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THE WHITE HOUSE

WASHINGTON

November 3, 1983

MEMORANDUM FOR EDWIN MEESE
FROM: KEVIN R. HOPKINS *KRA*
SUBJECT: "THE DAY AFTER"

I had the privilege yesterday of viewing the upcoming ABC-TV film "The Day After," and found it both well-done and powerful. I am all the more convinced that this film could have a significant effect on public opinion, and that an appropriate posture on our part is imperative in order to minimize any damage and/or take advantage of the film to promote our country's national security interests. To these ends, I recommend the following:

- 1) You and the President should view this film, if you have not already done so, at the earliest possible date. No review (even as descriptive a one as the attached from the Los Angeles Times) can adequately prepare one for the impact of the movie.
- 2) The President definitely should address this issue prior to the film's showing. One possibility would be for him to make a nationally televised five-minute address immediately prior to the film. This would permit him to reach nearly all persons who are about to watch the movie, yet it would not unduly expand the movie's audience, as a speech earlier in the week theoretically might. A draft television address for this purpose is attached.
- 3) With your permission, I would like to submit for publication to the Wall Street Journal the attached draft op-ed article. It is to my mind, as one who has seen the film, extremely important that defense advocates not be distracted by extraneous issues such as the technical quality of the movie or ABC's wisdom in airing it before the deployment of the Pershing IIs. The film's impact paints such arguments as mere quibbling or worse, and we could actually do ourselves significant damage by so appearing to downgrade the gravity of film's theme or distract public attention from it. The attached op-ed therefore seeks to gently nudge conservative opinion-makers' attacks in a more constructive direction.

Since the article would be much more effective if it were published some time prior to the showing of "The Day After," it would me help greatly if you could review my draft and let me know your thoughts before your departure next week. Thank you.

cc: Jim Jenkins
Jack Svahn
Ken Cribb

**WF Day After*

HOWARD ROSENBERG

WHEN THE BUTTON WAS PUSHED

It doesn't matter. James Watt stays; he leaves. The Orioles win; the Phillies win. It rains today; it doesn't. You get the raise; you don't. "Dallas" is first; it isn't. The price of lettuce is up; it's down. Home computers are the rage; they aren't. "The Right Stuff" is right; it's wrong.

None of it matters compared with ending the threat of nuclear obliteration.

That is what you carry away from "The Day After," a shocking, horrifying, utterly bleak and highly controversial ABC movie about the lethal impact on Lawrence, Kan., when nearby Kansas City is destroyed by Soviet missiles.

Whether "The Day After" is dramatically good (which it is) seems almost irrelevant compared with the message it pounds home. Because of its subject and potential audience via TV (Channels 7, 3 and 10) on Nov. 20, it may be the most important movie ever made.

That sounds like hyperbole. However, even a TV ratings flop can reach 10-15 million viewers, a hit four or five times that many, a blockbuster perhaps 100 million.

Those who do watch "The Day After" will see a story that builds slowly, level by level, swelling with David Raksin's haunting score as the film follows the routine lives of ordinary people living or working in Lawrence amid rising East-West tensions.

Then U.S. missiles roar from their underground silos in rural Kansas and are answered minutes later by Soviet missiles.

Jason Robards plays one of the central characters, a Kansas City surgeon who is making the 37-mile trip to Lawrence when the missiles

hit. Asked later what it looked like, he replies:

"The sun exploding."

Director Nicholas Meyer's staging is masterful and Robert Black's special effects are among the most effective I've seen. There are scenes of awesome destruction, fire storms, people vaporized where they stand and others—is the body that of a black or is it charred?—burned beyond recognition. There are mass graves. There are survivors, the walking dead and hopeless who have lost their hair and aged years within days. There are firing squads, chaos, looting. In seconds, the screen in front of you seems to die.

There is the terrible feeling of being alone and isolated. A radio transmitter crackles an eerie SOS: "This is Lawrence, Kan. Is anybody there? Anybody at all?"

The impact is crushing on a personal level. You hear yourself moaning. At one point I was holding back tears.

