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Nuclear Freeze in a Cold War

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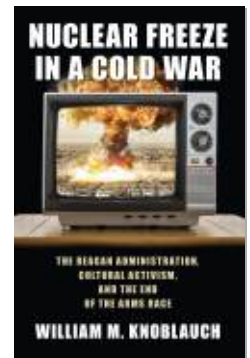
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Containing *The Day After*

By the time it aired on Sunday, November 20, 1983, ABC's apocalyptic drama *The Day After* had already become a nationwide media event. The buzz about the film was intense thanks to its timeliness, airing after six tumultuous months of steadily deteriorating superpower relations. Beginning in March 1983, President Reagan's rhetoric, notably his "Evil Empire" and Strategic Defense Initiative speeches alarmed peace activists at home and concerned leaders abroad. Reagan's adventurism overseas was equally disquieting. In addition to continued covert operations in Afghanistan, the president had committed a small "peacekeeping" force to Beirut. Convinced that eight hundred US Marines would help stabilize the region and prevent an Israeli invasion of Lebanon, Reagan was tragically proven wrong when, in April, terrorists bombed the US embassy, taking seventeen American lives.

Tensions escalated further on September 1, 1983, when Soviet military aircraft shot down Korean Airliner 007, killing of 269 civilians—including 61 Americans and US Representative Lawrence McDonald (who was a member of the conservative John Birch Society). Privately, Reagan urged restraint, but publicly the president called the act a "crime against humanity." In the days that followed, Moscow refused to accept responsibility. Andrei Gromyko offered only that "the world situation is now slipping toward a very dangerous precipice." Looking back, Reagan biographer Lou Cannon reflected that by September 1983, the global situation had "gone beyond words."¹ October proved even more precipitous. On October 23, 1983, a suicide bomber drove an explosive-packed delivery van past the gates and into an American military barracks in Lebanon. The blast, then the largest non-nuclear explosion on record, killed 241 US Marines; two days later, Reagan sent troops to Grenada.²

October also marked the impending importation of American nuclear warheads into Western Europe. The Euromissile crisis began in 1977 with President Carter's response to the Soviet deployment of SS-20 intermediate-range ballistic missiles (IRBMs) throughout the Eastern Bloc. The SS-20's MIRV design threatened to destabilize the European theater by tripling the atomic payload of each Soviet missile. Alarmed, West German chancellor Helmut Schmidt asked for support, and in 1979 NATO proposed a "dual track" response. On one track, the United States promised to deploy Pershing II IRBMs and tactical cruise missiles throughout Great Britain, Italy, and West Germany by 1983; on the other track, it would negotiate for the removal of SS-20s that threatened Europe. In 1981, Carter's decision became Reagan's burden, and the administration's "Zero Option" proposal proved to be one of the White House's most controversial foreign policy issues. Its architect, Richard Perle, was a protégé of the nuclear strategist Albert Wohlstetter, a hawkish conservative; Perle did not trust, or likely did not want to negotiate with, the Soviets. Basically, with the Zero Option he was asking something (Soviet disarmament) for nothing (*not* deploying American missiles), and Perle's gambit has been assessed by some as a strategy designed to fail.³ Not surprisingly, the Soviets refused this offer, and as the Euromissile deployment approached, antinuclear protests sprang up in Great Britain, France, and West Germany.⁴

Considering this context, it's hard to imagine a more frightening time for ABC to air *The Day After*, especially because its plot seemed based on real geopolitical events. In the film, nuclear war breaks out after American-Soviet confrontation in Europe, a narrative eerily mimicking the recent Euromissile deployment. Because of the similarity and because it aired at a tense time, pundits estimated that one hundred million Americans would tune in, turning *The Day After* into the most widely watched media event of the year.⁵

The film can hardly be called high art and is at times heavy-handed in conveying its antinuclear message. Set in Lawrence, Kansas, and nearby Kansas City, Missouri, it's a story about ordinary Americans—farmers, doctors, students, soldiers—who survive an atomic attack only to perish from radioactive fallout and societal breakdown. The first half of the film focuses on the banality of American life, juxtaposing daily routine with in-scene commentary (usually as television and radio broadcasts) explaining military escalations overseas. Frequently, characters expound on issues ranging from the 1962 Cuban missile crisis to the dangers of nuclear weapons, electromagnetic pulses, and radioactivity. The film's second half, by contrast, is more dire.

About an hour into the film, midwestern weapon silos open, ICBMs launch, and panic ensues. As the masses scramble for cover, Lawrence and Kansas City are obliterated. What follows is a not-so-subtle message: there's no surviving a nuclear war. Whatever its merits as a film, *The Day After* stands as the starkest dramatization of nuclear war ever shown on American television.⁶

Because of when it aired and the hype it created, *The Day After* was more than an antinuclear film; it became a nationwide media event, one that brought the nuclear debate into millions of American homes. The *New York Times* critic John Corry mused that "ABC's much-discussed vision of nuclear Armageddon is no longer only a television film: it has become an event, a rally and a controversy, much of it orchestrated." The White House agreed. In a memo to Edwin Meese, Special Assistant for Policy Information Kevin R. Hopkins expressed his concerns: "I had the privilege yesterday of viewing the upcoming ABC-TV film *The Day After* and found it both well-done and powerful. I am all the more convinced that this film could have a significant effect on public opinion, and that an appropriate posture on our part is imperative in order to minimize any damage and/or take advantage of the film to promote our country's national security interests."⁷ Clearly, the White House recognized the potential of this "orchestrated" antinuclear event to galvanize public opinion against the arms race. It had to respond.

