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The Pragmatic Interplay Between Media and Political Policy: An Analysis of The Day After and Its Implications on American Cold War Nuclear Policy and Opinion

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The Pragmatic Interplay Between Media and Political Policy: An Analysis of *The Day After* and Its Implications on American Cold War Nuclear Policy and Opinion

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Abstract

On November 10th, 1983 the TV movie, *The Day After* aired in the living rooms of homes across America. This dramatic portrayal of a nuclear attack on the citizens of Kansas and Missouri, scared Americans watching. Depicting the desolate landscape of a post-nuclear-attack world, paired with the feeling of inevitability of nuclear destruction, the American people began to change their feelings about nuclear weapons. But why does this movie matter? And how can we trace any meaningful influence this movie had on American Culture and understanding of nuclear war? This paper intends to expose the ways *The Day After* changed American society from the average American, to the Reagan administration making important policy decisions.

This movie did three things, first it increased nuclear awareness in America's general public with an increase in letter writing campaigns, voting and general concern in foreign affairs. Next, anti-nuclear organizations were able to use this movie as a steppingstone to increase awareness and raise money for anti-nuclear campaigns. Finally, anxiety from the general public creeped into the white house and we can see real-time rapid changes to public policy and foreign relations in Reagan's administration.

This paper exposes how forms of media and art can create real change politically, socially and culturally. Instead of responding to change, we can see media shaping change.

Key words: Cold War, media, political policy, *The Day After*

Introduction

On November 20th, 1983, the TV movie, *The Day After* was broadcast in homes across America. Viewers settled into what, at first, appeared to be a story about everyday life in Kansas and Missouri. The first half of the movie depicts the lives of Dr. Russel Oakes and his family, Billy McCoy, an airman stationed outside of Kansas City, and the Dahlberg family in Harrisonville Missouri, over thirty miles away from Kansas City. The Oakes struggle with the reality that their daughter is moving out, while the Dahlbergs prepare for the wedding of their oldest daughter, Denise. In the background, radios and televisions murmur about escalating political tensions and nuclear threats, but no one pays them much mind. The characters move through their days with mentions of Communism and international political tensions always lingering in the background, on televisions and radios.

Suddenly, air raid sirens go off, signaling the beginning of a nuclear attack. Across Kansas City and Lawrence, citizens scramble for shelters to escape the fallout zone. Finally, a nuclear blast hits Kansas City. The rest of the scene is a nuclear blast in action; citizens close to the blast zone are immediately incinerated. Their skeletons glow as their bodies are vaporized in the nuclear blast. A mushroom cloud appears over the horizon, Dr. Russel Oakes sees the effects of the nuclear blast from outside the city. The last half of the movie shows life after the nuclear blast and how radiation affects the people left. The youngest Dahlberg, Danny goes blind after looking directly at the nuclear blast. Denise Dahlberg, Danny, Russel Oakes and a hitchhiking college student are all slowly killed by radiation poisoning. And the movie closes with Professor Huxley, a supporting character, trying to contact survivors with a radio. No one responds.

How did the American public react to this movie? To put it plainly, not well. The image of the mushroom cloud, vaporized people, and the lasting effects of nuclear radiation alarmed the public. While Americans were exposed to conversations about nuclear war and conflicts with the Soviets, the information they had was limited and often wrong. U.S. officials widely circulated images of the Mushroom cloud hovering over Hiroshima, but they were not transparent about the real effects of a nuclear blast and how radiation can affect the human body in the fallout zone (Masco, 2008, p.368). Many Americans felt betrayed and scared when they were faced with the reality of nuclear weapons through a TV movie. Renee Blackwell, a 15-year-old student told *The New York Times*, ''I think I'd rather die than survive a nuclear war...Nuclear war was always in the back of my mind, but that show really woke me up" (Collins, 1983). Others had similar reactions. Martin Ebert, an engineer who sold nuclear survival suits explained that after *The Day After* hit screens across America, he saw a significant increase in his sales. Before November of 1983, the majority of his sales were to Government agencies, but for the first time a market opened up to an average citizen ("Increased Sales," 1983). Public outcry and preparation are two ways the public responded to *The Day After*, but the effects of this movie go further than just this.

The Day After was a cultural phenomenon that shifted how Americans thought about nuclear weapons, Soviet and American relations, and the Cold War. This paper focuses on the cultural implications of this movie in Reagan's America. Why was *The Day After* so important in its moment? What made this movie a cultural phenomenon? How did it influence how Americans thought about nuclear weapons? This paper will argue that *The Day After* influenced political action in many spheres. First, *The Day After* helped pro-freeze organizations extend their messages and agendas, which rallied for total nuclear disarmament and an extension of world peace. *The Day After* also created a sense of nuclear fear in the American public not seen since the 1960s, thus politicizing Americans around nuclear weapons more than any time before. Finally, *The Day After* pushed the Reagan administration to change its nuclear stances and created change in how the world community understood nuclear war. *The Day After* did not just reflect the political climate of the 1980s, Cold War America, it drove political change and affected policy. Three major changes came about after *The Day After:* the American public became more politicized and concerned about nuclear war, pro-freeze organizations took the opportunity to increase their campaigning and activism, and the Reagan administration drastically changed their nuclear policies as a direct result of the movie.

