PLANNING FOR "THE DAY AFTER"

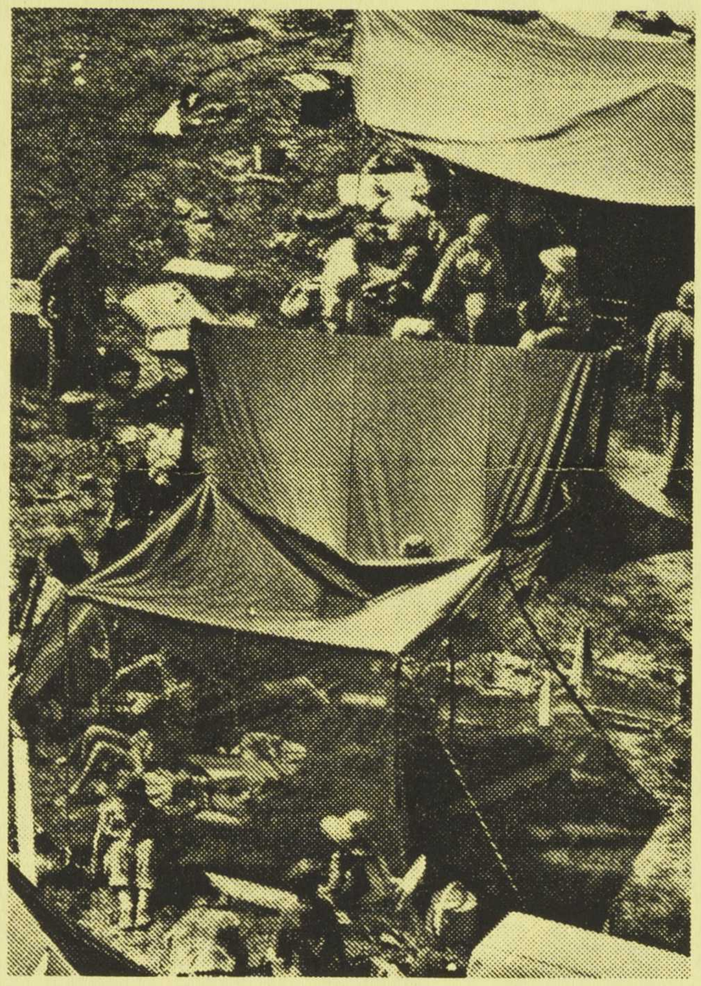
Groups Rally Around TV Movie

In the tradition of *The Thorn Birds*, *The Winds of War* and *Roots*, the American Broadcasting Company has promised another media event this fall—this one based on nuclear war. Sometime in October or November, ABC will air its long-delayed, made-for-television movie *The Day After*, starring Jason Robards, and millions of Americans will witness a nuclear attack on Kansas City and the struggle of survivors in nearby Lawrence, Kansas, to stay alive. According to the handful of people who have seen the two-and-a-half-hour drama, it is the most graphic portrayal of nuclear war yet attempted by any network or major film studio. Kansas City is obliterated, and those who survive the initial blast fight a losing battle against radiation sickness, food shortages and the disintegration of social institutions. Brandon Stoddard, president of ABC Motion Pictures, has called *The Day After* "the most important film we have ever done."

Even though the film depicts the failure of deterrence, ABC spokesman Dan Doran says that the movie takes no political stand. And persons who have viewed it say the film leaves the viewer with a feeling of despair. But it is the intent of several antinuclear organizations, in the words of Josh Baran, national media consultant for Target Kansas City, "to turn a television commercial event into an educational event on our own terms."

Target Kansas City, Baran's brainchild and a project of the Greater Kansas City Physicians for Social Responsibility, will use *The Day After* as the centerpiece for what he calls "a national educational forum." Baran hopes that antinuclear groups across the country will make use of *The Day After* by staging their own events, holding press conferences and placing representatives on local radio and television talk shows. There have been discussions among movement activists about using the film in attempts to rally opposition against deployment of the Euromissiles.

The ABC film is "*The Last Epidemic* for the general public," says Baran, noting that in one night 10 to 20 times as many people will see the network film as the total number of persons who will ever see the Helen Caldicott documentary. But the problem with *The Day After*, he adds, is that it does not go far beyond the point of illustrating—using chilling special effects—the horrors of nuclear war. "There's not one line in the movie," says Baran, "like 'Why did we build these missiles?' Not one comment like 'Why didn't we find a way to live in peace?' It's pretty depoliticized."



Lawrence residents playing nuclear war "extras" during filming of "The Day After"

In order to focus national attention on the political implications of *The Day After*, Target Kansas City is planning a series of events (many local peace groups in Kansas City are joining PSR in this effort). In the weeks leading up to the film's airing, Target Kansas City will sponsor lectures and symposia on nuclear war, says Diane Eagle, the project's associate director. The day of the film, the project plans a rally prior to its showing, with a release of balloons to show how the fallout pattern of a nuclear attack on Kansas City would spread. Immediately following the film, Eagle says, there will be a candlelight march and vigil. And the day after *The Day After*, the activities will continue with a sunrise women's march through Kansas City and an evening town hall meeting on nuclear war.

Forty miles away in Lawrence, an affiliated project, Let Lawrence Live, will sponsor similar actions. Lawrence is where Robards and much of the rest of the cast come to grips with the effects of nuclear war. During on-location filming, director Nicholas Meyer used over 1500 Lawrence residents to play victims of the attack. Local peace groups, says Steve McKinney, executive director of the Lawrence-based Athletes United for Peace, "are looking for big things from this movie. It will let people see the issue as it is."

All of the events planned by Target Kansas City and Let Lawrence Live, says Baran, are designed to bring national media attention to local activities which will amplify or correct points made in the film. "The film is not by any means perfect," says Baran. "For instance, at the end of the movie the survivors try to keep on living. The truth is, if you look at the fallout patterns, no one would survive in Lawrence."

But with the film's dramatic and upsetting depictions of sympathetic characters being vaporized on screen and its accurate portrayal of radiation sickness, the ABC network, Baran and Eagle note, is handing the movement a wonderful opportunity to reach more people, especially in the Kansas City area. "When people see their homes destroyed, they will have questions," Eagle explains. "We have to make sure there are people here to address these questions."

The key to using *The Day After* effectively around the country as an organizing tool, says Baran, a publicist based in Berkeley, California, is to get the message out to those who watch the movie that there is a way they can help prevent such a war. "Anyone can use this film," he adds, "and hopefully for something more than a potluck dinner, which is what the peace movement is famous for."

The film will air, he notes, shortly before NATO deploys cruise and Pershing 2 missiles in Western Europe. In the film the presence of these missiles contributes to the deterioration of East-West relations leading up to the war. The war itself starts along the German border, and it is never made clear who fires the first nuclear shot. But soon afterward both the United States and the Soviet Union launch their intercontinental ballistic missiles *en masse*.

"The only way to reach people today is through television," Baran says. "The time and money spent to make this film would take the entire peace movement's budget of $20 million. We have to take advantage of this free time." **—David Corn**

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