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The BBC, the State and Cold War Culture: The Case of Television's The War Game (1965)

IN early August 1985, the British Broadcasting Corporation was thrown into public turmoil when, following Fleet Street and government pressure, its board of governors banned the transmission of an episode of the *Real Lives* television documentary series. 'At the Edge of the Union' focused on the daily tasks of two elected representatives of Northern Ireland's political and sectarian divide, Gregory Campbell of the Democratic Unionist Party and Martin McGuinness of Sinn Fein. In the programme, both men talked of their support for political violence, unencumbered by hostile questioning or commentary. Coming only a matter of weeks after Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's assertion that the media was supplying 'terrorists' with the 'oxygen of publicity', the documentary threw into sharp relief the increasingly sensitive question of the BBC's coverage of 'the Troubles' in Northern Ireland. One BBC governor, Daphne Park, argued that by showing McGuinness, who was alleged to be a past Chief of Staff of the Irish Republican Army, at home with one of his children sitting on his knee, 'At the Edge of the Union' resembled 'a Hitler loved dogs' film. The BBC board of management disagreed profoundly. The Director-General considered resigning and the Controller Northern Ireland did, only to be persuaded to change his mind. On the day the programme was to have been screened, BBC and other journalists conducted a twenty-four-hour strike. 'At the Edge of the Union' was eventually transmitted two months later, in October 1985, with changes to highlight the illegitimacy of IRA violence.[1]

By coincidence, just as the BBC was imposing one embargo, another was finally being lifted. At 9.30 p.m. on 31 July 1985, a couple of days before the *Real Lives* row broke, BBC2 showed a forty-seven-minute drama documentary, *The War Game*. Made by the BBC within the context of the British state's fight against Soviet communism in the mid-1960s, rather than its contemporary struggle against Irish terrorism, *The War Game* depicted the personal and public effects of a nuclear attack on Kent, England. Blending fact and fiction in a startlingly graphic fashion, the film challenged the adequacy of the nation's civil defence programme and the whole philosophy of nuclear deterrence. Having banned the programme from television internationally for twenty years on the grounds that

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1. Alasdair Milne, *DG: The Memoirs of a British Broadcaster* (1988), 187–94; David Miller, *Don't Mention the War: Northern Ireland, Propaganda and the Media* (1994), 35–8.

it was 'too horrifying for the medium of broadcasting', the Corporation now celebrated *The War Game* as a 'classic' and one of the most important nuclear war films ever made. As several commentators charged the BBC with hypocrisy over its attitude towards *The War Game*, others argued about the role played by the state in censoring both it and 'At the Edge of the Union'. Peter Watkins, the director of *The War Game*, smelt the clammy hand of government in both cases, whereas Sir Hugh Greene, BBC Director-General in the 1960s, claimed they differed utterly because the BBC's decision not to show *The War Game* had been an entirely internal matter. While journalists and politicians argued over whether or not history was repeating itself, all observers agreed on the enduring power of *The War Game*. 'Far from being dated', said the *London Standard*'s television critic, Lucy Hughes-Hallett, the morning after the broadcast, 'it makes any other treatment of the subject I have seen look old-fashioned and sentimental'. Watching the film was, according to the *Daily Mail*'s critic, Mary Kenny, 'an exceptionally distressing experience', but one from which lovers of media freedom in the West could also take comfort. 'I wonder whether it will ever be shown in the USSR', she asked pointedly.[2]

The BBC's role in times of crisis and war has been the subject of considerable interest ever since the Corporation's birth in the 1920s. Scholars have written detailed accounts of that role in, for instance, the 1926 General Strike, the Second World War, the 1956 Suez crisis, the 1982 Falklands War and the 1991 Gulf War.[3] They have also scrutinised the BBC's portrayal of terrorism over the decades, in Northern Ireland, the Middle East and elsewhere.[4] By comparison, the BBC's behaviour during the cold war, a conflict that dominated international and domestic politics in the second half of the twentieth century, has generally been overlooked.[5] This can be explained partly by the greater problems associated with analysing the politics, policies and output of such a large media organisation over four decades than, say, during the six-year Second World War when, for one thing, the BBC confined

2. *Radio Times*, 27 July 1985, 3–5; *Broadcast*, 9 Aug. 1985, 25; *Listener*, 8 Aug. 1985, 2–7; *Listener*, 11 Dec. 1986, 20; *London Standard*, 1 Aug. 1985, 29; *Daily Mail*, 1 Aug. 1985, 21.

3. Michael Tracey, 'The BBC and the General Strike: May 1926', in Edward Buscombe (ed.), *British Television: A Reader* (Oxford, 2000), 25–44; Asa Briggs, *The History of Broadcasting in the UK. Volume III. The War of Words* (Oxford, 1970); Tony Shaw, *Eden, Suez and the Mass Media: Propaganda and Persuasion during the Suez Crisis* (1996); Derrik Mercer, Geoff Mungham and Kevin Williams, *The Fog of War* (1987); Philip M. Taylor, *War and the Media: Propaganda and Persuasion in the Gulf War* (1993).

4. P. Schlesinger, *Putting 'Reality' Together: BBC News* (1987); Greg Philo and Mike Berry, *Bad News from Israel* (2004); Susan L. Carruthers, *The Media at War* (2000).

5. Hitherto, scholars have generally confined themselves to the part played in the cold war by the BBC's External Services. See, for instance, Michael Nelson, *War of the Black Heavens: The Battles of Western Broadcasting in the Cold War* (Syracuse, 1997); Gary D. Rawnsley, *Radio Diplomacy and Propaganda: The BBC and VOA in International Politics, 1956–64* (1996); Paul Lashmar and James Oliver, *Britain's Secret Propaganda War, 1948–1977* (1998).

itself to radio and had no domestic competitor. It can also be attributed to the BBC's adherence to the British archival thirty year rule, meaning that most documentation relating to the BBC's activities during the cold war from the mid-1970s onwards remains closed. Yet, as several studies over the last decade or so have shown,[6] it is now widely recognised that the mass media played an unusually influential part in the battle between the 'East' and the 'West' between 1945 and 1991. The cold war was, after all, as much of a propaganda conflict – a battle of words, sounds and pictures – as one fought between diplomats, soldiers and politicians. The BBC, as a broadcaster of news, comment and entertainment in Britain and large parts of the world throughout the cold war, stood at the very centre of this propaganda conflict. Indeed, its role was arguably unique – no other media organisation combined such a powerful domestic and external reach, with a reputation for independence, impartiality and accuracy.

This article will not attempt to provide an overview of the BBC's role during the cold war. It will instead concentrate on two important aspects of that role: the Corporation's relationship with the state, and its coverage of the issue of nuclear weapons. These two themes will be brought together through examining an episode that took place roughly half way through the cold war, and which is one of the most controversial in the history of British broadcasting: the banning of Peter Watkins' *The War Game* from television in 1965.[7] Drawing on recently declassified sources, the article sheds new light on the origins, production and censorship of *The War Game*. It also traces the political and cultural impact of the film, following the BBC's decision in 1966 to grant the film a limited release in cinemas and via film clubs. As a result of this decision, over the next two decades *The War Game* provided a sharp focus for peace movements in Britain and throughout the world, as well as inspiring other contributions to cold war culture. By the time the

6. Everette Dennis, George Gerbner and Yassen N. Zassoursky (eds), *Beyond the Cold War: Soviet and American Media Images* (Newbury Park, 1991); Stephen J. Whitfield, *The Culture of the Cold War* (Baltimore, 1996); Walter L. Hixson, *Parting the Curtain: Propaganda, Culture, and the Cold War, 1945–1961* (1997); Nancy E. Bernhard, *Television News and Cold War Propaganda, 1947–1960* (Cambridge, 1999); Gary D. Rawnsley (ed.), *Cold-War Propaganda in the 1950s* (1999); Tony Shaw, *British Cinema and the Cold War: The State, Propaganda and Consensus* (2001); David Caute, *The Dancer Defects: The Struggle for Cultural Supremacy during the Cold War* (Oxford, 2003).

7. Most analyses of the production and censorship of *The War Game* have relied on press material: see Jack G. Shaheen, '*The War Game* Revisited', *Journal of Popular Film*, i (1972), 299–308; Michael Tracey, 'Censored: *The War Game* Story', in Crispin Aubrey (ed.), *Nukespeak: The Media and the Bomb* (1982), 38–54; James W. Welsh, 'The Modern Apocalypse: *The War Game*', *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, xi (1983), 25–41; John R. Cook and Patrick Murphy, 'After the Bomb Dropped: The Cinema Half-Life of *The War Game*', *Journal of Popular British Cinema*, iii (2000), 129–32. Recent accounts have examined the BBC's records relating to the film (released in 1996) but these have not placed the film in the wider context of the BBC's cold war role. Nor have they looked at *The War Game*'s political and cultural significance. See, for instance, Asa Briggs, *The History of Broadcasting in the UK. Volume V. Competition 1955–1974* (Oxford, 1995), 531–5; James Chapman, 'Voices of Censure and Dissent: The BBC and the Censorship of *The War Game*', *Journal of Contemporary History*, xli (2006), 75–94.

film was televised for the first time anywhere in 1985, it had already been seen by an estimated six million people, and was ranked (as it still is today) as perhaps the most moving and influential depiction of nuclear destruction produced in any medium.

In many senses, the British media had a field day with the cold war. Newspaper editors, film producers, playwrights, novelists, even musicians, gorged themselves on a myriad of themes, from espionage to space races, and 'hot' wars to defecting ballet dancers. On the face of it, the nuclear issue caught the media's imagination as much as these other subjects. Movie 'creature features' like Douglas Hickox and Eugene Lourié's *Behemoth the Sea Monster* (1958) told of prehistoric monsters revivified by radioactivity from atomic tests; novels such as Brian Aldiss's *Barefoot in the Head* (1969) mocked nuclear war as a bad LSD trip; and records like Frankie Goes to Hollywood's *Two Tribes* (1984) went to the top of the pop music charts calling for an end to the nuclear arms race.[8]

On closer inspection, however, during the first two decades of the 'atomic age' especially, the British media's coverage of nuclear issues was extremely selective. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, Fleet Street barely reported the Attlee governments' nuclear weapons and energy programmes. This can be explained partly by the 'veritable lead shield of secrecy'[9] which surrounded Attlee's decision to develop nuclear weapons in January 1947, together with the press's fear of endangering national security or triggering public hysteria about a nuclear Armageddon. When newspapers broached the subject a little more freely following Britain's entry into the 'nuclear club' in 1952, they invariably lent implicit or explicit support to official policy, either by playing down fears of a nuclear war or by claiming that Britain's nuclear deterrent was an essential ingredient of the nation's world power status.[10] Most British films of the 1940s and 1950s that speculated on how a nuclear war would arise, or what the world would look like during and after it, either offered lurid science-fiction visions of irradiated mutants, or encouraged viewers to come away not with questions about military policy but with a sense of inevitable tragedy. Stanley Kubrick's much celebrated *Dr Strangelove; or, How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964) challenged this passivity by satirically denouncing mutual assured destruction theory, but even this Anglo-American production declined to show the actual effects of a nuclear holocaust. Doubtless, the majority of Wardour

8. Ian Conrich, 'Trashing London: The British Colossal Creature Film and Fantasies of Mass Destruction', in I. Q. Hunter (ed.), *British Science Fiction Cinema* (1999), 88–98; David Dowling, *Fictions of Nuclear Disaster* (Iowa City, 1987); Tony Shaw, 'From Liverpool to Russia, With Love: *A Letter to Brezhnev* and Cold War Cinematic Dissent in 1980s Britain', *Contemporary British History*, xix (2005), 243–62.

9. Margaret Gowing, *Independence and Deterrence: Britain and Atomic Energy 1945–1952. Volume 1. Policy Making* (1974), 55.

