

# Nuclear War and Its Consequences on Television News

by David M. Rubin and Constance Cummings

*Because the threat of nuclear war is potentially too politically divisive and too frightening to the audience to be "newsworthy," television may be a "silent, willing partner of government in keeping nuclear issues below the threshold of national consciousness."*

When defense analyst Daniel Ellsberg provided copies of the classified Pentagon Papers study (43) to the *New York Times* and other newspapers in 1971, he was "convinced beyond any doubt that the information . . . , if widely available, would be explosive" and help bring about an end to the Vietnam War before it escalated into a "nuclear conflagration" (24; see also 51). What Ellsberg had not anticipated, however, was that the diplomatic and military story revealed in the Papers, the story he hoped would energize the public and lead it to more vigorous political action, would in fact not succeed in capturing the news spotlight. Rather, his story was almost instantaneously superseded by another: the government's attempt to prior restrain the press on national security grounds and thereby stop publication of the Papers (*New York Times v. U.S.*, 1 Med. L. Rptr. 1031, 403 U.S. 713 [June 30, 1971]). The legal showdown between press and government turned out to be "far more compelling" as a news story than articles on the Papers themselves, and, as a result, editorial resources were poured into the more dramatic and self-contained First Amendment issue, not into stimulating a public debate about the origins and course of the war (51, p. 167).

In retrospect it is clear why such a displacement of news media interest occurred. In late 1970, Gallup polls already showed that 59 percent of Americans thought the United States had made a mistake sending troops to fight in Vietnam, and 72 percent were in favor of withdrawing them by the end of the year. Ellsberg's evidence was redundant. By the time the Pentagon Papers appeared, the interest of the press and public in the war had already shifted from whether it should be ended to how and when the troops would come home (50, p. 71). There is no evidence that publication of the Papers stimulated any popular outcry for withdrawing from Vietnam (51, p. 313).

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Ellsberg is hardly the only political activist to have hoped that concentrated media attention to issues of war and peace would galvanize public interest, stimulate public debate, and force changes in public policy. The nuclear arms competition between the United States and the Soviet Union, with its ever-present threat of a catastrophic nuclear war, has stimulated this hope in others.

For example, Edward Hume, screenwriter of the ABC-TV movie "The Day After," which portrays the destruction that would result from a nuclear attack, hoped the film would "wrench" public dialogue "back to the surface" on the "value of defending this country with a nuclear arsenal" (9). Similarly, Carl Sagan hoped to provoke a widespread public response to his theory of nuclear winter—which would make nuclear war a suicidal undertaking—by revealing it in the popular Sunday magazine supplement *Parade* (38):

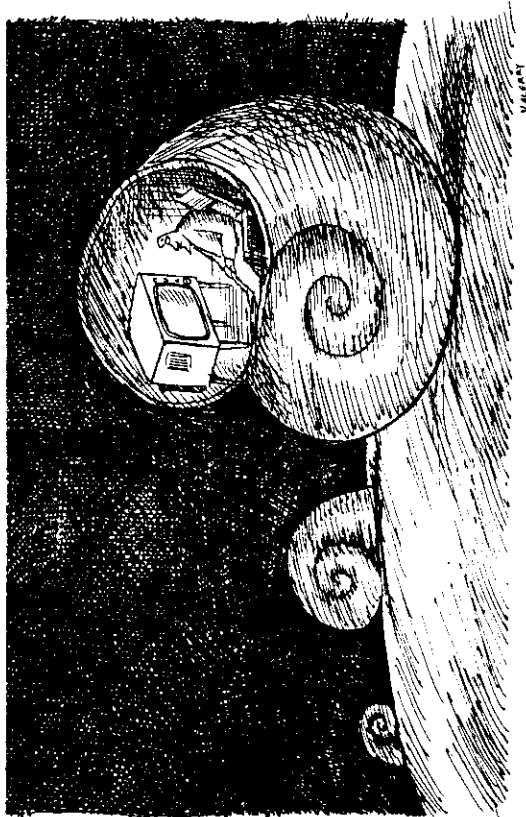
The low level of public knowledge about the most basic aspects of the nuclear regime, however, discourages those who seek to politicize nuclear issues (35, 36, 37).<sup>2</sup> Manoff (25, p. 220) has argued that the maintenance of the nuclear regime depends on just such an ignorant and politically inert public. Producing such a public requires a quiescent press which, in order to protect national security and maintain a strong deterrent in the face of the "enemy," avoids politicizing the nuclear issue by failing to undertake vigorous adversarial journalism of a type that is lauded in other contexts.

Although the low level of public knowledge in this area has been well documented, the performance of the media in presenting images of, and information about, nuclear war and its consequences has not often been studied in detail (see 1, chap. 12; 6; 14; 17; 19; 26; 27; 41). Part of the problem for scholars is deciding where in the 45-year history of nuclear weapons to examine the response of the mass media. With the threat of nuclear war serving as a *carthus firmus* to modern life, it could be argued that the media should be filled on a daily basis with images and information about the nuclear threat. Critic Richard Pollak has argued for establishment of a "peace beat" that would make nuclear news a staple of journalism, in much the way sports, politics, and crime have been ceded a permanent place (32). Given the event-pegged nature of U.S. journalism, however, it is unreasonable, and experientially futile, to expect such constant attention when, in journalistic terms, nothing new is "happening."

The journalistic "taboo" against reporting repetitive stories, which Gans (10, p. 169) has noted, seems particularly true for this story; the constant iteration of the horror of nuclear war and the production of nuclear weapons is not likely to interest or mobilize the public in the absence of clear, practical, uncompli-

<sup>2</sup> Sagan, a panel discussant on the ABC News program "Viewpoint" (Nov. 20, 1983), said of the merit of the film "The Day After": "We've been sleepwalking during the last 38 years. . . without really coming to grips with how dire and compelling [the nuclear issue] is. And I think ABC should be congratulated for spurring what I hope will be a year-long debate on this issue."

