

Laughing at Bombs:
An Ideological Analysis of the 1957
U.S. Civil Defense film *A Day Called X*
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Abstract

After the second world war, numerous civil defense efforts were undertaken by the United States to respond to Soviet threats of nuclear attack. One such effort was the 1957 civil defense film, *A Day Called X*. This film was produced as a dramatized portrayal of an evacuation drill in Portland, Oregon, a drill that actually occurred as “Project Greenlight” in 1955. Developed by the CBS Office of Civil Defense Mobilization, in partnership with the Portland Civil Defense program, this short film was broadcast around the country as a demonstration of the potential successes of civil defense efforts nationwide. Using ideological criticism, a form of rhetorical criticism, I seek to identify the discursive construction of American exceptionalism and farce within the film. I argue that the rhetorical construction of an American town’s calm, organized response to impending nuclear attack in *A Day Called X* is farcical in that it provides an unfair, untrue, and idealized picture of a hypothetical American response to the situation. This divergence from likely reality in this fictional representation will be shown to constitute a work of farce. This farce is amplified by the underlying theme of American exceptionalism. In the course of my analysis, I demonstrate that this assertion of superiority bolsters the absurdity of the representation and constitutes what I term “apocalyptic exceptionalism.”

Introduction

Nationalism was the core, and stoked the fires, of the two World Wars that shook the 20th century. From these wars grew two enduring problematics perhaps even more significant in the process of recent human history. The first was the Cold War, which refers to the tense global political situation between the U.S.S.R and its allies and the U.S.A and its allies from 1947-1991, and the second was the development of atomic weapons. Fear of atomic conflict has been a subject of political discourse since the weapon's inception in the 1940s. Its imagery and its destructive potential have invaded our culture and our foreign policy. In the face of such dire threat – the largest and most immediate threat to human existence as we know it – societies facing potential destruction had to form ways to alleviate these pains and fears, very visceral fears in the public eye. To combat panic, and to brace for the results of a nuclear war, numerous civil defense efforts were undertaken by the United States, the Soviet Union, and other nations during the Cold War.

One such effort was the 1957 civil defense film, *A Day Called X*. This film was produced as a dramatized portrayal of an evacuation drill in Portland, Oregon, a drill that actually occurred as “Project Greenlight” in 1955. Developed by the CBS Office of Civil Defense Mobilization, in partnership with the Portland Civil Defense program, this short film was broadcast around the country as a demonstration of the potential successes of civil defense efforts nationwide. One of the key goals of this film was to highlight the success of the Portland evacuation program. As one of the largest successful evacuation drills in American history, it was championed as state-of-the-art. The film is especially worthy of note because it provides a fully realized, high production value fictional narrative of an American city's response to nuclear crisis. It involves

individual characters and story arcs. Most other civil defense films perhaps offered narrative on the surface, but rarely did they make up so much of the film as with *A Day Called X*, and especially not as late into the civil defense era as 1957, making this film meaningful. This short film was broadcast around the country as a demonstration of the potential successes of civil defense efforts nationwide.

Critical studies of such civil defense productions, which range from films to pamphlets and more, have provided insight into the strategies utilized by governments to construct ideologies, or “pattern[s] of beliefs that determin[e] a group’s interpretation of some aspects of the world” (Foss, 2009, p. 209). However, there have been some notable gaps in these studies. Many focus more strictly on these artifacts’ bolstering of Americanism on the surface level, with references to the greatness of atomic advances (Mielke, 2005; O’Gorman & Hamilton, 2016). Others focus more strictly on the evolution of civil defense rhetoric over the course of the Cold War (Barker-Devine, 2006; Ringstad, 2012). Based on my extensive research, few analyses examined specific civil defense films from a rhetorical perspective as rhetorical artifacts, and none critically address American exceptionalism and farce within them.

My study takes aim at this gap in the literature. Through ideological criticism, a form of rhetorical criticism, I treat *A Day Called X* as an inherently rhetorical object. I seek to identify the discursive construction of American exceptionalism and farce within the film. More specifically, in this paper I argue that the rhetorical construction of an American town’s calm, organized response to impending nuclear attack in *A Day Called X* is farcical in that it provides an unfair, untrue, and idealized picture of a hypothetical American response to the situation. This divergence from likely reality in this fictional representation will be shown to constitute a work of farce. This farce is amplified by the underlying theme of American exceptionalism, or the

perception that “America is unique, is different in crucial ways from most other countries” (Lipset, 2010, p. 25). In the course of my analysis, I demonstrate that this assertion of superiority bolsters the absurdity of the representation and constitutes what I term “apocalyptic exceptionalism.” As American exceptionalism makes the claim that America is fundamentally different and exempt from certain limitations and realities in the world, apocalyptic exceptionalism refers to the incredible extension of that mindset of invulnerability to a world after a nuclear holocaust. The utilization of the term “apocalyptic,” here, fulfills two purposes. The first is to demonstrate the extension of exceptionalism to the apocalypse. The second is to make clear that this ignorant philosophy sets the stage for total loss of civilization. By imagining we are immune to the realities of nuclear conflict, we allow ourselves an excuse to not realistically consider it. That devastates our willingness and drive to seek peace – ironically pushing us closer to nuclear war.

To explicate my argument, the paper takes the following shape. I first provide a broad overview of the history of nuclear development and response between the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War, with particular attention to the development of new weapon technologies. I also provide a similar overview of the development and evolution of civil defense in this period. This historical context is essential for understanding not only the cultural/governmental response of civil defense, but also making clear that some form of response was necessary. Second, I provide a literature review that discusses the rhetoric and ideas that were manifest within various pieces of nuclear propaganda, ranging from documentaries to civil defense artifacts of the 1950s and 1960s. This literature review provides the scholarly basis for an examination of this discourse, and gives some insight to previous related work. Third, I construct an analytical framework that provides a rational basis for the

criticism of American exceptionalism within the context of nuclear war – a unique sort that I identify and deem apocalyptic exceptionalism. It establishes a lens to view civil defense films and other cold war artifacts as consistent with the genre of farce. Fourth, I explicate my methodology, ideological criticism, which is a form of rhetorical criticism. The key aim of this methodology is to “lay bare the complex nature of power relations that produce texts, construct the institutional contexts of texts and their reception, and affect readers of those texts in their particular social locations” (Aichele, 1997, p. 273). By way of a thorough consideration of this short film’s ideological messaging and rhetorical strategies, I will accomplish just this. Finally, I turn to an analysis of the film itself. I provide evidence of the film’s attempts at constructing ideologies for the viewer, and focus on their inherent absurdity and existence as farce. This all is part of a questioning of nationalism as a philosophy and a critique of methods in propaganda aimed at legitimizing such a philosophy. I turn now to a history of nuclear development in the 20th century.

A Brief History of Cold War Nuclear Development

The first detonation of a Soviet nuclear weapon was on August 29, 1949 in a rural area of what is now Kazakhstan. RDS-1 was an implosion type atomic bomb (similar to the American “Fat Man” detonated over Nagasaki) with a blast yield of 22 kilotons. The weapon, to the satisfaction of its commissioners, reportedly proved to be 50% more destructive than its designing engineers estimated. This test and proof of capability came several years prior to Western estimations, which did not expect Soviet nuclear capacity in any weaponized form until 1953 at the earliest. For their efforts, Soviet premier Joseph Stalin recommended that all participants in the atomic program be awarded the title, “Hero of Socialist Labour,” among the

top honors of Soviet culture, and over 800 scientists, researchers, and other workers received some order or commendation from the Soviet government in a response to the successful testing (Goncharev & Ryabev, 2001). This unexpected triumph naturally was a cause of alarm for powers in opposition to the Soviet Union (Aldrich, 1998, p. 333), and this atomic testing was a significant milestone in the rising tensions between Western (typically capitalist) and Eastern (in this context, Communist) coalitions in what we know today as the Cold War.