We never know which superpower pushed the button first and it doesn't matter here. You're in your front yard or in a field or at work or on the road or looking out your bedroom window—and suddenly you see our missiles zoom skyward and you know *theirs* are on the way. What do you do? Where do you go?

Everyone is always saying how catastrophic a nuclear holocaust would be, and you accept it on a visceral level. But never has the message smacked you across the face like this and bounced you off the wall.

"We're not talking about Hiroshima anymore," someone says. "Hiroshima is peanuts."

The movie's cast—Robards, John Collum, Jobeth Williams, Steven Guttenberg, Bibi Besch, Lori Lethin and John Lithgow—is first-rate.

Written by Edward Hume, "The Day After" has arrived on the scene—slimmed to 2¼ hours from its original four—with an explosion of its own.

ABC edgily held it back from an earlier scheduled air date and at one point Meyer expressed doubt that the movie would ever be shown publicly. For a while, only pirated copies were available.

The network has since launched a massive campaign to promote the

movie, including a special screening in Lawrence that drew wide press coverage. Anti-nuclear groups have seized upon the "The Day After" as a chance to advance the freeze movement.

ABC plans to cluster all commercials before the movie's missile attack occurs. However, there have been reports that the movie has been an extremely difficult sell because of its grim content and that ads are being solicited at bargain rates.

That night's competition is tough—the first episode of NBC's seven-hour miniseries about John F. Kennedy's White House years. However, instead of cringing, advertisers should be proud to buy time on "The Day After." Those who don't merely because it shocks rather than soothes, should be ashamed. The clock is ticking for them too.

Syndicated columnist William Rusher has accused ABC of being politically motivated in showing "The Day After" and has urged viewers to boycott advertisers who buy time on the movie. A reader responding to Rusher's column in a local newspaper went even further, charging the network with trying to frighten children with "X-rated" violence.

Are they kidding? Showing nuclear nightmare is political? Depicting death and suffering from missiles is gratuitously violent?

The irony is that—awful as it is—the catastrophe you see on "The Day After" would be mild compared with the real thing, a point made at the end of the movie.

Everyone should see "The Day After." Forget about "Psycho," "Friday the 13th" and "Halloween." They don't matter.

This is a horror story.

Remarks before The Day After

My fellow Americans, the program you are about to watch portrays in graphic detail the catastrophic results of a nuclear attack upon the United States.

Much of what you will see is horrifying. That is because nuclear war itself is horrifying. But we must not let our horror turn into feelings of helplessness or despair. We must channel our revulsion into working toward a world where the events of "The Day After" can never happen.

The awful and terrible consequences of a nuclear war have weighed heavily on my mind every single day since I took office. There is no graver responsibility than being Commander-in-Chief of our nuclear forces. Every day I pray to God that future Presidents will be spared the burden I bear.

That is why I believe we must thoroughly examine every opportunity for reducing tensions and for introducing greater stability into the strategic calculations on both sides.

I believe one of the most important contributions we could make toward this stability would be to reduce, and ultimately dismantle completely the nuclear arsenals of both the United States and the Soviet Union. For that reason, in

1981, I initiated the Strategic Arms Reductions Talks, known as START negotiations. The purpose of these talks is to produce mutual, verifiable reductions in the number of intercontinental missiles held by the U.S. and the Soviet Union. I might add that it is these intercontinental missiles that cause the destruction shown in the movie.

We are also negotiating to remove nuclear weapons from Europe. We first proposed the complete elimination of longer-range INF missiles from Europe, but the Soviets refused to go along. We followed up by proposing an interim solution, at an equal but lower number of missiles than at present. Unfortunately, the Soviets have rejected this approach as well. Meanwhile, they are continuing to deploy their weapons at a rate of one warhead per week.

My fellow Americans, it is not the United States that is standing in the way of an agreement to reverse the arms race. It is the Soviet Union that is not bargaining in good faith. It is long past the time that we work -- together -- to eliminate forever this nuclear menace from the world.