<sup>3</sup> Rosen (37) cites a May 1984 survey taken by the New York-based Public Agenda Foundation "which found that 81 percent of Americans mistakenly believe it is U.S. policy to use nuclear weapons only if the U.S. suffers a nuclear attack first."



cated actions that could be pursued to reduce the threat (53, p. 331). Journalists and public alike may have long since fallen victim to a paralysis of the mind or, in Robert Lifton's words, a "psychic numbing" (20, 21) that militates against daily journalistic attention regardless of the level of threat. Psychologist Dorothy Austin argues that "perhaps one of the reasons even highly intelligent people may have trouble thinking about the nuclear predicament is because it is very difficult to think in any meaningful way about extinction" (2, p. 331).

The nuclear threat does not, of course, hover spectrally over us, unchanged and unchanging. Events do occur that have news value in the traditional sense and provide an opportunity to examine how the media respond to the challenge of making real the nuclear threat and educating, if not energizing, the public.<sup>3</sup> The year 1983 saw the unfolding of three such events of potential interest to journalists, each of which could have been the news peg for a serious examination of the nuclear threat. One—the theory of nuclear winter—is based on scientific discovery. The second—televising the fictional film "The Day After"—is a cultural event. And the third—discussion by members of the Reagan administration of the possibility of fighting and prevailing in a limited nuclear war—is a strategic event that throws light on war-fighting policy.

This article is a study of how network television news responded to these three stories. After describing the three stories, we examine several questions: whether the significance of these stories, like that of the Pentagon Papers, was

<sup>3</sup> The tension between Existentialist (involved) journalism and Rationalist (aloof) journalism is described by Merrill (28, pp. 44-48). Merrill states that establishment journalism and journalism schools in the United States have championed the Rationalist approach, which frowns on what is sometimes called "advocacy" journalism.

deflected by journalists; whether the stories were used as vehicles by journalists to challenge government policy in the nuclear arena; whether in covering these stories journalists found appropriate and effective images for portraying the effects of nuclear war; and whether the quality of coverage suggests hypotheses about the limitations of daily journalism in confronting the nuclear regime.

**The theory of nuclear winter had its origins in a 1982 article by scientists Paul J. Cruzen and John W. Birks on the climatic effects of nuclear war.** Their hypotheses (7) were refined and popularized by a group of U.S. researchers that included two "visible scientists" (13) with credibility in the journalistic community: Cornell University astronomer Carl Sagan and Stanford University population biologist Paul Ehrlich.

At a Washington, D.C., conference on October 30–31, 1983, titled "The World After Nuclear War," the Sagan group predicted that a 5,000-megaton nuclear exchange between the superpowers (representing less than one-half of the Soviet and U.S. stockpiles) would ignite fires sending up enough dust, soot, and smoke to block 95 percent of the sun's light in the mid-latitudes of the Northern Hemisphere, causing temperatures to fall below freezing for months. (Comparatively little research had been conducted on the effects of smoke produced by a nuclear exchange; the research emphasis had, not illogically, concerned the effects of radiation, electromagnetic pulse, blast, and heat.) They theorized that this pall of smoke and dust would result in grave and permanent damage to the ecosystem, disrupting the growing season by impairing plant photosynthesis and provoking widespread famine. In their view, destruction of the human species would be a real possibility. Participation in a nuclear war could therefore be considered an act of national and global suicide.

The Sagan group projected scenarios for nuclear exchanges of varying magnitude, with different sets of targets destroyed; each model predicted different amounts of smoke and other pollutants. They concluded that there may exist a "threshold" for the size and tactical composition of a nuclear exchange, which, if crossed, might presage global extinction.

Not only did Sagan present these findings to the Washington conference, but that same weekend he published a popular article in *Parade* outlining nuclear winter in stark terms for the general public. This was followed by an article in *Science* that explained some of the scientific assumptions behind the computer modeling (49) and an article in *Foreign Policy* that suggested the strategic implications of nuclear winter (39). This highly controversial theory sparked potentially newsworthy debates in three spheres: the political, the scientific, and the strategic.

First, Sagan's political motives were attacked for having introduced nuclear winter with a thunderclap of publicity in *Parade*. He was accused of using bad—or certainly hasty—science to aid the growing nuclear freeze movement and the opponents of the intermediate range missiles that were soon to be deployed in Europe by the NATO allies. He was criticized for avoiding the

usual channels of peer review in order to seize the moment and exploit growing public fears about nuclear war-fighting that had been aroused by the Reagan administration (as will be discussed below). His aim, critics charged, was not better scientific understanding of the effects of nuclear war, but creation of new pseudo-scientific argument that would revive the antinuclear movement, thereby weakening the nation's deterrent posture (3, 11, 12, 15, 23, 40).

Second, the predicted climatic effects were challenged as unduly pessimistic. An important response appeared in 1986 from two scientists at the National Center for Atmospheric Research, Starley Thompson and Stephen Schneider (48). By factoring in the effects of warming ocean currents, rainfall, wind, and the changing seasons on the atmosphere and its ability to purge smoke and other toxic substances, they argued that "the global apocalyptic conclusions of the initial nuclear winter hypothesis can now be relegated to a vanishingly low level of probability." A number of other prominent scientists expressed dissatisfaction with the quality of the research that produced the nuclear winter theory (34, pp. 124, 127).<sup>4</sup>

Third, for those who regarded the nuclear winter theory and the existence of an apocalyptic threshold as plausible, Sagan's findings mandated a thorough review of the U.S. military's targeting policy. Such experts as Thomas Powers hoped that the terrifying message of the theory would force both superpowers to acknowledge the uselessness of nuclear bombs as military weapons and that strategists on both sides would be forced to rethink their use and integration into war-fighting arsenals (33).

Correct or not, the nuclear winter theory was a story of significant conflict with enormous news potential.

