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“We Must Be Ready”: Teaching and Learning About Nuclear Weapons in American Elementary Schools in the Early 1950s¹

In June 1952, the American magazine *Collier's Weekly* featured the story of the nation's “most atom-wise kids,” the children of Indian Springs Public School near Las Vegas, Nevada. The school was a two-room schoolhouse located in “a converted supply room at the Indian Springs Air Force Base, a security area attached to the closely guarded atomic testing grounds.” The students there, whose numbers fluctuated between 27 and 67, came from the families of the military personnel on the army base, the construction workers employed at the atomic proving ground, and the 17-strong permanent population of the town of Indian Springs. These children had seen “from less than 25 miles away, more atomic blasts than anyone in the world except for the handful of nuclear scientists and technicians who set them off.” In the preceding four weeks alone, noted journalist Robert Cahn, the students had watched four bombs detonate. Indeed, the awesome spectacle of nuclear explosions had become so commonplace as to “create hardly more than an excuse for a recess to watch the mushroom clouds.” A spokesman of the Atomic Energy Commission commented that, in being so closely and often exposed to the atomic bomb, these schoolchildren were “getting the same type of psychological indoctrination we are giving some of our combat troops.” For the Atomic Energy Commission, the value of being in such close proximity to these deadly weapons was clear: “If all the school children in the nation could witness an A-bomb blast,” the spokesman declared, “it would do much to destroy the fear and uncertainty which now exist.”²

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² Robert Cahn, “A is for Atom,” *Collier's Weekly* 129, no. 5 (June 21, 1952), 16.

Unlike the students of Indian Springs Public School, the vast majority of American schoolchildren encountered the atomic bomb in a much less intimate form through classroom lessons, films, and pamphlets. This essay explores the effect of Cold War atomic culture on the school lives of elementary-aged American children during the early 1950s, when the era's fears of nuclear annihilation had a very real presence in classrooms for the early primary years. Indeed, school curricula are a useful prism through which to examine the diffusion of Cold War political, social, and cultural dynamics into the everyday lives of Americans. "As a rule," writes *Parents Magazine* contributing editor Phyllis La Farge, "what adults want children to learn in schools is what they themselves are willing to recognize publicly as important to the society."³ Thus, what was taught to schoolchildren about nuclear weapons is indicative of the nuclear attitudes and beliefs of their educators, parents, and communities. In focusing on the youngest cohort of schoolchildren, those aged four to eleven, this study will emphasize the potency of the nuclear beliefs, fears, and concerns that led legislators, educators, and activists to forcefully push for even the youngest of children to meaningfully learn about the atomic threat.

This essay draws into focus a key period of heightened tensions in the early Cold War: the early 1950s, just after news broke that the Soviet Union had successfully detonated an atomic bomb, and as federal and state officials began seriously preparing for the new possibility of an imminent Soviet atomic attack. I will briefly trace the political, social, and cultural currents of the era and examine how this context, in turn, manifested in elementary schools through the Federal Civil Defense Administration (FCDA)'s suggested curricula, state curricular guides in North Carolina and Michigan, and the landmark civil defense children's film *Duck and Cover*.⁴ Ultimately, this analysis demonstrates that in seeking to understand school curricula it is necessary to understand the broader historical context from

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³ Phyllis La Farge, *The Strangelove Legacy: Children, Parents, and Teachers in the Nuclear Age* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), 184.

⁴ The focus on school curricula is driven by the source material available digitally, namely federal and state curriculum guidelines and classroom materials such as films and children's books. The question of what was actually taught in the classroom, as opposed to what was *supposed* to be taught, represents an area for further research that would require access to physical archives for sources such as students' papers, teachers' papers, and local PTA newsletters.

which the curricula emerged; thus understanding society can help us understand the history of education. Similarly, as the centerpiece of educational institutions, school curricula can reveal the major issues and concerns of society that were deemed so important as to permeate the lives of the youngest of children.

