure.³²⁵ Reagan's idealized image and positive optimism made him a perfect fit for television. His oratory conveyed heroism, patriotism, and faith in American optimism. This rhetorical style was best suited for television because it mirrors the teleplay's narrative conventions of plot and resolution.

When historians look back on the televised decade of the eighties, we find more cultural connectivity because of the immediacy of the television medium. Throughout the decade, over 100 million Americans watched the end of *M*A*S*H*, *The Day After*, and even the Super Bowls, leaving indelible imprints on the memories of Americans and helping to define American culture during the eighties. Television, acting as a mechanism for cultural identification and cultural interaction, is an important component of this narrative. Additionally, the deregulation of the network oligopoly is emblematic of the decade. Without the Republican agenda of deregulation the avenue for this public space and cultural remembrance may not have been as easily had. If

³²⁵ Jane Feuer, *Seeing through the Eighties: Television and Reaganism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), 3.

we are to understand the Reagan years and Cold War culture, it is imperative that we begin to see how all of these changes in political rhetoric, cultural imagery, and television work together to form a larger narrative that more effectively captures the eighties.

Recent scholarship on the Cold War, television, and Reagan are flourishing due in part to availability of documents and the exploration of television as an academic discipline. In *Epic Encounters*, Melani McAlister explains the connection between cinema executives, the Middle East and the Eisenhower administration.³²⁶ Bernhard's work on the significance of legitimizing network television reporting provides amazing insight into early cooperation between network executives and Cold Warriors, especially in terms of the importance of network news and documentary programming. Additionally, Jane Feuer's work on cultural constructions of wealth and identity during the eighties, *Seeing through the Eighties*, directly challenges the Gramscian ideology of television as a mechanism of state-sponsored propaganda. The fragmentation of the traditional network audience combined with the awesome success of cable niche stations, remote technology, and home video recording transcends the early cooperation between network executives and the government. For a moment before the emergence of the Internet and the collapse of the Soviet Union, television appeared to work as a democratized space, where individualism, choice, and debate could be obtained. However, international conglomerates such as Viacom, AOL-Time Warner, and others soon emerge and complicate the notion of individual agency. These international conglomerates still construct and maintain the public conscience, and just as the big three networks denied access to other cable channels, these corporations provide limited space for the people to access any real counter-narrative that challenged corporate sponsored news media. This would remain unchallenged until the technological

³²⁶ McAlister, Melani. *Epic Encounters: Culture Media and U.S. Interests in the Middle East, 1945-2000*(Berkley: University of California Press) 2001.

development and cultural participation in the opening of the Internet in the early nineties. Collectively, these nuclear dramas opened up a televised space for the suburban Generation-X viewers to become involved in the public discourse on nuclear issues. These made-for-television films, along with Hollywood cinematic productions, defined nuclear war, Communism, and Cold War ideology for a new generation. One could argue that the Cold War was defined by these made-for-television films as their popular images still resonate and are discussed within the public sphere. It is interesting that the Generation-Xers knew more about fictional accounts of historical events opposed to actual facts. Yet this reflects the nature of the medium of television that grew in tandem with the Cold War.

It is almost inconceivable to think that made-for-television films of the eighties were so politically wrought with controversy. The networks' attempt to explain them after they were broadcast, due to popular pressure or perhaps to increase ratings, are also worth noting. In the instance of *The Day After*, investigations into audience reception reveal that the news specials caused more confusion than explanation of Cold War events. These films did not affect the public's perception of Reagan. Looking at these network productions collectively, it is hard not to conclude that the mass media worked to create a climate of fear in terms of the production, investigation, and exhibition of nuclear-themed programming. My examination of official documents from the Reagan White House on the topics of nuclear freeze, popular culture, and the presentation of his national policies on television suggests that the issue was not so much that network television melodramas would remove the president from office. The real issue appears to be American assumptions and understanding of deterrence policy. With the growth of American network television in the postwar years, Americans were told that deterrence prevented nuclear war, even at the expense of nuclear disarmament. Nonetheless, as network

television transformed into an interesting mélange of news, entertainment, information, and public debate, the lines between fact and fiction became inexorably blurred.