The momentum of the Cold War had been slowly building since U.S. President Harry Truman's address to congress on March 12, 1947, which established the so-called Truman Doctrine, summarized by Truman's words in the address: "it must be the policy of the United States to support free people who are resisting subjugation by armed minorities or outside pressures" (Truman, 1947, para. 35). These words became the stepping stone for the development of American foreign policy in the post-World War II world, firmly dedicated to the containment of Communist expansion throughout the globe. Nuclear weapons were first considered within the parameters of this policy during the Korean War, where South Korean and American forces combatted Chinese and North Korean revolutionaries throughout the Korean peninsula. During a press conference on November 30, 1950, President Truman stated that, "we will take whatever steps are necessary to meet the military situation" (Kaufman, 1999, p. 148). A reporter then asked the question of the hour, "will that include the atomic bomb?" Truman responded with, "that includes every weapon that we have" (p. 148). When further pressed on whether there was active consideration of atomic warfare, Truman told the press that, "there has always been active consideration of [the atom bomb's] use" (p. 148). Of course, the United States was then and still is the only nation to have utilized nuclear weapons outside of tests, having detonated during World War II against Japan the "Little Boy" weapon over the Japanese

city of Hiroshima on August 6, 1945, and the “Fat Man” weapon over the Japanese city of Nagasaki on August 9 of that same year.

The United States largely maintained nuclear sovereignty over the rest of the world throughout the first half of the 1950’s. Echoing the success of the first atomic bombs of the 1940’s, the United States successfully tested the world’s first hydrogen bomb (500 times more powerful than Fat Man) on November 1, 1952, and shortly thereafter conducted the infamous Castle Bravo test which irradiated some small Japanese villages and was responsible for at least one civilian death. This was coupled with the general superiority of the American air force, which enjoyed better capability to deliver nuclear payloads to targets. This changed with the development of the intercontinental ballistic missile, or ICBM. Efforts to create methods of long-range explosive payload delivery date back to secret projects of Nazi Germany (including the famed V-2 rocket). The Nazis also tested the first practical ICBM design (the A9/10 rocket) to attack targets such as New York, but were unable to deploy such a weapon before the end of the war.

American General Henry “Hap” Arnold predicted the development of the ICBM in 1943, and offered some foreshadowing to the perpetual dread of life after their development some 15 years later:

Someday, not too distant, there can come streaking out of somewhere – we won’t be able to hear it, it will come so fast – some kind of gadget with an explosive so powerful that one projectile will be able to wipe out completely this city of Washington. . . (Neufeld, 1990, p. 35)

General Arnold’s predictions came true, materialized by military projects in the Soviet Union and the United States in a scramble to widen striking distance (at this time, of fission type

weapons, not the immensely more powerful hydrogen weapons) and especially to improve targeting capability for tactical strikes in supporting military conflicts through area denial, psychological impact, or attacks on military targets such as manufacturing centers or points of command. With access to fusion bombs, and an immensely more powerful payload per rocket possible, governments shifted focus from strategic strikes to applications in mass attacks. The U.S.S.R was the first nation to test an ICBM capable of this: after a failed launch on May 15, 1957, the R-7 rocket was successfully launched on August 21 of the same year, and flew over 3,700 miles. The American ICBM program lagged behind, as strategists were confident in the ability of the Air Force to satisfactorily outperform contemporary Soviet rockets (Johnson, 2002, p. 75). Despite this confidence, the advent of thermonuclear (hydrogen) weapons had demonstrated the necessity of long-range delivery systems, and the U.S. Atlas program, dedicated to the development of ICBMs, had been the top military priority since 1954. The first successful test of an Atlas rocket – the Atlas B – occurred on November 28, 1958, more than a year after the success of the Soviet R-7.

As the proliferation of hydrogen bombs continued, it became impossible to imagine nuclear strikes in terms of conventional warfare, and their place within strategy evolved to how we now perceive them: as deadly, horrific doomsday instruments. As stated, the development of the hydrogen bomb preceded the development of the ICBM by a number of years, and although the public was aware of the destructive ability of these new munitions, the delivery systems (bomber aircraft) were easily defended against by American anti-air facilities. With the success of the Soviet ICBM program, this comfort became a thing of the past, and nuclear paranoia reached a new height. The Cuban Missile Crisis (October 14 - October 28, 1962) involved a dispute between the United States government, the Soviet government, and the Cuban

government about Soviet storage of nuclear-armed ICBMs on the island of Cuba. For obvious reasons, the proximity of these weapons caused widespread panic, and both sides scrambled to achieve a diplomatic solution. Despite this, large portions of the American military – including nuclear-armed bombers – remained on standby during the event: the world “stood on the brink of nuclear war” (Kamps, 2007, p. 88).

As evidenced by the Cuban Missile Crisis, the panic surrounding the imminent threat of nuclear war peaked in the early 1960's. This event prompted the creation of the famed Moscow-Washington hotline, known in popular culture as the “red telephone,” although it was actually a teletype machine until 1986 when it was replaced with fax machines. In 2008 it was replaced with a secure email line. This marked the beginning of nuclear de-escalation, with both sides agreeing on a handful of provisions regarding de-proliferation, disarmament, and binding guidelines on the testing of new weapons. These international efforts resulted in the eventual end of the age of perpetual atomic fear – fears that, of course, linger to this day, but to a lesser degree than the everyday civilian lived with during earlier decades. Lowther (1973) argues that the American public began its decline in fear of nuclear war following the Cuban Missile Crisis. This was due to the realization that it could not rationally be defended against. This decline was evidenced in various ways, but most notably by the absence of the bomb in political campaigns and other writings since the early 1960s (pp. 77-79). This marked the end of American nuclear paranoia and the necessity for informational media designed to educate, placate, and instruct the mass population on the threats and procedures regarding nuclear conflict between the two superpowers, and marked the beginning of the transition from nuclear weapons as a practical consideration of everyday life to their manifestation within fiction as relics, and even as features

within comedic efforts. This also ushered in the end of what could be considered the golden years of United States civil defense.

Civil defense refers to efforts to protect non-combatant citizens of a nation from military attacks and natural disasters through education, planning, and various drills intended to simulate an actual event. The United States Office of Civil Defense was established in May 1941, and most nations involved in the Cold War established some variety of civil defense programs for their population. These programs were especially active during the era of the greatest threat of atomic war, which was during the early 1950s through the early 1960s. Western civil defense programs were sometimes questioned in their effectiveness, but at least one declassified report has demonstrated that if properly enacted, U.S. civil defense education could have saved around 27 million lives as late as 1968 (National Security Council, 1963, p. 27). However, full-scale implementation of this program would have been extremely costly, and was viewed as unnecessary due to the concept of mutually assured destruction, or MAD. This is the philosophy that no society could survive a global nuclear war, and it therefore acted as its own deterrent – if there was no possible advantageous outcome, why initiate a nuclear confrontation? The Soviet Bloc, according to Pipes (1977), was less swayed by this line of thinking, and remained convinced of the possibility of a winnable nuclear war, mobilizing extensive civil defense programs (p. 21).

As stated, the height of civil defense action in the United States was during the height of the Cold War. On January 12, 1951, President Truman signed into law the Federal Civil Defense Act of 1950. This act specifically mentions and outlines “measures to be taken following attack. . .” (Coen & Boyer, 1951, p. 11). This law also established the Federal Civil Defense Administration (FCDA). This administration operated under the direction of an Administrator,

and the law granted the Administrator myriad powers, including “provision for civil defense communications. . .” and “dissemination of information. . .” (p. 12), among others. Eventually, the Administration was superseded by the Office of Civil Defense Mobilization in 1958. Over the course of 10 years, these two offices followed a “wartime model of propaganda [that] involved a carefully orchestrated relationship with private sector media organizations” (Sharp, 2012, p. 187). Perhaps the most famous production from the FCDA is the now notorious *Duck and Cover*. This short film, developed in 1951 as a direct response to the Soviet testing of RDS-1, featured an anthropomorphic turtle (“Bert”) happily walking down a country lane, complete with bowtie, to the tune of a rather cheery musical accompaniment that explains in lyrics the events of the cartoon. Eventually, Bert is seen ducking into his shell when he encounters a monkey dangling a lit stick of dynamite near his face. Through this reaction, Bert is protected from the blast of the dynamite, and comes out unharmed. The monkey and the tree, of course, are obliterated. This is shown twice, repeating immediately. The rest of the video is live-action, and features a heavy-voiced narrator repeating the paranoid importance of ducking and covering, whether on family vacation, playing in the schoolyard, or riding your bike – you must always be ready for the bomb to strike.