The Early Atomic Age: America in the 1950s

By the end of the Second World War, the United States had become the world's dominant power, having emerged from the conflict with its economy strengthened, its physical territory largely unharmed, and its national security bolstered by the nation's exclusive possession of the massively destructive atomic weapon that had finally ended the war. Very quickly, American political leaders began to confront the burgeoning Soviet Union by invoking the epic American calling to defend liberty and freedom against all enemies. The Truman Doctrine of 1947 and the Marshall Plan, launched one year later, both served to solidify the division between capitalist and communist nations as the United States supplied billions of dollars in foreign aid to Western European countries. In 1949, the American monopoly on nuclear weapons ended when news broke of the Soviet Union's first successful detonation of an atomic bomb. By the next year, both nations were engaged in a proxy war on the Korean peninsula. In matters of foreign policy, the nation's engagements abroad clearly distinguished the Soviet Union as not only the military adversary of the United States, but as its ideological enemy as well.⁵

As real-world tensions continued to grow between the United States and the Soviet Union, the theme of the ideological struggle between democracy and totalitarianism became inescapable in popular culture. Under the "Militant Liberty" program, the Department of Defense encouraged Hollywood studios to produce anti-communist films; meanwhile, the newly created Central Intelligence Agency secretly funded ideologically friendly overseas publications, conferences, publishing houses, concerts, and art exhibitions. By the 1950s, the United States government

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⁵ Eric Foner, *Give Me Liberty: An American History*, 4th ed. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2014), 888-893.

had mounted significant efforts to saturate American mass culture with the notion of American liberty pitted against the dark evils of Soviet communism.⁶

The sharp dichotomy of capitalism and communism as demonstrated in late 1940s and early 1950s popular culture was accompanied by an equally rigid distinction between patriotism and disloyalty. This, in turn, led many Americans to contain not only communist opinions but all unorthodox opinions for fear of being labeled a traitor. Eric Foner has noted the irony of this curtailment of free speech, observing, “At precisely the moment when the United States celebrated freedom as the foundation of American life, the right to dissent came under attack.”⁷ At the federal level, the hearings of the House Un-American Activities Committee and a series of high-profile legal cases in the early 1950s bred an atmosphere of distrust and fear.⁸ States, too, convened their own investigative committees to examine suspected communists and dissenters, and some localities required loyalty oaths of professionals such as teachers and pharmacists; teachers who refused to sign loyalty oaths could be fired.⁹ With people’s livelihoods, social reputation, and loyalty to their own nation so easily called into question, the anti-communist crusade of the late 1940s and early 1950s strongly enforced adherence to the status quo – those who dared to dissent risked being labeled as traitors. Historian Henry Steele Commager argued in 1947 that the nation now had a “new definition of loyalty... conformity,” whereby anything but “uncritical and unquestioning acceptance of America as it is” would be labeled as unpatriotic.¹⁰

When, in the early 1950s, President Truman’s newly created FCDA turned towards public schools and schoolteachers as a key target for educational programs and activities, the reaction of teachers was heavily informed by the existing climate

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⁶ Foner, *Give Me Liberty*, 897.

⁷ Foner, *Give Me Liberty*, 906.

⁸ The hearings of the House Un-American Activities Committee led to the blacklisting of hundreds of artists. Perhaps the most infamous legal case of this period was that of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, both of whom were convicted of conspiracy to commit espionage. At their sentencing, Judge Irving Kaufman condemned the Rosenbergs’ crimes as “worse than murder.” Foner, *Give Me Liberty*, 907-909.

⁹ Foner, *Give Me Liberty*, 909-910.

¹⁰ Henry Steele Commager, “Who is Loyal to America?” *Harper’s Magazine* 195, no. 1168 (September 1947), 195.

of fear, conformity, and anti-communism. As historian JoAnne Brown has argued, just as the FCDA attempted to capitalize on public schools as a “channel for the mass education of parents as well as children,” so too did teachers’ own professional and personal concerns inform their cooperation with federal authorities, thus creating space for teaching and learning about the atomic bomb in classrooms.¹¹ For some teachers, the overtly patriotic and anti-communist FCDA lessons on the atomic threat helped placate right-wing anti-communist critics of progressive education. For other educators, the solemnity of preparing students for a nuclear attack served to deflect criticism of the era’s life adjustment education philosophy.¹² For still others, genuine fears about atomic war with the Soviet Union, enthusiasm for the opportunity to do *something* about the threat of nuclear annihilation, or belief in teachers’ responsibility to prepare the children in their charge for the trauma of war served as sufficient motivation. As Brown asserts, though educators had numerous justifications for allowing atomic education into their classrooms, the uniformity of their response was strikingly unique in a period distinguished by a diversity of opinion on educational pedagogy.¹³ While the FCDA and state departments of education may have provided the encouragement and curricular materials, that civil defense and atomic learning became so pervasive and consequential must be attributed to the efforts of these teachers.