**The ABC television movie "The Day After," a fictional account of the destruction of Kansas City in a nuclear exchange, aired on November 20, 1983, to an estimated 100 million people.** Reaching an audience of 38.5 million homes, it was at the time the highest-rated made-for-television movie ever shown.<sup>5</sup>

Although the movie carefully avoided describing what prompted the nuclear exchange, it did attempt to portray the horror that followed. Depiction of the holocaust began with tinted footage of actual hydrogen bomb tests. The first explosion occurred at a great distance from Kansas City, producing an electromagnetic pulse of energy in the form of high-voltage radio waves that fused electric circuits, shorted out power lines, and stalled traffic. This was followed

<sup>4</sup> Thompson and atmospheric scientist Richard Furco, of the Sagan group, appeared as opponents on "CBS Evening News" coverage of the nuclear winter experiment on December 12, 1986. Referring to recent evidence, Thompson said, "Nothing we've seen... leads me to believe that the extinction of the human race is a 'real possibility.'" This was the only serious criticism of the nuclear winter theory to appear on network television through 1986. In the same piece, correspondent Jerry Bowen asked rhetorically what the impact of nuclear winter might be on the structure of U.S. forces.

<sup>5</sup> An article in the *Los Angeles Times* (42) revised *Variety's* early projections (30) downward from 46 million to 38.5 million homes, according to Nielsen's national estimates.

by a flash of white and then red light ("like the sun exploding," as the heroic heart surgeon played by actor Jason Robards described it in the film). The residents of Kansas City (in reality Lawrence, Kansas) were then hit with firestorms, hurricane-force winds, and two mushroom clouds of radioactive debris and dust. Victims at ground zero were irradiated by a red glow, X-rayed, and then vaporized. Survivors (including Robards) spent the remaining 70 minutes of the film suffering from various stages of radiation poisoning as they wandered through the wreckage of their city seeking medical treatment and succor.

Well in advance of the air date, the film provoked controversy of the most predictable kind. Although the network tried to project an image of political neutrality, the antinuclear movement, which had circulated taped copies months beforehand, quite publicly embraced the film and used it as an organizing tool. Proponents of a nuclear arsenal attacked ABC for presenting an emotionally biased film that endangered national security by undermining the credibility of deterrence and, additionally, contravened the Federal Communications Commission's Fairness Doctrine (31, 46). Representative Vin Weber, a Minnesota Republican, said in an interview on ABC's "World News Tonight" (Nov. 18, 1983), "The movie clearly is timed to have a propagandistic value and to influence public opinion on the deployment of the intermediate range nuclear missiles in Europe." Moral Majority leader Jerry Falwell, interviewed on the same program, added, "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."

With 100 million Americans suddenly interested, at least to some degree, in the effects of a nuclear war, and with the political Left and Right dueling over the message of the film, journalists seeking to capitalize on this interest had many avenues open to them in reporting on "The Day After" controversy. For example, can national will be undermined by such a film? How is the strength of a deterrent measured, and what role does the public play in maintaining it? What might precipitate such a nuclear exchange? Are the current policies of the superpowers designed to increase or decrease the threat of nuclear war? How accurate is the film in its presentation of the aftermath of a nuclear attack? What civil defense measures, if any, may be useful in a nuclear attack? All of these questions became potential news stories in the context of the film.

**The declared policy of the United States on the use of nuclear weapons has long been summed up for the public as MAD—Mutual Assured Destruction.** This policy holds that the U.S. nuclear arsenal deters a Soviet first strike by threatening a retaliatory strike that would permanently cripple Soviet society (18, pp. 214-226). Yet as far back as the Truman administration, strategic thinkers have been considering how best to integrate nuclear weapons into overall war-fighting plans. In 1950 Paul Nitze argued that the United States should be able to escalate a nuclear war on its own terms and dominate the Soviets at any force level (18, pp. 62-63). In the early 1960s Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara announced that Soviet military targets, rather than civilian targets, might be the objective in a limited nuclear war (18, p. 138); his

hope was that the Soviets would similarly not target U.S. cities for destruction, since there was (and is) no way for either side to protect its population centers from nuclear devastation. In 1974, as the Soviet nuclear arsenal moved closer to parity with U.S. weaponry, President Nixon signed a new National Security Decision Memorandum (NSDM-242) acknowledging the need to prepare for nuclear war-fighting beyond a second-strike capability (18, p. 176). The Carter administration also prepared to fight both a limited and protracted nuclear war and to launch decapitating strikes against the Soviet leadership and command centers with precision-guided nuclear weapons (18, p. 192).

By 1983, when the Reagan administration began to talk publicly of the need to dominate a nuclear war at every force level, to provide nuclear options for the president, to employ cruise missiles and other new technologies that blur the distinction between conventional and nuclear war, and to fight and prevail in a nuclear war that might rage for weeks (16), experts saw only an evolution of past policies. To segments of the public, however, such blunt talk seemed new and worrisome, combined as it was with the drive to put intermediate-range missiles into Europe, the collapse of the arms reduction talks in Geneva, and the president's plan to develop a Strategic Defense Initiative that might protect U.S. military and civilian targets (thereby making survivability in a nuclear war somewhat more plausible). Nuclear war-fighting seemed to become a genuine possibility, ripe for political discussion.

The concurrence of these three events in late 1983 provided the news media with an opportunity, perhaps unparalleled since the explosion of the atomic bomb, to lead a public debate about nuclear war. The result, as we shall see, was bitterly disappointing to those who—like Ellsberg, Sagan, and Hume—see the news media as potential agents for stimulating change in the nuclear regime.

**The response of the network television news divisions to these three stories (and closely related subjects) was minimal and, with two notable exceptions, formulaic.** Television news programs were identified from citations for nuclear war-fighting, nuclear winter, and "The Day After" in the Vanderbilt Television News Archive for the period 1982 to 1986. For comparison, we examined a much more substantial body of print coverage of the three events in major newspapers, news magazines, and specialized journals.