Creating *The Day After*

The Day After was the brainchild of ABC Motion Pictures president Brandon Stoddard. In 1977, Stoddard produced the miniseries *Roots*, a popular adaptation of Alex Haley's 1976 novel about American slavery. The series was so successful that Stoddard looked for new, equally provocative material. After seeing *The China Syndrome*, a movie about the dangers of nuclear power, he decided to create his own antinuclear film, this time about the dangers of nuclear weapons. He enlisted the screenwriter Edward Hume, who prepared for the assignment by scouring government civil defense literature. Hume hoped to use official government language from civil defense propaganda to show the American public a realistic representation of nuclear war's devastating effects on society. Admittedly "sympathetic with disarmament," Hume agreed to do the project because he was growing increasingly "alarmed by the state of [US] defense policy" under President Reagan.⁸

With his screenwriter on board, Stoddard now needed a director. After three invitations were declined (citing the film as too depressing), Stoddard's

fourth choice, Nicholas Meyer, accepted. By 1983, Meyer had made a name for himself both as a writer, especially for his novel-turned-screenplay *The Seven-Percent Solution*, and as a director, notably of two successful *Star Trek* movies. Meyer agreed to work on *The Day After* out of a sense of duty. “I didn’t want to make this movie,” he told the *Washington Post*. “I did it to be a Boy Scout, to do my good deed for the day. I did this to be a good citizen. I thought it was a civic responsibility.” Sympathetic with disarmament, Meyer hoped that *The Day After* would stimulate public dialogue about nuclear war among apathetic Americans: “I did not want to preach to the converted,” he admitted; instead, he and ABC were “going after those who haven’t formed an opinion.”⁹ It was a lofty goal, considering that previous Cold War atomic films statistically had done little to convert citizens into antinuclear activists. In the early 1980s, however, there were hints that atomic films were capturing the public’s imagination. For instance, in 1982 *The Atomic Café*, a sardonic look at 1950s US civil defense propaganda, became popular on college campuses; other antinuclear films, such as *Threads* and *Testament*, were already in production. Because it promised an unflinching view of the horrors of nuclear war after six months of deteriorating superpower relations, *The Day After* held the potential to garner a huge audience.¹⁰

Meyer worked to make *The Day After* as realistic as possible. For research, he read Jonathan Schell’s *The Fate of the Earth*, examined US civil defense plans, and studied nuclear phenomena such as electromagnetic pulses (EMPs). He hoped to juxtapose realistic and frightening aspects of nuclear war with the banality of middle American life.¹¹ If he drove home the impossibility of surviving a nuclear war, Meyer could call out the Reagan administration—those who had bragged about winning a nuclear war just a year previous—as liars. Often, the director towed ABC’s line of nonpartisanship, stating that *The Day After* was not political and not meant to support disarmament. Other times, he was more forthright, even stating that he hoped to “sober the world and slow the pace with which we seem determined to turn our planet into a nuclear porcupine” and, ultimately, “clobber sixty million people over the head” with an antinuclear message.¹² That was a conservative estimate, and Meyer exceeded his goal by forty million. If gauged in terms of ratings, popularity, and news coverage, *The Day After* and its estimated one hundred million viewers makes it one of the most-watched media events of the 1980s.¹³

As its airdate approached, conservative critics who had previewed the film panned it as antinuclear propaganda, but Meyer did little to deflect the

criticism. Publicly, he maintained that his film was “fiction based on fact,” and *The Day After* opened with a disclaimer: “Although based on scientific fact, the following film is fiction.” On October 13, some five weeks before it aired, Meyer stated on National Public Radio that *The Day After* was a “public service announcement” and that he was elated that ABC was “spending millions of dollars to go on the air and call Ronald Reagan a liar.”¹⁴ In response, Reagan supporters quickly labeled the film subjective propaganda against the arms buildup. William F. Buckley’s *National Review* sarcastically suggested that *The Day After* was a film “for all of you who thought nuclear war would be a piece of cake,” while the *New York Post* asked: “Why is Nicholas Meyer doing Yuri Andropov’s job?”¹⁵ Such reviews, printed even before the film had aired, hinted at how divisive *The Day After* would become.