Nuclear Education Curricula

Soon after its creation in 1950, the FCDA began producing and distributing a series of training and education bulletins on the topic of state and local civil defense. In 1951, the FCDA published *Interim Civil Defense Instructions for Schools and Colleges*, a manual for school and college administrators across the nation that outlined their expected role in the vital work of preparing the public against the Soviet atomic threat. Containing guidance in such areas as atomic curricula in the classroom, effective coordination with local civil defense organizations, responsible financing of school civil defense training, planning for emergency medical personnel,

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¹¹ JoAnne Brown, “A is for Atom, B is for Bomb: Civil Defense in American Public Education, 1948-1963,” *Journal of American History* 75, no. 1 (June 1988), 70.

¹² This education philosophy called for children to learn skills, such as how to dress, how to get a job, and how to use the telephone, so that they could function in the ‘real world.’

¹³ Brown, “A is for Atom,” 74.

rendering aid to the wider community, and shelter and physical protection against “flying missiles, dangerous rays, blasts, and heat,” this bulletin framed the school not only as a place for teaching and safeguarding children, but also as a resource and shelter for the entire community should a bomb strike.¹⁴ Though the multi-faceted roles and responsibilities assigned to schools by the FCDA are areas worthy of investigation, here I will focus on the classroom activities and curricular outcomes outlined in the manual.

In the introduction to *Interim Civil Defense Instructions for Schools and Colleges*, the FCDA framed civil defense as “a new concept of citizenship” that called for “self-discipline in the interest of common welfare.” This “new citizenship” would not only ensure “self-preservation and mutual safety and welfare,” it would also mark a “new realization of democracy for our time.”¹⁵ This rhetoric, which drew a close connection between active participation in civil defense and American citizenship, democracy, and patriotism, would have been especially potent in an era characterized by anti-communist hysteria and notions of conformity and national loyalty. Having likened civil defense to American patriotism, the FCDA bulletin went on to emphasize the crucial role of schools, equipped as they were with “many physical and human resources,” in the “urgent” task of training Americans for a new conception of citizenship and a “new way of life” in the atomic era. That being said, the bulletin was quick to assure teachers that, just as they had something to offer to the FCDA, so too would civil defense enrich the education of students as a “springboard for constructive citizenship through the stimulation of a general, keener interest in democratic processes throughout the United States.”¹⁶ For the FCDA, the inclusion of civil defense and the atomic bomb in school curricula not only befit the needs of the federal agency, but could even be considered mutually beneficial to teachers and students.

As outlined in *Interim Civil Defense Instructions for Schools and Colleges*, the basic concept at the heart of the “new citizenship” of civil defense was “self-reliance,”

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¹⁴ Federal Civil Defense Administration, *Interim Civil Defense Instructions for Schools and Colleges* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1951), iii.

¹⁵ FCDA, *Interim Civil Defense Instructions*, iv.

¹⁶ FCDA, *Interim Civil Defense Instructions*, iv-v.

which called for “every responsible person in this country [to] train himself and his family in self-protection and self-help.” Though self-responsibility served as a “minimum protection policy which every person owes to himself and his family,” the FCDA bulletin declared that individuals must also extend the concept of self-help to neighbors and co-workers in order to create a “larger insurance policy for himself, his family, and his community.” Thus, the FCDA advocated first and foremost independent responsibility for one’s survival and, as a logical extension of this, contributions to local civil defense efforts for which “the mutual advantages are obvious.”¹⁷ In advising school administrators on “how to create the right kind and the necessary amount of interest in the school civil defense program,” the bulletin urged emphasis on this marriage of self-reliance and group cohesion, noting that while “civil defense is everyone’s business – that one’s survival and his neighbor’s depends on self-reliance, ... group self-protection and self-help is an essential ingredient of a successful civil defense program.”¹⁸

The dual themes of self-reliance and group help were also evident in the curricular outcomes suggested by the FCDA bulletin. The agency even went so far as to suggest that the integration of civil defense education, self-reliance, and group thinking into the curriculum would prove so radical as to “call for a review of educational values.”¹⁹ The FCDA outlined seven objectives as especially significant for schoolchildren:

1. Planned emergency drills.
2. Practice leadership of small groups.
3. Development of techniques of informing others through messenger experience.
4. Trips to gain experience in following instructions other than under the normal school environment.
5. Exercises to account for the presence of members of a group.
6. Development of supplementary activities during prolonged drills to overcome fear and pass time.
7. Experiences to develop self-reliance.²⁰

Clearly, the FCDA expected even the youngest of children to appreciate their role in leading groups, reliably performing duties in the service of groups, and following

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¹⁷ FCDA, *Interim Civil Defense Instructions*, 1.

¹⁸ FCDA, *Interim Civil Defense Instructions*, 12-13.