10. Peter Hennessy, *What the Papers Never Said* (1985).

Street's money-minded producers and distributors worked on the assumption that customers were unlikely to pay for pessimistic entertainment, and that the conservatively minded British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) would block anything too shocking or inflammatory anyway.[11]

As the nation's prime public service broadcaster, obliged by its charter not only to entertain but to inform and educate, the BBC wrestled uncomfortably with the nuclear issue throughout the cold war. In the 1940s and 1950s a combination of institutionalised self-censorship, official pressures and the close political affinity between senior executives and government, meant that the Corporation's nuclear coverage largely mirrored that of the press and film industry. With the BBC having established a tight working relationship with Whitehall during the fight against Nazism, it was only natural that this should continue during the struggle against what many in government and the Corporation saw as another inherently expansionist, totalitarian movement: Soviet communism. Former Whitehall officials had traditionally been appointed to the higher echelons of the BBC, and this tendency increased significantly during the first decades of the cold war. Having been Military Assistant Secretary to the Cabinet during the Second World War, Sir Ian Jacob became head of the BBC's European and Overseas Services in the late 1940s, then Director-General in the 1950s. Jacob actively supported the creation in 1948 of the Foreign Office's secret anti-communist propaganda unit, the Information Research Department (IRD), and the dissemination of its material on the BBC's external and domestic services afterwards.[12] The chairman of the BBC's board of governors between 1952 and 1957 was Sir Alexander Cadogan, permanent under-secretary at the Foreign Office 1938–46. The Corporation's head of Russian and Eastern European broadcasts in the late 1940s, director of News and Current Affairs in the late 1950s, then Director-General between 1960 and 1969, Hugh Carleton-Greene (Sir Hugh Greene after 1964), had masterminded the British government's psychological warfare campaign against the communist insurgents in Malaya in 1950–1. At a meeting sponsored by the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) in 1959, Carleton-Greene described the BBC's 'English by Radio' broadcasts as 'one of the most important contributions' the BBC was then making to Western propaganda operations targeted at the USSR.[13]

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11. Shaw, *British Cinema and the Cold War*, 115–41.

12. P[ublic] R[ecord] O[ffice, London], FO1110/16, PR377 Jacob to Christopher Warner, 28 May 1948; PRO, FO1110/33, PR902/71/913 Minutes of the Russia Committee, 14 Oct. 1948; Foreign and Commonwealth Library and Records Department, IRD, *Origins and Establishment of the Foreign Office Information Research Department, 1946–8* (1995); Lashmar and Oliver, *Britain's Secret Propaganda War*, 57–65. The chief architect of IRD, Labour politician Christopher Mayhew, was a well-known broadcaster in the 1950s on radio and television.

13. Sir Hugh Greene, *The Third Floor Front: A View of Broadcasting in the Sixties* (1969), 31.

From the end of the Second World War to the mid-1950s, as best it could the BBC largely avoided the issues posed by nuclear arms. For the rest of the decade it responded to increasing public concern about the proliferation of thermonuclear weapons by discouraging controversy, playing down polemic and endorsing official doctrine on defence. This can partly be explained by fear. The British government regularly issued D-notices through the long-standing Services, Press and Broadcasting Committee, requesting the BBC and other media outlets not to publicise nuclear-related information. Given that the D-notice system was widely identified with the Official Secrets Act, many journalists believed the alternative to compliance was imprisonment.[14] Added to this, MI5 vetted BBC staff for 'subversives', thus inducing further caution among its employees and reducing further the possibility of dissent on the airwaves.[15] Such pressures aside, BBC–government relations were characterised mostly by voluntary, if discreet, cooperation on the nuclear issue. Through Jacob, Cadogan and others below them, Whitehall and the BBC liaised frequently, in common agreement on what constituted 'the national interest' in foreign and defence matters. BBC officials, Whitehall and politicians consulted each other on how issues such as the hydrogen bomb might be covered without frightening viewers and listeners. In 1955, for instance, the BBC axed a programme about nuclear fallout in the wake of Prime Minister Winston Churchill's complaints, made directly through the chairman, that it might foster defeatism.[16] Similarly, other BBC programmes marginalised discussions about the effects of radiation, while in 1957 the fire at the nuclear reactor at Windscale in Cumbria was portrayed by BBC news as a 'mishap'. Narrow ideas of what constituted news shaped presentation, while the BBC's decisive criterion for talks and features was 'responsibility'. Within these boundaries, organisations like the National Peace Council and the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND, established in 1958), found it almost impossible to access the airwaves, the BBC's circular rationale being that they represented a minority.[17]

As well as censoring in this manner, the BBC also acted as an official publicity arm, selling civil defence, by, for instance, televising Central Office of Information (COI) short films and inserting civil defence material into regular programmes, like Alistair Cooke's 'Letter from

14. Alasdair Palmer, 'The History of the D-Notice Committee', in Christopher Andrew and David Dilks (eds), *The Missing Dimension: Governments and Intelligence Communities in the Twentieth Century* (Basingstoke, 1984), 227–49. A D-notice of February 1958, for instance, instructed the BBC not to disclose any details of ballistic missile deployment in the UK. BBC W[ritten] A[rchives] C[entre, Caversham], T16/150/2: Controller of Programmes, Television, 28 Feb. 1958.

15. Clive Ponting, *Secrecy in Britain* (1990), 35. Whitehall vetting of the BBC had started in 1937.

16. *Guardian*, 20 Aug. 1999, 6.

17. Anthony Adamthwaite, ' "Nation Shall Speak Peace Unto Nation": The BBC's Response to Peace and Defence issues, 1945–58', *Contemporary Record*, xii (1993), 557–77.

America'. In the aftermath of the 1957 Defence White Paper, in which ministers admitted openly for the first time that there was no adequate protection against nuclear attack, the government launched a propaganda campaign against the opponents of nuclear weapons and testing, in which the BBC played a central role.[18] This campaign built on IRD's efforts earlier in the decade to encourage a public discourse that made 'peace' a dirty word.[19] Anthony Adamthwaite posits that, by collaborating in these various ways with the state's sophisticated information management system, the BBC not only played an important role in establishing the credibility of a British nuclear deterrent, it also, by hindering the development of informed public debate, delayed the emergence of a sustained mass protest movement against nuclear weapons in Britain.[20] While this particular cause and effect may be questionable, it can reasonably be argued that the BBC's coverage of nuclear issues during the 1940s and for most of the 1950s had something of a tranquilising effect on the British public and, by keeping peace campaigners off the air, helped to keep the issue of nuclear disarmament relatively low on the national political agenda. After the birth of CND and into the early 1960s, the Corporation's coverage widened somewhat, to take account of CND's burgeoning membership (by 1961 it could boast more than 800 local groups) and opinion polls that suggested that up to a third of the British public supported the movement.[21] However, the majority of programmes continued to soft-pedal, particularly on the issue of nuclear war survivability.[22]

In April 1963, the year after the Cuban Missile Crisis, Peter Watkins, a precociously talented, 28-year-old film-maker, joined the BBC as a Talks Production Assistant. Watkins, the winner of an Amateur Ciné Camera Award in 1961 with *Forgotten Faces*, a recreation of the 1956 Hungarian uprising in the back streets of Canterbury, was one of a group of gifted young directors hired to help launch the experimental BBC2 in 1964.[23] The BBC was beginning to undergo something of a revolution in the early 1960s, as the new Director-General, Hugh Carleton-Greene, sought to shrug off the Corporation's stuffy image. Working in a more informal, dynamic environment, producers were encouraged to challenge political and cultural conventions. Television

18. Ibid., 572–4; BBC WAC, R34/640/2: Propaganda – Defence, 1955–1959, Civil Defence, 7 Sept. 1955.

19. On this see John Dwight Jenks, 'Hot News/Cold War: The British State, Propaganda and the News Media, 1948–53' (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of California, Berkeley, 2000), 251–93.

20. Adamthwaite, 'Nation Shall Speak Peace Unto Nation', 572–5.

21. Lawrence Wittner, *The Struggle Against the Bomb. Volume II. Resisting the Bomb: A History of the World Nuclear Disarmament Movement, 1954–1970* (Stanford, 1997), 190.

22. BBC WAC, T56/262/1: *The War Game* research file lists ten programmes about nuclear weapons and disarmament made by the BBC between Feb. 1963 and March 1965.

23. For the strong impression *Forgotten Faces* made on BBC staff see BBC WAC, S251, Box 8: 'The Story of *The War Game*', 2; Briggs, *Competition*, 532, n. 65.

programmes such as *That Was The Week That Was* (1962–3), with its bitingly satirical, anti-authoritarian material, exemplified the new liberalising, risk-taking regime.[24] Watkins, who was not a member of CND but was sympathetic to its cause, had been thinking for two years about a film that would, in his words, 'break down the present silence' about the effects of nuclear weapons. Consequently, in August 1963, he wrote to Huw Wheldon, head of BBC Documentary and Music Programmes, making an impassioned plea to be allowed to make a film, provisionally entitled 'After the Bomb', which traced the consequences of a nuclear attack on Britain:

> We all of us know and accept the fact that nuclear warfare *might* be the outcome of present world politics – we all condone the presence of nuclear weapons which could mean in one hour the death of ten or twenty times the number of people assassinated during the Jewish pogroms – and yet really and honestly not one of us gives a blind nickel in thought to what in effect we might well be responsible for: children covered in gaping third degree burns, healthy men reduced to puss-oozing lumps, women turned sterile in a moment . . . I realise that if I *say* this during the running of the film, virtually the entire audience will reach for the 'off' switch. No, the film will be impartial – journalistic, but BECAUSE it will be taking place *after* the next world war has started and BECAUSE everything in it will be painfully recognisable as cogs in their everyday ordinary life, but subjected to the most hideous events conceivable – I hope that in this roundabout way I will make the point I want to: why in hell's name, before it's too late, don't we kick ourselves in the pants and begin to behave like human beings.[25]

Despite support for the project from senior producer Stephen Hearst – 'in terms of content and approach, this would be a completely novel and path-finding imaginative documentary which, if well made, would have a tremendous impact'[26] – Wheldon turned Watkins down. Wheldon, who had made his name at the BBC editing and presenting the ground-breaking populist arts programme, *Monitor*, between 1958 and 1962, regarded Watkins as a potentially brilliant film-maker. However, aside from the technical difficulties such a project would cause a man of his inexperience, he felt the film could only be seen to be lending assistance to those who advocated unilateral disarmament and thereby break the BBC's commitment to neutrality in national security matters.[27] By way of compensation and diversion, Wheldon gave an aggrieved Watkins permission to make a film about the 1745 Battle of

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24. On the 'Greene revolution', see Briggs, *Competition*, 323, 338–40, 350–76. On the emergence of a new form of realist television drama in Britain in the 1960s, through writers and directors such as Troy Kennedy Martin and Ken Loach, see John Caughie, *Television Drama: Realism, Modernism and British Culture* (Oxford, 2000).

25. BBC WAC, T16/679/2: Watkins' letter to BBC, 25 Jan. 1966; T16/679/1: Watkins, via Stephen Hearst to Huw Wheldon, 7 Aug. 1963.