The criticisms only added to the film’s buzz, however, and soon antinuclear organizations were using *The Day After* as a cause for new antinuclear events. Roger Molander’s Ground Zero group distributed 200,000 viewing guides that encouraged “people to watch the film in groups and join the [antinuclear] movement” while the Campaign against Nuclear War scheduled two days of disarmament seminars to coincide with the film.¹⁶ Other groups established toll-free telephone hotlines that concerned citizens could call to join their organizations. Anticipating a strong response, ABC executives established their own phone counseling hotline; so did the White House. As early as September, viewers had hints of how dire ABC’s film would be, especially after a *New York Times* editorial called it “relentlessly depressing, with scenes of enormous destruction by firestorm, people being vaporized, mass graves, the irretrievable loss of food and water supplies, vandalism and murder, the breakdown of medical care and disfigurement and death from radiation sickness.”¹⁷ By late October 1983, *The Day After* was eliciting similar reviews across the nation. Newspaper ads called the film a “starkly realistic drama of nuclear confrontation and its devastating effects on a group of average American citizens.” Few made-for-television films had ever garnered such a response, leading the critic Edward Gorman to call *The Day After* “the most powerful use of TV in American history.”¹⁸

The film was powerful because it conjured comparisons to real-world geopolitical events. Citing the recent KAL 007 shoot down, the *National Review* asserted that Meyer’s film actually supported deterrence: “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 if it were a Korean airplane.” Recalling the Euromissile protests,

the *Washington Times* believed that the film would bring “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.” SDI supporters High Frontier proposed that *The Day After* “and media coverage of it, would seem to increase the distance, and the level of feelings, between the anti-nuke and the pro-defense factions.” If Meyer hoped that his film would spark public dialogue, he certainly achieved that goal.¹⁹

ABC was more than happy to fuel such debate. They distributed more than half a million “viewer’s guides” to spark conversation, purchased full-page advertisements—such as “The Day After: Beyond Imagining,” which included images of an American family watching ICBMs fly out of underground silos nestled in Kansas cornfields—and scheduled accompanying programs for a full week of antinuclear television.²⁰ One such program, *War Games*, would be a week-long series that showed the actual “decision making tactics in government crisis management [that are] designed to prevent escalation and confrontation.” Later aired as *The Crisis Game*, it included commentary from former defense secretary Clark Clifford, the noted diplomat Richard Holbrooke, the historian and JFK adviser Arthur Schlesinger, former assistant secretary of state Leslie Gelb, and the Harvard historian Richard Pipes.²¹

All of this publicity leading up to *The Day After* did not surprise the Reagan administration. In fact, as the buzz grew, the White House was working on a preemptive media blitz, one that could capitalize on *The Day After*’s hype to publicize a new, peaceful rhetoric and co-opt Meyer’s message about the futility of nuclear war.

The White House Preempts

The administration’s efforts to contain Meyer’s two-hour antinuclear “public service announcement” started in the Pentagon, which had initially allowed ABC access to airbases and equipment for the film. They reconsidered such access after learning that Meyer would insinuate that the United States, not the Soviet Union, instigated the film’s nuclear apocalypse. When the Department of Defense demanded that the script be changed to blame the Russians, Meyer refused, and the Pentagon retracted ABC’s access to US Air Force bases. It was only after Assistant to the President for Communications David Gergen pressed the issue that ABC ultimately acquiesced, making the film’s final cut ambiguous as to which superpower launched first.²² But this was just the beginning; by November 9, internal White House memoranda

trace a coordinated, detailed, and sweeping public affairs plan to contain the potentially critical fallout from *The Day After*. Specifically, drafts of this plan made clear: "The aim will be to channel peoples' [sic] emotional reactions to the film into support for the President's efforts to strengthen deterrence and reduce the threat of nuclear war."²³ It was an audacious political pivot. This is how they executed it.

On November 9, 1983, Robert Sims, then special assistant to the president and senior director of public affairs on the National Security Council, advised National Security Advisor Robert C. "Bud" McFarlane and David Gergen of the following actions. First, the NSC should distribute "talking points" to "all Administration spokesmen" to prepare them to defend "the President's policies of deterrence and arms control." These talking points were to be sent to "several hundred Administration appointees" as well as "a small number" of influential "conservative columnists." Sims tasked Karna Small-Stringer, director of the recently formed Office of Media Relations, with contacting "Conservative Columnists and Commentators" for support. Simultaneously, the NSC would prepare a "White House Digest" publication to outline the president's views on arms control for the press, as well as a question-and-answer guide laying out "the best ways to respond to the film or questions raised by the public or media" to be made available to "all Base Commanders, defense agencies and Public Affairs Officers world-wide." Finally, a "rotary hot-line" was set up for "mid-level specialists at the Department of Defense to answer requests from local radio and TV talk shows." Clearly, the NSC wanted everyone from high-ranking officials to low-level staffers equipped to serve as impromptu spokespeople who could defend the president's policies in the wake of *The Day After*.²⁴

Two days later, with only nine days until *The Day After*'s broadcast, President Reagan was in Japan attending a World War Two commemoration. Now peaceful allies, these former advisories shared a unique past: Japan remained the only nation ever attacked with atomic weapons, and the United States the only nation to use them in wartime. For this reason, and in the wake of rising Cold War atomic fears, the press would be closely following Reagan's remarks that day. It was a unique opportunity in a tense time, and the administration aimed to jettison its previous rhetoric about fighting and winning a nuclear war and assume a more conciliatory tone. Appropriately, it was Veteran's Day, and Reagan delivered. One part of his speech became especially important in the days leading up to *The Day After*:

I believe there can be only one policy for preserving our precious civilization in this modern age: A nuclear war can never be won and must never be fought. The only value in possessing nuclear weapons is to make sure they can't be used—ever. I know I speak for people everywhere when I say, our dream is to see the day when nuclear weapons will be banished from the face of this Earth. Arms control must mean arms reductions. America is doing its part. As I pledged to the United Nations less than two months ago, the United States will accept any equitable, verifiable agreement that stabilizes forces at lower levels than currently exist. We want significant reductions and we are willing to compromise.