¹⁹ FCDA, *Interim Civil Defense Instructions*, 5.

²⁰ FCDA, *Interim Civil Defense Instructions*, 6.

instructions as part of group activities. This, along with learning how to “overcome fear,” “pass time,” and “develop self-reliance,” would purportedly serve students well in the event of an atomic explosion and the subsequent nuclear fallout.

Along with encouraging curricular changes in order to equip children with skills conducive to self-reliance and group survival, the FCDA bulletin also instructed teachers in exactly which attitudes students should and should not develop in regard to the atomic threat. Fear of the bomb, in particular, was accorded particular scorn. “Play down fear stimuli,” the bulletin directed, “reduce fears and worries by teaching the people how to take care of themselves; keep them informed. (Fear is aggravated by the unknown.)”²¹ For the FCDA, civil defense would be successful if Americans of all ages were not only aware of the atomic bomb, but also well informed and confident enough in what was expected of them so as not to fear the looming threat of nuclear annihilation. The FCDA, then, was advocating a normalization or, as Laura McEnaney has described, a “domestication” of the atomic threat – rather than something to fear, the nuclear bomb was something with which to become familiar, something to learn to conquer by self-defense.²² This attempt to domesticate the atomic threat was reflected also in the FCDA bulletin’s advocacy for atomic attack drills in schools. Practicing these drills would “help prevent panic,” the bulletin stated, noting, “Loss of life has been greatly reduced by adequate fire drills.”²³ By comparing atomic bomb drills to fire drills, the FCDA implied that the threats of nuclear attack and fire were equal in severity, to be addressed in the same way, and to be treated with equal importance – which is to say, routine importance.

Given that authority over school curricula in the United States was and is located at the state level, state departments of education would have mediated the FCDA’s authority over what actually appeared in school curricula. Thus, it is useful

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²¹ FCDA, *Interim Civil Defense Instructions*, 13.

²² Laura McEnaney discusses the FCDA’s attempts to domesticate the atomic bomb at length, albeit in the context of the family and home. “Domestication literally cleaned up the language of nuclear warfare,” she writes, “it sanitized the images and rhetoric in a desperate attempt to prevent the panic, fatalism, and resistance that the FCDA’s scientists had predicted. Nothing was as it seemed in the civil defense literature: fallout was dust, family fire drills were “games,” and blast or fallout shelters were “family,” “family-type,” or “home” shelters.” Laura McEnaney, *Civil Defense Begins at Home: Militarization Meets Everyday Life in the Fifties* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 74. See also pp. 72-78.

²³ FCDA, *Interim Civil Defense Instructions*, 25.

to examine the civil defense curricula created by states in the wake of the FCDA's publication of its guidelines for civil defense education in schools. In 1953, the North Carolina State Superintendent of Public Instruction published *The Schools and Civil Defense*, a bulletin intended to aid schools in fulfilling their "duty and responsibility... to implement the [civil defense] program" as prescribed by the FCDA and the state's General Assembly.²⁴ The current political tensions of "a world divided into what we call the free nations on the one hand and a group of communistic nations on the other" had rendered it essential that there exist "full cooperation and understanding between school authorities and the local civil defense director... [for] an effective plan for protecting children and other school personnel against the dangers in a time of emergency," the bulletin declared, explicitly tying this new curriculum of civil defense to the political and military tensions of the Cold War.²⁵

In order to prepare for the possibility of atomic attack, the North Carolina curriculum guide urged teachers to "plan for training within the curriculum in first aid, home nursing, and home care of the sick," which was to be "taught to all children at all levels."²⁶ Implicit in this guideline was the possibility that, should an attack occur, children could be left alone and without capable adult help; thus, children should be equipped and able to physically care for one another. This emphasis on basic first-aid skills was a practical application of one of the curriculum's primary objectives, that children develop "self-reliance, [for instance, through] opportunities to make decisions, individual activities, [and] sharing in planning the school day." Other curricular suggestions aimed at building up students' ability to help themselves included arts and leisure activities to encourage children to "build inner resources," and learning everyday life skills "as an aid in building self-confidence with respect to [the] ability to meet everyday problems." Through activities that fostered confidence in one's decisions and clear-headedness

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²⁴ State Superintendent of Public Instruction, *Publication No. 290: The Schools and Civil Defense* (Raleigh, N.C.: State of North Carolina, 1953), 3.

²⁵ State Superintendent of Public Instruction, *The Schools and Civil Defense*, 6.

