

# *The Day After*

1983

Director: Nicholas Meyer

Starring: Jason Robards, Steve Guttenberg, John Lithgow

127 minutes - Unrated

By Ellie Stanton

## **Synopsis:**

Set in a peaceful town in Kansas in 1983, *The Day After* tells the story of several average Americans as they struggle to recover from a nuclear attack. Although the events that culminated in war are explained, the real focus of the film is on the devastating consequences of war for its victims in the heartland of America. Russell Oakes is living a comfortable life as a doctor when he suddenly finds himself caught in traffic at the time of the nuclear blast. He heads to the local hospital, where he spends the rest of the film treating the wounded along with Dr. Sam Hachiya and Nurse Bauer. Meanwhile, farmer Jim Dahlberg and his family, who live in a rural area close to a missile launch site, must seek shelter from the fallout in the basement of their home. They slowly develop symptoms of radiation sickness while they try to cope with the chaos that has followed the attack. The movie's concentration on the destruction of individual lives, social order and the environment leaves the viewer with a strong sense of the hopelessness we would face in the aftermath of nuclear war.

### *Historically Relevant Scenes*

00:15:00>00:16:00	- Depiction of missile launch site
00:58:00>01:01:00	- Explosion of nuclear bomb
01:06:00>01:22:00	- Impact on environment
01:32:00>01:48:00	- Deteriorating health of survivors

## **Ratings:**

Entertainment - ★ ★ ★ ☆

Historical Accuracy - ★ ★ ☆ ☆

## Historical Analysis:

The TV movie *The Day After* portrays a scenario in which forty years of Cold War tensions have led to a nuclear war. While this war did not in fact happen, a nuclear attack felt like a real possibility in 1983 after decades of ideological confrontation and a continuing arms race. The real significance of the film lies in its visualization of the horrors of “the day after” a nuclear strike, as well as the American public’s reaction to the film within the context of the fear of nuclear war prevalent in the early 1980s.

At its most basic level, the Cold War was a war over ideas. The United States operated as a democracy with a capitalist economy based on free enterprise, while the Soviet Union was a one-party state in which the Communist Party controlled the government, the economy, and the lives of its people. The leading ideologies of the Soviet Union conflicted with those of the United States, which refused to recognize it until 1933. As Nazi Germany became more aggressive with the onset of World War II, the United States and the Soviet Union entered an alliance of convenience. Though underlying tensions between the two nations remained, they worked together to defeat Nazi Germany from 1941 to 1945.

By the end of World War II in 1945, the United States and the Soviet Union emerged as superpowers, nations with the strongest military forces in the world. Meanwhile, the war had left many of the countries in Europe in economic ruin and political chaos. The stark contrast in the economic and political policies of the two superpowers meant that they had very different ideas for how to handle post-war reconstruction. The United States wanted to ensure the return or establishment of democracy in post-war Europe, fearing that the Soviet Union would exploit the instability in order to spread communism and Soviet control, as it ultimately did.

From the perspective of the Soviet Union, their nation had endured enormous suffering during World War I and II, including horrific casualties. Over three million of their people died in World War I and over 23 million died in World War II, more than any other participating nation. The Soviet Union sought above all protection from future losses, and therefore moved in to Eastern Europe to secure its borders. To contain this threatening advance, the United States enacted the Truman Doctrine in 1947, which supported vulnerable Greece and Turkey with economic and military aid. It proclaimed that “it must be the policy of the United States to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or outside pressures.” The Marshall Plan followed shortly after. It pledged to aid allies in Europe

with reconstruction while countering communist threats at the same time. These actions represented the policy of containment, which grew out of the desire to stop the spread of communism. This idea would become a cornerstone of American foreign policy for the remainder of the Cold War. In fact, one scene in *The Day After* shows a young man suggesting that “maybe [we] can contain it,” in reference to the “containment” of a possible Soviet nuclear attack.

The growing Soviet threat caused the Western democracies to establish the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, or NATO, in April 1949. The organization committed all members to agree that “an armed attack against one...shall be considered an attack against them all.” The Soviet Union perceived this alliance as a threat, and in turn organized the Warsaw Pact of all the nations under its control. British Prime Minister Winston Churchill coined the phrase “iron curtain” to describe the division that had descended upon Europe. It was a symbolic barrier that marked the physical and ideological divide between the democratic West and the communist East.