While some have criticized the effectiveness of the instructions provided within *Duck and Cover*, at least some evidence has demonstrated that had it been properly followed, for those outside of the immediate blast of an atomic bomb, the procedure may have actually been very effective at reducing injury through sheltering from debris and shielding from radiation burns, and thus saving lives (Reynolds, 2011). It is important to remember that this iconic short film was designed at least one year prior to the testing of the first hydrogen bomb. Hydrogen bombs, as discussed, produce blasts overwhelmingly more destructive than atomic bombs. It is unclear

how effective exactly the procedure detailed in *Duck and Cover* would be in the event of a hydrogen bomb explosion (just as it is unclear precisely how effective it would be in atomic bomb explosion), but one can extrapolate (scaling for order of magnitude) that similar procedures would produce similar effects in that scenario. Also worth noting is the distinct absence of ICBMs from the film. Instead, we are shown a radar tower and assured that our detection systems will likely warn us of an attack before it happens. But this is not intended to criticize the work of scientists or historians that have speculated on the potential realistic application of these strategies, merely to provide some insight on existing research and models. Instead, let us focus on the ideas within and other aspects of these short films.

Duck and Cover was one of many such films produced by the FCDA. The organization continued to create and disseminate such materials that all reiterated the same key message: quick response is the singular key to surviving a nuclear explosion. Later short films elaborated on aspects absent in *Duck and Cover*, and provided more detailed instruction regarding the proper societal response in the event of such a conflict. To analyze and navigate the messages provided about the mythical assurance of a functioning American society after nuclear war, designed and produced in full knowledge and understanding of the potential destruction made possible by the horrifying union of the hydrogen bomb and the intercontinental ballistic missile, is the purpose of analysis later in this paper. Specifically, one such film is the focus: *A Day Called X*.

The Federal Civil Defense Act of 1950 mandated state and federal governments to match civil defense funds raised by local governments, and Portland, Oregon's civil defense program raised \$600,000 in 1952 and by this time was a "national model." Interestingly, and accordingly in regards to my assertion that the Cuban Missile Crisis ended the "golden age" of civil defense,

Portland was the first American city to dissolve its civil defense program in 1963. Portland's civil defense program is known for planning and executing the largest and most complex evacuation drills in America to date, known as Operation Green Light. This project took place on September 27, 1955, and was successful in evacuating over 100,000 people from the project area. Immediately, the FCDA partnered with the civil defense organization of Portland to create a dramatized "documentary" of the evacuation, which came to be known as *A Day Called X* (Johnson, Oregon Encyclopedia). This film is rich with efforts to persuade, and it offers a wonderful opportunity for the analysis and critique of the civil defense format's conventions, methods, and ideologies.

Civil Defense in the United States: A Review of the Literature

Similar to records regarding the production of civil defense short films, critical analyses of these particular artifacts are sparse. This necessitates a broadening of scope – as this paper's focus is to identify the role of farce in American civil defense rhetoric at its height in the late 1950s, and to discuss the presence and construction of ideology within civil defense productions, this literature review will focus on sources that, in some way, examine similar themes within the discourse of American nuclear culture. The evolution of civil defense rhetoric is central to the arguments posited by this paper. The observation of this evolution reveals to us the objective shift in understanding of nuclear war as the weapons developed, and as the sociopolitical responses adapted to the shift in this understanding. Furthermore, if we accept civil defense literature as inherently rhetorical artifacts – that is, deliberately designed to achieve a persuasive goal – then we can understand this evolution of rhetoric as evidence of changing perceptions of

danger during the conflict. Understanding ostensible reasoning, in this case, is the key to analysis and criticism of the response.

Arnold Ringstad's (2012) article "The Evolution of American Civil Defense Film Rhetoric" is a compelling starting point for a glance into the existing scholarly analyses of public communications that involve nuclear culture. The nucleus of Ringstad's article regards the underlying motivations for this evolution:

The evolving rhetoric of U.S. civil defense films can in some cases be linked directly to historical and scientific developments. In other cases, the changes reflect adjustments made in the wider civil defense establishment, changes in public perception of civil defense, and the unique power of film as a medium of persuasion. (p. 93)

Here, then, Ringstad lays the foundation for this analysis. *A Day Called X* was created to showcase the efficacy of a particular program, and was intended to boost public support of such a program. Film could be broadcast on television and has more rich capability than pamphlets or radio. He also touches on the necessity of revising civil defense practice and purpose to accommodate for advancing weapon and defense platforms – including the shift from atomic to hydrogen weapons, and the advent of the ICBM.

Regarding the timeline of U.S. civil defense films, it is noted that B. Wayne Blanchard of FEMA considered the early 1960s the only time in American history when civil defense was ever "seriously addressed or funded" (Ringstad, 2012, p. 121). Ringstad reviews films from both this time period and from the 1950s, considering those films "early" and the 1960s films "later." As I've hypothesized, Ringstad notes a clear response in the rhetoric of civil defense films to the development of the hydrogen bomb and the new dangers of fallout these weapons brought (p.

103). Interestingly, Ringstad argues that deliberate ideological content was entirely removed from American civil defense films over the course of the 1950s into the early 1960s (p. 110) – a marked contrast with much of the literature, which largely argues that the manifestation of ideology changed rather than disappeared. Ringstad also mentions the rhetorical shift from “conventionalization” to “integration” – the shift from presenting nuclear weapons as a new form of regular warfare to be defended against the same way (think *Duck and Cover*) and to presenting them as an entirely new animal, but still a part of normal life. Many later civil defense films, for example, featured families building and partially living in personal fallout shelters – response to nuclear war is demonstrated as a normal part of American life. This was part of the effort to encourage the population to take nuclear war seriously; Ringstad claims that early civil defense films “do not treat nuclear war with sufficient gravity” (p. 118). These changes were deemed necessary as the threat of war and the power of nuclear weapons grew, culminating with the Cuban Missile Crisis.

The Cuban Missile Crisis was a sort of proving grounds for civil defense (Davis, 2009, p. 155). A real nuclear emergency provided a clear backdrop to consider the effectiveness of existing civil defense. It resulted in a slew of public civil defense exercises intended to test the mettle of the program (pp. 161-175). The findings of these tests – that the United States was unprepared for a full-on nuclear strike – set the stage for 1960s civil defense rhetoric that focused on enduring a nuclear war properly (p. 176).

The propagation of these ideas (and the exposure of the public to the “normalcy” of the atom bomb) did not stop at civil defense films. Bob Mielke’s (2005) article, “Rhetoric and Ideology in the Nuclear Test Documentary” offers us a critical glance at a similar field of rhetoric. Mielke states in his introduction that “the nuclear test documentary is a little-known sub

genre of documentary activity” and that these pieces were “financed by the government in order to provide a lasting detonation of nuclear devices” (p. 28). In regards to these artifacts, Mielke maintains that, “. . . every documentary made about nuclear testing posits that conducting and observing nuclear explosions is really a scientific endeavor, not geopolitical saber-rattling” (p. 29). Mielke tells us that documentary of nuclear explosions began with the adequate filming of the Trinity explosion in New Mexico (the world’s first atomic detonation, a test of the “Fat Man” style bomb that would be detonated over Nagasaki less than a month later), but there was “less satisfaction” (p. 29) due to shoddy camera work (not pristine propaganda footage!). This led to a massive filming effort of the 1946 atomic tests at Bikini Atoll (Operation Crossroads), during which one and a half million feet of film were used, leading to a shortage of film worldwide that lasted for months. The article details a few of these documentaries, but notes that many of them remain classified. They are dubbed “technoporn,” complete with the eventual detonation as the “money shot” (p. 30). Mielke comments on the curious juxtaposition of music eliciting a sense of “19th-century romanticism” and “sublime frissons” with images and footage of mushroom clouds and explosions greater than human comprehension. In addition, the article mentions moments in these films that denature the bomb entirely, referring to it as “the gadget” and the testing as a “date with destiny,” which, according to Mielke, eliminates human agency in the production and use of these weapons (p. 31).

Mielke continues to bring to light many other incredible moments within these films. Many of them shy away from discussing the tests of literal bombs – the most explosive man-made forces in history at the time these documentaries were made – to a rhetorical focus in narration to the myriad “scientific,” “medical,” and “agricultural uses for radiation.” Here we see a perverse romanticization of this devastating technology. This romanticization, combined with

the sexualization, transforms nuclear horror. Instead of mortal terror, we are told to consider these weapons palatable or even exciting. As discussed later, this conception demonstrates the magical cancellation of violence that is so prevalent in farce. The documentaries on Hiroshima and Nagasaki “emphasize the technical knowledge gleaned about building structures and blast phenomenology rather than any other emotional, ethical, or metaphysical response” (p. 32).