It was that second line—*a nuclear war can never be won and must never be fought*—that popped. It was short, declarative, and marked a distinct departure from an administration who previously boasted that they could “prevail” in a nuclear war. It was the kind of line that just might disarm detractors who still saw Reagan as a warmonger. Ultimately, it was the line that became the centerpiece of the White House’s anti-*Day After* media strategy.²⁵

In the days leading up to *The Day After*, nervous administration officials expressed a multitude of concerns. Most agreed that it was time to go “on the offensive against those who will try to exploit the film for anti-Reagan purposes,” promote desires to keep the peace, and, whenever possible, accuse the film’s supporters of being the dangerous ones.²⁶ To implement this strategy, Karna Small-Stringer solicited ideas from members of the State Department, the Pentagon, the NSC, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), Science Advisor George Keyworth, and David Gergen. As director of communications, Gergen would play a pivotal role in this campaign.

Gergen quickly realized that this was a diverse group with myriad concerns. For instance, the Pentagon was upset that it had little time to create its own pro-defense film, so it ultimately decided to avoid national television altogether because “we tend to lose in debates.” As an alternative, it wanted an “outside group [to] attack ABC producers on scaring the public.” FEMA expressed regret over its removal of “civil defense [propaganda] from [the] public arena a year ago” and scheduled a meeting of advisers to come to “D.C. to see the film, and get guidance” on how they might resurrect civil defense pamphlets. Keyworth disliked this plan, positing that new civil defense propaganda would only do more to make nuclear war “sound like a possibility.” Ultimately, FEMA acquiesced. It would “not engage in public or media debate on the film or on the subject of Civil Defense,” and chose instead simply to “prepare letter response[s] to citizens who ask questions about [nuclear]

emergency plans." FEMA developed a new brochure, "What You Should Know about Nuclear Preparedness," aimed specifically at viewers of *The Day After* who might request "information after the film." Whatever branch of government involved, the most important rule was that the administration not "fight the film" or "point out technical inaccuracies." As the White House pollster Richard Wirthlin admitted, Meyer's depiction of nuclear war "was credible," so instead of arguing with the film's premise, administration officials should shift the dialogue away from the arms buildup and toward the president's rhetoric of maintaining peace.²⁷

One way for the White House to shift that dialogue was to handle the anticipated high volume of concerned callers. As the broadcast date approached, the White House enlisted "twenty volunteer telephone operators . . . to answer questions from the public" immediately after the film.²⁸ These operators were given specific talking points to recite. If a caller registered "concern over the effects of nuclear war," operators were to thank them and assure them that "President Reagan and all of his advisers share your concerns . . . that nuclear war would indeed be horrible." Of special importance was to remind callers of Reagan's recent remark that "a nuclear war can never be won and must never be fought." If callers complained about ABC or the film, operators should promise "to pass along [such] concerns to President Reagan" and offer to send literature about civil defense measures. All phone calls were to close with reminders of Reagan's pursuit of arms reductions, specifically the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty, but callers critical of ABC or *The Day After* would receive positive feedback.²⁹

Phone lines in order, Small-Stringer now secured a strong presence in national newspapers. She flooded the press with pro-Reagan editorials by conservative columnists such as Patrick Buchanan, William Safire, and Rowland Evans, as well as high-ranking officials including Vice President George H. W. Bush and Defense Secretary Weinberger. Bush penned an anti-*Day After* piece for the *New York Times* that endorsed "preserving peace through deterrence" and conveyed the VP's firsthand knowledge of the president's "sincere and abiding" commitment to arms reductions. Bush affirmed that Reagan's SDI program offered "the best chance of any recent President to achieve genuine arms reductions" and that he remained "convinced . . . that our policy of strength, deterrence, and serious negotiation holds open the door to lasting peace."³⁰ Weinberger sent a similar piece to the *Washington Post*. In it, he repeated Reagan's mantra that a "nuclear war can never be won and must never be fought." He also acknowledged that while *The Day After*

was frightening, it failed to “take us into the minds of the Soviet leaders” who over the “past two decades . . . have developed more and more powerful . . . nuclear weapons . . . than they could possibly need to deter attack.” Unlike Reagan, it was the Soviets who believe that “a nuclear war can be fought and won.”³¹