26. BBC WAC, T16/679/1: Stephen Hearst to Huw Wheldon, 7 Aug. 1963.

27. BBC WAC, S251, Box 8: 'The Story of *The War Game*', 2–3.

Culloden. Even before it was finished, Wheldon and Grace Wyndham Goldie, head of Talks and Current Affairs, recognised *Culloden* as a television landmark. When it was broadcast on BBC1 in December 1964, the film was acclaimed for extending the boundaries of the historical survey on television, partly due to its avowed partiality, and partly due to its use of handheld camera-work, 'impromptu' interviews *in situ* and detached commentary.[28]

Throughout 1964, Watkins had aggressively lobbied Wheldon and others for permission to start work on 'After the Bomb', emphasising the project's even handedness, and even threatening to resign rather than be 'sidetracked'. In November, Wheldon authorised him to visit Berlin and hire a research assistant for 'exploratory' purposes. Eventually, in the wake of *Culloden* in December, anxious to keep 'one of the most original and promising young talents the BBC had ever recruited', Wheldon concluded that there was no choice but to let Watkins 'get this film out of his system'. As stated in a memo to Kenneth Adam, director of BBC Television, Wheldon had grave misgivings about the project from a political perspective. For one thing, he doubted whether the Russians would ever make such a film, and he thought the end product was bound to be 'horrifying'. On the other hand, he and Wyndham Goldie felt that so long as there was no security risk and the facts deployed by Watkins were authentic, there was a strong case for arguing that the British people should be entrusted with the truth about nuclear bombardment. After lengthy discussions in January 1965 with Greene himself, who also feared that the film would be too horrifying to show on television but was also worried about Watkins' inadvertent disclosure of 'classified information', Wheldon agreed to a stage-by-stage process. Approval was granted for research and scripting, but only after the Director-General had cleared the script could shooting and then transmission proceed. In the mean time, the BBC should seek 'counsel' on the film's security aspects.[29]

It is clear, therefore, that from the outset of production, the BBC sought official guidance on what would, from early March onwards, be entitled *The War Game*. Yet what that guidance actually amounted to was soon open to dispute within the BBC and Home Office. Political input complicated matters further. In mid-January 1965, Greene received a letter from Peter Thorneycroft, the Conservative shadow Minister of Defence, whom Watkins had recently interviewed in the course of his research, warning of the 'uproar which would take place if the BBC came out with a film about the deterrent which was straight propaganda for the Committee [*sic*] for Nuclear Disarmament'. Responding to this, and Greene's fears that 'this project is running into

28. BBC WAC, S251, Box 8: 'The Story of *The War Game*', 12–15; S. M. J. Arrowsmith, 'Peter Watkins', in G. W. Brandt (ed.), *British Television Drama* (Cambridge, 1981), 224.

29. BBC WAC, T16/679/1: Wheldon to Watkins, 3 Nov. 1964, and Wheldon to Adam, 31 Dec. 1964; S251, Box 8: 'The Story of *The War Game*', 22.

rather stormy weather', Wheldon, who in mid-1963 had shared
Thorneycroft's scepticism, assured Adam of Watkins' wide-ranging,
balanced approach. 'His intention is to add grist to the mill of thought,
not to propagandise for CND'.[30] Others in the BBC were less sanguine.
In mid-February, H. D. Winther, the BBC's Home Office liaison
official, and J. H. Arkell, the BBC's director of administration, warned
Greene that unless the Home Office were involved at various points in
the film's production, the BBC risked breaching national security. This,
in turn, could 'undermine the high confidence which the Government
at present has in the BBC in this sphere', and ultimately might even
result in the government's first ever exercise of its formal powers of veto
over programmes, outlined in the BBC's charter. In early 1965, Watkins
had set the alarm bells ringing in Whitehall by sending a detailed
questionnaire to several government departments, inquiring, among
other things, about the availability of hospital beds in a nuclear
emergency. Tellingly, the Home Office argued that as 'partners in the
civil defence field', the government and Corporation ought to work
together throughout production to ensure that the film was 'prepared
with the utmost care and responsibility' given its potentially harmful
effects on the public.[31]

   At the end of February, Wheldon persuaded Greene against taking
this course of action, or agreeing to any sort of 'advanced showing' that
gave the authorities control over the film's final content and thereby
compromised the BBC's independence. Official advice should instead
be sought at an 'assembly' stage, when the film was in rough cut, and,
because the programme was not a live studio transmission, when there
was ample scope for modification.[32] Still unhappy with this, at a meeting
of the long-standing 222 Committee comprising BBC and Whitehall
officials in early March, the Home Office continued to emphasise how
'dangerous' *The War Game* was and the subsequent need to have
'clarification of the aims and objectives of the programme with a view
to advising their Ministers'. Arkell, who was present, sympathised fully
with the committee's judgement that the film's subject 'did not lend
itself for presentation as a documentary and that, if it were to go forward
at all, it would be more generally acceptable if presented as fiction or
fantasy'. Donald Edwards, the BBC's Editor of News and Current
Affairs, concurred, and suggested the issue be referred up to the Services,
Press and Broadcasting Committee, of which he was a member, thus
raising the prospect of the programme being suppressed by one or more
D-notices.[33] A week later, Greene and Lord Normanbrook, the BBC's

30. BBC WAC, T16/679/1: Thorneycroft to Greene, 18 Jan. 1965, Greene to Adam, 27 Jan.
1965; Wheldon to Adam, 29 Jan. 1965.
31. BBC WAC, T16/679/1: Winther to Arkell, 22 Jan. 1965; R78/2, 680/1: Winther to Arkell,
16 Feb. 1965; Arkell to Greene, 18 Feb. 1965.
32. BBC WAC, T16/679/1: Wheldon to Adam, 22 Feb. 1965.
33. BBC WAC, T16/679/1: Minutes of 78th meeting of 222 Committee, 5 March 1965.

chairman of governors, read Watkins' draft script and concluded that, given the 'weighty problems and difficulties involved', the project should be shelved. Wheldon, who had just been promoted to the position of controller of Television Programmes, countered this by stressing how 'open-minded' the script's attitude towards the nuclear bomb was and the 'fully documented' nature of Watkins' material. His view prevailed and the next stage, shooting, was given the go ahead.[34]

Away from, though cognisant of, these delicate negotiations, Peter Watkins was working to construct a film that would fulfil his three objectives: first, to bring home to people as graphically and authentically as possible the horrendous nature of nuclear war, and thereby 'make the man in the street stop to think about himself and the future'; secondly, to challenge conventional assumptions about the media's social function, and more particularly the mechanisms for self-regulation adopted by the institutions governing television; and thirdly, to radicalise the documentary form, primarily by taking advantage of the growing technological sophistication of television news-gathering.[35] He was allotted a budget of £9,000, the second largest ever for a BBC film, and three times the usual allowance.[36] Watkins' research into nuclear war, carried out mainly between November 1964 and February 1965, was prodigious. He was determined to base the film on fact and well-founded opinion, and even compiled a thick dossier to support his images and conclusions. Watkins' bibliography amounted to more than sixty books and a similar number of reports and articles, including military and scientific appraisals, histories and polemics.[37] He elicited the views of the distinguished (MPs, biologists, geneticists, philosophers) to build up a picture of emotional and intellectual attitudes towards 'the bomb', and surveyed old people's homes and schools so his actors could give the views of ordinary people. He drew up two questionnaires, one for government departments that probed such issues as emergency clothing stocks and radiation meters (and with which only the Fire Service actively cooperated, against Home Office instructions), and another sent to doctors, psychiatrists, academics and civil defence experts. This consisted of 112 questions, such as 'Does radioactive dust taste?'[38] Watkins then assembled an unofficial nine-member advisory panel which included scientists, civil defence experts and a member of CND to help during the scripting, filming and editing phases.[39]

34. BBC WAC, S251, Box 8: 'The Story of *The War Game*', 25; T16/679/1: Wheldon to Adam, 2 March 1965 and Adam to Greene, 15 March 1965.
35. *New York Times*, 3 April 1966, S2, 19; Arrowsmith, 'Peter Watkins', 217–39.
36. BBC WAC, T56/262/1: Peter Gillman's on-location report for the *Sunday Times*, May 1965. The film eventually cost in the region of £11,000.
37. BBC WAC, T16/748: Appendix 2(b).
38. BBC WAC, T16/748: Appendix 2(a); T56/266/1: *The War Game* research; T56/266/2 *The War Game* research.
39. BBC WAC, S251, Box 8: 'The Story of *The War Game*', 18–19.

The War Game's storyline and structure underwent several changes, as Watkins pondered the best way to 'move ruthlessly' and make his points incisively. From the outset, Watkins chose to focus on the plight suffered by those caught on the fringes of a nuclear strike, rather than at its epicentre. This was not only easier to depict on film but would also undermine official notions of survivability. His first idea revolved around a television camera crew sent to Canterbury in the immediate aftermath of a nuclear strike on London, reporting over a span of ten days how the town's population physically and mentally collapsed. Elements of this made their way into the final print – the Kent location in particular – but the prominence of the camera crew theme was rejected, perhaps because it resembled *Culloden* too closely.[40] Watkins spent months discussing with international relations specialists the most likely group of events or 'trouble spots' that could lead to the start of a nuclear conflagration, again all part of his efforts to achieve 'total realism'. Watkins initially opted for a scenario in which escalation was sparked by an American invasion of Cuba and a retaliatory Russian entry into West Berlin.[41] Watkins' reconnaissance trip to Berlin in November 1964 – during which he meticulously compiled information on the uniforms and equipment used by the West and East German forces, and visited the zonal border – confirmed the city's place in the film, but ultimately Cuba was replaced by Vietnam. In light of the United States' controversial decision in early 1965 to begin bombarding North Vietnam (Operation 'Rolling Thunder'), this made the film even more topical.[42] Watkins' pre-filming scripts explicitly divided the film into two parts, with the first composed of quotes from various authority figures offering their (largely positive) opinions on nuclear deterrence, and the second depicting the build up to and effects of a Soviet thermonuclear attack on the south of England. At the filming and editing stages, these two sections were intercut with one another, and greater attention paid, via a pacier narrative, to the speed at which war would arrive and its gruesome impact on a relatively small community.[43]

Watkins' quest for authenticity dictated that the members of this community be utterly normal and thus entirely anonymous. Consequently, in March a cast of roughly 350 was assembled from several amateur dramatic societies in Kent, a handful of *Culloden* veterans and a few CND enthusiasts.[44] Shooting followed throughout April,

40. BBC WAC, T56/263/2: Watkins to Alan Shuttleworth, member of CND, 14 July 1963 and undated (probably late summer 1963) typescript by Peter Watkins.

41. BBC WAC, T56/266/1: Watkins to Emanuel de Kadt, Royal Institute of International Affairs, 13 Jan. 1965.

42. BBC WAC, T56/263/1: Berlin trip; Sean Greenwood, *Britain and the Cold War* (Basingstoke, 2000), 168–72.

43. BBC WAC, T16/748: Appendix 4: Scripts of *The War Game*; T56/263/1: Pre-filming script.

44. BBC WAC, T56/261/1: Cast files 1 and 2.

mainly at derelict sites in Chatham, Rochester and Dover. Watkins took a very hands-on approach to directing, literally in some instances. With an Éclair handheld camera perched on his shoulder, cameraman Peter Bartlett was instructed to stay as close as possible to the action, especially during the attack scenes, when Watkins would thump him when he wanted the camera to jerk for an explosion. Watkins took pains in coaching the amateurs how to 'act' like dead bodies, making them lie convincingly askew amongst rubble, and checking their postures against photographs taken at Hiroshima. Students were chosen for the fight and riot scenes, on the assumption that they would less mind running the risk of getting in the way of an unpulled punch, and so make the violence more believable.[45]

Watkins eschewed a science-fiction appearance, with, as he put it, 'people reduced to crawling troglodytes', because he wanted the audience to empathise with the holocaust victims. At the same time, he was careful not to alienate viewers, and thus set certain limits. He was aware that, in making the film for television and not art cinema, *The War Game*'s images had to be moderated: 'There will be only about ten minutes of close-up details of human suffering', he told the *Observer* prior to filming. 'That's all an audience can take.'[46] Similarly, Watkins was judicious with his choice of staged expert interviews, which were filmed in a glossy studio in order to contrast with the grey and grainy, quasi-newsreel action sequences. For example, he discarded one prominent quote from an American strategist who confidently predicted that the number of nuclear war survivors would not be anywhere near as low as the number of pilgrims who had landed at Plymouth as settlers in America in the seventeenth century, 'and look at what that small number was able to do with this country in a comparatively short time'. To have included this, or, as was originally intended, lyrics by the radical singer–songwriter Bob Dylan, would in Watkins' opinion have been clumsy and didactic. Watkins deliberately 'cross bred' formats – the newsreel, street interview, current affairs programme, naturalist drama and *cinéma-vérité* documentary – and consequently blurred established television viewing 'codes'. Particular innovations included the sudden switch to a blank screen followed by images in negative to demonstrate the retinal burns on human beings, and the use of freeze-frame to end certain scenes, rather then dissolve or fade-out. The latter gave a photographic, memorial tone to victims, such as the 'waxwork' family in the film's final minutes. An unemotional narration, supplied by the well-known voices of documentary commentator Dick Graham and BBC news reporter Michael Aspel, lent the film an air of sobriety and respectability.[47]

45. BBC WAC, T56/262/1: Gillman Report, May 1965.
46. *Observer*, 24 Jan. 1965, cited in Welsh, 'The Modern Apocalypse', 28.
47. BBC WAC, T56/262/1: Gillman Report, May 1965; T56/263/1: Watkins on Dylan and music by Duke Ellington.