The Day After movie represented an important cultural and political event in the 1980's America, but it is largely absent from the scholarship on that period. Scholars have written extensively about cultural representations of nuclear war, but most scholars focus on the cultural climate of the 1950s, and 1960s at the height of McCarthyism and the Hollywood blacklist. In the article, "Sheltering Time: The Containment of Everyday life in Nuclear-Shelter Film Narratives" Andrea Vesentini explores how nuclear shelters were depicted in movies and their meaning in a larger cultural context. Vesentini argues that, "Films were also more effective than pamphlets in that they provided a vision of the bomb. In order to stress the actuality of the threat, civil defense used videos to generate terror among the population with a spectacle of disaster" (Vesentini, 2015, p.43). Vesentini emphasizes the weight that films carry for an audience, but she focusses on 1950s and 1960s movies and leaves out the nuclear fear movies of the 1980s, including *The Day After.* Frances Stonor Saunders has a similar issue in his book, *The Cultural Cold War: The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters.* Saunders' book focused once again on the 1950s and 1960s, and the House Un-American Activities committee. Saunders' approach is to analyze how the United States Government controlled and censored movies for their own gain. Saunders argues that the U.S. government manipulated the film industry to warp American's perceptions of Communism. Saunders' focus is the reverse of mine. He looks at how the American government attempted to change its citizens' political opinions, while this paper investigates how a movie changed political opinions of Americans without any influence from the government.

The scholarship on Cold War movies lacks a necessary investigation into the 1980s. This paper intends to fill that gap in the scholarship.

Histories of America under Reagan and general histories of 1980s political and cultural history also leave out *The Day After*. In Beth A. Fischer's article, "US Foreign policy under Reagan and Bush", she explains Reagan's foreign policy initiatives during his term. Reagan began his term throwing threats at the Soviet Union about nuclear weapons, and then made a sudden transition in his policies in January of 1984 (2012, p.274). Yet, like many other scholars, she does not mention *The Day After* which came out only two months before Reagan's policy change and created mass hysteria in the American public. It is only when *The Day After* is the main subject of scholarship do we see Reagan and the movie together.

In the article, "'Remember! It's only a movie!' Expectations and Receptions of *The Day After* (1983)" Deron Overpeck focusses on the political influences of the movie's production, and the responses of the public and political organizations. This lens is important, yet it is only found in histories of film, almost never in political histories of the United States under Reagan. What differentiates this paper from Overpeck's is that first, Overpeck argues that this movie had no meaningful change on public opinions on nuclear policy. And second, Overpeck does not draw connections between Reagan's change in nuclear policy in 1984 to the film released just a few months earlier. This paper will argue that *The Day After* had larger implications, focusing on everyday Americans and political, pro-freeze organizations.

The Day After sets a precedent on how we can view the interactions between media and history. Unlike most films which act as a reaction to a historical moment, or change, *The Day After* acts as a facilitator for change. It is vital to take this framework and begin to apply it to how we see other forms of media possibly shaping political opinions and even government actions. We are still living in the political and social fallout of the Cold War, so it is necessary to first, look at how media shaped opinions and actions in the moment it was created, but also how media continues to shape us today. Movies are no longer only a reaction to politics and society, but they can actively shape it; by viewing media in this way, not only can new social commentaries about the past be made, but also about our present moment. At the bare minimum, this paper intends to convince you of *The Day After*'s importance in 1980s politics and social opinion. But in the larger scope of importance and lasting impact, this paper is meant to also shift your opinion on the lasting impacts media of all forms have on individual opinions and also how they cause change on a larger scale.

Historical Context

Nuclear weapons defined the political climate of the late 1970s and early 1980s. The American public was anxious about aggressions from the Soviet Union. President Carter and later President Reagan only increased those fears. Jimmy Carter's presidency was laced with anxiety from the American public. Carter focused on human rights appeals, pulling American forces out of other countries and slowing the arms race. In 1979 Carter negotiated with the Soviet Union to slow the production of nuclear weapons for both sides in the SALT II meetings. But to the public, it appeared that the Russians were increasing their arsenal, while the Americans were decreasing theirs (Frankel, 1992, p.96). Polls taken in 1977 and 1978 showed that for the first time since the 1960s, a majority of American citizens were worried about Soviet power and the threat of Communism (Njølstad, 2012, p.149). Americans were feeling the threat of nuclear war hanging over their heads, yet it appeared that their leader was not fighting back.

Carter's foreign policies focused on the global south, namely Panama, and other developing nations. This made the American public think that he was not only failing at Soviet/U.S. relations, but also essentially ignoring it. Carter also failed in the eyes of the American people over the Iran Hostage crisis. On November 4th, 1979, revolutionaries took over Iran and the Shah fled, allowing a new government to take his place. Americans working in government offices in Iran were taken hostage. Months passed and Carter continued to fail to negotiate with the Iranians, leaving the Americans there for 444 days. As an insult to Carter, the hostages were not released until he left office (Frankel, 1992, p.27). President Carter's foreign policy failures created a move towards conservative, pro-American thought in the American public. These sentiments assisted President Reagan's election in 1980.