More high-ranking officials would deliver similar language. Kenneth Adelman, director of the US Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, contributed an op-ed to *USA Today* that accused *The Day After* of ignoring the reality that “only a strong defense will deter nuclear war.” Adelman concluded his piece with Reagan’s new slogan; so did Keyworth, who submitted a similar letter to the *New York Post*, which would be reprinted in more than one hundred American newspapers. In it, he pleaded that Americans “not let our revulsion at the idea of nuclear war turn into feelings of helplessness or despair. Instead, we must rededicate ourselves to doing everything we possibly can to prevent a nuclear war from ever taking place” because, as Reagan had stated, a nuclear war must “never be fought.”³² Six op-ed pieces by high-ranking administration officials and conservative columnists echoed this slogan in metropolitan newspapers including the *Washington Post*, *Chicago Tribune*, and *USA Today*.³³

In addition to print media, Small-Stringer coordinated an equally impressive showing on American television and radio. In the days leading up to *The Day After*, Richard Perle expressed pro-administration views on ABC’s *This Week*, CNN’s *Evans & Novak*, and CBS’s *Sunday Night Network News* and *Morning News Monday*. Perle was also scheduled to speak on KABC-Radio in Los Angeles and two major Chicago radio stations. Small-Stringer herself appeared on National Public Radio, CNN News, KFBK-Radio in Sacramento, and KZZB-Radio out of Beaumont, Texas, while a cast of Department of Defense characters were slated to appear on major radio stations in New York City, Boston, Miami, Sacramento, Des Moines, Chicago, Los Angeles, San Antonio, St. Louis, and Schenectady, New York. All told, administration officials appeared in twenty-seven major media markets just before *The Day After* aired.³⁴

Small-Stringer also enlisted pro-administration groups outside the government for this public relations campaign. She provided numerous conservative-leaning organizations, such as the American Security Council and Citizens for America, with White House talking points. Gergen requested that these groups contact other organizations, such as local Parent Teacher Associations; specifically, “we should find groups to tell parents not to let kids watch.

How about PTA . . . invite them to see it and get the word out to parents.” The American Legion followed this advice and filed a class action lawsuit “on behalf of those hurt psychologically by [*The Day After*].” Per these requests, conservative groups pressured television affiliates to censor the film or at least to encourage local viewers—and especially children—not to watch it.³⁵

Other conservative groups joined in the anti-*Day After* cause. William I. Greener, communications director of the Republican National Committee, coordinated efforts to discredit the nuclear freeze campaign in the wake of the broadcast. Greener did not contest the film directly but shifted the conversation toward “the best way to prevent” nuclear war. To spread their message, the RNC sent packets to state chairmen and emphasized that it was “crucial that . . . Republican Party leader[s], be prepared to respond to inquiries and make comments . . . on the film itself and on the entire issue of nuclear arms control.” The RNC packet also included materials from the National Republican Congressional Committee which criticized the nuclear freeze movement and requested that Republican critics attack *The Day After* publicly, as the film “exploits emotions, denies reason, [is] particularly disturbing to children, [and] implies that the U.S. would start a nuclear war.” Such propaganda, if used effectively, might “contribute to a national hysteria.” The RNC sent a similarly themed article to *Reader’s Digest*, asking “proponents of the nuclear freeze a set of questions” that contended the logic of disarmament. Overall, RNC representatives aimed to “come across as strong proponents of peace.”³⁶

Citizens for America (CFA) sent similar talking points and position papers to organization chairmen in important congressional districts. Led by Lew Lehrman—president of Rite Aid and a former New York gubernatorial candidate—the CFA heeded White House requests and publicly accused *The Day After* of being a “piece of nuclear freeze propaganda [which] clearly implies that President Reagan will be personally responsible for causing nuclear war within his term.” On November 15, CFA’s propaganda packets made their way to congressional district chairs and requested that their responses to the film be “swift and convincing.” They asked every district chair to “hold a press conference concerning the film [on] Monday morning at 11 am.” Accompanying CFA packets were prep materials, including a pro-SDI letter from Edward Teller; pro-administration guest editorials; a briefing paper on strategic defense; a background paper by the Heritage Foundation; Reagan’s March 23 SDI speech; Keyworth’s remarks on SDI; and even “instructions on how to hold a press conference.”³⁷

Armed with these materials, congressional district chairmen were to begin calling ABC affiliates to “express concern over the content and timing of the film [as well as] ask them for time to air an editorial response to the film.” Their goal was explicit: to “call every television and radio station in their district and ask what talk shows will be discussing” the film, contact “newspapers and offer to write a guest editorial on the subject of strategic defense,” and paint the film as propaganda presented “without regard to facts or responsible judgment.” Overall, the CFA succeeded in coordinating 110 pro-administration press releases set to appear the morning of Monday, November 21—the day after *The Day After*.³⁸

The administration’s most fervent source of outside support, however, came from Daniel Graham’s High Frontier organization. Graham, who would lead a zealous pro-SDI media campaign (the focus of chapter 4), anticipated a considerable backlash from *The Day After* and was wary that “nuclear freeze groups” would try to “capitalize on public sentiment generated by the film to renew a push for a freeze resolution in Congress.” High Frontier crafted its own public relations plan which, like the White House plan, was “not designed to debate the film’s accuracy or to deny in any way the horror of nuclear war,” but instead provide “a means by which the Administration can express its views” and “calm . . . public fears.” High Frontier hoped to “channel peoples’ [sic] emotional reactions to the film into support for the President’s efforts to strengthen deterrence.”³⁹