Mielke also discusses the ideologies of race and gender presented in these artifacts. In one documentary entitled *Operation Buster/Jangle*, a narrator responds with “okay by me” when it is mentioned that the fallout from the test will blow into Mexico demonstrating a reckless regard for the “Other” (p. 31). Another describes a testing site, the populated Enewetak Atoll, as “distant and primitive.” Furthermore, in another test, Operation Wigwam in 1955, that sought to assess blast effects on submarines, the mock submarines constructed were dubbed “squaws” (p. 32). The obscenity here is clear. While glorifying weapons capable of ending any notion of civilization, we rhetorically (and literally) target those our culture has deemed “primitive” and bask in our “rationality.” In terms of gender, the absence of women in any of these films is noted: in all documentaries viewed by Mielke, only one shows a woman at all – and she is not part of the testing process; she is working on another project (p. 33).

These findings, with regard to race, are consistent then with some other artifacts outside of Mielke’s scope. Sharp (2012) focuses on the cultural images associated with civil defense and nuclear war. He contends that “the idea that the United States is essentially a white nation... became a central aspect [during the Cold War] of both strategic policy and anti-proliferation fantasies regarding nuclear weapons” (p. 170). He notes that the subjects and victims of civil defense “propaganda” were always white and middle class. Sharp offers a critical insight into the fiction literature of post-nuclear apocalypse fiction in his assessment that “nuclear frontier stories

usually relished the prospect of civilization being destroyed” (p. 171). In his studies, which largely focus on character/setting interaction in contemporary fiction, he observes that the absence of an established civilization after nuclear war in fiction sometimes left room for a new, better society to emerge. Disturbingly, he adds that many of these societies featured the same evolution of social Darwinism and European cultural sovereignty in the new frontier to establish “ideal societies” of white supremacy and western cultural sovereignty – a return to normalcy, family values, and prosperous American ways – after the bomb had reduced the world into a wasteland. This message is consistent with the argument made here regarding civil defense rhetoric in general – it is our task, of course, to put America back on its exceptional track after the apocalypse (p. 172).

This brings us back to Mielke’s examples of racism within civil defense films and his claims that they develop a consistent ideology and have a clear rhetorical goal. Through their production and dissemination they function to espouse the values of the state and convince the population of their subjects’ righteousness and ethical existence within a democratic society. At the closing moments of the film *Operation Ivy*, immediately prior to detonation, the narrator states, “. . . for the sake of our country, I know you join me in wishing this expedition well” (p. 33). This wraps the nonchalant and casual love of science into a patriotic shell: here we move away from the testing of hydrogen bombs for the progress of science to their testing for the safety and prosperity of America. Furthermore, the use of the word “expedition” invokes wonder, mystery, and a crucial part of the “American spirit.” In our heads, we envision the patriotic journey of Lewis and Clark; we feel our conception of, and link to, Manifest Destiny. This occurs simultaneously while celebrating weapons of mass destruction.

The crippling ironies within the films were noticed by others, as well. O’Gorman and Hamilton (2016) also focus on the rhetoric of these test documentaries – particularly *Operation Ivy*. Like Mielke’s, their article pays close attention to the idea of the nuclear explosion itself as a rhetorical image within film. O’Gorman and Hamilton also discuss the process of the film’s distribution. They state that film’s “apparent capacity to directly absorb the lifeworld grants it a seemingly immediate connection to flesh... and immediacy that eludes traditional writing” (p. 14). For the subject of nuclear war, this allows for spectacle as well as warning. As mentioned, *Operation Ivy* demonstrated the first detonation of a thermonuclear device, and President Eisenhower reportedly claimed that every American should see it (p. 25). This is evidence of the constructed unity of perception of military superiority and one’s identity as an American citizen. O’Gorman and Hamilton also note the response of the FCDA to *Operation Ivy*. The agency viewed it as a way to encourage American citizens to take civil defense seriously, and therefore as a “means of activating new forms of citizenship and federalism...” (p. 27), and was distraught when the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) delayed its release to the public. This is an irony crucial to this paper. The bomb and preparation for the bomb precipitates a more patriotic and exceptional population, rather than an exterminated one.

Moving back specifically to analyses of civil defense materials, Barker-Devine (2006) notes the broadening of civil defense rhetoric to include rural populations. As mentioned earlier, atomic bombs were at first thought to only pose a significant threat to military targets and urban centers. The development of the hydrogen bomb – as well as the expansion of nuclear arsenals – made civil defense education necessary in even rural America, as even if nuclear annihilation was not immediate for them, they would still have to protect crops and livestock to supply an imaginary post-attack world. Barker-Devine attributes this realization to the consequences of

hydrogen tests in the Pacific that proved fallout could spread thousands of square miles from initial detonation (p. 424). Earlier attempts at civil defense propagation in rural states such as Nebraska and Iowa were also rhetorically laden. Barker-Devine mentions that these early 1950s rural civil defense programs painted these areas as the refugee camps of post-nuclear war society, these productions “emphasize rural residents as the... moral base of the nation” and as “the custodians of democracy” (p. 416) for the massive influx of refugees expected after an attack.

The majority of civil defense materials published specifically for rural counties came after 1960 (Barker-Devine, 2006, p. 424). Due to the Kennedy Administration’s shift from evacuation policy to emphasis on public shelter construction, these later materials switched the practical and rhetorical focus from refugee preparedness to preservation of food supply chains – while maintaining the assertion that the rural population was America’s “moral backbone,” and would be responsible for “retaining normalcy” (p. 426) through providing for fellow man and preventing famine. The straightforward messages of the productions changed over time from providing land and comfort to providing food, but the underlying rhetoric remained consistent. Farmers and rural populations were instilled with the idea that they would be the foundation of new society – a society that industrialization may have excluded them from. Barker-Devine gathers and melds together evidence that demonstrates the acknowledgment of new dangers by civil defense strategists and those tasked with designing the materials, as well as the concerted construction of ideology to guide a post-nuclear war society in these materials.

The American civil defense film, *A Day Called X* (1957), presents some of the same absurd assertions of exceptionalism. Some critics have noted the absurdist tendencies of the film. Oakes (1995) comments on some aspects of the film that line up with this paper’s interpretations.

He mentions that “Portlanders [in *A Day Called X*] seem to be unexceptionably white and middle class. All municipal officials and civil defense workers are impeccably dressed in anticipation of thermonuclear destruction” (p. 101). Perhaps more troublingly, Oakes argues that this is a signal of normalization (p. 101) – similar to other observances that make this kind of conflict palatable and a definite part of the American character.

A reading of the literature reveals that the chief ideology presented by these artifacts is that of “American exceptionalism.” Despite this, most critics in these analyses have not named American exceptionalism specifically. This review demonstrates its presence under the fingernails of even those productions meant to avert catastrophe. In this paper, though, I expose it as a focal point of civil defense and similar efforts. I also expose the role of farce in these assertions. American exceptionalism is an amalgamation of a few concepts, but most often refers to the perception that “America is unique, is different in crucial ways from most other countries” (Lipset, 2010, p. 25). This concept originates from Alexis de Tocqueville’s (1863) classic work, *Democracy in America*. In this book, he writes that, “the position of the Americans is therefore quite exceptional... no democratic people will ever be placed in a similar on... (p. 42). With such a broad perception, this concept has been an enabler of many ostensibly negative American actions. Pease (2009) writes, “U.S. policymakers depended upon the fantasy of American exceptionalism to authorize their practices of governance...” and that exceptionalism “enabled U.S. citizens to define, support, and defend the U.S. national identity” (p. 11). Others have studied the role of exceptionalism on other fronts, such as American moral panic over gay marriage (Adam, 2003) and its role in military video games (Robinson, 2014). Ceaser (2012) presents the idea of exceptionalism in America as one that arises directly from the conflict of left versus right – the humanistic versus the nationalistic.

If the humanistic versus the nationalistic is the primary catalyst for assertions of and detraction against exceptionalism, it is clear why the Cold War – the most intense conflict between right and left ideologies in modern history – would provide a space for it to grow. The conflict of the Cold War, then, was the continuation of the ancient “religiously inspired errand to promote liberty... in the world” (p. 8). American exceptionalism, to Ceaser (2012), has survived the course of American history, from the Revolution itself to the wars in the Middle East to establish “democracies” today – all fought on supposed “warrants from God” (p. 8). The Cold War itself was a struggle “over religious faith” (p. 23). This attests to Barker-Devine’s (2006) findings: that civil defense rhetoric featured an absurd mission based on the continuation of American morality – Christian morality – after the end of the world. This analysis of *A Day Called X* seeks to find that absurdity in the midst of this mythical exceptionalism.