In the 1980s, Americans were nervous. Ronald Reagan, who had just entered office, promised to crack down on Communism. After Jimmy's Carter's relaxed policies on Communism, many Americans were nervous about Soviet and American relations. Reagan promised to be tough on Communism. In 1981, Reagan vowed: "[The West] will dismiss [Communism] as some bizarre chapter in human history whose last pages are even now being written" (Fischer, 2012, pp.269-270). This quote, like many others, was a direct threat to the Soviet Union, and Communism at large. In 1981, Reagan was just beginning his presidency, and his stance on Communism needed to be firm for the American public to support him. Reagan was not afraid to express his opinions of the Soviet Union to the American public and the world at large. Yet on the other side of the spectrum, Americans were becoming increasingly worried once again about the reality of a nuclear war.

Reagan moved quickly to arm America and to let the American public know he was doing so. In a total reversal of Carter's SALT II policies, Reagan rapidly increased American nuclear warheads and America expanded the military. The years 1981 to 1985 saw the largest increase of peacetime military funding in America to date (Fischer, 2012, p.270). In March 1982, Reagan announced

his plans for the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), which promised to protect Americans from Soviet ballistic missiles. This plan outlined that shields would be erected around the coasts of major cities. Many Americans became concerned about the cost of this project, while world leaders became nervous for their own safety. European countries worried that they would now become the main target of Soviet attacks (Hilstrom, 2006, p. 402).

While Reagan built up America's nuclear arsenal and boosted the military, he publicly shamed the Soviets for their weapons. In Spring of 1982 he announced START, the Strategic Arms Reduction Talks. These talks were meant to equalize the number of nuclear warheads in each country. Yet the guidelines of this agreement required that the Soviets would destroy more than half of their arsenal, while American continued to build theirs up. To no one's surprise, the Soviets did not agree to this. Tensions grew. In November of 1981, Reagan proposed the zero option treaty which once again favored the US. It called for the removal of all intermediate-range nuclear weapons from Europe, but at this time the Soviets were the only ones with weapons in Europe (Fischer, 1997, p. 484). Once again, the Soviets refused. Beth A. Fischer, a historian of Cold War America, explains, "Washington made little effort to address Soviet concerns or to offer proposals that Moscow could find remotely acceptable. This strongly suggested that the Reagan administration was not genuinely interested in arms control." (1997, p.485). Americans were getting the idea that Reagan was not looking to negotiate. He was just looking for weapons and defense.

America went from a liberal, relaxed leader who supported nuclear disarmament, to an aggressive conservative leader who was focused on building up nuclear arsenals more than anything else. Because of Carter's focus on disarmament, the American public was nervous about being unprepared and for an impending nuclear war. This anxiety is what enabled Reagan to be elected. Reagan's aggressive foreign policy with the Soviet Union, paired with his pro-nuclear agenda, made Americans feel a new, different kind of fear. Instead of fearing that they would be unprepared, the American public was now worried about egging on a nuclear war which would send the global community into ruins. While many Americans felt that Carter was not tough enough on Communism, when Reagan came into office, his policies scared Americans in a new way. The shift in nuclear fears in the early 1980s begins with Reagan and his aggressive rhetoric and plans.

The Day After

While military tensions are rising in the US, writer Edward Hume, director Nicholas Meyes and producers, Robert Papazian and Stephanie Austin began to develop *The Day After*. In the beginning stages of the movie's production the United States Department of Defense offered the filmmakers money for production, on the grounds that the script would blame the Soviet Union for

the war. The team denied the funding (Overpeck, 2012, p. 272). At first the team advertised *The Day After* as an a-political movie, harboring no favoritism or agenda. Deron Overpeck explains how an a-political framework for the movie began to break down: "[Hume] relied exclusively on pro-freeze or disarmament texts, or sources that emphasized the horrendous destruction that would ensue after a nuclear exchange" (Overpeck, 2012, p.273). Hume was directly referencing pro-freeze documents when he was writing the movie, all of his inspiration came from the framework of pro-freeze organizations. From the beginning of the project, Meyer and Hume were infusing this movie with political motives and bias, as it is almost impossible to tell the story of a nuclear attack without politics. As *The Day After* was gaining media attention and the public began to talk about this TV event, nuclear freeze organizations were given early access to the movie and ample advertisement slots (Overpeck, 2012, p.279). This angered conservatives who supported America's arsenal of nuclear weapons, because despite claiming to be a-political, *The Day After* team was demonstrating the exact opposite. Finally, just a few weeks before the movie was released, the film makers came forward and announced that the movie had a pro-freeze leaning, and now citizens just had to wait for the movie in order to make up their own minds.

The Days Before

The opening scene of *The Day After* reads: "We are grateful to the people of Lawrence, Kansas for their participation and help in the making of this film" (Meyer, 1983). *The Day After* filmed on location, using the local residents as extras. Lawrence Kansas, and Kansas City, Missouri seemed like odd places to base a nuclear attack movie, but that was exactly what the filmmaker wanted. The central characters are everyday Midwesterners. Dr. Oakes is a dedicated doctor, with a loving relationship with his wife and daughter, the Dahlbergs are a farming family, and Billy McCoy is a dedicated airman working for the military, stationed just outside of Kansas City. These characters were specific representations of "everyday Americans." These people do not live in a big city or work prestigious jobs, but they are as susceptible to nuclear attack as anyone in the country. The idea that any American could be hit by a nuclear attack was ingrained into the minds of the audience from the moment they tuned into the film. Thirty minutes into the movie, Dr. Oakes and a coworker discuss the reports, "There are even people leaving Kansas City because of the missile field. Now I ask you, where does one go from Kansas City? Yukon? Tahiti? We are not talking about Hiroshima anymore…" (Meyer, 1983, 32:17-32:35). Characters are discussing that there is nowhere to go. The movie implies that if places like Kansas City were in fear of being bombed, no place in America was safe.