²⁶ State Superintendent of Public Instruction, *The Schools and Civil Defense*, 9-10.

in the face of difficulty, children were to develop “feelings of security and confidence in normal living [which] are productive of the ability to meet emergencies.”²⁷

Just as children were to learn mental toughness, so too were they to learn about personal health, for “a major responsibility of the individual under wartime conditions is the exercising of good judgment in the selection and use of food and drink for himself and others.” In grades 1 through 3, North Carolinian children were to learn about soap, cleanliness of the body, and how to select and use safe food and water. In grades 4 to 6, children were to learn how to “decontaminat[e] [their] environment, clothes, and person after atomic or chemical exposure,” and to protect their food and water supply from contamination. Again, that children should acquire these specialized, adult skills suggested the possibility – even expectation – that in “wartime,” adults would not be available to take care of children’s safety and well-being.²⁸

The 1953 North Carolina civil defense curriculum guide also echoed the FCDA’s emphasis on group cohesion as an extension of self-reliance. A primary objective of this curriculum was that children should “develop habits and skills of group action” through activities such as “clubs, small group instruction, committees, [and] planning field trips.” Children were to learn the importance of “understanding others, ... including other races, nationalities, religions, rural and urban.” Teachers were to underscore the danger of “prejudice, rumors, and other types of emotional thinking” that could spark conflict and strife within a group. Furthermore, children were to practice “activities concerning the respect for rightful authority – parents, teachers, public officials.” This emphasis on obeying authority figures could arguably be seen as a contradiction of the principles of self-reliance and self-help, which suggested to the children that in the event of disaster, there would be no authority figures to guard their safety and security.

Just as children were to learn practical skills to help themselves find and decontaminate food in the aftermath of a disaster, so too were they to gain

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²⁷ State Superintendent of Public Instruction, *The Schools and Civil Defense*, 11-12.

²⁸ State Superintendent of Public Instruction, *The Schools and Civil Defense*, 13.

proficiency in tasks that would contribute to the survival and well-being of those around them. For instance, in preparation for the need for “volunteer assistance... in the caring for thousands of casualties, since there would be a shortage of professional medical and nursing personnel,” students in grades 1 to 3 were to learn to “comfort the ill person” and “perform small tasks for the ill.” Students in grades 4 to 6 would learn to assist caregivers by “put[ting] labels on medicines” and “assisting with the care of the ill under supervision of older person.”²⁹ These older children, aged eight to twelve, were also to learn about the “need for a community blood procurement program” and the medical and research uses of blood by visiting a blood center or hospital laboratory.³⁰ All elementary-aged children were to learn about sanitation, immunizations, the spread of disease, and the importance of washing hands to guard against the medical dangers of caring for “thousands of casualties and disease victims.”³¹ That the North Carolina curriculum guide so explicitly tied learning outcomes to the expected conditions in the aftermath of an atomic attack suggests a mindset of the inevitability of nuclear war. No attention was given to the political mechanisms and posturing that had resulted in such potent a nuclear threat, and all efforts remained squarely focused on the need to “help develop in children and youth the physical stamina, attitudes and skills essential to protection and survival; the emotional stability and morale needed to train for and do the tasks necessary for civil defense; and the moral conviction that the American way of life is worth defending.”³²

Michigan was another state that developed its own civil defense curriculum guide, which was published in 1955 as a collaborative effort of the state’s Office of Civil Defense and Department of Public Instruction under the title *Civil Defense and Safety Manual: A Program for Michigan Schools*. Many of the themes found in the earlier FCDA and North Carolina publications also emerged in Michigan. Like the FCDA, the Michigan civil defense and public school authorities lauded the civil defense curriculum as conducive to the “development of good citizenship,” and

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²⁹ State Superintendent of Public Instruction, *The Schools and Civil Defense*, 14.

³⁰ State Superintendent of Public Instruction, *The Schools and Civil Defense*, 15.

³¹ State Superintendent of Public Instruction, *The Schools and Civil Defense*, 17.

³² State Superintendent of Public Instruction, *The Schools and Civil Defense*, 26.

advocated a definition of “good citizenship” that “recognize[s] that we are engaged in a life and death struggle for our existence which will require the intelligent cooperation of every youth and adult.”³³ The importance of group cohesion and collaborative efforts as championed by the FCDA and North Carolina officials mirrored the Michigan requirement that students “learn to be worthy group members” through “activities which are cooperative in nature [which will] help children develop satisfactory social relationships.”³⁴ Here, too, fear of the atomic bomb was deemed detrimental – instead, children were expected to level-headedly “overcome fear through proper information and training, and through the development of attitudes which will help prepare [them] for any situation they may be required to meet.”³⁵ The Michigan curriculum guide further framed this preparation for an atomic blast as a normative part of “learning to face dangers realistically.” Just as children learned “how to ride a bicycle safely, cross properly at intersections, protect oneself from fire and disease, and to drive carefully and courteously,” so too should they learn how to survive a nuclear attack by participating in a civil defense education program. Indeed, a well-integrated civil defense program, carefully incorporated into “health, physical education, recreation, social science, language arts, science, and vocational and homemaking education,” would surely “dispel fear regarding life in the air-atomic age, and contribute to the development of good citizens.”³⁶

