The American Embrace of Armageddon:
The Rise of the Fallout Shelter in American Popular Culture

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In 1959, a Miami radio station and bomb shelter manufacturing company held a promotion looking for a couple who were willing to marry and spend a two-week honeymoon in a fallout shelter. Melvin and Maria Mininson, the selected couple, took to the shelter following their wedding reception, and spent their honeymoon as highly publicized test subjects. They ran the shelter according to instructions, and sealed off from the outside world, with the exception of a telephone line that was constantly off the hook with reporters, Civil Defense officials and family members. The honeymoon/experiment ran fine with few problems, and after their two weeks, the couple cheerily returned to the surface and promptly faded from the attention of popular culture.[1]

This story is a perfect example of the phenomenon that was bomb shelter culture in the 1950s and 60s. Somehow, for two decades, a structure with the sole purpose of protecting civilians from radiation in the worst-case scenario of a nuclear war became a celebrated object in popular culture. Even before the fall of the Soviet Union, the phrase "bomb shelter" was synonymous with 1950s Cold War paranoia, and bomb shelters have not been a popular topic for decades. In the 1950s, America decided that fallout shelters were important, and at some point, we changed our mind. While Civil Defense documentaries of the period would have us believe that American homes without fallout shelters constituted an unfortunate minority, the truth is that a tiny percentage — only 4% according to a 1962 study — were actually taking steps to build shelters.[2] Many public buildings were fitted with fallout shelters, but the celebrated image of the family-size shelter underneath the backyard was actually quite rare. The bomb shelter was talked about more than it was built, but the Mininsons are an excellent example of the presence of the bomb shelter in popular culture. The fear and confusion about nuclear war in American culture, and the popular media that

sometimes exacerbated and sometimes quelled those fears, was responsible for the bomb shelter's simultaneous pop-icon status and overwhelming absence from American homes.

The celebration of the fallout shelter in American culture brings to mind Albert Einstein's bumper sticker adage: "you cannot simultaneously prevent and prepare for war." The enthusiasm with which Americans embraced the fallout shelter indicates a lack of attention on the prevention of war. This widespread acceptance of the threat of nuclear annihilation was due in large part to steadfast American anti-Communism.[3] The phrase "better dead than red" shows how deep this sentiment ran - Americans have always clung ferociously to the idea of freedom, and most saw mutual assured destruction as the only alternative to a Communist-controlled America. American propaganda portrayed Communists as murderers and rapists, concerned only with the destruction of American values. Even before the 1950s, anti-Communism had a presence in popular culture. the 1949 film *The Red Menace* tells the story of a bitter WWII veteran who turns to Communism in his anger. When he witnesses the murder of a dissenter to the Party at the hands of his leaders, he flees, and is targeted as well.[4] Later documentaries such as *The Commies are Coming! The Commies are Coming!* (1962) presented the hypothetical situation of an American family man, waking up one morning to find his neighborhood run by Communists. The film illustrates what rights this man would no longer enjoy under Communist rule. It is fairly accurate and mostly pro-American, but the film portrays Communism as evil, unnatural and unwelcome.[5] The demonization of Communism in popular culture resulted in an extension of Communism in the American mind to include anything that threatened the status quo, especially movements promoting rights for minorities, homosexuals and women. America saw the Soviet Union as a

monster, and monsters cannot be reasoned with. For many Americans, prevention of war was not possible, leaving only preparation.

Not all of American Culture was infected with anti-Communism; Rod Serling's *The Twilight Zone* was often the vehicle for liberal messages. Particularly relevant is the episode *Two* (1961), set in the downtown area of an American-looking town, six years after a war that appears to have wiped out the population. A man, played by Charles Bronson, belonging to the home army, and a woman, played by Elizabeth Montgomery, belonging to the formerly-invading army, encounter each other in the empty town. The episode follows their slow journey into mutual trust, and the relevant scene occurs when the woman sees a dress in a blown out window, and the man encourages her to put it on. In a stoke of misfortune, she enters a recruiting office to change, and seeing the army propaganda on the walls portraying members of her army held at gunpoint, she changes her mind and fires two shots at the man waiting for her across the street. They miss and he walks away in disappointment at her attitude. In the end of the episode, we find the man leaving a building, having traded his uniform for civilian garb. He find the woman waiting outside, and as she steps from behind a truck, we see that she is wearing the dress from the shop window, and clearly ready to let bygones be bygones. As they walk off together, Rod Serling reassures us that this has been "a love story... about two lonely people who found each other... in the Twilight Zone," but despite this disclaimer, the episode is loaded with social commentary. Rod Serling explains in his introduction to the episode that this takes place in a fictional world, but the episode is clearly critical of American anti-communism. Propaganda is brought into question when the posters drive the woman back to violence and hatred, suggesting that they do the same for the population. The conclusion of the episode is that we are all the same underneath the uniforms, and that the hatred