From mid-May to mid-June, Watkins undertook preliminary editing of *The War Game*. During this period, the new head of Documentaries, Richard Cawston, took the unusual step of commissioning a former BBC producer, Gilbert Phelps, to compile a report on the making of the film, in order to verify its assertions and protect the BBC against any future outside complaints.[48] On 17 June, Watkins showed the film in rough form to his panel of consultants for guidance on a range of factual and scientific points. The strategic experts felt the film exaggerated the Americans' readiness to resort to tactical nuclear weapons, and Watkins made the necessary corrections. On 24 June, Wheldon and Cawston saw the film for the first time, and expressed a number of misgivings about its tone, content and technique. Most importantly, they felt the film failed to set out the pros and cons of deterrence theory, and thus 'smacked too much of a CND hand-out'. Wheldon also doubted whether the police and armed forces would be as ill-disciplined as the film portrayed; whether it was feasible to suggest that the police would carry out mercy-killings in the presence of spectators; and whether the depicted public executions were actually likely to take place. Though profoundly upset by these reactions, Watkins carried out the requested changes, and even cut other scenes in anticipation of further possible criticisms, including one showing a government official's suicide and a sequence that depicted fighting between soldiers and police; however, he refused to delete the public executions. In late July, Wheldon and Cawston scrutinised the revised version and pronounced it a superior film in every way, especially in terms of political balance. As a result, pending minor amendments, they were happy to see the film go forward, as arranged, for consideration by Greene and Normanbrook. In August, the alterations were completed, and a tentative date of mid-October set by the Television Service for transmission.[49]

Months of research, rewrites and quality control from inside and outside the BBC had produced an unmistakably novel docudrama. *The War Game* opens with a map illustrating how Britain contained more potential nuclear targets per acre of land mass than any other country in the world. It then proposes a politico-military chain reaction, starting in Vietnam, erupting in Berlin and leading to a limited Soviet thermonuclear assault on Britain. Having first exposed London's chaotically deficient evacuation plans, the film deals at length with the effects of the Soviet attack on a civilian area of Kent, to which the evacuees have been sent and where two missiles have dropped nearby, short of their military targets. The fictional 'action' sequences are interspersed with diagrams, staged comments from academic experts, actual interviews with the ill-informed general public and quotations

48. Phelps started work on 27 May 1965. His dossier, dated 3 Dec. 1966, is at BBC WAC, S251, Box 8: 'The Story of *The War Game*'. See p. 28 for his appointment.
49. BBC WAC, S251, Box 8: 'The Story of *The War Game*', 31–47.

from nuclear texts, civil defence manuals, and leading public figures and scientific authorities. Statements made by various socially, politically and theologically engaged parties, originally designed to allay public fears about nuclear war on practical or moral grounds, are juxtaposed with hideously convincing scenes depicting acute personal suffering and psychological disintegration. Blazing firestorms wreak havoc, policemen kill the maimed to put them out of their misery, civilians raid military food supplies and helpless doctors tell of people 'falling apart'. These eventualities are portrayed solemnly and unspectacularly, with little change in narrative tone and an avoidance of individual characterisation, giving them a shocking, matter-of-fact plausibility. The film demonstrates by example the irresponsibility of a government that fails to alert its civilian population to the potential danger that hangs over it. It also demonstrates that, although the extent of human suffering can be estimated in abstract terms, even scientists making these calculations cannot grasp the horrendous meaning in purely human terms of such widespread destruction. The overall impression left by *The War Game* is that defence is a meaningless concept in the thermonuclear age, and that those people who escape the immediate effects of World War Three would be consigned to a fate almost worse than death: a primeval existence marked by trauma, savagery and disease.

In late November 1965, three months after the film had been approved by those at the top of its Television Service, the BBC's Press Office announced that *The War Game* was 'too horrifying for the medium of broadcasting' and would therefore not be shown, adding that the decision had nothing to do with 'outside pressure of any kind'.[50] This statement caused protest and counter-protest in parliament and the press at the time, and started an argument about government censorship that has exercised scholars and commentators for the past forty years. In essence, while the BBC's view has been that the decision not to broadcast was an internal one based on the film's distressing nature, others claim that the decision was taken out of the BBC's hands by a Labour government frightened by the political ramifications of the film's fatalistic message.[51] Close analysis of this hitherto distinctly murky three-month phase in the story of *The War Game* – appropriately called the 'twilight period' by Gilbert Phelps – reveals a more complex picture.

   On 2 September, Normanbrook, who now assumed a pivotal role in proceedings, watched *The War Game* for the first time with Greene. While the Director-General and chairman agreed that it was an

   50. BBC WAC, T16/679/1: BBC Press Office announcement, 26 Nov. 1965.

   51. Briggs, *Competition*, 531–5; Patrick Murphy, '*The War Game* – The Controversy', *Film International*, iii (2003), 25–8. Significantly, Murphy's account of the government's banning of the film ('*The War Game* – The Controversy') also appears on the VHS (VCF41867) and DVD (BFIVD544) releases of *The War Game*, in the British Film Institute 'Archive Television' series.

impressive documentary, they felt that the responsibility for its showing was 'too great for the BBC to bear alone'. Normanbrook, who as Cabinet Secretary was Britain's most senior civil servant in the late 1940s and 1950s, and as architect of the Cabinet's Central War Planning Secretariat in the mid-1950s had helped to draw up plans for the continuation of government in the event of a nuclear war,[52] therefore proposed to 'take soundings among Home Office and MOD officials and among members of the Government'.[53]

To Watkins, this 'appalling' course of action amounted to a flagrant negation of the BBC's independence and a personal breach of promise. After angry exchanges with Wheldon and Cawston, on 24 September the BBC accepted his resignation.[54] That same day, having used his successor as Cabinet secretary, Sir Burke Trend, as a go-between, Normanbrook, together with Arkell, Robert Lusty, vice chairman of the board of governors, and Oliver Whitley, Greene's chief assistant and political adviser, watched *The War Game* along with Trend, Sir Charles Cunningham, permanent under-secretary at the Home Office, George Leitch from the Ministry of Defence, Brigadier A. C. Lewis, representing the joint chiefs of staff, and Alan Wolstencroft, deputy Director-General of the Post Office. Significantly, bearing in mind the BBC's announcement in November, at no point in either Normanbrook's earlier letter to Trend of 7 September or at this meeting was the central issue that of the immediate psychological impact of the film's horror; rather, it was that of *The War Game*'s impact on the public's attitudes to the nuclear deterrent. Thus, while Normanbrook, in leading the discussion, stated the theoretical case for showing the film – its avowed 'objectivity', careful research and the public's right to have 'a clearer imaginative picture of the realities of nuclear warfare' – he ended up behaving, as the BBC's historian puts it, 'less like a decision-maker than a Government official'. The meeting concluded that, taken as a whole, the film would have the effect, whatever its intention, of lending support to CND, and that further guidance was required.[55] Some hint of the debate now stirring within the BBC about *The War Game* were the conflicting views of Lusty and Whitley. Lusty, who was also the Managing-Director of Hutchinson Publishing, thought it an 'awful film' and was utterly opposed to showing it, principally for moral reasons: 'I find myself wondering what might have

52. Constitutional historian Peter Hennessy calls Normanbrook 'that guarantor of joined-up government in the UK in the high Cold War' (*The Secret State: Whitehall and the Cold War* (2002), 50). On the strong professional relationship between Normanbrook and Greene see Briggs, *Competition*, 377–9.

53. BBC WAC, T16/679/1: Controllers' Minutes, 6 Sept. 1965.

54. BBC WAC, S251, Box 8: Watkins' General Memorandum, 10 Sept. 1965; T16/748: Diary Appendix, 5. Watkins joined a new film production company run by the actor Albert Finney, Memorial Enterprises. His notice at the BBC expired in late October 1965.

55. BBC WAC, T16/679/1: Normanbrook to Trend, 7 Sept. 1965, and report on '*The War Game*' by Normanbrook, 27 Sept. 1965; Briggs, *Competition*, 533.

been the fate of Christianity if our producer had shown in advance to the followers of Jesus a documentary showing the details of his inevitable crucifixion!' Whitley, on the other hand, the son of a former chairman of the BBC, argued that the Corporation had a 'moral responsibility' to make the film available to as many people as practicable, and penned his own prelude to the film which warned the nervously disposed of its 'disturbing' nature: 'If we live under the sword of Damocles, it says, don't let's kid ourselves about what would happen if it dropped – let's try to know'.[56]

In October, *The War Game* scaled the very heights of the cold war state. On 8 October, Trend informed Prime Minister Harold Wilson that, in the opinion of the group of officials which had seen *The War Game* on 24 September, the implications of showing the film to the public were 'so highly political' that ministers needed to watch it themselves before deciding if and how to intervene. Significantly, the group acknowledged that the film did not exaggerate the effects caused generally by a nuclear attack; indeed, if anything, it played them down. However, even if the film were broadcast late at night and with due warning, its 'realistic portrayal of human misery' might still result in 'casualties and many more protests'. Issues of taste and horror aside, the main thrust of the group's comments rested on the film's perceived lack of balance. Three issues were identified in particular, all political, and all, in light of the BBC's system of quality control, questionable.