Table 1 shows how coverage was divided among the networks. Over the five-year period 1982 through 1986, the networks presented a total of 24 stories on these issues, filling 48 minutes and 40 seconds on their evening news programs; much of it (16 stories, totaling 34 minutes and 50 seconds) was concentrated between October 31, 1983, and March 9, 1984.

Network coverage moved in lockstep response to the nuclear winter story. ABC and NBC covered Sagan's statements at the October 30-31, 1983, conference in Washington, release of a study by the National Academy of Sciences on December 11, 1984, which largely supported Sagan's view; and efforts in December 1986 to use a planned forest fire in California (set with napalm) to test the nuclear winter theory. Only NBC reported two related events on Sep-

**Table 4: Network television coverage of three stories about nuclear war, 1982-1986**

	ABC		CBS		NBC	
	No. of stories	Total time	No. of stories	Total time	No. of stories	Total time
Nuclear winter	3	2:40	3	3:50	4	5:20
"The Day After"	5	10:40	3	7:40	2	3:00
Nuclear war-fighting	0	0:00	1	4:20	3	11:40

tember 19, 1985: that survivors of a nuclear attack would be particularly susceptible to contracting AIDS and AIDS-related disorders, and that scientists at a National Academy of Sciences/Institute of Medicine symposium urged that the estimates of the number of casualties in a nuclear war be revised upward.

CBS deviated from this pattern by failing to report the first mention of nuclear winter on October 31, 1983; instead, the network delayed coverage of the theory until December 5, 1983, when it backed into the story by pegging it to a Federal Emergency Management Administration study seemingly in conflict with Sagan's views. (The FEMA study was actually published before Sagan's revelations and therefore addresses none of his scientific hypotheses.) In retrospect it seems likely that CBS was making amends for missing the story on October 31, and a chance to report on supposedly conflicting theories provided a traditional news peg. Like the other two networks, CBS later reported results of the National Academy of Sciences study on December 11, 1984, and the California test in 1986.

"The Day After" coverage was similarly uniform. ABC and CBS cited the controversy surrounding the film in previews on November 18 and 20. NBC aired nothing in advance of the film. All three ran by-the-book reaction stories from Lawrence, Kansas, and from Washington on November 21. Discussion of the film and its impact then vanished from CBS and NBC. ABC later described reaction to the film in the U.S.S.R. and Poland, but then it also dropped the story. In short, "The Day After" came and went in four days, eliciting no special reportorial consideration of its political nuances.

Television coverage of nuclear war-fighting was less predictable because there existed no single event—like the Sagan appearance—to stimulate coverage. For this reason, it required enterprise reporting, a journalistic form most likely to be squeezed out by the tyranny of the 22-minute newshole.

ABC aired nothing of a substantive nature on the administration's war-fighting strategy in the five-year period.<sup>6</sup> CBS contributed an inconsequential piece

<sup>6</sup> This article does not directly discuss the many passing mentions in television news stories from Washington during this period in which such government officials as Secretary of Defense Weinberger made reference to nuclear war-fighting strategy. Such brief references serve not to enlighten the public but rather, by constant iteration, to reinforce the view that there is only one possible course to follow in managing the nuclear arsenal—the course of the administration in power. The Kalb and Hart stories on NBC that are described below, by comparison, challenge that view and do not leave the last word (or only word) to official spokespersons.

on the National Attack Warning System and its considerable shortcomings, NBC provided by far the most impressive pair of stories (totaling 11 minutes and 20 seconds): a close examination by Marvin Kalb of the administration's policy for surviving a nuclear war and what that would mean (March 4, 1982); and a follow-up, two years later (March 9, 1984), from correspondent John Hart, which explained U.S. nuclear targeting strategy, probed the likelihood of keeping a nuclear war "limited" once the first bombs had been detonated, and noted that the Soviets do not subscribe to the U.S. view that nuclear war can be limited—a rather significant caveat.

The paucity of network coverage overall suggests that television was uninterested in using nuclear winter or "The Day After" to discuss nuclear war and its consequences. Only NBC rose to the challenge, within the context of its evening news program, of explaining the implications of the administration's declared policy on nuclear war-fighting, albeit on but two occasions two years apart.

A closer examination of the 24 news stories suggests at least four additional hypotheses on the television response to the nuclear challenge, each of which is examined below in the context of the 1983 events.

**First, network journalists seem to have wholly accepted the view that life will not survive a nuclear exchange; therefore, additional evidence of that fact is uncritically embraced by television news organizations and largely ignored.** Civil defense efforts are usually met with scorn. Emphasizing the destructiveness of a nuclear attack is pointless as "news."

The theory of nuclear winter, as articulated by Sagan and his colleagues, was and is the subject of serious scientific debate. Nelkin (29) notes that when confronted with complex scientific disputes, reporters usually try to present a balanced account by citing all sides without evaluating the quality of competing claims. She quotes one reporter as saying, "As long as you don't fall into the trap of presenting just one side, you're playing ball" (29, p. 92).

Yet, because television journalists embrace Sagan's thesis as an inevitable consequence of war, the scientific opposition never received an impartial hearing on network television. ABC's Carole Simpson (Oct. 31, 1983), after putting Sagan at center stage, noted that "some other scientists dismiss the new studies as propaganda." To represent these scientists she introduced Robert Kupperman of the Georgetown Center for Strategic and International Studies, who was not further identified. The quote used from Kupperman concerned only his criticism of Sagan's political motives, not the robustness of his science. It remained unclear to the viewer what sort of scientist Kupperman was, or what was wrong with Sagan's hypothesis or methods of inquiry; Kupperman was overmatched. Even this criticism was peremptorily undermined by Simpson, who predicted that Sagan would receive further support from an upcoming National Academy of Sciences study under preparation for the Pentagon.

When Peter Jennings ultimately reported these NAS findings (Dec. 11, 1984), he presented as fact that the world would be turned "into a cold and dark

planet." He did not report any opposition to the Sagan theory within the scientific community. His manner signified that the issue was settled.