The Cold War serves as a vague backdrop to the daily lives of the characters. In the first half of the movie, characters hear TV and radio reports of Soviet

aggression in Europe, as tensions rise in East and West Germany. East Germany invades West Germany and drops bombs on their hospitals, schools and government facilities. Things start heating up when Steven Klein hears that Soviets have invaded West Berlin. This scene is a commentary on Cold War politics. No matter how antinuclear this movie may be, the filmmakers still made Communists the aggressors. One girl in the crowd says "Fantasy Land" in response to the news broadcaster speculating about nuclear weapons. She offers a politically driven critique of American military policy: "Look, did we help the Czechs, the Hungarians, the Afghans or the Poles? Well, we're not going to nuke the Russians to save the Germans. I mean if you were talking oil in Saudi Arabia, I'd be real worried." (Meyer, 1983, 36:29-36:45). For a movie that originally claimed the be anti-political, a strong commentary on American foreign policy and its violent links to the oil industry are seen here. Steven Klein decides to hitchhike home, Dr. Oakes leaves work to be with his family, and the Dahlbergs leave church to prepare their basement as a shelter. The next scene is in a supermarket where residents of Kansas City are pushing one another and running for the registers. While on line, Denise Dahlberg's fiancé, Bruce Gallatin, overhears a news report that the Russians hit an American ship in the Persian Gulf. Once again, Communists are the aggressors, leaving the American government in a positive light, for now.

Moving to the Dahlberg's home, the viewer gets a quick glimpse into their lives. Mr. Dahlberg anxiously prepares the basement, and his wife refuses to acknowledge the problem and continues to prepare for the wedding. Mr. Dahlberg, along with many other characters prepare for the bomb, yet none of them seem to be adequately equipped to prepare their homes and stock supplies. The scenes of family life are cut between images of military preparation as soldiers run frantically to prepare and await orders from the government. Finally, in the distance, missiles launch and the realities of nuclear attack begin to set in. The airmen stationed at the Whiteman Airforce panic and run into an underground shelter. Billy McCoy leaves, against orders, to be with his family. Themes of family and companionship are strong throughout the movie, seen in the relationships and decisions each character makes.

The sirens sound, and families rush into city hall to a nuclear shelter. An aerial shot of main street shows citizens like ants running frantically. Then the bomb hits. First all the electric power goes out, all cars and trucks stop working, and then the flash. From Dr. Oakes' view from his car on the highway, we see the full mushroom cloud. People scream as they are engulfed in the blast and their skeletons glow as they are vaporized. Many of the images of vaporized people are scenes with children and families, one is even of a wedding. Kansas City is destroyed. We see houses and businesses engulfed in flames, blown over from the blast and buried under rubble. The only survivors are those in the fallout zone, who only see the massive explosion, but do not immediately feel the effects.

After the Bomb

There is chaos in the homes and buildings of the survivors. In the hospital, patients resort to violence, and Dr Oakes needs to calm down a crowd. He asks them to help the most injured and sick. The Dahlbergs have a visitor in the upstairs of their house, and Steven comes down to stay with them after being threatened by Mr. Dahlberg. Next, we see Billy McCoy wandering the destroyed town around him. He passes a memorial that says, "In Memory of our World War Veterans" and in front of it a father and young son lay dead (Meyer, 1983, 1:15:20-1:15:33). This acts as a commentary on the victims of the nuclear attack as victims of a world war, fighting in a war they cannot win. Joe Huxely, a university professor, contacts Dr. Oakes over the radio and notes the high levels of nuclear radiation in the air. More nuclear radiation is moving in by wind from more nuclear silos out west. We are reminded of the good, pious Christian citizens of middle America when the Dahlberg's attend church despite the effects of radiation still present in the air. Denise is beginning to feel the effects of the radiation poisoning and her groin begins to bleed, and she passes out during the sermon. As Stephen brings Denise and Danny to the university hospital on a horse-drawn carriage, they pass men who are hauling dead bodies on the flatbed of a truck. Danny asks Stephen what he sees, he lies and says cows and telephone poles, things that remind Danny of life before the blast.

In an act of satire, the President is broadcasted over the radio and tells an uplifting message that the U.S. has not backed down from conflict, "There is at the present time, a ceasefire with the Soviet Union which has sustained damage equally catastrophic... we are counting on you, on your strength, your patience, your will and your courage to help rebuild this great nation of ours. God Bless us all" (1:39:55-1:42:05). This voice over is cut with scenes of the suffering people, it shows the dead and dying, families hiding under rubble and the destroyed state of life and routine. There is a strong anti-government sentiment throughout the remainder of the movie. After this catastrophe, the citizens are no longer willing to listen to the government's advice and action. Farmers including Mr. Dahlberg are told they must get rid of their remaining topsoil, but they have no solutions to purify the soil after that (1:48:07- 1:49:56). The remaining American government is asking its citizens to think of the needs of the larger United States, yet individuals can hardly keep their families alive.