First, the group asserted that the film's depiction of the start of the war completely ignored the political efforts that would be made to prevent a nuclear holocaust. Moreover, it showed the great powers to be 'irresponsible', painted a particularly unfavourable portrait of US President Lyndon Johnson, and gave the misleading impression that the Vietnam War could trigger escalation. This was of some importance, in light of the public and party criticism the Wilson government faced in late 1965 about its support for US policy in Vietnam.[57] Secondly, the film ignored the political argument that the possession of nuclear bombs by two parties was itself a safeguard against their use. Thirdly, the film

56. BBC WAC, T16/679/1: Lusty to Normanbrook, 28 Sept. 1965, and Whitley to Normanbrook, 27 Sept. and 4 Oct. 1965.

57. The Wilson government saw an identity of interest between Britain and the United States in the struggle to hold back the Communist advance in South East Asia, and was therefore prepared publicly to defend America's commitment in Vietnam. However, the Cabinet refused to send troops, partly because of Foreign Office doubts about whether the war in Vietnam could be won. In March 1965, Labour's Chief Whip, Ted Short, pressed the Cabinet for a public initiative of some sort to placate backbench opinion, as he had found that Vietnam 'caused . . . more party problems than any other issue'. This and Wilson's fear of party defectors in the light of his single-figure majority in the House of Commons, writes John Young, helps to explain the prime minister's attempts in 1965 to mediate a peaceful settlement in Vietnam. In the meantime, large-scale demonstrations against the war in Britain began in October–November that year, during *The War Game*'s 'twilight period'. John W. Young, *The Labour Governments 1964–1970. Volume II. International Policy* (Manchester, 2003), 70, 78.

gave a misleading impression of the adequacy of civil defence, by focusing on an area targeted for a Soviet attack. The dilemma for the government, the group then said, was that it could not afford to give the impression that, by overriding the BBC's duty to educate, it was sweeping under the rug an issue which ministers found politically embarrassing. Special attention was drawn to the recent secret Home Defence Review, which had concluded that Britain's Civil Defence Corps would be of little use in saving lives during a nuclear attack and that civil defence needed to be more cost-effective. Via leaks, the press had already reported these findings negatively, and Trend feared that a film as high profile as *The War Game* would add significantly to charges that the government knew that civil defence was futile and thus jeopardise the Review's modernisation plans. The potential answer to this problem, Trend noted finally, lay in a recent meeting between Greene, Normanbrook and Herbert Bowden, Lord President of the Council, at which the Director-General and chairman had 'indicated that, if it were decided on grounds of public policy that the film should not be shown, the BBC might be prepared to issue a statement to the effect that they themselves had decided on these grounds not to show it'. If the BBC were true to its word, this effectively allowed ministers off the hook. There would be no need to invoke the government's power of veto to ban the film or to ask the BBC to make wholesale changes. All that was needed was to convince the Corporation that *The War Game* was contrary to the national interest (broadly defined), something which its senior officials seemed to have worked out for themselves, with help from Whitehall, anyway.[58]

Further clues as to why the BBC was willing to be so cooperative at this point can be found in the wider political and financial pressures the Corporation was under in late 1965. Relations between Number 10 Downing Street and the BBC during Harold Wilson's tenure as prime minister between 1964 and 1970 were exceptionally sour. As Michael Cockerell puts it, Wilson took the view that the BBC was 'a nest of Tories', an instrument of conspiracy against the Labour Party and especially against himself.[59] Soon after taking office, Wilson had set up a powerful Ministerial Committee on Broadcasting, chaired by Herbert Bowden, to plan the future of British broadcasting, taking in such contentious issues as the BBC licence fee and television standards. Though Wilson agreed in April 1965 to a limited increase in the licence fee, negotiations about BBC finances had been, and remained, rancorous. The fact that the BBC had run into serious debt to cope with the start of BBC2 (which Wilson quickly dismissed as élitist and

58. PRO, PREM 13/139: Trend to Wilson, 8 Oct. 1965; S251, Box 8: 'The Story of *The War Game*', 47.

59. Michael Cockerell, *Live From Number 10: The Inside Story of Prime Ministers and Television* (1989), 132.

not worth subsidising), and that rumours were widespread that Tony Benn, the paymaster-general, wanted the Corporation to introduce advertising, meant the BBC was feeling particularly vulnerable in the summer and autumn of 1965 and, consequently perhaps, less in a mood to take political risks.[60] Relations between the government and BBC were exacerbated by Wilson's efforts to rewrite the rules of ministerial and party political broadcasts, laid down soon after the Second World War, to enable him to deliver Rooseveltian 'fireside chats' to the television public. Matters came to a head in October and November 1965, when Wilson and Normanbrook met to discuss the issue, only for the prime minister then to accuse the BBC in parliament of having changed its practice in relation to ministerial broadcasts to favour the Conservatives.[61]

In October too, Wilson persuaded Normanbrook, in Greene's absence, that Rhodesian prime minister Ian Smith's scheduled appearance on the television programme *24 Hours* was neither in the government's nor the BBC's interest. The invitation to Smith, whose White minority government in the crown colony was threatening a unilateral declaration of independence, was cancelled, a decision which enraged the current affairs staff at Lime Grove. That same month, Wilson vented his fury at the Corporation for giving airtime to trade union left-wingers at the Labour Party conference, telling the chief assistant of Television Current Affairs that unless the BBC mended its ways the government would think of methods of bringing it under tighter control. Labour's Transport House then set up a special unit to monitor the BBC's coverage of the Conservative conference.[62] If relations were not already sensitive enough, a general election was widely expected in autumn 1965, owing to the fact that the government had a majority in the House of Commons of only two. This issue was one of the first things which had sprung to Greene's mind when he saw *The War Game* on 2 September. In the Director-General's eyes, there was a danger that *The War Game* might inadvertently become a platform for left-wing elements in the Labour Party, 'leaving the BBC in the very position it had always been at particular pains to avoid – that of putting out a programme which might influence opinion at election time and that might become a direct political issue'.[63]

Given the tension between Number 10 and the BBC in the autumn of 1965, one might have expected Wilson to react to Trend's 8 October note aggressively, say by alleging that the BBC were pacifist stooges. Even he must have realised the danger of playing into his opponents'

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60. Briggs, *Competition*, 517, 536–7; Tony Benn, *Out of the Wilderness: Diaries 1963–67* (1987), 353, 387.

61. PRO, PREM 13/141: Correspondence over ministerial broadcasts, Nov. 1964–Nov. 1965.

62. Cockerell, *Live From Number 10*, 121–4.

63. BBC WAC, T16/679/1: Controllers' Minutes, 6 Sept. 1965. The election took place in March 1966, when Labour returned to power with a majority of ninety-six.

hands, however. Following communications between Trend, Bowden and Wilson, on 12 October ministers decided to back away from offering any explicit opinion on whether *The War Game* ought to be broadcast. Instead, three weeks later, on 5 November, Trend, Cunningham and Wolstencroft diplomatically impressed further on Normanbrook the Whitehall view (now endorsed implicitly by ministers and Downing Street) that the film was 'somewhat unbalanced in its presentation'. The trio outlined the three issues identified earlier by Trend, adding that some of the film's detailed comments on civil defence precautions were 'excessively sharp and cynical'. Coming from Cunningham, who had personally superintended civil defence exercises, such criticism carried considerable weight. If *The War Game* were to be broadcast, a decision which the officials said they would leave 'wholly to the BBC', the least the Corporation could do was to make alterations in these areas, and to flank the film by a 'serious discussion' aired immediately before and afterwards, putting its 'controversial aspects into perspective'. Normanbrook's reported conclusion – 'that Whitehall will be relieved if the BBC decides not to show it' – was both something of an understatement and, one can surmise, a sentiment the chairman shared.[64]

After all, Normanbrook probably understood more than anyone else at the BBC (including Watkins) what a nuclear attack on Britain would mean. His natural instincts were to shield the public from the awful truth, for their own and the state's good. He supported deterrence theory and believed one of the government's prime duties was to ameliorate the threat of post-nuclear assault 'breakdown', defined by one Whitehall expert in 1960 as occurring 'when the government of a country is no longer able to ensure that its orders are carried out' with 'the mass of people becoming preoccupied with their own survival rather than the country's war effort and prepared to run the risk of being shot rather than to obey orders'.[65] Having watched *The War Game*, Normanbrook already knew how accurately it depicted 'breakdown', and former colleagues had now confirmed his own thoughts on how powerfully the film either disputed or exposed the official view on the rationale for Britain's independent nuclear deterrent. With Greene attending a conference in Nigeria, and not due to return until mid- to late November, it fell upon him to resolve the matter.

Though BBC files are unfortunately incomplete for this period, it now seems *The War Game*'s fate was effectively sealed. The Home Office continued to fret, and throughout November prepared elaborate briefing papers for civil defence regional directors in case the film was televised.[66] But the only real issue that remained was when and how the BBC should announce that the programme had been pulled. By this stage *The War*

64. PRO, PREM 13/139: D. J. Mitchell to Trend to Wilson, 12 Oct. 1965; BBC WAC, T16/679/1: Normanbrook to Greene, 5 Nov. 1965.
65. Hennessy, *The Secret State*, 120–1.
66. Patrick Murphy, *New Statesman*, 22 Aug. 1997, 22–4.

Game had already attracted the public's interest, due to excited tabloid reports during filming, Mrs Mary Whitehouse's condemnation of the film as part of her 'Clean-up TV' campaign and Peter Watkins' own increasingly noisy if desperate efforts via the press to get the film on air by shaming the BBC.[67] Neither these activities, nor the grilling that Greene received from left-wing Labour MPs Tom Driberg and William Hamilton on 24 November about government interference in the matter, gave the BBC's senior officials any second thoughts.[68] If anything, the fears expressed in some newspapers about the potentially suicidal effect the film's frightening images and defeatist message might have on the elderly and mentally infirm strengthened those already held by Greene and others.[69]

The rumours circulating about Whitehall's anxieties about *The War Game* did, nevertheless, highlight how important it was for the Corporation to be seen to be acting independently and transparently. On 24 November, Normanbrook wrote to Trend 'to let you know that we have decided not to broadcast *The War Game*'. When the BBC went public with this decision two days later, it explicitly denied outside influence. It also declared that the film would be shown to specially 'invited audiences', who, Greene calculated privately, would testify to the film's unsuitability for the small screen.[70] The delay between 5 and 26 November was not, as some have claimed, because of a split within the BBC's ranks.[71] Senior executives like Oliver Whitley did want the film televised, but few if any members of the board of governors and board of management appear to have taken this line. At a lower level, Wheldon and Cawston, despite having championed Watkins' cause to an extent, fully supported their chiefs' consultations and ultimate decision.[72] Nor was the delay due to a rift between the leading players, Greene and Normanbrook. Available records fail to make it clear precisely who took the decision to pull *The War Game* and when. They do, however, show beyond doubt that, having been sceptical about the film from the start, the more Greene and Normanbrook saw and heard about the film, the more unsettled they became about its indiscriminate transmission. Their nervousness can be attributed to a range of factors: the fear of scaring the vulnerable through on-screen violence, anxiety

67. BBC WAC, T16/679/1: Home Office to Winther, 30 June 1965; T16/679/1: Greene to Adam, 6 July 1965; R2/18/5: Board of Management Minutes, 6 Sept. 1965; T16/679/1: Watkins to Wheldon, 12 Nov. 1965.

68. BBC WAC, S251, Box 8: 'The Story of *The War Game*', 72.

69. BBC WAC, R44/1334: '*The War Game*', internal circular, undated; R2/18/5: Board of Management Minutes, 29 Nov. 1965.

70. BBC WAC, T16/679/1: Normanbrook to Trend, 24 Nov. 1965; T16/679/1: BBC Press Office announcement, 26 Nov. 1965; R78/2, 620/1: Board of Management Minutes, 10 Jan. 1966.

71. See, for instance, M. Tracey, *A Variety of Lives: A Biography of Sir Hugh Greene* (1983), 253.

72. BBC WAC, R78/2, 620/1: Board of Governors' Minutes, 2 Dec. 1965; R2/18/5: Board of Management Minutes, 22 Nov. 1965; S251, Box 8: 'The Story of *The War Game*', 76.

that the Wilson government might punish a 'radical' BBC financially and, most importantly of all, the feeling that it was not in the 'public' or 'national' interest to expose Britain's nuclear deterrent and civil defence strategies to such critical scrutiny at this particular point in time.[73]

The culture of deference in defence and nuclear matters was not as pervasive in the BBC in the mid-1960s as it had been earlier in the cold war. Had it been, Watkins' 'After the Bomb' proposal would not even have got off the ground. Nevertheless, the case of *The War Game* shows that at the mid-point in the cold war, the majority within the BBC still worked within strict parameters on nuclear issues. It was not, as some scholars have argued, that BBC personnel confused 'national interest' with 'government interest'. Rather, they held to the principle laid down by the Corporation's founding Director-General, Sir John Reith: that the BBC ought to be inform and educate the public, but not when it left the Corporation open to charges of gratuitousness and not at the cost of damaging morale (after all, Britain was at war). The umbilical links between Whitehall and Broadcasting House, which meant the BBC had peculiar access to sensitive information, deepened the Corporation's already keen sense of 'responsibility'. Having seen *The War Game* in early 1966, one or two of Watkins' peers within the BBC quietly called for the film to be televised. 'This is a brilliantly made, carefully documented film of unprecedented importance', wrote John Boorman, Head of the Documentary Unit at Bristol, 'made by a highly sensitive man who may well be a genius and whose passionate love of life is blindingly obvious.'[74] However, most colleagues seem to have taken the view that Watkins was a maverick who had overstepped the mark which distinguished legitimate fictional speculation from the reckless or misanthropic representation of actuality. To Watkins, who felt he had bent over backwards to comply with his bosses' demands for even-handedness, *The War Game*'s blurring of fiction and reality was the only way to get people to think the unthinkable.