Although Ted Koppel's "Nightline" program on ABC is usually a forum for establishment debate, his segment on nuclear winter was similarly skewed in favor of the Sagan thesis. During "Nightline" (Nov. 1, 1983) and in his moderating of the "Viewpoint" discussion (Nov. 20, 1983) that followed "The Day After," Koppel appeared to have already ruled out the possibility of survival, a notion "so academic as to be totally pointless," he remarked. This view determined the course of his questioning.

The scientific opponent chosen to confront Sagan on "Nightline" was Edward Teller, the physicist partially responsible for the H-bomb and the X-ray laser. Teller said he essentially agreed that a nuclear exchange would result in major climatic changes, but he disagreed with Sagan's more dire predictions and implied that the data had been released prematurely for political purposes. But Koppel overlooked this criticism to assure viewers that the discussants—Sagan, Teller, Ehrlich, Assistant Secretary of State Richard Burt, and a Soviet physicist—"seem to have something almost approaching unanimity here, which, as I suggested, happens so rarely in the scientific community."

On December 11, 1984, NBC also presented Teller as Sagan's loyal opponent. But Teller was never given the opportunity to offer specific scientific criticism of nuclear winter. His grim visage was presented symbolically on screen as anchor Tom Brokaw reported that Sagan had critics, but none of the actual criticism from Teller or anyone else was included in the story.

That journalists do not believe that the postnuclear attack environment merited more serious discussion is also suggested by the work of CBS's Bob Simon. In a lengthy investigative piece of 4 minutes and 20 seconds (Feb. 17, 1984), Simon reported on the efficiency of the National Attack Warning System (NAWAS) located near Washington, which is designed to alert various sites, including the White House, Congress, and the Central Intelligence Agency, of an impending nuclear attack. Simon was allowed into a bunker and permitted to videotape an actual test of the system's bells, whistles, sirens, and lights. As luck would have it (for Simon) there was a total system failure. Not one site received the test warning, a situation made worse by the fact that senior NAWAS personnel were unreachable for 22 minutes and spokespersons for the White House and the House of Representatives did not even know what NAWAS was. Simon taped the chagrined test manager telling his boss by phone that the system had totally failed and that CBS had captured it all for the evening news.

This was entertaining, if potentially disturbing, television. It was reported by Simon in a somewhat mocking tone (and who can blame him?). CBS placed it at the end of the news program, where humor is a highly valued form of closure (10, p. 157). Simon's tone was reinforced by anchor Dan Rather, who added the editorial tag, "What can I tell you?" before the credits rolled.

What Simon or Rather might have told the audience is whether this failure should be interpreted as significant. Yet there was no investigation of other systems that would activate in the event of an attack. Nor did they mention how

important a role NAWAS plays in the civil defense effort, how often test failures occur, or whether the U.S. public should be concerned with post-attack planning. If, on the other hand, one has accepted the Sagan view of the postnuclear world, Simon's dismissive approach to the story is understandable, although one wonders why he wasted time on the warning system at all.

A similar lack of interest in examining the post-attack environment can be seen in the news pieces that appeared summarizing reaction to "The Day After" (Nov. 21, 1983). Not one ventured beyond the obligatory shots of Lawrence residents watching themselves on television in roles as extras, or teachers leading inaudible discussions in classrooms. All three networks framed their reaction pieces with a quote from President Reagan diminishing the importance of the film: "It didn't say anything we don't already know," said the president on CBS, as he received a Thanksgiving turkey in the Rose Garden. "That is that nuclear war would be horrible and that's why we're doing what we're doing so there won't be one."

ABC's Jack Smith diminished the impact of the film by noting that meetings in Lawrence to discuss it were poorly attended. "They made up their minds a long time ago," Smith said, although what they made up their minds about is left ambiguous. It is likely that Smith was revealing his own resolution of the issue—that is, there is nothing left to be said about a film like "The Day After."

If, like Daniel Ellsberg, Sagan hoped through his *Parade* article and the television coverage of nuclear winter to unleash a public debate about targeting strategy and nuclear war-fighting, he must have been frustrated by the journalistic consensus that greeted him. Television received his views reverentially. The nuclear winter story—as well as the message of "The Day After"—was not so much displaced (as happened with the Pentagon Papers) as smothered by uncritical acceptance.

**A second hypothesis suggested by TV's response is that television journalists, operating as stand-ins for their audience, seem to believe that viewers cannot endure more debates about the bomb. Nuclear weapons are a permanent part of the U.S. landscape (4, 5).<sup>7</sup> It is permissible to report from time to time that public debates (or manifestations of nuclear angst) have surfaced, but it is not worthwhile to devote valuable air time to the content of those debates.**

Conflict is a part of the catechism that defines news, so it is not surprising that coverage of nuclear winter and "The Day After" bristled with mentions of debate. ABC's Sam Donaldson introduced a story on "The Day After" (Nov. 20, 1983) by announcing that the film had already created "a huge controversy over what it depicts and how it depicts it." Donaldson and reporter Jack Smith

<sup>7</sup> "If U.S. arms control policy reflected the opinions of most of the twenty-three journalists interviewed by the Center [for War, Peace, and the News Media]," writes Bram (4), "it might incorporate many of the views of Democratic Senator Sam Nunn." Only two reporters—Sara Fritz of the *Los Angeles Times* and Eleanor Clift of *Newsweek*—said they were proponents of nuclear disarmament.

failed to explain this misleading introduction, as neither the "what" nor "how" was the stimulus for debate.

The following night (Nov. 21, 1983), ABC's Peter Jennings quoted President Reagan as saying that nuclear war would be "horrible" and that his policies "are designed to prevent such a war." Jennings added, "Many Americans disagree," but that invitation to debate was also left unresolved. The only naysayer to the president in the three-minute piece that followed was a Lawrence citizen who argued, "The way to get rid of nuclear weapons is to get rid of nuclear weapons." Further along in the piece, when ABC viewers were told that high-school groups in Lawrence had debated the film, nothing from that debate found its way onto the screen. Church groups, viewers were told, considered nuclear alternatives. What were they? The phone lines of a New York radio talk show were tied up for 18 hours by callers discussing the film. What did they say?