and the war it drives us to, which Serling refers to as "man's battles against himself," are needless.

The dangers of a nuclear attack had mixed representation in popular culture. Accurate information about nuclear weapons was readily available, and the Office of Civil Defense publicized the findings of many experiments. A comprehensive pamphlet confusingly titled *Highlights of the Architectural and Engineering Development Program,* released in June of 1964, provides the findings of many investigations. The information is presented matter-of-factly in large black-and-white graphs and illustrations, depicting the range and effects of a twenty megaton blast, the life saving potential of fallout shelters, and the parts of skyscrapers that provide the most protection from fallout. On the other hand, early Civil Defense documentaries show a different approach to this information.

Duck and Cover (1951), one of the more notorious CD films, used a cartoon character named Bert the Turtle to educate children about how to protect themselves during a nuclear attack. The film begins with Bert walking through a forest to his happy-go-lucky theme song. A stick of dynamite on a fishing line appears behind him, held by a mischievous monkey in a tree. Bert notices the dynamite, ducks into his shell, and is protected from the subsequent explosion that leaves the tree charred and broken and vaporizes the monkey. The effects of an atomic blast are again downplayed later on in the film, when the narrator explains the dangers of an atomic blast: "If you were not ready, and did not know what to do, it could hurt you in different ways. It could knock you down hard, or throw you against a tree or a wall. It is such a big explosion that it can smash in buildings and knock signboards over, break windows all over town. But, if you duck and cover, like Bert, you will be much safer." The atomic blast portrayed by *Duck and Cover* is only slightly more dangerous than the

neighborhood bullies. To be fair, the dangers of a nuclear attack must have been difficult to explain to children, and to downplay them for the sake of preventing fear and panic was a wise choice. However, not all of these films were aimed at children.

Survival Under Atomic Attack (1951), also released by the Civil Defense Administration, appears to have been made for men and women with families in an effort to show them how they can protect themselves and their families from an atomic attack. Unfortunately, the film is peppered with misinformation, as it implies that the death toll was so high at Hiroshima and Nagasaki because the victims were unprepared for a nuclear attack. "People caught in the open as far as two miles away suffered flash burns," the narrator explains, "yet, protection could have been easily achieved." To illustrate this, we see how a bridge post shielded the road behind it from the flash, implying that the people of Hiroshima would have been all right had only they known to duck behind a bridge post. It was known at the time, at least to those familiar with such weapons, that the heat flash of an atomic blast is instantaneous; a person exposed to an atomic heat flash would be burned by the time they realized what was happening. The film continues right on to radioactivity with a startling manipulation of information: "The majority of people exposed to radiation recovered completely... Today they lead normal lives. They bear children. Their children are normal." Only four years later, the Department of Defense released *About Fallout*, which accurately explained cellular damage due to radiation.

A 1950 film titled *Medical Aspects of Nuclear Radiation* tries to dispel the public's fears about radiation, but the film reaches levels of silliness that make it difficult to take seriously. "Radioactivity is dangerous, but to say that it is deadly, period, is as misleading as giving a flat answer to the question 'how high is up?' The radium-treated dial on your watch, for instance, is harmless." At its most

ridiculous moment, the film compares two pie charts to illustrate how radiation constitutes 85% of Americans' "worrying capacity," while it is responsible for only 15% of deaths caused by an atomic bomb. "And that's unsound," the charismatic narrator explains. The misinformation in Civil Defense documentaries suggests that the American public lacked a proper understanding of the dangers of nuclear weapons in the early 1950s. The Department of Civil Defense made these films with the intention of quelling public concern, but the films are a little too convincing, and one comes away with the impression that a nuclear attack wouldn't be all that bad.