Nuclear Education in Film: *Duck and Cover*

In discussing civil defense and atomic education in the early 1950s, a key piece of documentary evidence that has since been called “the best-remembered (and most infamous)” of FCDA efforts is the *Duck and Cover*, a 1951 animation and live-action short film.³⁷ The landmark production began with a catchy tune that

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³³ State of Michigan Office of Civil Defense and Department of Public Instruction, *Civil Defense and Safety Manual: A Program for Michigan Schools* (Lansing, MI: State of Michigan, 1955), 9.

³⁴ State of Michigan, *Civil Defense and Safety Manual*, 10.

³⁵ State of Michigan, *Civil Defense and Safety Manual*, 11.

³⁶ State of Michigan, *Civil Defense and Safety Manual*, 11. Further discussion and examples of civil defence curricula in American elementary and secondary schools can be found in Tracy C. Davis, *Stages of Emergency: Cold War Nuclear Civil Defense* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2007), 110-115.

³⁷ Arnold Ringstad, “The Evolution of American Civil Defense Film Rhetoric,” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 14, no. 4 (Fall 2012), 93. Indeed, viewing this film is what originally sparked my own interest

introduced its iconic anthropomorphic animated character Bert the Turtle, who wore the tin helmet of an air raid warden, and who was “very alert” and “knew just what to do” when “danger threatened” him. Obviously intended for a young, school-aged audience, *Duck and Cover* encouraged children to emulate Bert the Turtle, who “duck[ed] and cover[ed]” under the safety of his shell “until the coast was clear.” The danger from which Bert was seeking shelter was that of the atomic bomb, “a new danger” that, much like fires and automobile accidents, had to be met by preparedness and safety rules. The narrator explained that an atomic blast and its possible effects would look like “a bright flash, brighter than the sun;” it could “knock you down hard, or throw you against a tree or wall;” it could “knock down walls ... or break windows all over town;” it could “burn you worse than a terrible sun burn.” “But if you duck and cover like Bert,” the narrator encouraged, “you will be much safer.”³⁸

For modern audiences, this vast understatement of the terrible destruction of a nuclear explosion and the belief that ducking and covering would somehow offer protection from vaporization, shock waves, thermal burns, and firestorms is absurd, and the film can seem a demonstration of the government’s ludicrous response to the nuclear threat. The film, however, is not only a piece of entertaining 1950s kitsch, but befit the era’s attitudes toward the atomic threat. As I will demonstrate, *Duck and Cover* disseminated the very same ideas about the threat of the atomic bomb that appeared in the FCDA bulletins and state curricula of the same period, which attempted to normalize or domesticate the nuclear threat, taught children to respect and adhere to authority figures while concurrently telling children that they must practice self-reliance, and treated nuclear war as an inevitable prospect.³⁹

In my analysis of FCDA and state curricula, I found that, in comparing atomic bomb drills to school fire drills and civil defense training to learning to face

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in the topic of what children learned about the atomic bomb in their classrooms. Another film from the same era intended for an elementary-aged audience and worthy of further analysis is Encyclopedia Britannica’s *Atomic Alert (Elementary Version)*, 1951.

³⁸ *Duck and Cover*, directed by Anthony Rizzo (New York: Archer Productions, 1951).

³⁹ For discussion of the use and circulation of *Duck and Cover*, see Hughes, Jake, “Duck and Cover,” *National Film Registry, Library of Congress*, accessed 18 July 2016, https://www.loc.gov/programs/static/national-film-preservation-board/documents/duck_cover.pdf

dangers such as crossing intersections and riding a bike, federal and state agencies attempted to normalize or domesticate the nuclear threat into just another everyday manageable danger that anyone could be prepared for and protected against. While Laura McEnaney has used the term “domestication” to describe this desensitization campaign as it related to the family and home life, Guy Oakes describes this civil defense rhetorical technique as the “conventionalization argument” in his 1994 book *The Imaginary War*. During the Cold War, Oakes explains, the use of this strategy suggested that “although atomic bombs might be quantitatively more destructive than the conventional bombs used in World War II, qualitatively they achieved essentially the same results.” Thus, federal and state agencies could downplay the annihilation promised by atomic blasts and contain hysteria and fear.⁴⁰