Unfortunately, some who have already seen this movie say the film proves the need for a nuclear freeze. Nothing could be further from the truth. Everything that happens in "The Day After" could happen in the real world even with a nuclear freeze. If the Soviet Union and the United States froze their nuclear forces today, there would still be far

too many weapons of destruction in the world. There would still be thousands of warheads aimed at American cities. And the Soviet Union, with their nuclear supremacy locked into place by a freeze, would have no incentive to negotiate any real reductions. The world would then have to live permanently with the dangerous situation that currently exists.

But even if the Soviets refuse to negotiate seriously, and even if they continue to threaten peace-loving people, there is hope for a safer world. Last March I shared with you my vision for the future. I called upon the nation to embark upon a program that would eventually lead to technology that would intercept and destroy strategic missiles before they reached our own soil. We, of course, have not yet developed that technology, but we are working on it and some day soon, I hope, nuclear attacks like the one in this movie would not be possible.

My friends, I am weary, as you are, of the anxiety produced by a world full of nuclear weapons. But that anxiety will not be lessened by simplistic answers. As I and all my predecessors have discovered, peace is a complex process. It does not come about by unilateral disarmament or empty declarations of our desire for peace. Nor would we

achieve peace just by closing our eyes to the intentions of our adversaries. We must remain at the bargaining table as long as it takes to reach a fair and verifiable settlement. But in the meantime, the United States must continue to maintain its strategic forces. As long as we have a powerful deterrent, the Soviets will know that the risks of an attack on America or her allies would far outweigh the possible gains.

The nightmarish world of "The Day After" must never be allowed to happen. Only the parallel goals of deterrence and genuine arms reductions can prevent nuclear madness. We must resolve to remain firm in the pursuit of this most important of our national objectives.

Thank you for listening, and God bless you.

LESSONS FROM THE END OF THE WORLD

by

Kevin R. Hopkins

"Nothing else matters," ran a line from a popular song last year. Such is the feeling that envelops one upon viewing "The Day After," ABC's forthcoming film of the world's nuclear Goetterdaemmerung: "Nothing else matters" but keeping the world from incinerating itself in this final moment of nuclear madness.

But the possibility of success in that enterprise is seen, per force, as so slim, and the price of failure is so graphically depicted, that the viewer is quickly benumbed by an air of utter hopelessness. Not since "On The Beach" has humanity been as clinically disposed of.

If it is despair and desperation that the movie engenders, however, that is not the ultimate objective of the film's promoters, particularly those in the nuclear freeze movement. They hope, quite simply, to use the movie to do what no amount of political rhetoric has so far been able to accomplish: to so terrify the public that they demand an immediate halt to the U.S. nuclear weapons program.

They may well succeed, at least partially, for the movie is terrifying. No scene epitomizes this terror more effectively than one midway through the film, in which a middle-age farm family mom is calmly making her bed while Soviet missiles streak across the Midwestern sky. As her husband literally carries her downstairs toward the basement, she screams out in piercing, breathless sobs that "this can't be happening." Anyone who has confronted the import of his or her own death will recognize this unparalleled fear.

What a relief it is for the viewer, then, to wake up the next morning and find that the radio disc jockey is telling funny stories with the same light-heartedness that he had last

week, that the toaster still works, and that cars are traveling down the freeway just as they were the day before. But this relief is edged with a new, clinging caution. Nuclear war is no longer a faraway prospect or a grim statistical accounting of millions of deaths; it is a starkly human horror that ends forever the ambivalence with which one might look at the weapons of mass destruction.

This is the first lesson proponents of a strong defense must be prepared to learn in the days ahead. "The Day After" will deeply affect many millions of Americans. Few will be able to watch a beautiful young woman on the eve of her wedding be transformed into a grotesque parody of life, or the birth of an innocent baby into a Dantean inferno, and not be unmoved.

The challenge for those who oppose the implicit charge of this film -- that we disarm at once -- is not to deny these horrific visages, but to use them to further the cause of real, permanent, and livable world peace. In particular, defense advocates should avoid several tempting but inevitably counterproductive rhetorical traps:

1) Do not rely on the film's cinematic weaknesses to undermine its credibility. Granted, some of the dialogue in the first 40 minutes would make soap opera devotees cringe, and the plot is occasionally disjointed, but that is mere quibbling. The characters are generally well-realized, the acting is almost uniformly good, and the special effects are first-rate. Most important, the movie has impact, probably more so than "Fail-Safe" and "The China Syndrome," which are better films from a technical standpoint.