Had the BBC stuck to its outright ban, chances are the controversy surrounding *The War Game* in late 1965 and early 1966 would have blown over relatively quickly. Unlike during the *Real Lives* affair twenty years later, for instance, there was no damaging split within the BBC's upper ranks to feed the press's and public's appetite for gossip. However, in March 1966 the Corporation announced that a deal had been struck with the British Film Institute (BFI) for the distribution rights to *The War Game*, and that therefore, from April onwards, the film would be available for hire for public showings in cinemas and via film societies. What looks a curious decision made sense in light of the pressure for the

73. BBC WAC, T16/679/2: Normanbrook to Greene, 28 Feb. 1966 and Greene's reply, 2 March 1966.
74. BBC WAC, T16/682/1: Boorman to Controller West Region, 15 Feb. 1966.

film to be seen in early 1966, the financial rewards distribution would bring a cash-strapped BBC and the need to spike Watkins' plans to remake *The War Game* as a feature film.[75] In changing tack in this way, the BBC helped to convert *The War Game* from a relatively minor *cause célèbre* supported by anti-nuclear and freedom of information campaigners into a major focus of cold war dissent for the remaining years of the conflict.

In many ways, things could hardly have gone better for the BBC when *The War Game* was shown principally to specially invited politicians, civil servants, journalists and the armed services at the National Film Theatre (NFT) in February 1966. Arkell's fears that CND activists might storm the building proved groundless, and because Watkins failed to attend there was no need to implement the plan to drown him out with music if he attempted to make a speech in protest.[76] Afterwards, elements of the liberal and left-wing press did call for the film to be televised. The *Observer*'s influential arts critic Kenneth Tynan went so far as to call *The War Game* 'maybe the most important film ever made' and urged that it 'be screened everywhere on earth'. In most newspapers, however, the film was deemed gratuitously violent, politically dangerous or monstrously misrepresentative; many simply described it as crude CND propaganda.[77] This may have had something to do with the BBC's decision to urge editors to send their defence correspondents rather than television critics to the showings, but it also tied in with Fleet Street's continuing tendency to treat nuclear issues with kid gloves.[78] Without this 'remarkable press concensus [*sic*]', as Greene put it, the BBC might not have had the necessary confidence to make the film available through other channels.[79] As it was, the Corporation hoped the film's wider dissemination would be controlled suitably by the fact that the BFI dealt mainly with 'art house' cinemas and that the BBFC would give the film an 'X' certificate (restricting exhibition to those over 16). On top of this, the BBC–BFI agreement stipulated that the film's presentation was not to be 'handled with sensationalism or bad taste'.[80]

We can only speculate about the impact *The War Game* might have had had it been televised in 1965. Given that television was accessible to

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75. BBC WAC, R2/19/2: Board of Management Minutes, 21 Feb. 1966.

76. BBC WAC, R101/437/1: Arkell to H.C.S.G., 2 Feb. 1965; R2/19/2: Board of Management Minutes, 7 Feb. 1966.

77. For the BBC's own analysis see BBC WAC, T16/264/1: '*The War Game*' – Press Reaction in Brief', 15 Feb. 1966, and T16/748. For a wider overview see Welsh, 'The Modern Apocalypse'.

78. BBC WAC, T16/679/2: Greene to newspaper editors, 24 Jan. 1966, and Watkins to Greene, 9 Feb. 1966.

79. BBC WAC, T16/679/2: Greene to Adam, 9 Feb. 1966.

80. BBC WAC, T16/679/2: G. del Strother to Michael Webb (BFI), 4 March 1966; *Variety*, 9 March 1966. The agreement was initially for five years, with receipts to be divided on a fifty-fifty basis until the BFI had recovered its distribution costs, whereafter the BBC would take a larger share.

more than 90 per cent of British households at that time, it could be
argued that more people would have seen it on that one occasion than
all those who saw the film in colleges, town halls and other venues in
the years afterwards put together.[81] Not only this, on television it would
have been seen, as Watkins put it, by the '*voluntary* ordinary public',
rather than 'being restricted to a certain mental and intellectual "type"'.[82]
The War Game also lost the power of immediacy and intimacy by being
wrenched out of its context, that of television news and current affairs
coverage. Equally, it can be argued that were it not for the television
ban, *The War Game* would not have attracted such a wide range of
social, political and cultural comment in Britain and overseas, and
galvanised political activity over such a long time period. That so much
of the controversy was driven by rumours (which we now know to be
false) that the government imposed the ban on the BBC for political
reasons is not only ironic, given that the links between Whitehall and
the BBC meant that ministers did not need to go this far. The extent to
which these suspicions were voiced and outrage expressed, in the media
and public at large, also confirms what other studies have shown: that it
was in the 1960s that fundamental questions were being asked of
government's right to act paternalistically, in *The War Game*'s case in
relation to one of the last great taboos, nuclear weapons.[83]

Certainly, rarely before in Britain had a single television programme
generated such intense public wrangling.[84] Ministers were quizzed in
parliament about their role in the ban and the accuracy of *The War
Game*'s portrayal of civil defence throughout the winter and spring of
1965–6.[85] After the NFT screenings the BBC received scores of letters,
some from scientists warning the Corporation that it could not 'lock
this programme up in a box and forget about it', and others congratulating
the organisation on producing a brilliant piece of pro-deterrent
propaganda.[86] Soon after the film was released, after spotting in his local

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81. Des Freedman, 'Modernising the BBC: Wilson's Government and Television 1964–66',
Contemporary British History, xv (2001), 21–40 at 22.

82. BBC WAC, T16/679/2: Watkins to Adam, 25 Feb. 1966.

83. The extent to which the 1960s saw a sea-change in attitudes towards authority is best
assessed in Arthur Marwick, *The Sixties: Cultural Revolution in Britain, France, Italy and the United
States* (Oxford, 1998).

84. Two previous BBC Television programmes which had caused uproar were the afore-
mentioned *That Was The Week That Was*, which the BBC halted in late 1963 at least partly due to
the political fuss it was causing (see Briggs, *Competition*, 350–76), and Nigel Kneale's 1954
adaptation of George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, entitled *1984*, which was reportedly so
frightening it caused one viewer to die of a heart attack. See Jason Jacobs, *The Intimate Screen:
Early British Television Drama* (Oxford, 2000), 139–55.

85. See, for instance, Prime Minister Harold Wilson's reply of 30 Nov. 1965 (Hansard, 5th
Series, v 721, c. 1230), Home Secretary Frank Soskice's reply of 2 Dec. 1965 (Hansard, 5th Series,
v 721, c. 239–40) and Home Secretary Roy Jenkins' reply of 23 June 1966 (Hansard, 5th Series,
v 730, c. 873–5).

86. BBC WAC, T16/679/2: Professor Hadow, Chairman of the Science Consultative Group,
in Adam to BBC Secretary, 18 Feb. 1966; R101/427/1: Rear-Admiral M. C. Morgan, MP, 6 Feb.
1966.

newspaper a report of a sensationalist screening of *The War Game*,
Greene grew exasperated by the BFI's failure to impose the special
restrictions on advertising and exhibition.[87] *The War Game*'s notoriety
increased as newspapers exploited stories of the film's terrible images
causing viewers to faint, and journalists on the right and left used the
film for their own propagandistic purposes. Overall, *The War Game*
(and its banning) was the catalyst for a public debate which raged for
almost a year, about subjects including Britain's possession of nuclear
weapons, civil defence, the public's access to information about nuclear
issues, the BBC's relationship with government and violence on
television. This debate took in many who chose not to or could not get
to see the film, drawing in MPs, local officials, students, teachers,
clergymen, as well as pressure groups like CND.[88] Film scholar James
Welsh is not the only commentator to have compared *The War Game*
with Leni Riefenstahl's classic Nazi party rally documentary, *Triumph
of the Will* (1934), in the way it elicited an emotional response and
(some would say) it propagandised an issue. Welsh has also likened *The
War Game* to D. W. Griffith's American civil war epic, *Birth of A Nation*
(1915), in the way it raised the issue of censorship and occasioned
personal attacks against the man who made it.[89]

   Despite feeling 'betrayed' by the BBC and lacking copyright on the
film,[90] in between working on other cinematic and television projects,
Watkins went out of his way to promote *The War Game* in the late
1960s and beyond. His personal appearances at screenings in Britain
and overseas, delivering lectures on the mass media's artistic and political
conservatism, helped to boost ticket sales and to foster his iconic status
as a rebellious film-maker.[91] Watkins tried to get distribution of
The War Game widened to include commercial cinema, but the two major
British distribution circuits, Rank and ABC, turned the offer down,
presumably because they believed it was unsuitable for general viewing.[92]
Despite this, given the distribution constraints, the film performed
exceptionally well. Soon after its release in 1966, *The War Game* was
quickly on the way to becoming the most heavily booked 16 mm film
in the BFI's history. The BFI carried approximately thirty 16 mm prints
of *The War Game* for non-theatrical presentation, as well as a couple of
35 mm prints for cinemas. As time passed, organisations were allowed
to buy their own copies, so long as they were intended for private

   87. BBC WAC, T16/679/2: Adam to Stanley Reed (BFI director), 12 July 1966.
   88. See Welsh, 'The Modern Apocalypse', 30 ff.
   89. Ibid., 33. See also BBC WAC, T16/682/1: Boorman to Controller West Region, 15 Feb.
1966.
   90. BBC WAC, S51 Box 8: Watkins to Cawston, 1 Feb. 1966.
   91. On Watkins' troubled career after *The War Game*, mostly spent making docudramas in
Scandinavia and continental Europe, see John R. Cook and Patrick Murphy, *Freethinker: The
Films of Peter Watkins* (Manchester, forthcoming).
   92. Cook and Murphy, 'After the Bomb Dropped', 130.

showings.[93] By the summer of 1967, *The War Game* had been seen in nearly every major town in Britain. Its total audience at that stage was estimated to be roughly 1.5 million.[94] Others may have read the book of the film, which was adapted by Watkins and published in 1967.[95] At the end of 1968, the BBC reported that receipts from *The War Game* were 'still very healthy' and noted the film's popularity 'in colleges and similar non-theatrical outlets in the USA'.[96]

For a British-made and British-centred television film, *The War Game* travelled extremely well overseas. Before the BBC–BFI deal of March 1966, a host of foreign organisations wanted to hire or borrow copies of the film from the BBC, including the US Army's Civil Defence Office, Swiss Defence Department and several West German television companies. By the summer, the BBC had received applications for distribution from film and television companies from countries as far apart geographically and politically as the USA, Australia, Kenya, Lebanon and Yugoslavia.[97] During its first week in France in April 1967, 20,000 people saw a subtitled version of *The War Game* in Paris, after which the film was dubbed for more general release. Reports suggested that the French government under Georges Pompidou had delayed granting permission to show the film until after the March elections, so that its left-wing opponents could not capitalise on the public reaction to the film to buttress its own argument against the French nuclear *force de frappe*. In Australia, the film created 'tremendous interest' and was the subject of talk-back radio programmes.[98] To what extent *The War Game* was seen in communist countries is unclear, though the ruling parties' unwillingness to brook any opposition to the nuclear deterrent strategy espoused by Moscow and Beijing militated against the film's open distribution. In late 1966, Plato Films Ltd, a body linked to the British Communist Party that specialised in distributing Eastern bloc-made films in Britain, took *The War Game* to East Germany, only for the film to be banned from the prestigious Leipzig Festival.[99]

In the United States, *The War Game* made considerable political and cultural inroads. Americans seemed to take pleasure in hearing about the BBC's embarrassment over the ban, perhaps reading it as an affirmation of the United States' principled attachment to the freedom

93. Author's interview with Andrew Youdell, BFI Bookings Department, 1 April 2004.

94. *Films and Filming*, June 1967, 30; Basil Wright, *The Long View: An International History of Cinema* (1976), 554–5.