In *Duck and Cover*, this attempt to domesticate, normalize, or conventionalize the atomic bomb was especially evident in comparisons between the atomic threat and everyday dangers. “We must get ready for [the atomic bomb], just as we are ready for many other dangers that are around us all the time,” the narrator advised, before going on to discuss the threat of fires and the protection offered by “your fine fire department to put out the fire and fire drills in your school so you know what to do.”⁴¹ Similarly, the threat of car accidents was reduced by safety rules and traffic lights for drivers and pedestrians. This analogy suggested that the nuclear bomb was no more a threat than fires and car wrecks. Just as firefighters were ready and able to put out fires, and automobile collisions were avoidable so long as motorists and pedestrians obeyed traffic lights and police officers, so too was the threat of the atomic bomb quite manageable. This narration played over stock footage of firefighters sliding down a fire pole, a fire truck on its way to a fire, and a police officer marshaling traffic at a busy intersection. Thus, the analogy between a nuclear bomb and fires or car accidents was extended: not only were these threats equally dangerous, so too did nuclear explosions, burning buildings, and car accidents require the same measured, orderly, and calm response.

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⁴⁰ Guy Oakes, *The Imaginary War*, 51-52, quoted in Ringstad, “Film Rhetoric,” 111.

⁴¹ *Duck and Cover*.

In drawing the analogy between the atomic bomb and fires and car accidents, and in reassuring its young audience that just as firefighters, police officers, and the rule of law served to protect one from harm, *Duck and Cover* also told students that they could rely on and must obey authority figures. Several scenes in the film showed teachers instructing their classes of youngsters how to “duck and cover” under their desks in the event of an atomic blast, thus reinforcing the credibility of what students were learning in their own classrooms.⁴² Civil defense workers, too, were to be obeyed. In a scene that featured a civil defense worker dressed in an overcoat and an air raid warden helmet, the narrator explained, “His job is to help protect us if there is danger of the atomic bomb. We must obey the civil defense worker.” Later, the narrator assured the children that they could “ask an older person for help” if they were unsure of what to do. There was nothing to fear, the narrator continued, for “older people will help us, as they always do,” thus expanding the circle of authority figures to whom children were to defer to include all adults. There were even authority figures within the schoolchildren’s peer groups that children could emulate: “Here is a group of older boys showing what to do if you are not in the classroom,” the narrator recited over footage of teenagers demonstrating the “duck and cover” maneuver in a school corridor.⁴³ In each of these instances, *Duck and Cover* indicated that children could and should rely on, adhere to, and be confident in the efforts of authorities to ensure their safety.⁴⁴

Despite emphasizing again and again that teachers, civil defense workers, adults, and even older children were in control of the situation and knew what to do to keep children safe in the event a nuclear attack, *Duck and Cover* paradoxically conveyed the opposite message as well, that “we will all have to be ready to take care of ourselves.”⁴⁵ “The flash of an atomic bomb can come at any time, no matter where you may be,” the narrator warned, before describing what children should do

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⁴² As revealed in the end credits of *Duck and Cover*, the schoolchildren featured in these scenes were actual pupils from schools in Astoria, N.Y., and New York, N.Y.

⁴³ *Duck and Cover*.

⁴⁴ Ringstad, “Film Rhetoric,” 115.

⁴⁵ This paradox is discussed at length by Bo Jacobs of the Hiroshima Peace Institute in his article “Atomic Kids: *Duck and Cover* and *Atomic Alert* Teach American Children How to Survive Atomic Attack,” *Film & History* 40, no. 1, particularly pp. 25-31.

in several circumstances in which they would find themselves alone. “You may be in your schoolyard playing, ... you might be out playing at home, [or] ... you might be eating your lunch when the flash comes,” the narrator posited. In any case, children were to immediately “go to the safest cover” and crouch with their arms over their heads so that “if glass breaks and flies through the air, it won’t cut you” and “if the explosion makes anything in the room fall down, it won’t fall on you.” A series of montages showed Paul, Patty, and Tony walking to school and biking to a cub scout meeting when suddenly, there was a bright flash – an atomic explosion. They “know what to do,” the narrator commended, as the children scrambled to nearby walls and fell to the ground in the “duck and cover” posture.⁴⁶ As Bo Jacobs has noted and as demonstrated in these scenes, despite assuring children that they could count on authority figures, *Duck and Cover* sought to prepare children to survive a nuclear attack by themselves, without the help of adults.⁴⁷ The narrator of the film further reinforced the necessity of self-reliance at the very end of the film as he ominously warned, “there might not be any grownups around when the bomb explodes. Then you are on your own.”⁴⁸