With the explosions of the first atomic bombs in Japan, the nation has operated with a different framework for dealing with foreign and domestic affairs. As most scholars have noted, what developed in the postwar years was a triangular dialogue of television, scientists, and policy makers and social critics that have often confused and misinformed the American people more than it has explained the awesome possibilities and conflicts of the nuclear age.³²⁷ Additionally, this triangular dialogue became more complex with the inclusion of more popular debate with the expansion and prevalence of mass media, including network television, film, print journalism, and the exposure of political pundits writ large.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, defenders of Reagan's military buildup insist it was necessary to lure the Soviets into a position of reform that would bring a real arms-reduction agreement. Alternatively, since the fall of Communism, longtime Soviet ambassador to the United States Anatoly Dobrynin has proffered that Reagan's presentation of militarism had the opposite effect. He states, "It strengthened those in the Politburo, the Central Committee, and the security apparatus who had been pressing for a mirror-image of Reagan's own policy."³²⁸ Even the architect of containment theory, George Kennan, agrees with this alternative version of Reagan's Cold War policies working to delay, not hasten the collapse of the Soviet Union.³²⁹ As historians and political insiders continue to provide more insight into the internal cooperation between the Reagan administration and the Soviet Union

³²⁷ Allan W. Winkler, "The 'Atom' in American Life," *History Teacher* 26, no. 3 (May 1993): 317.

³²⁸ Anatoly Dobrynin, *In Confidence* (New York: Times Books, 1995), 482, 495, cited in Lawrence Wittner, *Toward Nuclear Abolition*, vol. 3 of *The Struggle Against the Bomb* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University, 2003), 308.

³²⁹ Joseph Cirincione, *Bomb Scare: The History and Future of Nuclear Weapons* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 41.

under the leadership of Mikhail Gorbachev, an evident “change” in both countries brought new cultural and economic transformations.

The ways in which the Cold War came to an end will continue to be examined by scholars, as well as the future of nuclear weapons in the post–Cold War world. Popular American notions on the collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe are developed and constructed by television imagery. In the aftermath of the celebratory ending of Soviet occupation, nuclear discourse transformed as the proven methods of nuclear deterrence and Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) were no longer viable. Today, we recognize how vulnerable we continue to be in the face of long-term nuclear issues and how much effort it will take to ever rid the world of that extraordinary atomic menace. Nonetheless, while nuclear fears may have dissipated in the post–Cold War era, it seems destined that nuclear culture and imagery have long-reaching cultural, political, and social effects. The role of the historian is to continue to examine this material in terms not only of adding to the historical narrative on the Cold War, but also of retelling the potential consequences of nuclear war. As quoted in Paul Boyer’s 1998 *Fallout*, a student from Generation X reminds historians of this imperative with this acute observation, “Those of you who lived through all those scary events have to keep reminding us that nuclear weapons really exist.”³³⁰ The further away from the Cold War we move, the more the world collectively forgets the existence of nuclear weapons and the awesome power they play in terms of politics, culture, economics, and international diplomacy. Although atomic history and the Cold War narrative are filled with near-miss accidents, potential showdowns, and miscommunication, there remains a wealth of information that is not available to the public. We might now know just how close to nuclear war the United States and the Soviet Union actually

³³⁰ Paul Boyer, *Fallout: A Historian Reflects on America’s Half-Century Encounters with Nuclear Weapons* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1998), 193.

came, but we should continue to examine television not only as the primary medium to deliver the American Cold War objective, but as a device that is emblematic of the entire Cold War era.