Similarly, CBS anchor Morton Dean introduced a preview for the film (Nov. 20, 1983) by announcing that it had become "a national event that has provoked a national debate." The piece that followed suggested that the debate centered on whether children could watch the movie without risking severe psychological harm. (NBC's Mary Nissenon [Nov. 21, 1983] likewise considered the film's impact on children as the key issue.) The CBS piece was devoid of any political content and entirely avoided defining the "national debate" by portraying groups going to church, children discussing their nightmares, and artists promoting their antinuclear wares. Reporter Derrick Blakeley's tag was a portentous statement about Lawrence residents gathering to discuss "how best to ward off the beginning of the end." Blakeley did not ask what solutions were under discussion or whom they blamed for the current predicament.

As noted above, President Reagan, in successfully deflecting from the White House any criticism engendered by the film,<sup>8</sup> noted that nuclear war is "horrible and that's why we're doing *what we're doing* so that there won't be one" (CBS, Nov. 21, 1983, emphasis added). "What we're doing" to head off nuclear war is, of course, the heart of the matter, a legitimate issue on which the national debate might have focused. Of all the television pieces viewed for this study only those by Marvin Kalb and John Hart on NBC addressed that question head on (discussed below). Neither the nuclear winter theory nor "The Day After" occasioned such investigation.

<sup>8</sup> The film had a statistically insignificant impact on public opinion and helped, wittingly or not, sustain and reinforce support for President Reagan's defense policy. Girded for a firestorm, the White House received "less than a thousand" calls during and after the broadcast, according to *Washington Post* columnist Mary McGroarty (22). *Washington Post* polls before and after the air date indicated little shift in public opinion. For example, the number of those who supported a mutual freeze between the Soviet Union and the United States rose from 83 percent to 85 percent. On the other hand, President Reagan's job approval rating increased from 63 percent to 65 percent. Forty-three percent, down from 57 percent in early November, said they felt Reagan's handling of foreign affairs increased the chances of war (47). Approval of Washington's defense policies rose from 54 percent to 58 percent (8), according to a poll taken by ABT Associates of Cambridge, Mass.



On the contrary, CBS White House correspondent Leslie Stahl, who provided those reassuring lines from the president, decisively ignored them in her wrap-up on the film. Her own perspective was revealed in the tag she chose for the story. She quoted approvingly "a Reagan advisor" who compared the film to a Chinese meal and predicted that it "will be forgotten in less than a week." To the veteran television journalist Stahl, there was no newsworthy debate surrounding the film. "Debate" was simply a journalistic construct to sell a story about a disaster film.

Brandon Stoddard, who was responsible for producing "The Day After" at ABC's Entertainment Division, said at the time (ABC, Nov. 18, 1983) that the film's only purpose was to show "what it's like to live [after a nuclear attack]." If Stoddard's determination to disavow any political motive seemed disingenuous at the time, the television reporting of the "debate" supported his view.

**A third suggestion of television's coverage is that, given the permanent presence of nuclear weapons, the networks have no desire to politicize their existence or encourage inquiry into how they might actually be used in war-fighting.** The underlying premise of much of network reporting is that there is only one logical way to manage the nuclear arsenal and the permanent threat it imposes on society, and that way lies along whatever course the administration in power is pursuing.

At a press preview for "The Day After," Stoddard revealed that one line had been cut from the script, a "fragment of a radio broadcast that quotes a Soviet official as saying that it was the coordinated movement of Pershing II launchers that provoked the original Soviet action" (45). Stoddard found this to be a "completely unimportant line" (52); yet, as many print journalists pointed out (52), it would have supplied the most controversial point of discussion in the

film. By offering the fragment of a scenario that leads to an uncontrollable escalation, it addressed President Reagan's statement about doing "what we're doing" to avoid nuclear war. The excised line was, according to Hume, the "last vestige of reality tying the film to the political situation in the world today" (9).

Even with the offending line removed, ABC's News Division took pains to dissociate itself from the film and to depoliticize it. Two days before the air date, Peter Jennings announced that the film had been made by ABC's Entertainment Division, as distinct from the News Division (Nov. 18, 1983). Reporter Jack Smith then noted that antinuclear groups had tried to buy advertising spots from the network during the film and had been turned down. Nevertheless, Smith reported, some local affiliates, not under the network's control, had agreed to air the spots. His implied message was clear: Don't blame the network for the appearance of the politically implicated antinuclear spots.

The special edition of "Viewpoint" that followed the film was another effort by the ABC News Division and the White House to neutralize any possible political message. "We wanted reasonableness and calmness. We wanted to address the issue of what you can do to assure there never is a nuclear war," said White House Communications Director David Gergen (44). Koppel, organizing a wide space between fiction and reality, introduced "The Day After" as "a sort of nuclear version of Charles Dickens's *Christmas Carol*." This permitted Secretary of State George Shultz to remark that the film "is a vivid and dramatic portrayal of the fact that nuclear war is simply not acceptable" and should inspire Americans to rally in support of President Reagan's policies of "balance and deterrence" while "seeking reductions."

Former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger said that the film presented "a very simpleminded notion" of the problem, pointedly asking, "Are we supposed to make policy by scaring ourselves to death?" He implied that the government should continue to avoid open discourse with the public on nuclear issues. Network television's unwillingness to question the administration's nuclear policy—in the context of either nuclear winter or "The Day After"—is thrown into sharper relief when compared with the work of NBC's Marvin Kalb and John Hart. Both produced enterprise pieces in reaction to the administration's declared policy of fighting and prevailing in a nuclear war. Although two pieces in the space of two years can hardly be expected to prompt serious reflection by the public, their work is illustrative of what a politically engaged television news division could regularly produce if it so chose.