Farce as an Analytical Framework

The purpose of this paper is to reveal and explore the role of farce, especially as expressed through American exceptionalism within *A Day Called X*. My analysis carries with it implications for other civil defense films – the most popular civilian safeguard against nuclear annihilation at the hands of the Soviets – that invoke American exceptionalism. My argument is that the film’s consistent use of American exceptionalism is entirely absurd when considered within the context of impending nuclear war. In respect to the concept’s legitimacy, Restad (2012) insists that American exceptionalism “has been a powerful, persistent, and popular myth throughout American history...” (p. 55). Here, I consider the implications of that thought as well as the absurd stretch of exceptionalism to the stage of nuclear war. In this framework, civil defense produced after the advent of the hydrogen bomb that attempts to construe the possibility

of a post-nuclear war America with the same moral character and infrastructure, or in the case of *A Day Called X*, a calm and orderly response to impending holocaust, is farcical and constitutes what I've defined as apocalyptic exceptionalism – the ridiculous idea that an ideal, moral American society is possible after total destruction and irradiation due to some mythical aspect of the American character being strong enough to withstand such horror.

To understand this framework, we have to consider the objective reality of a hydrogen bomb war. Much of this reality is more thoroughly examined in the “history” section of this paper. To summarize, though, prospects of survival in a global nuclear war, for any party, are slim; the concept of MAD (mutually assured destruction) emerged from the understanding of this. I posit that it is a form of comedy to present such a situation as viable and rational. Comedy entails many traditions, and is a vital consideration in any analysis of cultural artifacts. Many discourses can be framed and analyzed within the scope of these traditions. Considering the inherent absurdity of global thermonuclear war – demonstrated most succinctly by the eponymous concept of MAD – it is obvious why we should consider artifacts that propose any positivity or general order in the face of such an event as themselves absurd. Absurdity is a crucial component of many forms of comedy. The most apt form of comedy within which we could consider apocalyptic exceptionalism depends on absurdity – that form is farce.

At its simplest, farce can be defined as “a funny play or movie about ridiculous situations and events” (Webster, “Farce”). This analysis will focus on one particular movie, *A Day Called X*, as one that focuses primarily on what is undoubtedly a ridiculous situation: a calm, mild-mannered and fully organized civic response to concrete and dire nuclear threat.

To Howe (1990), farce “turns upon the ineptitude of people trying to cope with the perversity of objects... its philosophy is a rude pragmatism. Even if its ultimate negations assert

a bitter truth: that sprawled out on the pavement of adorned with a pair of horns, we are all equally ridiculous” (p. 5). In my analysis, the objects of perversity are nuclear weapons, capable of leveling the city of Portland. Furthermore, Howe notes that “farce brings pleasure through humiliation . . . and then a sort of magical cancellation” (p. 5). In *A Day Called X*, this humiliation is constituted by calm submissiveness to what in all likelihood would be an apocalypse. Noting that farce concerns itself less with convention and strict rules than comedy, Howe states that farce “bears an ill-concealed, sometimes unconcealed animus against civilization” (p. 5). Although it would be nonsensical to assert that this film was created intentionally as a comedy, there is no way to ignore the subject matter’s complete disregard for civilization.

Of course, farce is a rich genre, and involves many other distinct features and tropes. Stephenson (1960) offers another perspective on farce. To Stephenson, the genre of farce requires:

[I]ncongruous juxtapositions; mechanical mystifications; antitheses (of types, accents, dialects, behaviors); staccato successions (in speech, action, scene); arithmetical crescendos (*i.e.*, iterations); exaggerations of all kinds; the *reductio ad absurdum* within simple propositions of behavior; brutal directness; brisk reversals, an effect of the impudent last word, and so on (pp. 89-90)

Stephenson continues to say that, “among rhetorical devices, [farce] chiefly resorts to hyperbole” (p. 90). This analysis will be seeking and revealing instances of these qualities within *A Day Called X*. As to the typical subject matter of farce, Cannings (1961) states that

[B]y far the majority . . . are simply ‘slice of life’ dramatically and comically distorted but still very close to reality... the characters... are everyday people

anchored in daily life, with names and nicknames, with homes of their own and professions and jobs... (p. 558)

We will see many instances of these characteristics within the film, which is fervently established as a “slice of life” film, although with an explosive twist.

Eric Bentley (1964) provides compelling insight towards the definition and manifestation of farce within our culture. In his critical essay “Farce,” he begins by noting that “farce is... notorious for its love of violent images” (p. 279). Notably, when discussing the genre conventions of farce, Bentley notes that “in general... the villain is a giant whose strength passes the limits of nature... the ‘little man’s’ revenges have to be more than proportionate to the provocation” (pp. 280-281) as well as “the abstractness of violence... prongs of a rake in the backside are received as pin pricks... bullets seem to pass right through, sledge-hammer blows produce only momentary irritation” (p. 281). This abstractness of violence is pivotal to the arguments of this paper, and to bolster the importance of properly identifying farce, Bentley reminds us that, “. . . we cannot allow ourselves to be jockeyed into regarding the distinction between thought and act, fantasy and fact, as a sort of minor detail. The person who confuses the two... is not eccentric, he is insane” (p. 281) and as a counterpoint, Bentley mentions that, “it is possible for a thinker and fantacist to bank... on the sanity of his audience” (p. 281). As revealed by the history of the atomic project, sanity was often in short supply, and the gravity of the situation would have left little room for capacity to navigate (unintentional) farce.

Interestingly, Farrell (1995) states that the status of farce in the theatrical world evolved during the 1950’s. This is significant, as *A Day Called X* was developed and distributed in this era. Farrell avers, “traditionally farce was viewed as a somewhat vulgar, inferior genre, whose only purpose was to provide vacuous diversion for vacant minds” (p. 307). At the foundation of

this evolution was the shift in the accepted definition of absurdity, which came to be understood as the “logical absence of all order” (p. 312) and while it “found its expression in the previously despised genre of farce,” its presence within farce in the 1950’s gave the genre a newfound sense of importance and literary significance, especially in France, where “the metaphysical idea of the ‘Absurd’ dominated philosophy and drama” (p. 308). Through Farrell’s analysis, we can establish absurdity and the absence of rationality as a core underpinning of farce in drama.

Farce as genre has been studied primarily within the context of stage drama, with significant critical attention being given to that sphere (Perrett, 1984; Pablos, 2005; Farrell, 1995). This is understandable – farce has established itself as a dramatic genre and method, reaching far back to ancient Greek Satyr and Phylax plays: forms “rife with mock drunkenness, sight gags, pranks, and general wackiness” (“Absurd History,” 2013). Despite this, analysis of farce as a method and as a genre has proliferated into other fields. Garfinkle (1998) equates American foreign policy in the Middle East during to 1990’s, under the administration of Bill Clinton, to non-staged, non-fiction real life farce. Despite the myriad fields the theatrical genre of farce has been considered within and applied to, a large and significant gap remains in the literature, and many other possibilities do exist. Among the most notable of these gaps is that of the discourse of nuclear war, and in particular civil defense.

Bentley (1964) reserves the right for the indulgence in farce for those who can “distinguish between fantasy and reality” (p. 281). As a look at the intricacies of American exceptionalism as it manifests in the rhetoric of Cold War civil defense will reveal, the designers of ideologically-charged civil defense often struggled with that distinction. Erickson et al (2013) consider the Cuban Missile Crisis as an instance of Cold War absurdity and abandonment of rationality. Opposite of what one may expect, Erickson et al argue that the result of the Crisis not

escalating into full-scale nuclear war constituted an abandonment of rationality: in this case, human reason trumped “rational” doctrine and defied the expectations of many observers (p. 104). Scholars immediately began developing theories to account for why deterrent theory had failed to keep Soviet missiles from Cuba, and to account for why the quarantine method was successful to the Crisis’ de-escalation (p. 83).