95. BBC WAC, T16/681: '*The War Game*' – Publication of Script, 1966. Peter Watkins, *The War Game* (Sphere Books, London, 1967).

96. BBC WAC, T16/679/2: G. del Strother to Wheldon, 2 Dec. 1968.

97. BBC WAC, R101/434/1: *The War Game*, Showings; R101/428/1: *The War Game*, Distribution; T16/769/2: list of applications.

98. *Variety* (weekly), June 14, 1967; Welsh, 'The Modern Apocalypse', 32; CND Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick (hereafter WMRC): CND Microfilm Records, 1/66/13 Unitarian Extension Movement of Australia to BBC General Manager, 25 March 1968.

99. BBC WAC, S251, Box 8: 'The Story of *The War Game*', 142; Margaret Dickinson (ed.), *Rogue Reels: Oppositional Film in Britain, 1945–1990* (1999), 222.

of speech. Some journals saw it as anti-American but the majority of the cinema trade press gave it top marks artistically and urged theatres to book it.[100] The film made its debut at the New York Film Festival in September 1966, alongside a documentary about the recent visit of Beat poets Lawrence Ferlinghetti and Allen Ginsberg to London. In April 1967, *The War Game* received the Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature of 1966, a testament to its striking realism. Watkins' 'Oscar' was collected on his behalf by friend and actress Liz Taylor. Together with other British, Italian and German awards, the 'Oscar' generated huge publicity for the film and took it beyond the art circuit. In May, Pathé Contemporary Films, its US distributor, predicted the film would reach the magic $1,000,000 rental category.[101] *The War Game*'s 'box office bonanza' in the United States was boosted further by the plaudits from such disparate sources as United Nations secretary-general U-Thant, who described it as 'very relevant to the human situation in which we are today', to the American Society of Friends, a Quaker organisation which paid for a large advertisement in the *New York Times*' religious section. In college towns, History and English professors assigned term papers on the film, and committees of faculty wives initiated letter-writing campaigns to the staff of their universities and local newspapers.[102] Members of Congress, including the powerful J. William Fulbright, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and Vietnam War opponent, urged Americans to see the film, while the left-wing *New Republic* used it as a rallying call for liberal intellectuals of the Old Left to unite with the younger 'Pepsi–Banana Generation' that wanted to 'Turn On, Tune In, Drop Out of Vietnam and global responsibility'.[103] As resistance to American policy in Vietnam increased in the late 1960s, so *The War Game* fed more broadly into the 'counter-culture' movement sweeping the United States. America's nuclear disarmament pressure group, the National Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy (SANE), sponsored screenings of the film at rock music festivals, and the film was celebrated by musicians like the New York-based John Lennon and Yoko Ono, leading celebrity figures in the anti-war movement.[104]

Back in Britain, *The War Game*'s chief significance lay in its ability to stimulate debate and activism in relation to the nation's nuclear deterrent, on various levels well into the 1980s. One of the keys to understanding this is the use made of the film by CND. The Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament was in a state of crisis in the mid-1960s, torn by internal

100. See, for instance, *Variety* (weekly), 21 Sept. 1966; *Box Office*, 24 April 1967; *Los Angeles Times*, 15 May 1967.
101. *Variety* (weekly), 21 September 1966; *Guardian*, 25 Feb. 2000, Friday Pages, 2; *Films and Filming*, June 1967, 30; *Variety* (weekly), 24 May 1967.
102. *Manchester Evening News*, 21 July 1967, 20; *Variety* (weekly), 24 May 1967.
103. *Manchester Evening News*, 21 July 1967, 20; *New Republic*, 13 May 1967.
104. Patrick Murphy, '*The War Game* – The Controversy', on *The War Game* DVD (BFIVD544).

feuds and many people's assumptions that the Cuban Missile Crisis had demonstrated that deterrence worked.[105] The organisation therefore regarded *The War Game* as little short of a godsend. Organisation officials rightly believed that, up to this point, people might have *thought* and *read* about nuclear war's effects, but here at last was a film that *showed* them what these effects would be like. Furthermore, the film's scenario tied in with CND's long-running campaign against US policy in Vietnam, and the banning rumours served to confirm the organisation's line that the government was pulling the wool over people's eyes about the reality of nuclear war. According to Terence Heelas, a senior CND official and one of Watkins' panel of consultants, *The War Game* was 'excellent propaganda for nuclear disarmament'. He and others hoped that the film might provide the organisation with a much-needed focus and give CND an opportunity to reach beyond its middle-class, intellectual base.[106]

These hopes were only partially realised. CND went to imaginative lengths to exploit *The War Game*. During production, it distributed promotional leaflets about the film outside cinemas showing Sidney Lumet's nuclear melodrama, *Fail Safe* (1964). In the wake of the ban announcement, the organisation cheekily wrote an open letter to Broadcasting House asking whether the BBC would like to join its next Easter March to Aldermaston as a consequence of the Corporation's recent conversion to CND's views on nuclear weapons – that they were too horrific to contemplate. Its militant wing, the Committee of 100, then demonstrated outside Broadcasting House before the NFT showings, complaining about its lack of tickets.[107] When the film was released, CND hired several copies, each of which was in constant use in the years ahead. Local CND groups pressurised cinemas to show the film and publicity stunts were devised. In April 1966, for instance, CND's Women's Liaison Committee arranged to meet US Defence Secretary, Robert McNamara, who was arriving in London for talks with NATO defence ministers, to present him with tickets for the film.[108]

CND records during this early period reveal a tangible sense of excitement about the film, as local groups reported the effect that its dramatic images had on audiences. However, CND was in a peculiarly weak position financially to take full advantage of *The War Game* at this point in its history. Its shortage of members meant it also lacked the heavy manpower required for effective leafleting, canvassing and projecting. In March 1967, a year after the film's release, CND's national

105. Richard Taylor, *Against the Bomb: The British Peace Movement 1958–65* (Oxford, 1988), 108–12.

106. WMRC: CND National Council Minutes, 19 June 1965; *Sanity*, January 1966, 4; BBC WAC, T16/679/2: Committee of 100 'Resistance' leaflets dated Dec. 1965 and Feb. 1966.

107. WMRC: CND National Council Minutes, 1–2 May 1965 and 4–5 Dec. 1965; BBC WAC, R2/19/1: Board of Management Minutes, 31 Jan. 1966.

108. WMRC: CND National Executive Committee Minutes, 23 April 1966.

membership was a meagre 800, a figure that suggests the film had had little or no impact on the organisation's state of health. On the credit side, many in the organisation felt that the platform for future growth had been established because *The War Game* had brought CND back to first principles, that of nuclear disarmament. It was this, they argued, that ought to form the core of their work, not side issues like the war in Vietnam on which the organisation had expended so much energy for the past two to three years.[109] In the event, the period after *The War Game*'s release continued to represent something of a false dawn for CND, and the organisation remained in the political doldrums for most of the 1970s. During these lean years, *The War Game* still topped the list of films that CND hired out to schools, colleges, trade unions and other interested bodies. Indeed, *The War Game* was one of the few recruiting vehicles the organisation had during the years of East–West détente. So well used were CND's copies at this stage the documentary got increasingly shorter as broken pieces of 16 mm film had to be sliced out.[110]

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, détente gave way to a new cold war, with the nuclear issue at its very centre. Between 1979 and 1983, the bipartisan consensus on British defence policy established after the Second World War collapsed. Margaret Thatcher's new Conservative government took the decision to replace the Polaris nuclear force with Trident (at a cost of £5 billion), and deployed US-made cruise missiles at Greenham Common and Molesworth. The Labour Party adopted a fully fledged unilateralist platform in 1982, calling for the withdrawal of all American bases and missiles from British soil, and the abandonment of the British nuclear deterrent. *The War Game* played an integral part in the spectacular re-birth of CND during this heady period, when its membership grew from a few thousand local (as distinct from national) members in 1979 to about a quarter of a million in late 1981.[111] In 1978–9, according to one source the film was screened almost 200 times, helping to 'resuscitate' the organisation. In a rallying call to anti-nuclear protesters in 1980, CND's new general secretary, Bruce Kent, called *The War Game* 'still the most powerful piece of motivation in the business' despite being 'out of date in some respects'.[112] As demand for the film grew, CND replaced its old copies with new prints loaned from the

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109. WMRC: CND National Executive Committee Minutes, 3 March 1967; *Sanity*, April 1967, 7 and Oct. 1967, 2; CND Microfilm Records, Reel 3, 1/66/3 & 8, Peter Watkins' correspondence with Dick Nettleton, May 1966.

110. WMRC: CND Microfilm Records, Reel 18, C18/43/42–3 'CND: Film Information Sheet'; Bruce Kent, *Undiscovered Ends: An Autobiography* (1992), 170, 198.

111. Dan Keohane, *Labour Party Defence Policy since 1945* (Leicester, 1993), 31; Mark Phythian, 'CND's Cold War', *Contemporary British History*, vx (2001), 133–56.

112. Amitabh Mattoo, 'The Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament: A Study of its Re-emergence, Growth and Decline in the 1980s' (unpublished D. Phil thesis, University of Oxford, 1992), 41; Bruce Kent, 'Notes from the Concrete Grass Roots', in E. P. Thompson and Dan Smith (eds), *Protest and Survive* (Harmondsworth, 1980), 254.

Ipswich-based Concord Films Council Ltd, a specialist supplier of educational and pacifist films, which acquired a licence for twenty copies of *The War Game* from the BFI. Concord had particularly strong links with schools and colleges, and it was here, as well as in churches and town halls, that the film was mostly seen. Its enormous circulation was helped by its length: at forty-seven minutes it was ideal for a school lesson or college lecture slot. For groups like CND, it could form the basis of an evening: film showings could be followed by discussion. *The War Game* even made it onto the curricula of film courses at universities and general studies programmes in sixth form colleges.[113] *The War Game* became so central to CND campaigning that in 1982 Daniel Plesch, a trained community organiser and CND's organising secretary in the West Country, produced a seventy-two-page booklet entitled *A Disarmament Action Manual: What Do We Do After We've Shown 'The War Game'?* Plesch had been showing the film constantly for two years in housing estates in and around Bristol, to between 200 and 1,000 people a night. The booklet was published nationally and was designed to show how the film could be shown as part of a coherent campaign both to increase membership and to stimulate discussion on the subject.[114]

Quakers and other groups opposed to nuclear weapons also showed the film during this period. One Birmingham-based Quaker, Sidney White, hired *The War Game* for a year from Concord, and received financial assistance from fellow Quaker Paul Cadbury, of the local chocolate firm.[115] On a different note, in many books and pamphlets published on the subject of 'survivability' in Britain in the early 1980s (some sponsored by CND, most not), excerpts from the film would be used to illustrate the literal truth about nuclear war. Stills from *The War Game* (often unlabelled) would appear alongside photographs from Hiroshima, as if they provided an updated or more 'real' insight into radiation sickness and the other gruesome effects of a modern-day thermonuclear attack on Britain.[116]

From 1966 onwards, government propagandists had kept a wary distance from *The War Game* whenever possible. Behind the scenes, the Home Office regarded the film with contempt and its depiction of civil defence as dangerously misleading. 'The purpose of this film is to present a pacifist solution to the threat of nuclear war and to support unilateral disarmament', a 1970 Home Office memo stated bluntly.