On November 4, 1983, Graham mailed his plans to numerous White House officials in a lengthy document titled “High Frontier: Two Day Media Blitz.” In it, Graham expressed concerns that the “pro-freeze film has already stirred a storm of anti-nuclear sentiment across the country.” Because it was “expected to draw a 50 share [sic] of the audience,” and become one of the “highest rated shows of all time,” High Frontier wanted to run pro-administration ads during commercial breaks. Graham exhorted the White House not to “allow the disarmament lobby to capitalize on this emotional movie [and] play on the fears and frustrations of the citizens of this country.” To help, High Frontier advertisements would “provide a sensible alternative” to blind disarmament.⁴⁰

Graham’s “media blitz” proposed full-page ads in major newspapers, including the *Washington Post*, *Miami Herald*, *San Diego Union Tribune*, *Topeka Capital Journal*, *Denver Post*, and *New York Times*, as well as television ads to air during the Ted Koppel *Viewpoint* special and on numerous local affiliates. That kind of media presence did not come cheap, and High Frontier

simply did not “have the financial resources on hand to purchase this time.” So, Graham asked the White House to contact wealthy conservatives, such as Joseph Coors and W. Clement Stone, and solicit donations of \$500,000 from each for High Frontier’s efforts.⁴¹

The White House rejected Graham’s request, and cautioned administration officials “not to become involved” with fundraising for High Frontier because “as a general principle, such activities are better handled outside the White House.” Not wanting to dismay one of their strongest supporters, however, officials later reassured Graham that President Reagan remained “deeply committed” to SDI and that he would follow High Frontier’s efforts with great interest. Despite this setback, High Frontier put together enough money to film its own pro-missile defense documentary that aired the week following *The Day After*. While some forty ABC affiliates aired the pro-defense special, the White House’s reluctance to aid Graham hinted at future administration efforts to distance themselves from him and his zealous SDI supporters.⁴²

By November 18, just two days before its airdate, television pundits speculated on what, if any, role *The Day After* might have on the antinuclear movement. CBS’s Bill Moyers argued that if the film had any power, it was because it “contradicts our basic American optimism that everything has a happy ending, even a confrontation between superpowers. It confounds the idea of American Exceptionalism.” On ABC, news anchor Peter Jennings offered that “*The Day After* has become a political tool [and] conservatives are concerned that it will play into the hands of the anti-nuclear movement.” The evangelical leader Jerry Falwell, a longtime Reagan supporter, dismissed the film’s message and commented that “one can think of no other subject from foreign policy to the economy that a network would dare to present in such a one dimensional manner.” Congressman Vin Weber (R-MN) criticized the film as an attempt to remove tactical nuclear missiles from the European theater.⁴³

The most common criticism on network news, however, was one that the White House specifically requested its conservative commentators share: that the film might traumatize children. It was a sound strategy, as even those who supported the film’s antinuclear message believed that children should not view it without parental supervision; others argued that because of the film’s graphic nature, children not be allowed to watch it at all. One CBS news broadcast from Lawrence, Kansas, featured a preacher exclaiming, “Let’s reject the vision of *The Day After*. Let’s reject it! Let’s reject it for us and

let's reject its despair and doom and gloom for our children." In the same broadcast, a local resident advised children not to worry about nuclear war because "adults are working on that. You don't need to worry about that." White House talking points had shaped the dynamics of televised debates regarding *The Day After*.⁴⁴

On November 20, just minutes before broadcast, White House officials made their final push on network news. Ken Adelman appeared on CBS to argue that *The Day After*'s premise was flawed, that worrying "about a nuclear conflict the day after is useless; it's managing to prevent one the day before that counts. That's the real message of tonight's television movie."⁴⁵ Adelman's remarks summed up a concerted White House effort, one that utilized top-ranking cabinet members, sympathetic pundits and columnists, NGOs, and a multitude of print, radio, and televised media, to sway millions of Americans to be wary of the film's antinuclear message. The Reagan administration had done what Kevin Hopkins had hoped: not attack the film on technical grounds or shy away from it but instead "view it as an opportunity to make our case" and "talk constructively about how to prevent" nuclear war.⁴⁶ In only a few weeks, the administration had turned a potentially damaging media event into a platform to change its rhetoric. The spin would continue after *The Day After*'s final credits rolled.

ABC's Viewpoint

Immediately following the film, ABC aired *Viewpoint*, a news special featuring anchorman Ted Koppel, who moderated a nuclear-themed roundtable discussion unlike any other in television history. After highlighting the importance of the film ("much more than a movie; it has become a national event"), Koppel introduced his panel, which included William F. Buckley Jr., the writer and Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel, former secretary of defense Robert S. McNamara, former national security adviser and secretary of state Henry Kissinger, former national security adviser (and chairman of President Reagan's bipartisan commission on the MX missile) Brent Scowcroft, Carl Sagan, and finally—and perhaps most important—Secretary of State George Shultz.