Refocusing back to the concept of absurdity (which farce utilizes extensively) – here the abandonment of rationality – famed Cold War diplomat George Kennan (1957), the originator of the policy of communist containment himself, stated that “the weapon of mass destruction is a sterile and hopeless weapon... there can be no coherent relation between such a weapon and the normal objects of national policy” (para. 11). During the same speech, Kennan stated “a number of thoughtful people [have recognized] the bankruptcy of the hydrogen bomb and the long-range missile as the basis for a defence policy. . .” (para. 14). This obviously constitutes an understanding of nuclear deterrence and response as one understood as farcical: the same reasoning expressed here by Kennan can be extended to the rhetoric of civil defense films in the 1950s. If we consider the total uselessness of nuclear weapons within Kennan’s rationale, any sort of organized response to their use is at best an exercise in futility. Within Bentley’s (1964) context of farce, the idea that any righteousness could come from the utilization of weapons as horrible as the hydrogen bomb is somewhat akin to the prongs of a rake appearing as pin pricks in the backside, however in this context even more oblivious: these “pin pricks” are construed as the application of righteousness, a contribution to the sovereignty of American morality.

Working within the understanding of farce as both genre and method of critical reading, particularly the reading of ideologies, we can enrich our interpretations of artifacts of all forms. Moving forward, I expect that considerations of farce will become more and more important in

our interpretations of government communications. We must be able to recognize the shameless mixing of fantasy and reality, and remember that only a true fool would be unable to make the distinction. We must be leery for normalization of violent images. And, to be sure, we must sharpen our ability to recognize absurdity, hyperbole, and “wackiness” masquerading as rational discussion. This paper examines *A Day Called X* giving full consideration to these conventions and necessities. The analysis will expose this abandonment of rationality in the film as what it is – farce, as defined and explored by the aforementioned scholarship.

Methodology

This analysis is grounded within the method of rhetorical criticism. This form of criticism primarily deals with the exploration and analysis of the persuasive dimensions of artifacts – here referring to anything capable of presenting a message, from film to literature to advertisement to speeches and beyond. Considering the classic definition of rhetoric, from Aristotle, rhetorical criticism concerns itself with discovering the ways a rhetor has discovered and utilized the available means of persuasion to move his or her audience. In particular, a critical analysis of a nuclear propaganda film such as *A Day Called X* calls for a more focused approach. This is because a film such as this is laden with ideology. According to Foss (2009) an ideology is a “pattern of beliefs that determines a group’s interpretation of some aspects of the world” (p. 209). As the film is concerned with promoting a specific and cultural way of thinking, a specialized form of rhetorical criticism is most effective at discerning, interpreting, and challenging the messages propagated by the film. Ideological criticism is a branch of rhetorical criticism, and its purpose is just this.

According to Aichele (1997), one of the chief aims of ideological criticism is to “lay bare the complex nature of power relations that produce texts, construct the institutional contexts of texts and their reception, and affect readers of those texts in their particular social locations” (p. 273). In other words, ideological criticism is dedicated to revealing the ways in which ideology is constructed, presented, argued for/against, and all the while maintaining a consideration of whatever entity was responsible for the production of a text. The consideration of sociology and history, then, are closely woven throughout ideological analysis. It is a form of rhetorical criticism that accepts that texts often are not intended strictly as independent persuasive pieces, but as single pieces within a network with ideological goals; indeed, “central to most discussions of ideology and ideological criticism... are issues of power and power relations” (p. 274).

Ideological criticism requires some level of resistance at the fundamental level. It is an assessment of social programming. To perform it, one has to simultaneously acknowledge the ideological power of a text and remain objective in its analysis. However, that does not preclude an understanding of interest in this uncovering of power. As explained by Aichele (1997), an ideological criticism of the Bible, for instance, “is a critical action designed to expose cultural systems of power...” (p. 277). So, we must understand our efforts within rhetorical criticism (a study of the tools of persuasion within a text) as contributing to a larger idea, a larger effort and one that is seeking to analyze the promotion hegemony, or dominance of ideology.

A Day Called X deploys its ideological goals less explicitly than some of its contemporary pieces, which at times focused more firmly on demonizing the Soviet Union than preaching the total superiority of the United States. This subtlety does not eliminate space for ideological criticism; indeed, a text can be all the more persuasive for its subtlety. This analysis will seek instead to uncover the conscious formation and propagation of a different ideology –

apocalyptic exceptionalism, which ties hand in hand with American exceptionalism. In this analysis, there will be a consideration of ideas – expressed both verbally and in imagery – that could be rationally assessed to construct an argument. According to Friesen (2008), ideological criticism “. . . takes ideas that are presented as commonsensical and self-evident and compares them to the social and cultural” (p. 176). So, within the context of this study, my method stands firmly in line with these principles: 1) the assessment of rhetorical strategies to construct themes; 2) the assessment of these themes as foundations of a projected ideology.

Analysis of A Day Called X

In an ideological critique, three related exceptional themes can be assessed from this film to be put under scrutiny in the framework of farce and apocalyptic exceptionalism: the contradicting and here-ridiculous assertion of “rugged individuality,” the continuity of American society and morality, and the recognition and enforcement of existing hierarchical structures within American culture. This, presented against the backdrop of nuclear war, constitutes farce’s trademark lack of concern for distinguishing between fact and reality, and sets up farce as a new mode of ideological criticism. Farce, as discussed in the frameworks section, proves to be an effective lens in which to examine self-contradicting and preposterous ideologies regardless of their subtlety. This analysis will provide an in-depth summary of the narrative of the film including plot and setting. Interspersed, I present my analysis and observations.

First broadcast on December 8, 1957, *A Day Called X* was directed by Harry Rasky and narrated by popular contemporary actor, Glenn Ford. Produced by CBS’ Public Affairs Division, the film presents a dramatization of the city of Portland, Oregon responding to impending nuclear attack. The film opens with an aerial shot of a radio tower, and behind it lies a highway

with a lone black car being led by two motorcycles along a highway. There is an alternating, high-pitched squeal that emulates a distress radio response. The camera follows this car until it stops, and two men in black suits exit. These men are escorted into what appears to be a bunker by a security guard. Their serious tone is unequivocal, and the camera rolls with them as they scowl, before one of their close ups: “Ladies and gentlemen, you heard the report that enemy planes are approaching. In less than three hours, an H-bomb might fall over Portland.”

Immediately, there is a deafening wail of an air raid siren and a fade away to the siren itself. The end is coming. We have identified, then, our “perverse object.” This, to Howe (1990), sets the scene for “people trying to cope...” This is the very premise of *A Day Called X*: people attempting to cope with the most perverse object in human history – an object designed to bring total destruction from within the very building blocks of nature. These people are certainly inept, and “equally ridiculous.” They embody the complacency and belief in exceptionalism that made such a situation possible. Furthermore, we can utilize Bentley’s (1964) considerations of adversity within farce. He states that, “[in farce] the villain is a giant whose strength passes the limits of nature” (p. 280). This works on more than one plane. For one, the bomb itself is surely a strong villain. Secondly, we can imagine this great villain as the Soviet Union itself. Considering Bentley’s elaborations on this point – that “the ‘little man’s revenges have to be more than proportionate to the provocation” (p. 281) – mirrors the escalations of Cold War tensions on the broad scale. We can take this one step further. Consider exceptionalism itself as a villain, that here farce is exposing: exceptionalism becomes a sort of blind spot to our limitations, and destroys our ability to objectively assess.

Glenn Ford, the narrator, then insists, “there are no actors in this movie. Only people.” Looking back to Canning’s (1961) conceptualization of farce, we can examine his contention

that farce's subject matter is "slice of life" (p. 558). Ford's assertion that these are real people clearly line up well with Canning's idea. Indeed, the characters in *A Day Called X* are "anchored in daily life... with homes of their own and professions and jobs..." This fact, taken alongside Oakes' (1995, p. 101) and my own assertion of normalization, means that *A Day Called X* is at least nominally realistic. The most compelling evidence for this argument comes from the opening moments of the film. Cannings also contends that farce "dramatically and comically" distorts reality. While the humor here may not be so obvious, dramatic distortion of everyday life is plainly seen. The film opens with the aforementioned distress radio, the eerie black car, the entrance into the hidden bunker. At the same time, Ford insists that "there are no actors in this movie. Only people." *A Day Called X* is deceptive in its truthfulness here. Interestingly, apart from Ford himself, the people in this film are *not* actors. They are indeed actual residents of Portland, largely portrayed in their real-life occupations. This serves to beg the contended realism of the film, while establishing a nominal basis of truth to Ford's claims.

