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ABC FILM: "THE DAY AFTER"

"I care not who writes my country's laws so long as I can write its songs," says a centuries-old aphorism. The modern version would be, "I care not who writes my country's laws or who is elected its officials, so long as I can write its television programs."

ABC television network has made an executive decision to spend $7 million to induce the United States to accept a nuclear freeze. No, it's not a public affairs debate or a political speech or a scientific presentation; it's a fictional dramatization called "The Day After" which purports to show what happens when a nuclear bomb hits Lawrence, Kansas.

ABC-TV doesn't claim that this program is merely fictional fun and fantasy. Alfred R. Schneider, ABC vice president in charge of broadcast standards, admits that, "graphically," the film shows "the core of the argument of those who are for a nuclear freeze."

That was a candidly accurate statement. The core of the nuclear freeze argument is (1) "nuclear war is horrible"; and (2) "therefore, we should do anything and everything to avoid it, including surrender to the Soviets."

The first of these statements is true; the second is false -- logically, morally, and historically. The nuclear freeze advocates make the jump to this non sequitur by playing on the emotion of fear; hence the use of a horror film.

ABC-TV has generously provided the $7 million budget to produce the fear necessary to dramatize this argument. According to descriptions by those who have previewed the two-hour film, it is "relentlessly depressing, with scenes of enormous destruction by firestorm, people being vaporized, mass graves, the irretrievable loss of food and water supplies, vandalism and murder, the breakdown of medical care and disfigurement and death from radiation sickness."

Make-up artists were challenged to simulate burns and sores, and to show the hair falling out of wigs. Fields were painted black with food dye spewed out of water wagons, and 3,000 Lawrence residents posed as corpses.

ABC is apparently a bit nervous about this program. ABC's sales department is telling advertisers that commercials will air only during the first half of the film

(before the bomb expodes) so the advertisers won't be so closely associated with the devastation (after the bomb).

ABC has prepared a disclaimer for the beginning of the program warning viewers that it may not be suitable for children because of its graphic scenes. ABC plans to preview it for political, religious and community leaders in an attempt to find a few who will publicly defend the film and thus neutralize the criticism that is sure to come.

ABC knows exactly what it is doing. Mr. Schneider admits that the very dramatization of nuclear war itself could be interpreted "as a political statement." The $7 million spent on the film is more than three times the usual amount for a TV film; and ABC is planning a promotional campaign to start a month before the November 20 airing of "The Day After," rather than just a few days before (as is typical with most TV films).

The proposed airing of this propaganda/horror film illustrates why Congress and the FCC should extend the Fairness Doctrine to the networks. The nuclear freeze is certainly a controversial issue of public importance, and ABC should have an obligation to present contrasting viewpoints.

It would be appropriate for "The Day After" to be followed immediately by a $7 million dramatization of the calculated massacre of KAL Flight #007 by the Russians, or of Soviet tanks rolling into Budapest in 1956 or into Prague in 1968, or of the deadly and disfiguring effects of Soviet chemical warfare in Afghanistan. It would be appropriate to show horror films of the mass genocide in Cambodia or Tibet.

What do you want to bet that ABC not only won't show contrasting viewpoints about "The Day After," but that ABC won't even sell broadcast time to any group to show a film on why a Communist-style "peace" is worse than war or death (as witnessed by the Vietnam boat people)? Or a film on how the Communists really begin the killing in earnest <u>after</u> the guns are silenced (as in Cambodia)? Or a film on why military weakness is the surest way to make America the victim of nuclear war?

Newspapers and magazines offer regular access to their pages through letters and advertisements to those who wish to rebut what has been printed. But control of the airwaves is so tight that you cannot broadcast your views unless the TV or radio owners give or sell you the time. That's why we need a Fairness Doctrine, and it should include the networks as well as local stations.