In the action packed last fifteen minutes of the movie, Mr. Dahlberg is shot by a roaming group which squatted on his property, and Dr. Oakes is quickly succumbing to the effects of radiation. As Dr. Oakes leaves the hospital and makes his way towards Kansas City a firing squad executes two men on the side of the road. The United States government no longer has power over its citizens, they are taking on responsibility for themselves. As the radiation poisoning overcomes each character their skin turns pale and their hair falls

out in thick chunks. When Dr. Oakes arrives at Kansas City everything is destroyed, all that is left is the ghosts of buildings. There are scavengers stealing wedding rings and other valuable items off of corpses. In the final scene Dr. Oakes comes across his old house, now nothing more than a pile of rubble. As Dr. Oakes collapses on the ground in distress a stranger embraces him, and the camera fades out. The movie closes with these lines passing over the screen:

> "The Catastrophic events you have just 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. It is hoped that the images of this film will inspire the nations of this earth, their peoples and leaders, to find the means to avert the fateful day" (2:04:57 - 2:05:13).

The movie is over and the audience is left with the lasting images of war and destruction.

Reactions

The Public

Faced with the dramatic images of explosions and nuclear war, Americans were terrified. In the weeks leading up the showing of *The Day After* news outlets talked incessantly about the premiere of the movie. People prepared in a variety of different ways. Young children were not advised to watch the movie at all, while children ages twelve to fifteen could watch but they would be closely monitored for signs of distress or anxiety afterwards (Overpeck, 2012, p.280). On the ground in schools and homes, parents and educators were seriously worried about the lasting effects these horror filled images could have on children. Dr. Howard H. Hiatt, the head of Harvard's Graduate School of Public Health warned a group of advanced high school students: "be prepared for a dreadful experience… But see it" (Kraft, 1983, p.2). As conversations continued in schools, excitement increased for the movie, and it became a topic in the media, in the classroom, and in schools. Across America, teachers were encouraged to lead discussions about the movie, before and after it aired. Students had a variety of opinions and emotions after seeing the movie, Nora Maccoby, a 16-year-old high school student explained, "I expect to see [nuclear war]. I expect it in my lifetime" ("Viewers Shocked", 1983). Maccoby was not alone, many American citizens believed that nuclear war was destined to happen. The threat of a nuclear strike constantly hung over the head of American citizens, and the images of suffering and destruction in *The Day After* did nothing more than heighten these fears.

Just like Maccoby, many people dramatically reacted to the film. In order to begin to understand public response, we should look at how *The Day After* was discussed in newspapers and between American citizens. In a *New York Times* article just three days after the movie explains, "On the day after 'The Day After,' the 'experts' gave us little reason for celebrating this year's Thanksgiving Day. It was just a 'movie,' some of them said, but they didn't say it in Hiroshima or Nagasaki" (Reston, 1983, p.A23). Here, the journalist, James Reston, is explaining the overwhelming feeling of dread and fear felt across the nation. Some people had more compassionate responses. Instead of looking towards a desolate future, or vilifying the Soviet Union, a mother said after the film that, "I think it's very important for us to be nurturing compassion in our hearts," said Ruth Stewart. "When I think of our mothers, I think of mothers in Russia who also don't want their children killed" (Linenberger,1983). Unlike many other Americans, Stewart chose to empathize with the citizens of the Soviet Union. As we will see later on, the safety of children is a common factor across all aspects of the nuclear weapons debate.

The American public did not take this TV movie event lightly. Doctors began freeing up their schedules weeks in advance to see patients who felt traumatized by *The Day After* (Rothenberg, 1983). Immediately after the movie was shown American citizens began writing to President Reagan asking for his response. A letter written by a distraught watcher says: "'Dear President Reagan: Our country must not wait until the day after a nuclear war. We must negotiate an end to the extreme danger posed by nuclear weapons now." The letter ends with, "'Please Mr. President give us tomorrow'" (Cardarella, 1983, p.1). The White House received so many calls the night of the movie that their switchboard operators required a full day to count them all. And ABC headquarters also reported an influx of calls, mostly in support of the movie (Overpeck, 2012, p.280).

The Day After also popularized certain specific fears associated with nuclear radiation and attack. In the book, *Decade of Nightmares: The End of the Sixties and the Making of Eighties America,* Philip Jenkins explains the way people thought about nuclear attack before *The Day After.* Jenkins explains a common fear called the "nuclear winter theory" where a nuclear war could damage the ecosystem and climate of the world so much that it would cause a human extinction (222). Whether it was residual radiation directly killing people or the destruction of the environment, a nuclear war which would destroy any means for human survival. We can see this represented in scenes with Mr. Dahlberg and other farmers, where they are asked to get rid of their topsoil and prepare the ground for new planting when it is safe. But the farmers in the film are given no clear direction on how and when they will know their soil is safe once again. There is a direct connection between the anxieties of people before the movie was broadcast, and the content of the movie.