2) Do not criticize ABC for showing the film. It is true that the movie, airing as it does just before the deployment of the Pershing IIs, comes at an awkward time, and its effect, if not intent, is blatantly political. But ABC actually does the nation a service by

bringing the nuclear bogeyman out of the closet. This is the evil monster we have been hearing so much about, and it is just as hideous as we expected. So what? If ABC suddenly decides not to show the film, would that make nuclear war any more acceptable? Better to know the nature of the beast so we can better and more determinedly ward it off.

3) Do not bemoan the movie's political bias. Yes, "The Day After" does tilt leftward, and even portrays the U.S. as exploding the first nuclear device. But after a few seconds of seeing human beings instantaneously metamorphosed into skeletons and then vaporized, the movie's political ornamentation becomes irrelevant. The producers could have begun the film with a unnerved President informing Americans that the Soviet Union had launched an unprovoked nuclear first-strike on the U.S., and it would have diminished little the central message of the film that nuclear war is a horrible, almost unimaginable nightmare.

4) Do not deny the possibility of nuclear war. Nuclear war remains extremely unlikely. But as long as large stockpiles of nuclear weapons exist in this world, such a conflict is at least theoretically possible. Those who try to contend otherwise, especially in the aftermath of this graphic film, will only damage their credibility.

5) Finally, do not waste time debating the magnitude of a nuclear war's effect. Dr. Carl Sagan has made headlines recently by claiming that even a small nuclear exchange could destroy the earth's atmosphere. Some have risen to dispute his findings, and others may bicker with specific meteorological and social extrapolations in "The Day After." But that is only thumb-twiddling. A full-scale nuclear war would end civilization as we know it. Period.

Does all this mean that the defense advocate's situation is hopeless? Fortunately, it does not. In fact, a second lesson of "The Day After" is that it is a remarkable opportunity for those interested in the security of the United States. For once and for all, we can put

behind us the question of whether a nuclear war is winnable. As the film poignantly demonstrates, it is not. We must therefore move beyond this concern, and focus the debate not on the horrors of nuclear war, but on the means to prevent such a catastrophe while preserving our freedom and that of generations to come. Only then will the American people profit from what promises to be an emotionally unsettling evening of TV entertainment.

One concluding thought, perhaps a lesson for those who see "The Day After" as a two-hour political advertisement for the nuclear freeze. Let's assume that President Reagan, on November 21, declares a unilateral nuclear freeze (following on the United States' de facto unilateral nuclear freeze of the 1970s), and promises not to deploy the Pershing IIs under any circumstance. The Soviets, thereby emboldened, close off West Berlin (as they do in the film). The Western forces try to break the blockade (as in the film), and the Soviets respond by overrunning West Germany. The NATO countries, frightened by this onslaught and wholly unable to stop it by conventional means, detonate a nuclear device over the advancing Soviet troops. Soviet leaders (who proved their paranoia, if nothing else, in the Korean Airliner massacre) retaliate (again, as in the film) by destroying NATO headquarters with a nuclear warhead, and then launching a first-strike against the United States. Mutual annihilation follows. And it does so because of, rather than in spite of, a nuclear freeze.

The script could have been written just as credibly this way. Or any number of ways. The very fact that it could have been points up perhaps the most important lesson of "The Day After": Peace is not an easy process; it cannot be evoked by the mere incantation of the shibboleth du jour, but must be produced through long, hard negotiation and a willingness to stand firm in its pursuit. Most important, it must have as its goal the reduction, and ultimate elimination, of nuclear weapons, not the mere "freezing" of their numbers into place.

President Reagan has demonstrated that he recognizes this reality. Would that those who so vociferously agitate for "peace" did so as well.

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Kevin R. Hopkins is Director, White House Office of Policy Information. He recently attended a pre-screening of the film "The Day After," to be shown on ABC-TV November 20.