The choice of Shultz to represent the White House was made after much debate. As early as October 7, ABC requested that Vice President Bush comment on the film, and that UN ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick join the roundtable discussion; but neither Bush, who had previously bragged about

American nuclear superiority, nor Kirkpatrick, whose rigid foreign policy opinions—famously expressed in her 1979 *Commentary* article “Dictatorships and Double Standards”—were ideal representatives to tout a new, moderate line. For this particular public affairs strategy, Shultz was a perfect fit. A pragmatist, Shultz played a vital role in transitioning Reagan’s foreign policy away from the hardline stances of Pipes, Weinberger, and Perle, and toward reopening talks with the Soviets. To minimize his participation, the secretary of state opted to attend remotely, via closed circuit—a calculated move that ensured a limited time commitment and, it was hoped, would avoid a potentially dangerous free-flowing discussion.⁴⁷

Viewpoint opened on a somber tone. After introducing the participants, Koppel reassured the millions of viewers that “we’re all still here,” that “what we have all just seen” was not reality but a frightening possibility in a nuclear world. Next, he wondered whether “the vision that we’ve just seen [is] the future as it will be or the future as it may be? Is there still time?” He aimed the question directly at Shultz, who reassured viewers that *The Day After* did not depict the future; it only provided a “vivid and dramatic portrayal of the fact that nuclear war is simply not acceptable.” These remarks were straight from the “Public Affairs Strategy” playbook, as was Shultz’s claim that avoiding nuclear war “has been the policy of the United States for decades now—the successful policy of the United States. We simply do not accept nuclear war, and we have been successful in preventing it.”⁴⁸

Koppel knew that the secretary of state was reciting a script; indeed, viewers at home likely recognized that Shultz was reading cue cards. So, he restated the question: How would Shultz respond if, instead of addressing millions of Americans, he had to explain to a close family member America’s arms buildup? Shultz didn’t flinch; he stuck to the talking points: “The only reason that we have nuclear weapons, as President Reagan said in Japan recently, is to see to it that they are not used.” Additionally, the president was already working to “reduce the number of nuclear weapons” in the world; since the 1960s the total US nuclear destructive power had been reduced by 70 percent. Reagan wanted to remove nuclear warheads from Europe, so, if Americans could take anything valuable away from *The Day After*, it was the “unacceptability of nuclear warfare. It says to those who have criticized the President for seeking reductions—that really is the sensible course to take. We should be rallying around and supporting . . . the idea that we should be reducing the numbers of these weapons.” In only five minutes, Shultz had crisply mentioned nearly all of the White House’s prepared talking points; in

doing so, he successfully pivoted Koppel's questions to emphasize Reagan's hopes for peace.

After Shultz, the discussion turned to the roundtable. Buckley called the film communist propaganda—"the whole point of this movie is to launch an enterprise that seeks to debilitate the United States"—and accused Brandon Stoddard of creating a pro-nuclear freeze film that, if effective in compelling Americans to join the antinuclear cause, would only weaken the United States. Carl Sagan disagreed. He applauded ABC for "spurring what I hope will be a yearlong debate" on the nuclear arms race. Then, after explaining the new scientific theory of nuclear winter, he criticized Reagan's SDI program. Specifically, Sagan questioned Shultz's estimation that the White House was reducing the number of global nuclear weapons, rebutting that instead "what the administration is really doing—according to the congressional budget office—is increasing the inventory of strategic warheads from nine thousand in the United States to fourteen thousand." Sagan also responded to an audience question regarding the plausibility of the nuclear freeze movement. He stressed that the freeze was "a good first step," but then summarized the global nuclear situation with an analogy: "A room, awash in gasoline, and there are two implacable enemies in that room. One of them has nine thousand matches; the other has seven thousand matches. Each of them is concerned about who's ahead, who's stronger. Well, that's the kind of situation that we are actually in . . . What is necessary is to reduce the matches and to clean up the gasoline."

The discussion continued with Kissinger, who argued that *The Day After* had oversimplified a complex issue, and that instead of engaging "in an orgy of demonstrating how terrible the causalities of a nuclear war are," policy-makers should focus on how to avoid a nuclear war. McNamara concurred, and praised the film because he did "not believe that the American people understand the world we live in [nor the] risk we face." The former secretary of defense, who had helped JFK navigate the Cuban missile crisis, offered specifics: "There are forty thousand nuclear warheads in the inventories of the United States and the Soviet Union today, with the destructive power roughly a million times that of the Hiroshima bomb. I don't know any arms expert, and I doubt that at anyone in this room believes, that in the next ten to fifteen years we can reduce that number by more than half." Scowcroft followed by endorsing a US "military posture which the Soviets—whatever they think about deterrence, when they think about the nature of nuclear weapons—can never imagine that to resort to them makes sense." Finally, Elie Wiesel urged

that Americans not see *The Day After*'s events as an impossible tragedy; he reminded viewers that the tragedy of the Holocaust, in which millions of innocents needlessly died, had already happened.

