



Fallout Can Be Fun

Abridged article by David Greenberg

The dropping of the atom bomb in 1945—and the Soviet Union's attainment of nuclear capability in 1949—transformed the meaning of civil defence.

During World War II, the government drafted citizens to make tangible contributions to the war effort: scrimping on scarce supplies such as meat and nylons, produce from Victory Gardens, and materials acquired from scrap metal drives. Although officials urged these gestures mainly to foster a feeling of patriotic engagement, their secondary purpose—materially aiding America's military goals—was also legitimate.

However during the Cold War there was little for citizens to do. Instead, preparedness became the watchword. This was reinforced by the fear that the Soviet Union would initiate a nuclear war. Citizens, particularly children, had to be ready for an attack.

Public education materials on how best to be prepared for a nuclear attack were widely circulated. Education materials were developed for public schools. Home-economics classes taught girls how to furnish bomb shelters. Advertising firms lent their experts to the mission, and newspapers offered free placement of ads. Radios regularly broadcast public education announcements. Celebrities were signed up to help pitch the cause.

But the most famous of all was the cartoon figure Bert the Turtle, star of comic-book pamphlets and short classroom films such as *Duck and Cover*. The amiable Bert demonstrated to kids how, in the event of a nuclear attack, "you DUCK to avoid the things flying through the air ..." (here the panel shows a frightened Bert, diving to the ground) "... and COVER to keep from getting cut or even badly burned." (In the next panel, Bert withdraws his head into his shell while his friend throws on the hood of his jacket.) In the movie version, music accompanied the instruction.

School drills were very popular. Teachers, at a random moment, would order their students to "Drop!" and the children would crouch and bury their faces. New York City spent \$159,000 on 2.5 million identification bracelets, or dog tags, for students to wear at all times. This came with the unspoken understanding that they would help distinguish children who were lost or killed in a nuclear explosion.

Then there was the bomb shelter craze. Off and on until the early 1960s, Americans built underground rooms that promised to protect them from a nuclear attack. Commercial firms marketed a range of safe houses that ranged from a "\$13.50 foxhole shelter" to a \$5,000 "deluxe" model that included a phone, beds, toilets, and even a Geiger counter to measure radioactivity. *Life* magazine ran a story on a young newlywed couple who spent their honeymoon in a steel-and-concrete room 12 feet underground. "Fallout can be fun," the article said.

A kindergarten teacher put her pupils to work adorning the school's bomb shelter with their artwork and turning it into a "reading den" so they wouldn't be afraid to go there if and when the bombs came.

North Americans mostly reacted with enthusiasm to these measures. Sometimes, however, it was questioned. A handful of educators, for example, questioned the schools' approach to nuclear preparedness, suggesting that fear-struck grade-schoolers gazing out classroom windows for Soviet jets hardly constituted an ideal learning environment.

Into the early '60s, these strategies began to be questioned. With the 1963 nuclear test-ban treaty between the United States and Russia, superpower relations finally began to thaw.

The Peace Movement raised public awareness of the dangers of nuclear testing, fallout, and the arms race. The Vietnam War diverted attention from the theoretical possibility of a nuclear face-off between the superpowers to the all-too-concrete reality of old-fashioned on-the-ground warfare in a proxy battlefield.

Perhaps most important, subversive cultural currents helped undermine the Cold War consensus and exposed the absurdities of its civil-defense rituals. Stanley Kubrick's 1964 classic *Dr. Strangelove* laid bare the absurdity of the whole culture of nuclear gamesmanship.

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