Political Organizations

From the beginning, the political bias of *The Day After* had been strong. From the first stages of writing and producing, *The Day After* was created with anti-nuclear, Pro-Freeze sentiments in mind. Because of this, pro-freeze organizations were eager to utilize this movie to their advantage. Pro-freeze organizations ran rallies and protests nationwide to support disarmament, "In June 1982 over a million people attended a rally in Central Park in New York City, calling for a freeze of nuclear weapons production" (Robert & Jones, 2016, p.442). Large protests like this placed Pro-Freeze organizations into political conversation and importance. Deron Overpeck (1983), in his article, "'Remember! It's only a Movie!' Expectations and Receptions of the Day After," argues that *The Day After* had little impact on the public opinion of nuclear freeze movements but it, "motivate[d] many Americans, ordinary and otherwise, to become involved in the nuclear war debate" (p. 268). While Overpeck's argument leaves out the vital influence of *The Day After* on political leanings, he does make strong points about political involvement. Pro-freeze organizations capitalized on this push towards politicization by setting up voter registration at meetings to discuss *The Day After.*

One pro-freeze organization called, "The 800-NUCLEAR Project" was explained as, "an ad hoc group supported by disarmament organization and individuals including Ralph Nader, the consumer advocate, and Hamilton Fish, publisher of the *Nation* magazine" (Smith, 1983). These organizations were linked with the peace movement and made political and social work to increase awareness about nuclear weapons. Jack Willis, the director of the 800-Nuclear Project explained the voter registrations, "The peace movement recognizes that people will get depressed and feel helpless after watching the film…. That's why we're offering ways, such as voter registration, for people to channel their frustrations through the political system" (Rothenberg, 1983, p.2). These organizations saw the opportunity that *The Day After* presented, and they capitalized on that hysteria.

Pro-freeze organizations such as, the 800-Nuclear Project, Nuclear Weapons Freeze Campaign, Let Lawrence Live, the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, The Day Before were all eager to use *The Day After* as a way to further their anti-nuclear agendas. These groups showed direct support for these movies, Randall Kehler a member of the Nuclear Weapons Freeze Campaign saw the movie as a reality and explained, "the only sane response… is to protest the current nuclear buildup and demand a nuclear freeze" ("Viewers Shocked," 1983, p.3). Kehler was not alone. Many other political organizers and activists felt that *The Day After* was a representation of the inevitable destruction by nuclear weapons. Disarmament groups saw *The Day After* as nothing less than a positive political move for their campaigns and agendas moving towards nuclear peace.

These pro-freeze organizations continued to rally behind the movie and spread awareness for their cause. These groups also saw the movie as an opportunity to show support and compassion to those suffering from anxiety from watching the movie. Groups distributed, "hundreds of thousands of viewing guides suggesting how to cope with the film: Share your feelings before, watch in groups, and, after seeing it, 'turn off the TV set. Stay together… take a few minutes before people begin to speak'" (Rothenberg, 1983, p.1). These clear guidelines were meant to ease any sense of anxiety and give people a constructive outlet on how to express their feelings about the movie. Organizations such as the Physicians for Social Responsibility set up hotlines for anxious watchers to call if they felt distressed. The group explained the need for a hotline as, "given the accurate horror portrayed in the movie, these emotions are appropriate." (Corry, 1983). One of their hotlines in Philadelphia received over 400 calls the night of the showing ("Viewers shocked," 1983, p.2).

Pro-freeze organizations were able to comfort people in need and create a relationship where they felt supported by these organizations and, therefore, more willing to subscribe to their mottos and agendas. This then created a larger pro-freeze community across America. Pro-freeze organizations also created community events in order to bring people together to watch the movie or comment on it in some way. In Lawrence Kansas, and other towns across America, pro-freeze organizations held candlelight vigils in response to the movie and threats of nuclear attack (Rothenberg, 1983, p.2). Organizations also set up letter writing campaigns in communities to urge Reagan to change his nuclear policies. Pro-freeze organizations were creating a direct link to communities which allowed their rhetoric and agenda to be more readily accepted in the communities they entered. These organizations were so successful because members were trained on how to speak to the media. Members were each given a pamphlet which taught them how to represent the organization in interviews (Overpeck, 2012, p.277). Pro-freeze organizations took the opportunity which *They Day After* presented, and they were able to rally support for their respective organizations and claims.

While Pro-Freeze organizations saw this movie as an opportunity to further their own agendas, there were many conservative, pro-armament organizations who thought differently. Pro-armament organizations and their supporters saw this movie as a blatant hit to their ideals and to the Reagan administration. One such organization was the Mutually Assured Destruction Policy (MAD) which supported nuclear weapons for the protection of the U.S. (Overpeck, 1983, 267). Reverend Jerry Falwell was upset that the movie was popularizing disarmament in the population; he believed that it would weaken America and leave them unprepared for a nuclear attack. Falwell wished to boycott the companies who bought advertising time. While he later withdrew this threat, many other people who supported nuclear arms as a necessary part of American foreign policy saw this movie as a threat to the U.S.' safety (Shales, 1983). Between the pro-freeze organizations, and the conservative,

pro-nuclear organization there was an overlap in rhetoric. Once again, Reverend Jerry Farwell, a leader of the "Moral Majority," a conservative Christian group, criticized the movie for, "making a blatant political statement in favor of disarmament. The future security of this nation and the freedom of our children are both at stake" (Rothenberg, 1983, p.2). It is significant that Farwell, and other supporters of nuclear weapons buildup make the argument that in order to protect the U.S.' children, they must have strong nuclear weapons. Conversely, pro-freeze organizations used the same rhetoric to support disarmament. As mentioned earlier, Reverend Bud Cooper (a supporter of disarmament) expressed that it was necessary to disarm the countries for the safety of the nation's children (Cardarella, 1983). These comparisons show two groups with ideological differences between them, yet they were both supposedly reaching for the same goals.