The film then makes a dramatic shift, with classical music overlaying a sweeping panorama of the nature surrounding 1957 Oregon. Glenn Ford waxes poetic about the "snow-capped mountains" and "friendly, ruggedly individualistic people." Curiously, Ford mentions that Portland is "about the size of Hiroshima." This subtle allusion is made with no apparent tenor of reflection or guilt; it works here to prompt a recall in the audience, who have likely witnessed the horrifying destruction of the atom bombs in Japan on newsreels or television, that this doom is not exclusive to the foreign world. Here, though, Ford ignores the obvious fact that his own country is the one who dropped the bomb on Hiroshima. The camera focuses on a young boy stopping his bicycle to smile at the sunrise. He delivers a newspaper, and the headline is shown clearly: "World Shaken By Crisis." A housewife – noted to be a mother of

five – retrieves it from her porch. We then shift to “8:31 AM,” in a hospital room, with a mother holding her newborn – “the population of Oregon has increased by one” – this serves as a strange juxtaposition with the impending sharp decrease in population. Then a shot of a Christian church, a cornerstone of American morality, filled with people singing the gospel, praising God for a good and righteous world that soon will end. At 9:18, Ray Matthews (remember, real people!), a longshoreman, is working hard at the dock to load scrap iron aboard a cargo boat. Several more iconic scenes of hard-working and well-meaning Americans playing their dutiful roles as citizens are shuffled through, including menial work at the fire station, the childhood games of a kindergarten classroom, the processions of a city council meeting, and the activity of a local police station, which has dealt with two stolen cars and a drunk and disorderly – “an average day” (again, recall Canning’s comments on farce as “slice of life”).

This tranquility is interrupted, however, by Ford’s narration, “for this day is the one called X.” The same squealing sound from the opening is overlaid again, and a report comes over the station loudspeakers: “This is an air raid warning... 3 hours, 15 minutes.” The two officers then calmly, with no demonstrated sense of fear, pick up their telephones and call the city’s civil defense director, who calmly calls the mayor, who addresses the city with no sense of urgency before sounding the air raid alarm. The fire department dispatches all trucks, the police force takes to the streets in droves. The intended rhetorical effect here is obvious. We are shown first, of course, the authority figures – the noble first responders. This performance of calmness works to normalize the coming destruction. This is a matter attended to by the same noble figures that rescue kittens from trees and stop pickpockets. We should remain submissive to orders, to the same structure that laid the foundation for this cataclysm. There is a primacy and an order to the response. As if to underscore the importance of following order, the music takes a sinister tone

accompanying the siren, and the film cycles through many civilian populations calmly leaving their work and schools to follow protocol. At a diner, the patrons do so with an absurd decorum, all leaving their place at the counter in an eerie, communal unison. Ford notes that most cities go underground into shelters in the case of early warning. Portland, though, responds with a “well thought-out plan” – here we see the projection that Portland’s state-of-the-art program is a model for the nation. He muses, “will it work?” “Quietly, without panic, the city organizes – becomes mobile the best it can.” All citizens are shown to be supremely unperturbed by the impending raid. “Each man knows his responsibility.” The Portland strategy was an ambitious one – abandon the city in its entirety, and this is exactly what we are shown, until we travel back to the nuclear bunker from the beginning. We are told that “government must survive if its people are to survive,” suggesting quite explicitly that there is a natural order here – there is a rational hierarchy of whose lives will be valued and protected in the event of such a disaster. Curiously, this hierarchy prioritizes bureaucrats over the firefighters and law officers championed only moments ago, and disregards the value of the lives the opening of the film romanticizes.

All of these people in this bunker are sober, and intently paying attention, but there is no sense of panic, no questions, no rebellion. In a manner both quiet and docile, the men (worth noting, only men, once again following the traditional hierarchy) quietly discuss the time frame and the current status of the evacuation. Then, the scene cuts to a man in traffic, following the evacuation instructions from the radio – significantly, it is noted that the current broadcaster is the local sportscaster, but he is confidently and clearly speaking as a CONELRAD information agent now, and that due to his local popularity, he will be “trusted.” After 15 minutes, Ford finally tells the audience that Portland performed a similar drill in real life in 1955, and was able to clear the heart of the city in only 34 minutes. The film then focuses on the practical (albeit

dramatized) steps of the evacuation: traffic protocol, emergency services diversion, the establishment of shelters. Back in the bunker, we hear numerous figures report that the evacuation is going smoothly: “there’s no panic among the children, they’ve rehearsed this before.” Ford explains the rationale behind the plan. According to him, this plan allows for continuity of government (and thus society) after the attack.

One of the chief arguments of this analysis is that this film represents an idealized response to crisis, far removed from any attempt at representing a plausible reality. This aspect of the film – the near-flawless, calm response – does just that. The dramatized ideal response is a key factor in my concept of apocalyptic exceptionalism. It is free of any true error, there are no random variables, such as inclement weather. There is no panic.

The most somber moments of the film come at its close. The film ends with this council of people within the bunker sitting in a built-in cafeteria. Some are shown to be conversing, even smiling, despite the catastrophic destruction they face. Some others are shown to be entirely deadpan. The final solemn line comes chillingly, spoken by the lead man in the bunker: “the time: 1:37 PM. Enemy bombers are probably overhead.” The film then cycles through close-ups of many of those people in the bunker, all with the same emotionless, calm expression, although there is obvious cause for mortal terror flying above them. The dire music resumes as a strange juxtaposition to the calmness of the people; it serves to elicit fear, but the message on screen contradicts this. We are left confused, then, and left to the guidance of the final narrative monologue:

What happened after that moment, we leave you to contemplate. But one thing is certain: Portland has a plan for the survival of its people, and the continuity of its government. You know, actually, the survival of this entire nation depends upon

the ability of federal, state, and local governments to carry out their responsibilities in the event of a massive nuclear attack... the people of Portland are ready, if there ever were a day called X. How about you?

This conclusion refocuses the themes of the film, and presents new avenues for rhetorical exploration. Chiefly, we can assess it through the three themes I proposed at the start of this analysis. One, Ford presses the trope of “rugged individualism” early on, but doubles down here on the necessity of a strong government, which requires docile conformity, not rugged individualism. This preparedness for any sort of situation – especially one as dire and immediate as this – plays into the oxymoronical concept of rugged individuality in the face of the apocalypse. Everyone has a role to play in this crisis, but in his narration, Ford champions explicitly “rugged individuality.” Rugged individualism refers to a phrase coined by former U.S. president Herbert Hoover stressing his imagined solution to the Great Depression. To Hoover, the most effective solution would be complete self-reliance. The individual, here, takes up full responsibility for their own success and survival, but this is obviously nonsensical in the world the American government is creating. This also plays into the championing of the traditional hierarchy – government is protected by the orderly and obedient conduct of the people, at the expense of their homes, safety, and livelihoods.

Both of these contradictions are necessary to the third exceptional theme, the continuity of American morality and society, which will undoubtedly sustain itself in the aftermath of nuclear holocaust, amidst the fallout and craters, so long as we save our bureaucrats. Considering Stephenson’s (1960) note that farce relies primarily on hyperbole (p. 90), or overstatement characterized by exaggerated language, let us think about Ford’s claims. “The survival of a nation depends on the ability of... governments... in the event of a massive nuclear attack.” “The

people of Portland are ready, if there ever were a day called X.” What is exaggerated here? The prospect of survival, for one. This is besides the ridiculousness of depending on the very government that caused the attack to happen. What else? That the people of Portland are “ready” for certain doom. They are except’ed – immune – from the unimaginable horrors of a post-nuclear world because they practiced an evacuation drill. This is the most glaring exaggeration of the film. Along another line, the very title, the “day called X,” is a euphemism meant to rhetorically soften the real term: “doomsday.” Once again, we find the citizens of Portland – proud Americans – excused from reality, because they are truly exceptional.

More troublingly, Ford invites us to “contemplate” “what happens next.” We, and the contemporary audience, know and knew very well what happened next. We saw it twice at the conclusion of the Second World War. It is mortal terror, the vaporization and irradiation of innocent people. Would an outright identification of that fact disrupt the film’s narrative? *A Day Called X* (indeed, most nationalistic action) requires of its subjects obedience, fear, and total conviction that their nation’s actions are without a doubt the best possible course. Farce cannot call out its own insanity – it requires a capable populace to “distinguish between fantasy and reality” (Bentley, 1964, p. 281) to understand what is fanatical and what is real.