Kalb (March 4, 1982) focused on what "prevailing in a nuclear war" might mean. One of his vehicles was Jack Geiger of Physicians for Social Responsibility (PSR), who was shown describing for a tearful audience of San Francisco teachers what would happen if a one-megaton nuclear warhead (roughly 15 times the explosive force of the bomb dropped on Hiroshima) hit their city. "The survivors will envy the dead," Geiger predicted.

Kalb attacked the Federal Emergency Management Administration's published plans for urban evacuation in time of nuclear war. He noted dryly that a week's advance warning would be necessary to evacuate New York and that

"no panic is planned." Clearly skeptical, he added that fireballs, blast waves, and radiation fallout would be blanketing the country during the evacuation.

Again quoting PSR, he described "the madly confrontational" administration policy that had recommended a \$1.6 trillion military spending program. "What we're told," said an aggressive Kalb, "is that more weapons buys more security, and more security is the best deterrent against nuclear war. . . . But as military budgets increase, and the prospects for arms agreements diminish, which one of us can feel confident that even a small war will not escalate into what used to be called the unthinkable?"

While Kalb's report vibrated with emotion, John Hart's six-minute Special Segment (March 9, 1984) explored unusual territory for network news. Announcing at the beginning that "it is now the official defense doctrine of the United States that nuclear war is fightable and controllable and winnable," Hart stated that the United States is now preparing to wage a nuclear war for up to two months, enduring week after week of nuclear salvos, with the intention of retaining an arsenal for World War IV. He described in some detail the U.S. targeting plan that matches 10,000 warheads with 40,000 potential Soviet targets, updated daily to account for weather conditions, prevailing winds, and weapons on alert.

Hart interviewed atomic expert Desmond Ball about the likely Soviet targets on the list, observing that many of the so-called military targets are located near population centers. He confronted General Bennie Davis, commander of the Strategic Air Command, with this fact, implying that U.S. policy would lead to massive Soviet civilian deaths and the threat of reprisal against U.S. cities. "Your words," Davis replied with irritation. Hart closed by pointing out that the Soviets do not share the U.S. vision of a prolonged nuclear war, still preferring, in all likelihood, a strategy of launching their entire arsenal to knock out the United States in one "obliterating" blow.

Both pieces suggest dozens of angles for enterprising television journalists, but the two stood alone on the evening news programs during the five years under analysis. Such pieces entail risk; they seek to challenge national authority and debate the government's most closely held secrets on nuclear war-fighting. They threaten to politicize the nuclear regime, something that reporting on nuclear winter and "The Day After" avoided. It is perhaps discouraging, but not surprising, that they accounted for little more than 11 total minutes of air time.

**Finally, the network response suggests that television has acquired only a limited inventory of metonymical images for communicating the horror of nuclear war.** Old Nagasaki or Hiroshima footage, freeze frames of mushroom clouds, missile silo rehearsals, and global "weather maps" provide a visual backdrop for the narrative, but they fail utterly to transmit the significance of the "event."

The images employed by broadcasters to convey the reality of nuclear war can be divided into at least four types: computer graphics and winter landscapes to suggest the bleakness of nuclear winter; historical footage of the

destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, which serves to mirror reality; Department of Defense footage of test explosions, missile launchings, silo rehearsals, and related activities; and scenes of everyday American life, set against a chilling voiceover to ironic effect. Of those four, only the scenes of everyday activities that would be permanently disrupted by nuclear war have the power to move an audience.

Nuclear winter is essentially a "tell" story. Faced with the dilemma of illustrating a scientific theory, the networks relied in part on computer-generated graphics. ABC reporter Carole Simpson, who covered the Sagan conference (Oct. 31, 1983), began by discussing the "all-out war" that would "instantly kill more than a billion people." Tiny pinpoints of light materialized on an artist's rendering of the earth as seen from space to denote a series of detonations. This was followed by photographic stills of a devastated urban landscape and three different shots of forest fires emitting clouds of smoke. Then darkness eclipsed the earth.

NBC's report on the National Academy of Sciences findings (Dec. 11, 1984) included an elaborate graphic of the curved surface of the earth, with the United States and the Soviet Union clearly identifiable. Bars of light crisscrossed the Atlantic before tiny yellow clouds materialized. As reporter Robert Hager explained the atmospheric changes that would follow a nuclear exchange, a giant yellow sun broke apart in the middle of a green landscape and spewed forth a cloud of dust. Then yellow flames and gray smoke were superimposed on urban and forest landscapes. Along the horizon of the earth, a gray layer appeared representing 180 million tons of smoke settling 6 miles above the earth's surface, and, above it, a brown layer of dust, representing 15 million tons, that would drift as high as 11 miles in the atmosphere. Arrows charted how the sun's rays would be deflected by the dust and absorbed by the smoke, causing summer temperatures to fall 18 to 45 degrees below normal before harmful ultraviolet rays penetrated the depleted ozone layer, causing a nuclear "spring." These same effects were reported on December 11 by CBS with a simpler graphic of the earth spinning in space. A cap of white representing nuclear winter covered half the globe; yellow spears of "cancer-causing rays" were then shown striking the earth.

These television graphics rely on high-energy colors—greens, purples, oranges, and yellows—and an axial scheme, but they cannot convey a true picture of the effects of a nuclear exchange. Perhaps for this reason ABC (Oct. 31, 1983) included in its inventory of images unpeopled winter landscapes. The network selected a close-up still of icicles, two human figures in the middle ground struggling across a field of snow, and a sparse, snow-covered pine forest. NBC (Dec. 11, 1984) added a surrealistic touch with a black-and-white shot of the decapitated head of the Statue of Liberty in the right foreground and a devastated New York City skyline in the background, as dark clouds flowed angrily across the top of the screen. This was followed by a shot of the Eiffel Tower in the center background, visible over the rooftops of Paris but bent like a tree in a strong wind, plus three shots of snow blowing across different land-

scapes. Whether such images permit viewers to develop realistic expectations about the post-attack environment is, of course, debatable.