American popular culture of the 1950s presented specific standards of attitude and behavior for men, women and children. The men were hard-working, dedicated to their jobs, and their happy wives were there to greet them with smiles when they returned from work. For families like the Kramdens on *The Honeymooners,* problems were trivial and sitcom length, and Alice always had something reassuring to say. The attitude encouraged by the popular media was optimism, and a general faith that everything was A-OK. This encouraged a simple-mindedness in Americans that made it difficult to process a threat as large-scale as nuclear war.

While Ward Cleaver certainly didn't lose a wink of sleep over nuclear armageddon, the father as portrayed in popular culture was the unofficial mascot of bomb shelter culture. The father of the 1950s was the authority of the family. He provided for his wife and children and dispensed advice when needed. As the financial authority, his role as a caretaker was a provider of material needs. Accordingly, his solution to the threat of nuclear attack was material: to build a shelter to protect his family. The Office of Civil Defense published pamphlets with guides for shelter construction categorized by

complexity and cost. Shelter styles ranged from a wood-and-sand lean-to in the basement to high-ceiling underground bunkers, introducing the shelter as status symbol.[6] After all, how can a man cut corners when it comes to the lives of his family? It is important once again to draw a distinction here between the popular image of Americans and actual Americans. While many Americans were concerned with what their government was doing to prevent nuclear war from ever occurring, that concern went unrepresented in popular media because the scope of the iconic American was much smaller. The iconic American was concerned with the safety of his family and would not be so arrogant as to question the United States Government.

The imagery in these pamphlets and in the Civil Defense documentaries is often uncomfortably happy-go-lucky. We see in one pamphlet a cheerful family tucked into an underground shelter, the father cranking in air and the mother reading to the little boy while God-knows-what goes on outside.[7] The characters in *Duck and Cover* and other documentaries show a plucky determination to stay safe from atomic blasts. These contradictory attitudes towards nuclear war reveal an innocence on the part of the entire nation. This innocence had been violently disrupted by WWII, and after the war was over, a cold war began. More than anything, these documentaries and pamphlets were produced out of a desire by the entire nation for the illusion of safety. The CD documentaries attempt to be reassuring, to provide the public with peace of mind. In this context, the optimistic family man is a welcome image. Bomb shelters functioned in popular culture more as a mental exercise than actual protection. It was less important whether a man decided to build a shelter for his family; what was important was that he knew there was something he could do.

As American culture grew up over the course of the Cold War, attitudes towards nuclear war changed, and those concerned shifted their attention from protection to prevention. The bomb shelter faded out of popular culture, but not entirely, as it has long been a symbol of Cold War paranoia and 1950s atomic culture nostalgia. We look back on the culture of the time with a critical eye, and find a dark humor in the attitudes of the period, but there are many indications that the American public of the 1950s and 60s was very afraid, as one would expect of a culture that allowed an object with such heavy connotations of nuclear war to reach pop-icon status. Despite their flaws, the Civil Defense films, the shelter construction pamphlets, and popular magazines and television were working to quell the fears of the public and provide peace of mind to a population fearing Communism, war, and a weapon it did not understand.

Endnotes:

1: Geerhart, Bill. Atomic Honeymooners CONELRAD [http://www.conelrad.com/atomic_honeymooners.html] 1999-2002

2: Rose, Kenneth D. One Nation Underground - The Fallout Shelter in American Culture. (New York: New York University Press, 2001) p. 187

3: Ibid, p. 9

4: Plot Summary for Red Menace, The (1949) *Internet Movie Database* [http://us.imdb.com/Plot?0041791]

5: Patel, Anhoni. VHS Nation: 'The Commies are Coming! The Commies are Coming!' *sfbg.com* [http://www.sfbg.com/AandE/vhs/34.html] 2001

6: Family Shelter Designs (Washington: Office of Civil Defense, 1962) pp. 3-29

7: Ibid, p. 19

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