

# TV's nuclear holocaust: should children watch show?

BOSTON — Once, in the late 17th century, Dr. Samuel Johnson remarked about the threat of execution: "Depend upon it, sir, when a man knows he is to be hanged in a fortnight, it concentrates his mind wonderfully."

In the late 20th century, every one of us lives with the prospect of mass execution. But this nuclear doomsday has no deadline. So we pay homage to it in grim jokes and bumper stickers — "One Nuclear Bomb Can Spoil Your Whole Day" — and go about our daily business.

Now comes the ABC movie, "The Day After," a story of sorts about nuclear devastation and its aftermath. The view of survival in a post-nuclear age — sanitized as it must be for television — is vivid and tough enough to resonate through daydreams and nightmares. This is a movie that concentrates the mind wonderfully.

So it's not surprising, that during the past few weeks, "The Day After," scheduled for Nov. 20, has emerged from television show to national event. The program, screened extensively across the country, has brought on a heated debate about the proper level exposure for children to the TV holocaust. Parents who are notorious for lax supervision over the television set are anxiously asking: Should we keep them away from the set?

## WORDS WORDS

By Michael Gartner

The native language of the Philippines is called Tagalog, and the Tagalog word for mountain, especially mountains in the back country, is *boondok*. That word was picked up by Americans fighting in the Spanish-American war, and that's how the backcountry or hinterland of America came to be known as the *boondocks*.

The word is considered slang, and it's often considered disparaging or downgrading. Still, it's rather a nice word.

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Time-wasting work in the hinterland would be a *boondocks boondoggle*, I suppose.

*Boondoggle* is a coined word, and the man who coined it was one R.H. Lusk, a scoutmaster. In 1925, Mr. Lusk gave the name *boondoggle* to those useless leather cords that Boy Scouts often made to wear around their necks. The word apparently caught someone's fancy, for it quickly came to mean any insignificant handicraft.

Persons critical of the New Deal appropriated the word to describe the projects the government devised to employ workers during the Depression, and today the noun means any pointless, unnecessary and time-wasting work.

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A newspaper referred to a police chief as *straight-laced*, and that brought a note from Elizabeth Damick of Southington, Conn. "The gentleman was apparently an upright and moral gentleman, and probably quite well self-disciplined," she writes. "I have no doubt he did lace his shoes in a straight line," but, still, she thinks the chief was *straitlaced*, not *straightlaced*.

Mrs. Damick is right.

*Strait* comes from the French and Latin words meaning narrow or restricted. Thus, a *strait* is a narrow passage connecting two large bodies of water. A *strait-jacket* is "strait" because it confines. *Straitlaced* means excessively strict — or confining — in manners. And when you're in *straits*, you're in distress because you're in a condition of excessive narrowness or restriction.

When you're in *straits*, your situation is by definition dire. So *dire straits* is a redundancy. It has a spare *dire*, as some wag once said.

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Ellen Goodman



Educators are sending home notices advising parents. The Portland, Ore., school board says no child should watch at all. The National Education Association says no child should watch alone. Viewing groups are being set up in hundreds of communities, and psychologists are offering advice to teachers about likely student reactions: fear, depression, hopelessness.

Since screening the film, and living with its emotional fallout, I have shared all these questions and concerns. We have talked about it at home, where the youngest is a teen-ager. As parents, all our instincts are to protect children from anxiety, and this movie will undoubtedly make them anxious.

Yet I have also begun to wonder whether there isn't more behind this widespread parental concern. Certainly we are worried about our children, but aren't we also worried about ourselves?

In my own haphazard survey of adults, those who do not plan to watch have said, "I already know . . . I don't need to see that . . . I'm not up to it." Adults don't enjoy being upset any more than children. They particularly dislike being upset BY their children.

Dr. John Mack, a psychiatrist who has done extensive work on nuclear anxiety among children and adolescents, says: "Most parents are not ready to be confronted by the raw emotions of their kids. A great part of the fear of the kids watching is a fear of the questions they'll ask. You can be sure that they will ask: What are you doing to stop this? And we will feel ashamed."

It is far easier to protect our children from a television show than from nuclear war. It is easier for parents to deny the fear of their children than to confront it. Our children exaggerate our own sense of helplessness in the face of nuclear stockpiles and, yes, our shame that as grown-ups, we have done so little to make the world safer.

I think it is fair to ask whether it's right to shield children from a portrait of a post-holocaust world. After all, this is not science fiction. This is not "Jaws." This is nuclear war. At some age, surely, tuckermans and anxiety are appropriate, reasonable responses.

"The problem," says Dr. Mack, "isn't that we get upset. There are lots of people in the psychiatric wards who are not upset about anything." In the movie itself there is a vivid portrait of a woman carefully making a bed with full knowledge that missiles are on the way.

The point, says Dr. Mack, is what we do with that upset. Do we, do our children, fall into despair or into inaction? "What is the route to hope?" asks Dr. Mack. It's a question he has been exploring for some time: "It may be through facing reality. If everyone is not upset, we won't stop this thing."

Is a nuclear-war film kid stuff? I would still shield younger children from "The Day After." It's too overwhelming. But I am less certain about adolescents and teen-agers. Perhaps the best decision can be made in concert with them, with an understanding that this is rough, emotional material. Material that will make them afraid, as we are afraid.

But whether the young become viewers or not, we have to be willing to ask ourselves the question they would phrase: What are we doing to stop it? "The Day After" concentrates the mind wonderfully. And it is still the day before.