Just as the 1970s was the decade of great nostalgia regarding the 1950s, we are in the midst of a 1980s revival in popular and political terms. From clothing, music, television, movies, and political rhetoric, America finds itself again grappling with the contradictions of the Reagan era. Popular celebrations of the 1980s are evident in film from the recent sequel to Oliver Stone's 1986 film *Wall Street*, *Wall Street 2: Money Never Sleeps* (2010), to a retreatment of the popular 80s cop-drama *Miami Vice* into a 2007 film. A recent article in *USA Today* suggests that one of the reasons for the current preoccupation with the 1980s is that the ideas of the decade never left even as the calendar continues to move forward. The cultural success of the Reagan revolution in terms of the pursuit of fortune, individualism, and consumption continues to shape the collective consciousness of Americans. David Sirota, a columnist who recently published *Back to Our Future: How the 1980s Explain the World We Live in Now*, asserts that the greed, narcissism and the size of cultural products are still very evident in our contemporary lives in terms of the Lehman Brothers, Bernie Madoff, the housing market, and marketing cultural products for the widest possible audiences. Sirota explains, "almost every major cultural touchstone is rooted in the '80s...*The Sopranos* was an update of an '80s Scorsese flick (*Raging Bull* and later *Goodfellas*). *The Wire* was Baltimore's own *Colors*. *Curb Your Enthusiasm* is a Los-Angeles set *Seinfeld*. *American Idol* is *Star Search*."³³¹ He goes on to argue that unlike the baby boomer generation who pursued an interest in social movements and political activism, the next generation of Americans, Generation X, "didn't want to save the world...they wanted to get rich.

³³¹ David Sirota, *Back to Our Future: How the 1980s Explain the World We Live in Now* (New York: Ballantine, 2011), 10.

It became the norm, and it's the norm today."³³² Interestingly, the decade's dark side is also remembered most vividly through Cold War television imagery. For Sirota, the ABC made-for-television movie, *The Day After*, continues to serve as the primary visual demonstration of the looming presence of the power of nuclear weapons. More than any other television production of the decade, this cultural representation of the Cold War still evokes fear of nuclear annihilation and a visual representation of the Reagan presidency.

This renewed interest in the 1980s is not restricted to culture, but also politics and the legacy of the Cold War. For example, the February 7th issue of *Time* Magazine features a picture of Ronald Reagan superimposed with President Barack Obama with the title stating "Why Obama Hearts Reagan: And what he's learned from him."³³³ In the aforementioned article, Michael Scheuer and Michael Duffy explore the ways in which President Obama was able to command not only the medium of television but also controlled new social, internet media to gain political support and voters. Additionally, the authors suggest that Obama also possesses the affability and populist tone espoused by Reagan. This interesting commentary on presidential politics and technology speaks to the continuing legacy of the Reagan administration and the verisimilitudes of the Reagan Revolution.

Although the Cold War is over, the issue of nuclear weapons and nuclear imagery looms large, particularly since the 2011 nuclear disaster in Japan. The tragic incident has brought renewed immediacy to the issue of nuclear energy and the possible hazards nuclear energy can create. Television has recycled iconic images from the 1979 Three Mile Island nuclear disaster as well as the nuclear meltdown in Chernobyl in the Ukraine in 1986. The April 1986 explosion at Chernobyl "was the greatest single release of radioactivity in history," and one of the least

³³² Ibid, 14.

³³³ Michael Scherer and Michael Duffy, "Why Obama Hearts Reagan: And What he's learned from him," *Time* 7 February 2011, pp. 25-34.

explored nuclear accidents by American media outlets.³³⁴ A BBC television documentary in November 1989 visited the nuclear-laden wasteland and filmed the abandoned city of Pripyat, which was once home to over 60,000 people. Radiation levels remained high throughout the area, necessitating the demolition of villages and forests. One assertion that can be taken from the example of Chernobyl and now Japan is that the public is not equipped to understand the generational effects these nuclear incidents wreak on the human body and the environment. Television has been the primary medium in which most Americans have come to understand nuclear issues, even though throughout atomic and television history, the line between fact and fiction has been continuously blurred. Through nuclear themed television dramas, news special, and roundtable discussion, network television in the Reagan years attempted to represent the unimaginable consequences of nuclear war to the public even though at times these hypothetical visual representations were often in conflict with the conservative agenda of the Reagan presidency.

³³⁴ J. Mallory Wober, *Television and Nuclear Power: Making the Public Mind* (Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing Corporation, 1992), 270.

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