In his Special Segment (NBC, March 9, 1984), John Hart used footage from a rehearsal for World War III at a missile base in South Dakota, plus shots of the MX missile, the B-1 bomber, the cruise missile, and the Trident submarine. Such images, it can be argued, no longer evoke a strong viewer response, if they ever did. They simply identify a defense story and reinforce the notion that the nuclear regime is an inescapable reality—one that follows an evolutionary course through the development of new technologies and applications.

Similarly, what impact remains from the too-familiar, 45-year-old pictures of destruction at Hiroshima and Nagasaki? Like Department of Defense film clips, these images of obliteration are meant as a "mirror of reality." However, they offer no indication of the human experience of a nuclear conflagration, as human subjects were either photographed from a distance or altogether absent from these compositions. Tom Brokaw used such footage to provide a "hint of the horror" for his piece on nuclear winter on October 31, 1983. This sort of application is indeed little more than a "hint"; it is a spice that provides the scent of death to nuclear stories.

The potential consequences of nuclear war are perhaps most effectively illustrated by images of more intimate, human action. For example, Kalb described what would happen during "a nuclear emergency, say in New York City, assuming, of course, as the U.S. does, that there may be a week's notice to begin a mass evacuation of heavily populated areas." This was accompanied by an aerial shot of New York and one of its normally traffic-clogged expressways. "Planes will be loaded with outbound traffic. Everyone in line," continued Kalb, as people were shown walking briskly across the screen to board a commuter aircraft. "People heading for the subways," said Kalb, over a scene of commuter-mobbed escalators at rush hour. "No panic is planned," he added, "even the Staten Island Ferry taking city folks upstate. That's the plan,"—as he cut to a wide shot of the waterway from the deck of the ferry framed by two people in the foreground, arms around each other, "as fireballs, blast waves, [and] radiation fallout cover the country." This is hard-edged, interpretive reporting reinforced with provocative imagery.

In like manner, at the close of Robert Hager's piece on the medical consequences of nuclear war (NBC, Sept. 21, 1985), a medical doctor, Herbert Abrams, predicted that "if there were an expected 32 million injured, that would require 70 times more hospital beds than would be available throughout the nation, 12 times more doctors, and 48 times more nurses." Again, an ironic tension was created between his voice-over and the footage: a large surgical team operating on a single patient in a well-equipped theater.

These few examples suggest that television may be most evocative in its treatment of nuclear war when it marries everyday images of peaceful American life with specific information about the profound social stresses and fractures that would result from a nuclear exchange. Computer graphics, Department of Defense training films, and vintage footage from Hiroshima and Nagasaki do

not connect to contemporary life in any meaningful way. American culture—unlike Western European culture—is blessedly free of military images that crowd, and sometimes impinge upon, daily life. The techniques employed in the Kalb and Hager pieces force Americans to think about how their own lives would be affected in a nuclear exchange, how their government is planning to respond, and what those last hours, days, and weeks would be like. In this use of scenes from everyday life the news media are tentatively extending the image of nuclear war beyond the “accepted” boundaries of a Hiroshima and the sanctioned Department of Defense films. By touching upon the lives of the American people, they risk politicizing nuclear war—a radical idea, as we have seen.

It is difficult to imagine a major government initiative that has moved so inexorably through planning, funding, and execution with less public participation than the nuclear weapons program. With the exception of public agitation for a ban on atmospheric testing, and the widespread public opposition to the actual use of nuclear weapons, which has stayed the hand of presidents, the government has structured today's nuclear regime with little public participation. Television's reaction to the events of 1983 illustrates its role as a silent, willing partner of government in keeping nuclear issues below the threshold of national consciousness.

Timidity in the face of the nuclear issue has many causes. Journalists are reluctant to suggest that alternative courses of action are available to government in the stewardship of nuclear weapons; as a result, the issue is depoliticized. Such debate about policy as exists in the public forum is paid little attention, despite journalism's traditional enthusiasm for conflict. Journalists do not see stories dealing with the effects of nuclear war as newsworthy; they accept the scenarios that predict total devastation of the environment and extinction of the human species, yet these scenarios cause them to disengage from the subject rather than to seize it with missionary zeal. Nor has television advanced from the familiar images of the 1950s and 1960s in its portrayal of the nuclear threat. Little imagination has been employed in communicating how thoroughly the nuclear culture has invaded American life.

As a result, television's coverage of these events in 1983 was fatalistic, overly respectful of government, visually unimaginative, and politically neutralized. The strongest impression of the image of nuclear war on network television news in the Reagan years was of no image at all.

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# Modes of War and Modes of Social Address: The Text of SDI

by Robert Karl Manoff

***A detailed analysis of a television report explores the conjunction of the technologies of warfare and of communication that reveals cultural prototypes and creates a master narrative for the strategic defense program.***

Journalists know they write "stories," and we know that we watch "stories" and read them, but we are not sufficiently attentive to the consequences of these acts. For "news" occurs where texts and events come together, at that place where the reporter puts a name to things, tells a story about them, and thereby gives them a structure. Narrative conventions bring order to events by making them something that can be told about; by organizing experience, they exert a powerful pull on journalists and publics alike. As individuals and as a people, we tell the stories we need to hear to make sense of the world. Reality appears to us, but we grasp it through the tales we choose to tell to ourselves, our way (30).

Journalists grasp the world by making a text of it, and for those who seek to understand the journalistic act, this textualization of the world thus becomes a primary object of study. This article takes a single television news report and inquires into the strategies that governed the way it made its subject into a story, the way it transformed the world into a text. It does so in a sphere of textual and cultural studies loosely circumscribed by the work of such writers as Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault (4, 22, 27, 44). But it is in no sense a systematic application of their work. It is rather a provisional attempt to describe the logic according to which meaning is created, an effort to describe how truth-effects are produced, to open up a space of possibility for regarding the discourse of television journalism in the nuclear era.

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