113. Author's interview with Andrew Youdell, BFI Bookings Department, 1 April 2004; *Sanity*, vi (1980), 6; Dickinson, *Rogue Reels*, 32.

114. Daniel Plesch, *A Disarmament Action Manual: What Do We Do After We've Shown 'The War Game'?* (Russell Press, Nottingham, 1982); author's interview with Plesch, 26 April 2004.

115. Author's interviews with Chris Martin, White's projectionist, 26 April 2004, and Ken Williams, West Midlands CND member 1950s–1980s, 12 Nov. 2003.

116. See, for instance, Peter Goodwin, *Nuclear War: The Facts on Our Survival* (1981); Stan Openshaw, Philip Steadman and Owen Greene, *Doomsday: Britain after Nuclear Attack* (Oxford, 1983); Phil Bolsover, *Civil Defence: The Cruellest Confidence Trick* (1982).

However, officials believed that trumpeting these views would merely draw even further attention to *The War Game* (and, perhaps, the fact that civil defence groups were using the film for training purposes).[117] If ministers and officials were asked directly about *The War Game*'s portrayal of civil defence, their response would be that the film had been rendered out of date by changes in civil defence strategy, and that while those living in the immediate vicinity of a nuclear attack would not survive, a limited but effective civil defence was vital for people in other areas.[118] In the late 1960s and 1970s, Whitehall produced a range of pamphlets, books and short films intended to buttress support for nuclear deterrence and to show how well Britain would cope if the worst happened. Typical of this was the twenty-five-minute COI film, *Sound An Alarm* (1971), a dramatic account of the work of the UK Warning and Monitoring Organisation, as it worked flat out to save lives by logging the spread of radioactive fallout after an attack. This offered a perfect antidote to *The War Game*: downbeat with flashes of despair, but ultimately reassuring about the state's high-tech ability to protect its citizens.[119] At the height of the second cold war in 1983, the COI spent £70,000 on a video pack which it distributed freely to schools. Instead of considering the effects of nuclear war, the pack emphasised the historic threat posed by communist ambitions to dominate the world and Britain's need to update its conventional and nuclear deterrent. Its title, 'The Peace Game', subverted Watkins' title and connected it to other pro-Bomb lobby organisations such as Peace Through NATO, a group made up of leading trade unionists who repudiated the Labour Party's unilateralism. If government propaganda in the early 1950s had sought to associate the word peace with Soviet 'front' groups, in the 1980s it needed to challenge CND's ownership of the concept.[120]

'The Peace Game' arrived on teachers' desks during a period when the BBC's coverage of nuclear issues was in a state of flux. Having let the genie out of the bottle in 1965, Watkins had hoped to pave the way for further, more frank explorations of nuclear war in the mass media.

117. PRO, HO 322/203: '*The War Game*' – Home Office assessment and policy, 1966; Cook and Murphy, 'After the Bomb Dropped', 131; Duncan Campbell, *War Plan UK: The Truth about Civil Defence in Britain* (1982), 131.

118. PRO, HO 322/203: Home Office Civil Defence Department to Home Secretary Roy Jenkins, 23 June 1966; *Sanity*, vi (1980), 6. The government announced the results of the 1965/66 Home Defence Review – that which Trend feared would be jeopardised by *The War Game* – in February 1966: a slimmed-down Civil Defence Corps tasked to concentrate on survival and recovery rather than rescue, and those in makeshift fallout rooms to be left to fend for themselves. The policy was spun in terms that 'the civil defence plan will be strengthened, not weakened, if we discard non-essentials'. PRO, CAB 134/2634 CD(O)(PC)(66)7, 'The Home Office Defence Review: Presentation of Government Policy', Note by Home Office, 25 May 1966.

119. PRO, INF6/1581. *Sound An Alarm* was written and directed by Anthony Short, and is currently available on 'Protect And Survive' (VHS DD 3496).

120. Bodleian Library, Oxford: Oxford CND Records, MS Eng. C. 2068, fo. 142–6; Brian McNair, *Images of the Enemy: Reporting the New Cold War* (1988), 14–15.

As far as the BBC was concerned, and its Television Service in particular, *The War Game*'s legacy turned out to be somewhat mixed. In the 1970s, BBC Television produced the odd documentary that looked at the effects of nuclear war. The most highly regarded was Robert Vas's *To Die, To Live: The Survivors of Hiroshima* (1975), which interviewed Hiroshima's *hibakusha* (atomic-bomb outcasts). Several drama series depicted a post-apocalyptic Britain, notably Terry Nation's *Survivors* (1975–7), but the causes of the disaster in these were ecological rather than explicitly political.[121] The opening up of sharp divisions over the nuclear deterrent in the early 1980s, however, allowed the BBC to push more at the boundaries of its coverage, safe in the knowledge that the Corporation was responding to controversy rather than initiating it.[122] In March 1980, BBC Television's flagship current affairs programme, *Panorama*, revealed the existence of the government's pre-recorded 'Protect and Survive' films, to be transmitted in the run-up to a nuclear war. This prompted a national row,[123] and was the immediate trigger for one of the most unusual anti-nuclear works of the decade, Raymond Briggs' animated book, *When The Wind Blows* (published in 1982). Like Watkins a generation before him, Briggs, who was best known as a children's author, saw his story – that of an old couple pathetically trying to return to normality after the Bomb has dropped – as an opportunity to correct that 'terrible failure of the imagination' to confront the horrific consequences of a nuclear attack. Indeed, Briggs actively encouraged the idea that *When The Wind Blows* was his version of *The War Game*. When the BBC turned the book into a radio play in 1983 – itself a sign of the distance the BBC had travelled since the early 1960s – several listeners wrote in calling for the screening of *The War Game*.[124]

Later that year, Independent Television broadcast the American-made movie, *The Day After* (1983), a star-studded and harrowing account of a nuclear attack on Kansas. This had already been seen by 100 million in the United States (making it then the most watched television movie in history), and was so controversial an event that British Secretary of Defence Michael Heseltine demanded a right of reply after its broadcast.[125] In September 1984, BBC2 showed *Threads*, an equally provocative two-hour drama tracing the impact of a nuclear strike on

121. Concord Films Council Ltd advertisement, in *Guardian* Agenda, 1 Sept. 1980, 4; Paul Cornell, Martin Day and Keith Topping, *The Guinness Book of Classic British TV* (2nd edn, 1996), 308–11.

122. On the responsive, rather than pro-active, approach taken towards the issue of nuclear weapons in the early 1980s by British television current affairs programmes see Glasgow University Media Group, *War and Peace News* (Milton Keynes, 1985), 277–94.

123. Mattoo, 'The Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament', 33–4.

124. Richard Kilborn, *Multi-Media Melting Pot: Marketing When The Wind Blows* (1986), 37–9, 43, 58, 64.

125. Ibid., 95–7. The film was made for the ABC network by Nicholas Meyer.

two Sheffield families. Despite its critical portrayal of the international arms race and grim pictures of irradiated humans, according to the film's writer, Barry Hines, the BBC made no attempt at censorship. Given that *Threads* was possibly the closest any British film had come in nearly two decades to updating *The War Game*, it is not surprising that CND also used it as propaganda.[126] Whether *Threads* or *The Day After* shocked or taught their viewers as much as *The War Game* had – or even still did – is debatable. Peter Watkins was not alone in arguing that the very form which *The Day After* took – combining television soap opera with Hollywood war epic – meant the programme inevitably cast a sanitising gloss over the dangers of nuclear weapons. Others felt that *Threads* depended almost entirely on *The War Game* for its inspiration and treatment. Reviewing *Threads* in *The Times*, novelist and critic Peter Ackroyd appeared to be suffering some form of televisual nuclear overload: 'the images were unpleasant, but we have now become so accustomed to them that they seemed merely stereotypical'.[127]

   That some viewers were growing tired of vivid depictions of nuclear war by the mid-1980s helps to explain why the BBC finally took the decision to broadcast *The War Game* on BBC2 in July 1985. The film formed part of BBC Television's 'Nuclear Week', five programmes screened to commemorate the fortieth anniversary of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings. Twenty years on, and through numerous BBC refusals to transmit the film on the grounds that it would harm the elderly and those of 'limited mental intelligence',[128] *The War Game* had been rendered safe by the passage of time and by political and cultural changes. The event occasioned one final spasm in the long-running propaganda battle over the film. CND argued that it had been 'a disaster' not to have shown *The War Game* in 1965 – 'when we were so much more susceptible to the power of television and the memory of the Blitz was so much more alive'. Estimating that the film had already been seen by six million people, the BBC's *Radio Times* suggested the opposite: 'It's clear that *The War Game* – unbroadcast – has played a more pivotal and haunting role in the nuclear debate than if Sir Hugh [Greene] had approved its screening in 1965'. From Fleet Street's left, Julian Barnes wrote that the film 'remains precisely as frightening as it did in 1965 because of the probable truth it tells, so if it was right to ban it then, it remains right; if wrong now, wrong then'. From the provincial centre, the *Yorkshire Post* argued that the interviews in the film vindicated the BBC's ban because they showed how little people knew about

126. Fred Inglis, *The Cruel Peace: Everyday Life in the Cold War* (1991), 185–8. *Threads* was a BBC production directed by Mick Jackson.
   127. Watkins in the *Standard*, 9 Dec. 1983, cited in Kilborn, *Multi-Media Melting Pot*, 19–20; *Broadcast*, 9 Aug. 1985, 25; *The Times*, 24 Sept. 1984, 13.
   128. For example, BBC Director-General, Sir Ian Trethowan, *The Times*, 13 March 1981, 4.

nuclear weapons in 1965 and that the BBC had been right to televise it now 'because we are better educated'. Logical or not, the *Post*'s view represented mainstream press opinion. Watkins was exasperated by such myopia and sickened by the BBC's latter-day celebration of his film, accusing the Corporation of a 'hypocritical elitism' that was 'spectacularly disgusting and repugnant'.[129]

Watkins' last word in the whole saga of *The War Game* came two years later. After several failed attempts to remake *The War Game*, in 1987 he completed his fourteen-and-a-half-hour 'Film for Peace', *The Journey*. A pioneering documentary shot on five continents and in eight separate languages, *The Journey* explored the connections between the nuclear arms race, world hunger, gender politics and the functioning of the mass media. This uncompromising, flawed epic would reach only a tiny fraction of the mass audience that had seen *The War Game*.[130] A little over two years later, the cold war came to an end, bringing with it a new and arguably more unstable era of nuclear confrontation. If the main players set out in *The War Game* had now altered, for many people its basic rules and message remained the same.[131]

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129. *Sanity*, Oct. 1985, 33–5; *Radio Times*, 27 July 1985, 3–5; *Observer*, 4 Aug. 1985, Reviews, 24; *Yorkshire Post*, 1 Aug. 1985, 11; *Guardian*, 1 Aug. 1985, 17.

130. WMRC: CND Microfilm Records, Reel 29, 29/11/28–54 'The Nuclear War Film'; Peter Watkins, 'The Journey: A Voyage of Discovery', pamphlet, Feb. 1987, courtesy of Nigel Young, Colgate University, Hamilton, NY; Cook and Murphy, *Freethinker*.

131. More than a decade after the cold war, *The War Game* continued to be deployed as an educational and propagandistic tool. During the 2003 Gulf War, CND Chairwoman, Carol Naughton, sent the British Defence Secretary, Geoff Hoon, a DVD copy of the film, after he had threatened to launch Trident nuclear missiles against the Iraqi regime. Hoon's response is not known. Naughton email to author, 23 Oct. 2003.

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