Government Response

Before we begin to unravel Reagan's involvement and reaction to *The Day After,* it is important to consider how other politicians reacted to the movie. Conservative, pro-armament politicians and politicians that supported nuclear weapons freeze both crafted responses to *The Day After*, which furthered their respective agendas. Senator Alan Cranston from California and Representative Edward Markey from Massachusetts, both Democrats, used *The Day After* to support their own policies. Cranston organized fund-raising meetings in twenty-six states at the time of the movie's broadcast. And Markey organized an "awareness campaign" in 10 midwestern states, who like Lawrence Kansas, are near nuclear missile silos (Corry, 1983). Reactions to the movie were not limited to the general public; we can also see a number of politicians using this movie to further their campaigns and agendas.

Since the beginning of his presidency, the Reagan administration had felt pressure from the American people to reform their nuclear weapons policies. In his foreign policy initiatives, Reagan was tough on communism, but his administration left the American public generally uninformed about the reality of nuclear radiation. Americans were shocked by the second half of *The Day After*. Nuclear weapons had already been a major topic of conversation, but the effects of long-term exposure to radiation had not been explained. The Reagan administration originally argued a nuclear attack would be survivable, but the movie proved that wrong (Overpeck, 2012, p.270). Now the American public was losing trust they had in the Reagan administration. Reagan tried to limit the damage. He said, "[The movie] didn't say anything we didn't know and that is that nuclear war is horrible. And that's why we're doing what we're doing, so there won't be one" ("Viewers Shocked," 1983, p.2). Reagan's response was vague and did not clearly pinpoint a policy or strategy he wished to pursue. In his original public responses to the movie Reagan was careful not to allude to any plans or policy.

Originally, on hearing the news of *The Day After*'s production, the White House began a propaganda campaign right away. Originally, the White House wanted Reagan to do a public service announcement immediately after the end of the movie where he would, "transform the film into an argument for his defense policies" and tell the audience, "that he was shaken by the horrors of the film depicted but resolved never to let nuclear war happen" (Hänni, 2016, p.418). This plan would align Reagan with the American public and comfort them, knowing the president had the same fears as them, and was willing to do something about it. But because the Reagan administration was nervous about being that closely associated with the movie, they pulled-out of the deal at the last second (Hänni, 2016, p.418). Reagan was replaced by George Shultz, who ended up making a message (Frances, 200, p.235). These plans were not the end of Reagan's propaganda campaign, and they continued, for many months after the movie's airing.

On November 4th, 1983, representatives from government agencies ranging from the White House to FEMA met to discuss how each department should approach the movie. Their consensus was, "Don't fight the film, recognize the horrors of nuclear war and take the offensive through emphasizing deterrence and disarmament agreements" (Frances, 2000, p.235) Even before the movie was released, the government was preparing for backlash from the American people. The government knew that this movie would expose their policies and the true danger of nuclear weapons, so in order to protect themselves in the public eye, government officials all agreed not to argue with the images presented in the film, in an attempt to maintain trust with the public. In his personal diary, Reagan wrote about *The Day After* and what it meant for his outlook on nuclear weapons:

> "[*The Day After*] is powerfully done- all $7 mil. worth. It's very effective & left me greatly depressed. … Whether it will be a help to the 'anti nukes' or not, I can't say. My own reaction was one of our having to do all we can to have a deterrent & to see there is never a nuclear war" (Hänni, 2016, p.418).

Reagan begins this entry with his emotional reaction to the movie, expressing that he, like many other Americans, was left distraught after the movie. Then, he considers the impacts of this movie, and how it will affect his foreign policy initiatives, showing that there is a direct correlation between Reagan's political policy and this movie. From this point forward, Reagan and his cabinet created a plan to modify his nuclear policies in light of the movie. Ironically, the day after *The Day After*, the White House held, "Day after meetings" where members of Reagan's cabinet discussed the movie and planned how the government should react to it. As mentioned earlier, the Reagan administration originally told the public that a nuclear attack would be survivable, and the movie proved that incorrect. Instead of arguing with the movie's claims, the administration decided to agree with the effects of nuclear radiation as demonstrated in the movie (Hänni, 2016, pp.

420-421). And despite pro-armament leanings for the beginning of his administration, Reagan and his team changed rhetoric and instead came out in support of disarmament. Government employees were told to not discourage anyone from seeing the movie, and they were not to dispute any of the claims. The administration created a clear plan for each agency and government employee to respond to the movie and this is what created Reagan's next policy change.

Now that the American public was more actively afraid of nuclear attack, the U.S. government had to respond to the movie in a way which made the public feel protected and comfortable. On January 16, 1984 Reagan gave his first speech of the year and he made new claims on how he would treat nuclear weapons. "With regards to nuclear weapons, the simple truth is America's total nuclear stockpile has declined. Today we have far fewer nuclear weapons than we had 20 years ago" (Reagan, 1984). For the first time Reagan was not antagonizing the Soviet Union and threatening them with attack. His dramatic switch in rhetoric was solely to comfort the American people and make them feel like the events of *The Day After* would not happen again. This approach was once again emphasized at the end of the speech: "If the Soviet Government wants peace, then there will be peace. Together we can strengthen peace, reduce the level of arms" (Reagan, 1984). Reagan made a smart political move by placing the blame of nuclear weapons and aggression onto the Soviet Union, once again placing the U.S. in a positive light. Like the movie depicted, Reagan is expressing that the Soviet Union are the aggressors, and the U.S. is just defending themselves.