Further consideration reveals a troubling consistency: this ideology of exceptionalism persists even in the event of such a critical and earth shattering event as total nuclear war. As noted earlier, Stephenson (1960) posits farce as a literary and film genre marked most prominently by certain characteristics: one, a love of and inclusion of violent situations (and the downplaying of the severity of those situations). Stephenson also notes the presence of absurd narrative lines. *A Day Called X* features both of these prominently. Howe (1990) tells us that farce relies on humiliation. What could be more humiliating than forcing the evacuation of an

entire American city? Howe tells us this humiliation is always met with magical cancellation, and this comes in the form of the “ambiguous” ending. This is consistent with Bentley’s (1964) notes on farce. He tells us that “abstractness of violence” (p. 281) is a key feature, with little attention being paid to realistic physical consequences of violence. Our *deus ex machina* – Ford’s invitation to consider that maybe, miraculously, the world did not end that day – provides this relief.

In a larger context, the absurdity of the piece itself is noted by Ford’s narration. In the closing remarks of the film, he mentions that nuclear weapons technology is always growing, and that we must adapt to it. There is not any moment in the film that suggests that we should resist this normalization, evolution, or proliferation of the bomb. The preposterousness here is that we allow our governments to continue to build these weapons, threaten others with them, utilize tax money to produce materials warning of their danger, and then utilize those materials to foster our acceptance of this reality. Months before this film’s release (and notably, before it was even filmed), the ICBM entered the Soviet arsenal, and less than a year later it entered the American arsenal. These new weapons had delivery timeframes of less than an hour – rendering any sort of evacuation like this one entirely obsolete. Indeed, even the people of Portland came to understand the sheer absurdity of such concepts. Despite the success of the civil defense program in Portland, it was eventually defunded. The voters of the city refused to appropriate further funding to the program in 1963. This was perhaps in part due to recognition of its obsolescence: Commissioner Stanley Earl, of the Portland City Council, argued that new technologies such as the hydrogen bomb meant that “such preparations [were] meaningless and gave Portland’s citizens false hope” (Johnson, Oregon Encyclopedia).

The response to nuclear threat, of course, is a collective action. But this collective action is posited as only possible through each and every one's total preparedness. The self-contradictory nature of these assertions is clear. It is obvious that this film is not intended to have any amount of comedic value. How, then, are we to witness proselytizing of the virtue of rugged individuality from the pulpit of government-funded media with a straight face? And more, specifically, government-funded media whose entire purpose is to promote situational collectivization? *A Day Called X* features a society willing to work in a tightly regimented order, where everyone has a predetermined role to play. There is not even a cursory semblance to any sort of rugged individualism. If this is true, and if we accept Oakes' (1995) contention that this is projected as normal behavior in this film, then this film presents us the ultimate irony and the epitome of farce. If American exceptionalism exists on a foundation of moral principles, it is a strange reversal to forward it with brutal nuclear war. While *A Day Called X* does not participate in farce's typical, fetishized portrayal of graphic violence, it still convincingly participates in this trope in another way. The violence of the film is implied. Whether or not the city of Portland has been permanently wiped off the map as well as the hellish implications of one bomb being dropped for the rest of the world, and for cities with less developed or successful evacuation programs than Portland, not to mention uninvolved states who would endure the fallout, such as Mexico, as mentioned by Mielke (2005), is all left up to you. It remains entirely ambiguous. Here we find Howe's (1990) "magical cancellation" – a sort of *deus ex machina*.

Conclusions

In this paper I have argued specifically that the civil defense short film *A Day Called X* constitute farces. In particular, I have provided an ideological criticism of the short film. Prior to

that, I provided a brief summation of nuclear rhetoric and development through the end of the Cold War to the advent of ICBMs, and explained how these developments laid the foundation for civil defense laden with ideology. Furthermore, I have assembled a literature review that exposes some dominant themes within similar artifacts. The paper has provided an analytical framework detailing farce as a method of critical reading and as a critical backdrop for the analysis of exceptionalism. I have mapped out my method – ideological criticism – and explained its implementation within the framework provided. My analysis demonstrates that considering farce can help ideological criticism to lay bare the ideological underpinnings of this particular film and may serve as a vital method of unearthing the ideologies of other propagandistic efforts.

The analysis of the film itself exposes its myths of exceptionalism as farcical. Through a detailed summary, I have provided the basic evidence for the analysis and explored the piece's key exceptional themes, namely, the concept of "rugged individuality," assertion of an immortal American character, and perverse romanticization of traditional hierarchy. I made the claim that these themes are part of the concept of American exceptionalism, and more specifically what I have coined as apocalyptic exceptionalism which is the ridiculous idea that an ideal, moral American society is possible after total destruction and irradiation due to some mythical aspect of the American character being strong enough to withstand such horror. This analysis argues that these forms of rhetoric are constructed not solely to minimize loss of life in the event of a nuclear war. Rather, their intent is more complex and more dubious. *A Day Called X* moves past mere disaster readiness. It constructs an ideology that America and its culture and people are to some degree immune from the horrors of nuclear holocaust, while at the same time serving to normalize nuclear readiness as a natural and normal aspect of everyday life – perhaps in an

attempt to make palatable the very idea of nuclear conflict, as was considered in the Korean War and at points seemed inevitable during the Cold War.

It would seem that the world, and in particular the West, has entered a new age of nationalism and shift towards right-wing ideology (Shuster, 2016; Scanner, 2016; Gera, 2015; Rachman, 2016). With the Brexit vote in the U.K., the election of Donald Trump in the U.S., and other right-populist movements emerging in other Western powers such as France, it is hard to ignore some historical echoes. I reiterate in this conclusion a sentiment I introduced at the start: this shift has stoked the fires of nationalism worldwide. Hyper-nationalism – irrational and extreme obsession over the interests and advancement of one’s own nation – sometimes comes as a consequence of that. And when it has, history has endured dreadful periods. Nationalism predicated the ascent of fascism in Europe, laying the framework for the Second World War, the Holocaust, and the development of nuclear weapons. After this came the Cold War – not only a conflict over superiority of certain countries, but a war between foundational philosophies. This war nearly came to an atomic head more than once.

As we enter this new age, we must be careful to understand the discourse that shaped the past in similar situations. As has been made clear in this paper, propaganda efforts are often disguised as rational discourse. Although it is unlikely to see civil defense as it existed in its golden age, we still must maintain our guard. Ideologies undermining ethical conduct (by normalizing nuclear war and hyper-nationalism, for instance) can worm their way into seemingly innocuous mediums. They insist to promote rational and realistic responses to situations but a closer examination can reveal what is truly being propagated. This paper intends to serve as exactly this. By pointing out the absurdity of this particular propaganda effort, and arguing it constitutes farce rather than rational discourse, we can present similar analyses in the future, and

work towards forcing transparency at all levels. Considering the state of American politics, I hope that farce can continue to be utilized as a useful critical tool. The explicit identification of absurdity must become a cornerstone of our analyses going forward. This is especially true if we, as I fear, begin to endure the same strategies utilized against truth and reason in the last age of nationalism.

On a side note, there have been numerous cultural reflections of this enduring American character in the imaginary post-nuclear world. Not surprisingly, many of these take a black comedy approach to this, recognizing the absurdity of the notion. Among the most compelling are L.Q. Jones' 1975 film *A Boy and His Dog*, Stanley Kubrick's 1964 masterpiece *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*, and the *Fallout* series of video games. There are undoubtedly many more examples, but these serve a sufficient starting point for further examination in a more popular media sphere.

I close with another echo of the past. 67 years ago President Truman told the press that, "we will take whatever steps are necessary to meet the military situation... that includes every weapon that we have... there has always been active consideration of [the atom bomb's] use" (Kaufman, 1999, p. 148). This put the world in the shadow of atomic fear for decades. In those 67 years, nuclear weapons have evolved from the horrifying atom bombs detonated over Japan to globe-shattering multi-warhead hydrogen missiles. Only months ago, then-candidate for the American presidency Donald J. Trump told the world, when asked about his stance on nuclear weapons, something hauntingly similar: "I will never, ever rule [nuclear attack] out" (Sherfinski, 2016, para. 3).

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