The tensions between the superpowers grew with the onset of the Arms Race, in which both sides competed for supremacy in the number and technological sophistication of nuclear weapons. The United States had dropped two atomic bombs on Japan (one on Hiroshima and the other on Nagasaki) to “hasten the end of war [and it had] the ‘bonus effect’ of pressuring the Soviet Union.” Once the military potential of nuclear weapons had been demonstrated, the governments of the United States and the Soviet Union poured billions of dollars into the development of more powerful weapons. At its peak number of nuclear weapons in 1965 the United States possessed around 30,000 nuclear warheads, and the Soviet Union at its peak in 1986 had over 45,000 warheads. The most important of the new technological developments, the intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM), could deliver the weapons at targets thousands of miles away. The new long-range weapons could hit any target in the world, and the threat of complete annihilation led to the mounting fear of a nuclear holocaust.

Both the Soviet Union and the United States, however, were aware of the total destruction that an exchange of ICBMs would cause. Both nations therefore adopted the so-called doctrine of Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD), the policy of avoiding a nuclear war because neither country could survive a nuclear exchange. An integral component of this was the “Launch on Warning” strategy, whereby, if the United States received indications that the Soviet Union planned to attack, it would launch a full-scale attack on the Soviet Union before U.S. missiles could

be destroyed. *The Day After* illustrates what happens when deterrence fails and this strategy is implemented.

Mutual Assured Destruction arose out of the fear of the other side's capacity to retaliate. This was evident during the Cuban Missile Crisis, a brief period in 1962 when tensions peaked to the point that a nuclear war between the United States and the Soviet Union appeared inevitable. The Soviet Union thought their nuclear weapons were inferior to those of the United States, so Khrushchev decided that placing missiles in Cuba would increase his "strategic arsenal" and deter an American attack on the Soviet Union. U.S. reconnaissance aircraft spotted the missile sites, and the crisis began when the Soviet Union shot down an American U-2 spy plane over Cuba. The two week-long confrontation ended with the United States agreeing not to invade Cuba if the Soviet Union removed its missiles. For many Americans, the Cuban Missile Crisis was a period of "imprisonment in fear, expectation, and/or denial." It became the single moment in which the Cold War came closest to escalating into nuclear war. *The Day After* shows what might have happened if the Cuban Missile Crisis had not been resolved peacefully.

Although the 1970s were a decade marked by a gradual increase in arms control measures, the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980 signaled a shift in U.S.-Soviet relations. Reagan ran on a campaign platform that opposed détente (peaceful coexistence with an enemy) and the concessions associated with it. The early 1980s became what is known as the "Second Cold War," as hostility escalated once again. Reagan authorized the spending of \$2.2 trillion on the military. He installed cruise missiles in Europe, and he launched the Strategic Defense Initiative, or SDI. Based on the idea of shooting down enemy missiles while they were in mid-flight, the SDI strategy, nicknamed "Star Wars," inspired a great deal of resentment in the Soviet Union. Arms control talks and bans on nuclear testing had completely halted by the time *The Day After* aired, in the midst of growing nuclear tensions.

By the summer of 1983, President Reagan and Soviet leader Yuri Andropov's relationship grew openly hostile. Andropov lashed out in response to SDI, claiming Reagan was "inventing new plans on how to unleash a nuclear war in the best way, with the hope of winning it." Reagan saw SDI as a defensive measure, while Andropov interpreted it as an aggressive action. Andropov accused Reagan of "deliberately lying" to justify the program. In response Reagan denounced the Soviet Union as the "Evil Empire." This was a far cry from the relative détente of the previous decade.

The diplomatic tension coupled with the breakdown in arms control talks instilled a widespread fear of attack. For the first time since

the Cuban Missile Crisis, nuclear war seemed like a very real possibility. This peak in Cold War fear inspired “nuclear realism” as film and television attempted to graphically depict nuclear war scenarios.

Nuclear war films such as *War Games*, *Threads*, and *On the Beach* all posed scenarios that ended in the detonation of a nuclear weapon. *The Day After* was no exception. The movie follows the lives of the citizens of a Kansas town while numerous television and radio news reports discuss an escalating international conflict. The media reports that there has been a rebellion in the East German army, causing the Soviet Union to impose a blockade of West Berlin. Such an event actually happened in 1948 when the Soviet Union blockaded all railroad and road access to the Western-occupied areas of West Berlin (control of the city had previously been divided between the Soviet Union, the United States, France, and Great Britain). In that instance, the massive Berlin airlift, which ensured the survival of West Berlin, averted the crisis. No such solution occurs in the plot of *The Day After*.