In his speech Reagan outlined three main plans for his future Cold War foreign policies with the Soviet Union. First, a total nuclear disarmament, second, to create better relationships and dialogue between Western and Communist nations, and finally to have these nationals collaborate on regional conflicts such as in Afghanistan (Fischer, 2012, p.273). The goals that Reagan presented in this speech were not found anywhere else in his public statements or policies. Because of this dramatic shift in policy only two months after *The Day After*, we can conclude that due to the political impact of this movie on the population and political groups, that Reagan felt it was time to change his policies. *The Day After* scared Americans into thinking nuclear war was around the corner, and it affirmed beliefs that it would be impossible to recover from. Because of this intense fear Reagan had to change his policies to ease the minds of the American public.

Reagan's change in attitude towards the Soviet Union did not end with this speech. After the film aired, Reagan, again wrote in his diary commenting on his last three years in office and explained that he now understood that Soviet leaders and citizens feared the U.S. To combat this, "I was anxious to get a top Soviet leader in a room alone and convince him that we had no designs on the Soviet Union and Russians had nothing to fear from us" (Fizgerald, 2000, p.238). This was a dramatic change in rhetoric for a leader who spent

the first half of his Presidency incessantly threatening the Soviet Union. Similarly, in the months between November 1983 and June 1984, Reagan did his most international traveling as president. Including visiting China, the first Communist nation he visited in his presidency. Here he signed a treaty which increased investments and cultural exchanges between the countries. He also visited Tokyo, where he called for the total elimination of nuclear weapons (Fizgerald, 2000, p.235). Reagan was making clear decisions to create bonds with Communist nations in the months after the film was aired. These decisions were a direct result of the American public pressuring his aggressive policies.

There are a lot of arguments within scholarship on Reagan, the end of the cold war, and when exactly he changed his policies. Robert C. Roland and John M. Jones in their chapter,

> "Reagan's Strategy for the Cold War and the Evil Empire Address" argue that, …Reagan did not 'shift towards peace' in January 1984. Rather, they suggest that peace and nuclear abolition had long been a cornerstone in Reagan's Soviet policy. Although Reagan's tone changed in the years that followed this address, his critique of the Soviet system, commitment to military buildup as a means for achieving arms reduction, and faith in the triumph of democratic values never did (Robert & Jones, 2016, p.455). Here, the authors argue that Reagan's "Evil Empire" speech actually had elements of disarmament plans. But I argue that if these claims were present, they were overtaken by aggressive pro-American rhetoric. This rhetoric threatened the Soviet Union so much it overshadowed any attempt for disarmament. Many scholars argue that Reagan's transition to disarmament policies in late 1983 and early 1984 was just a culmination of Reagan's plans and ideologies all along, coming to light. Whether or not this is true, I argue that *The Day After* was the final push for Reagan to either reveal his long-standing disarmament policies, or to change his policies only to disarmament, which he had not considered before."

Conclusion

The cultural and political impact of films and other popular media forms cannot be ignored. We are accustomed to films reflecting the political and cultural trends of the moment, but there are moments when films and popular media can change how citizens think and feel about a subject, so much that that film creates a political change. *The Day After* is an example of a movie that took advantage of the nuclear fears present in America and used these fears to their own advantage. This paper essentially functions as a case study, analyzing how one movie can influence political activism and political leaning from an average American citizen to the President of the United States. In our

current oversaturated media climate. It is important that we understand the complexities and weight that one movie can have on politics and popular opinion of an issue. Movies such as *The China Syndrome,* paired with the Three Mile Island nuclear plant meltdown created hysterical nuclear fears across the country, but not from an attack, rather from faulty machinery or wiring.

The Day After was a highly anticipated TV event. Across the U.S., families came together to watch the world end on their TV sets, in their living rooms. The images of the mushroom cloud and vaporized bodies scared these watchers. But what really influenced Americans was the images of nuclear radiation destroying crops, everyday ways of life, and the characters. The fallout of nuclear radiation was what changed American's minds about foreign policy and ultimately placed pressure on Reagan. *The Day After* was a unique and poignant example of how popular cultural and media, specifically movies, can change public opinion on contemporary issues, and enact change at all levels of society, and political involvement. Moving forward, consumers and creators of media should look to *The Day After* and consider its impact as a TV Movie. What other movies, TV shows, songs, etc. have had a lasting impact and have played a role in a massive shift in opinion and political policy?

Though this paper was originally written before the COVID-19 pandemic, in revision it is necessary to consider how this approach to seeing media as action can be applied to media now depicting COVID-19. Just like the Cold War and the Nuclear crisis of the 1980s, we are living in a historic moment. In 15, 20, or 40 years, will we look back on movies and TV shows which discussed COVID-19 and realize it changed our opinions about vaccinations or wearing masks? By seeing media not only as a reaction to history, but an actor in it, we are giving agency and importance to the popular media we see every day. Going forth, consider how world events around you are depicted in fictionalized movies, TV shows, songs, novels, etc., and consider if these stories are affecting your opinions on the events around you, and maybe even how far these influences could go.

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