Koppel then turned to the studio audience for questions. When asked about the feasibility of space-based defenses (such as SDI), Kissinger expressed doubt about any technological fix to the Cold War standoff. When Koppel asked Sagan to respond to this same question, he scoffed at Reagan's SDI program and argued that any "ballistic missile defense system . . . is dangerous because it lulls us into thinking that we can get away from this problem." McNamara urged that the Reagan administration renounce the idea of "launch on warning" and instead propose a policy of No First Use; Scowcroft supported peace through strength; Wiesel shared optimism about human rights and antinuclear movements in Russia; Buckley stressed the need to flex American military muscle to deter a Soviet first strike; Sagan concluded, "I think that this can be done, we can get out of this trap that we and the Soviets have jointly set for ourselves and our civilization and our species but the way to cut nuclear weapons is to cut nuclear weapons." Koppel ended the program by applauding *The Day After* for shaking up national complacency toward nuclear weapons.

On November 21, the morning after *The Day After*, the media began assessing the film and what, if any, effect it would have on the public. One reviewer deemed the film important because it "removes the unimaginable from the abstract and makes it shatteringly real: this is what a nuclear Armageddon is going to look like."⁴⁹ Some attention fell on the residents of Lawrence, Kansas, many of whom acted as extras in *The Day After*. One NBC report featured footage from a conservative rally in which participants burned a Soviet flag while a young man denounced freeze activists and promised that he was not "just going to wait around until the communists get strong enough and then surrender." ABC covered a second rally, during which a local resident called the film a "two-and-a-half-hour commercial for the Kremlin, and they didn't even have to put KGB actors in it." Another Lawrence resident called the film "Communist propaganda." Nicholas Meyer may have succeeded in bringing the nuclear debate to Middle America, but the film was clearly polarizing.⁵⁰

After weeks of planning and days of efforts, David Gergen informed the president that "activities relating to *The Day After*" were highly effective. "Our administration spokesmen (and women) have done a first rate job over the past few days in promoting your policies during the renewed debate over nuclear arms." He especially applauded Shultz's performance as "particularly

effective in framing the issue [of] (how do we prevent a nuclear holocaust?) and in providing the answer (support your policies of deterrence and arms reduction)." Gergen saw these remarks as vital in helping the White House take "the lead" in nationwide nuclear debates. Altogether, *The Day After*, a film created to spark antinuclear debate, had instead, after this media campaign, resulted in a large public show of support for the president and his policies.⁵¹

Gergen was relying on polling and survey data taken in the wake of *The Day After* which showed little change in public perceptions of nuclear war. One Warner-Amex Qube cable network poll found "no dramatic shift one way or the other in the opinions of those who viewed" *The Day After*.⁵² Another survey found that for most viewers largely "no change occurred in views on the likelihood of nuclear war" and that "most people [remained] pessimistic about the chances of their surviving a nuclear war both before and after the movie." The survey also found that "there was no political fallout from the movie among average viewers [and that] defense and arms control issues showed no movement among those who had just seen *The Day After*," and while 78 percent of viewers supported a nuclear freeze when the antinuclear film aired, "President Reagan suffered no damage from the movie." These are not so much indictments on *The Day After's* potential to sway public opinion but instead, as Gergen assessed in late November 1983, a positive appraisal of the White House's highly effective media offensive.⁵³

After the Reagan Presidency, historians sympathetic to Reagan's Cold War policies cite these polls and similar data as proof that Americans were not as concerned about nuclear war as some peace scholars have argued. Others assert that *The Day After* failed to sway Americans because it presented a one-dimensional take on the complex issue of nuclear strategy.⁵⁴ Such conclusions discount the considerable efforts the Reagan administration undertook to contain the potentially damaging aftereffects of this film. These efforts turned *The Day After*, a film created to challenge the arms buildup, into an opportunity to promote the president's new goal of preventing—not prevailing in—a nuclear war.

The broadcast of *The Day After* contributed to an important period of the Reagan administration. Late October 1983 until March 1984 is sometimes seen as a time of "reversal" in Reagan's thinking, the beginning of a new era of rapprochement with the Soviets. To be sure, in the months that followed *The Day After*, Shultz reengaged with the Soviets and influenced Reagan to

do the same. With the death in 1985 of Konstantin Chernenko, Mikhail Gorbachev assumed power, instituted the policies of *glasnost* and *perestroika*, and helped to transform Soviet society. In the realm of public perception, however, the efforts to contain the political fallout from *The Day After* had a lasting effect. Before *The Day After* aired, many Americans were unsure that Reagan sought to avoid nuclear conflict; afterward, tens of millions of Americans were reassured of his commitment to prevent such a war from ever happening.⁵⁵

Largely, this trend of easing tensions continued, especially after the nuclear summits between Reagan and Gorbachev that would ultimately lead to actual nuclear arms reductions in Europe. That process, however, was not easy or immediate, and the biggest roadblock to achieving these breakthroughs would be Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative. But SDI wasn't simply an impediment at the negotiating table. After *The Day After*, Reagan's dream of space-based missile defense became the focal point of another, prolonged publicity battle that challenged the administration in mass media.