The United States responds by issuing an ultimatum that the Soviet Union end the blockade by the next day or it will be regarded as an act of war. The Soviets flatly refuse. The President then places the U.S. armed forces on DEFCON 2 alert (the same precautionary measure enacted by Kennedy during the Cuban Missile Crisis). There is an initial nuclear exchange in Belgium, but the filmmakers are deliberately vague about which superpower attacks first. Regardless of who started it, because of Mutual Assured Destruction, both sides face annihilation. The overall emphasis of the movie is not the events leading to nuclear war, but rather the stories of ordinary Americans who survive the initial blast and face a horrific aftermath.

Even so, the catalyst for war in the film, although fictional, may be compared to what could have happened had the Cuban Missile Crisis not been resolved diplomatically. In fact, the character Dr. Russell Oakes declares that “it’s 1962 all over again,” to which his wife replies “it didn’t happen then...it’s not going to happen.”

Unlike 1962, when Kennedy and Khrushchev made choices that averted the potential use of nuclear weapons, in this fictional scenario the “crisis” is realized. In an instant a mushroom cloud flashes over a highway in the countryside. The high-altitude of the explosion means that it is not instantly lethal, but its radiation creates an Electromagnetic Pulse that burns out the entire supply of electricity, in cars as well as homes and businesses. The air burst is immediately followed by a ground burst that vaporizes anyone in its vicinity and devastates the surrounding area. The survivors are left without electricity or any means of communication. The infrastructure of modern life is destroyed and the soil is rendered

infertile. In the months that follow, with their livestock dead and with no engines to drive machinery, farmers are at a loss as to how to produce food. Even wood, contaminated by radiation, cannot be burned as fuel.

There is no exaggeration in this depiction if we compare it to the aftermath of the atomic bomb's detonation in Hiroshima. That bomb detonated at 1,900 feet above the ground and struck the city with an explosive force of 12,500 tons of TNT. A college student described the extreme force of the explosion:

"I felt as though I had been struck on the back with something like a big hammer, and thrown into boiling oil... The vicinity was in pitch darkness; from the depths of the gloom, bright red flames rise crackling, and spread moment by moment. The faces of my friends who just before were working energetically are now burned and blistered, their clothes torn to rags."

280,000 citizens lived in Hiroshima. 100,000 died instantly, while the blast obliterated much of the city. As a witness described it, "the wave knocked down buildings, burned trees and people, and started the thousands of fires that finished off much of the city's structures." The bomb completely destroyed 48,000 of Hiroshima's 76,000 buildings. Even so, one of the doctors in *The Day After* cries that they "are not talking about Hiroshima anymore! Hiroshima was... was peanuts!" Here the filmmakers allude to the fact that in the decades since Hiroshima, nuclear technology had surpassed the earlier atomic weapons technology. The audience is thereby reminded that the devastation caused by the more powerful bombs of the 1980s would be much more horrific.

Aside from the environmental impact of nuclear attack, *The Day After* vividly portrays the hopelessness of post-war governance and social order. The President comes over the radio and delivers a less than inspiring speech, speaking of "no retreat from the principles of freedom and democracy" while violence and mob rule spread through the small town. Firing squads shoot people for looting, rape, and murder, while neighbors kill each other over shelter. The aftermath is grim, with no hint of a better future. Unlike *The Day After* and other disaster films that predict a world of utter chaos, the Japanese reacted quite differently to the only nuclear attacks in history. In the aftermath of Hiroshima, a peaceful festival "gave people, crushed by privation, a glimmer of hope which heightened their desire for restoration of the city." Reborn under the principle of democracy, the city elected Shinzo Hamai as mayor in the first post-war Elected by Popular Vote election. Yet a key difference between the real and the fictional post-nuclear strike societies lies in the

scope of the attack. *The Day After* presupposes an entire nation under attack, while the bombs in Hiroshima and Nagasaki were singular events, making it much easier to regain control in chaos. As the credits roll in *The Day After*, it is difficult to imagine the ravaged town "rising from the ashes as a Mecca of world peace."

This is especially true for the survivors of the bomb who face long and painful deaths from radiation sickness. The film depicts a single hospital that is crowded to the point of anarchy as panicked people seek treatment for their fatigue, weakness, and bleeding. In the days following the explosion the characters' faces grow increasingly grotesque from radiation sickness. This change in the physical appearance of the victims appears to be accurate, as make-up designer Michael Westmore studied footage of the aftermath of the bomb in Hiroshima when creating his depiction of the sick. If anything, the physical horrors suffered by the victims are downplayed and some of the more gruesome effects of a nuclear blast were omitted from the film. For example, in one scene a child looks into the mushroom cloud and is instantly blinded. In reality, his eyeballs would have literally melted out of his head. The film also does not fully portray the gruesome symptoms of radiation poisoning. For example, a grocer in Hiroshima described the people around her as having "skin blackened by burns... They had no hair because their hair was burned, and at a glance you couldn't tell whether you were looking at them from in front or in back.... Their skin not only on their arms, but on their faces and bodies too hung down." To some extent the minimization of the physical horrors of a nuclear blast can be attributed to the film's brief time horizon because many of the more severe side-effects such as cancer and the collapse of the immune system take longer than a few days to set in. *The Day After* was a made-for-TV movie, and for a TV audience in the early 1980s especially, regulations for broadcasts muted reality. At the end of the film the audience is therefore left with the jarring disclaimer that "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." The fact that the side-effects of radiation were not depicted with complete accuracy is partly because the truth was simply too horrific.

ABC preyed on public fears and anxieties about a nuclear war in the attention they gave to the broadcast of *The Day After*. The network spent \$7 million on advertising -- a huge sum then. Teachers assigned students to watch the film, and parents were encouraged to watch it with their children. As a result, half of the U.S. adult population (100 million people) watched it, a record for a TV movie.

It was no surprise therefore that the film generated such an enormous reaction from the American public. It created widespread psychological distress over the grim hopelessness and horrific aftermath of nuclear war. ABC set up toll-free phone lines and distributed half a million viewer's guides "as a way to help the Cold War-paranoid audience psychologically deal with the subject matter." Even Mr. Rogers, the host of America's most popular television show for children, made an effort to prepare children; he ran five shows about children's anxieties over nuclear war in the days preceding the broadcast. Many nonetheless viewed it as an extremely important educational film depicting a future which Americans should try to avert. Dr. Kenneth Porter, co-chairman of the New York chapter of Physicians for Social Responsibility at the time, said that if "families sit down and talk together about the dangers depicted in this television show, we'll be able to make it into the 21<sup>st</sup> century."

*The Day After* had an impact on more than the perceptions of ordinary Americans. More significantly perhaps, it affected the thinking and policies of one of the world's most important leaders at the time. President Ronald Reagan, the former film actor and a man who often spoke of movies as if they were real, had a private screening and said the film influenced him more than any military briefings did; in his diary he wrote, "It left me greatly depressed. We have to do all we can to see there is never a nuclear war." Reagan began to change his course, and would soon visit Moscow in an effort to ease tensions. Three years later, Director Nicholas Meyer received a telegram from Reagan after the President signed the Intermediate Range Weapons Agreement at Reykjavik with Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev that said, "Don't think your movie didn't have any part of this, because it did."

The Treaty marked the beginning of a gradual decrease in tensions and the beginning of the end of the Cold War, which came with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. The Soviet Union and its state-controlled economy were ridden with corruption, inefficiency, and low growth rates, and its technology was falling behind that of the West. Selected to be the new Soviet Communist Party leader in 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev proposed economic reforms and more meetings on arms control initiatives. While Soviet society started to open up in the face of economic stagnation, countries in Eastern Europe began to hold free elections to oust Communist leaders. From 1989 to 1991, the Communist party dictatorship in Eastern Europe collapsed, the Berlin Wall came down, and the Soviet Union disintegrated. The iron curtain had been lifted, and the Cold War ended without the nuclear apocalypse portrayed

in *The Day After*. The movie stands as a reminder and a warning that history doesn't necessarily always produce happy endings.

### *Key Quotes*

**Stephen Klein:** (*discussing the dangers of exposure to radiation*) You can't see it... you can't feel it... and you can't taste it. But it's here, right now, all around us. It's going through you like an X-ray. Right into your cells. What do you think killed all these animals?

**Alison Ransom:** (*explaining her loss of hope preceding the birth of her baby*) We knew the score. We knew all about bombs. We knew all about fallout. We knew this could happen for 40 years, but nobody was interested.

**Joe Huxley:** (*discussing the future of war in the aftermath of nuclear war*) You know what Einstein said about World War III? He said he didn't know how they were gonna fight World War III, but he knew how they would fight World War IV. With sticks and stones.

**Dr. Russell Oakes** (*in a state of shock after witnessing the air burst over the highway*) I was on the freeway, about thirty miles away. I'm not sure...it was high in the air, directly above downtown. Like the sun...exploding.