The statement that children could, ultimately, rely only on themselves for their own survival betrayed the impotence of the adult caregivers, government, and social authorities implicitly entrusted with their protection. This powerlessness was further reinforced by the narrator’s constant reminder that “we must be ready all of the time for the atomic bomb,” and must “know what you are supposed to do *when* you see the flash” [emphasis added] — not *if* the bomb detonates, but *when* the bomb detonates. The film, and the FCDA and state curricula as well, treated an atomic bomb attack against Americans as an inevitability rather than a mere possibility. A compelling illustration of the certainty with which Americans regarded imminent nuclear attack is evident in the efforts of multiple school districts in New York City, Seattle, San Francisco, Denver, Detroit, and Philadelphia to provide their students with metal identification tags to be worn as necklaces. Similar to the dog tags worn by military personnel, these tags were

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⁴⁶ *Duck and Cover*.

⁴⁷ Jacobs, “Atomic Kids,” 28.

⁴⁸ *Duck and Cover*.

selected after consideration of other options, such as clothing labels, tattooing, and fingerprinting, as the most durable form of identification to aid in the sorting of bodies after an atomic blast.⁴⁹ As Jacobs has suggested, this treatment of a nuclear attack as an unavoidable forgone conclusion portrayed to children “a world spinning out of control” in which children “would not be able to rely on their adult guardians to either prevent nuclear war, or even to be present to protect and guide them through the experience.”⁵⁰ In preparing children to be vigilant and ready to “duck and cover” at all times, *Duck and Cover* and the classroom drills for which the film was named also taught children that theirs was a dangerous world that could be destroyed at any moment, and that they were alone in facing a perilous future.⁵¹

Conclusion

During the early 1950s, the pervasive political and cultural atmosphere of strict conformity, animosity toward dissent, and anti-communist hysteria was compounded by the very real threat of a Soviet nuclear attack. These fears manifested in children’s lives through their experiences in the classroom. The curricular guidelines produced by the FCDA and by individual states, such as North Carolina and Michigan, advanced several themes: that this new nuclear threat was a conventional, manageable danger; that children should obey and trust civil defense authorities and adults; that, paradoxically, they must rely on themselves for survival; and finally, that the daunting future promised by their classroom preparations was inevitable. These themes also emerged in the iconic civil defense instructional film *Duck and Cover*. Under the veneer of a jaunty jingle and a friendly animated turtle, *Duck and Cover* sought to acclimate its young viewers to a new reality in which “duck and cover” was ritual and “the flash” of an atomic explosion could be expected at any time. Taken together, civil defense curricula and film ensured that even the youngest of students was made aware of the fragility of their

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⁴⁹ These dog tags are further discussed in Jacobs, “Atomic Kids,” 32; Paul Boyer, *By the Bomb’s Early Light: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), 327; and Brown, “A is for Bomb,” 81-83.

⁵⁰ Jacobs, “Atomic Kids,” 26.

⁵¹ The question of the consequences of this fatalistic education on the adult lives of 1950s schoolchildren is fascinating, and has been examined by Jacobs in “Atomic Kids,” pp. 37-41.

security, the instability of the world in which they lived, and the impotence of the authority figures whom they were supposed to trust.

The frank, bleak nuclear education that young American schoolchildren received in the early 1950s did transform over the ensuing decades. Given the longevity of the Cold War and the ebb and flow of public interest in and awareness of atomic weapons, nuclear proliferation, and the arms race, children's nuclear literacy and education also evolved as public discourse, government officials, and school authorities shifted emphasis away from or toward a focus on the nuclear threat. This long-term view of the changes in nuclear education represents an area for further study. For instance, the early 1950s period of hyperawareness of the atomic bomb could be compared to another period marked by avid interest in nuclear weapons, such as the Reagan era of the 1980s.⁵² Further research could also examine the nuclear education received by older children in junior high, high school and college, where teaching on nuclear weapons was, fittingly, more complex and involved. The question of what actually happened in classrooms as compared to the prescribed curriculum is another fascinating topic worthy of further research.

As I have demonstrated in this study, the civil defense school curricula and classroom materials of the early 1950s offer a penetrating and revealing glimpse of Americans' nuclear anxieties, fears, and attitudes during the same time. The nuclear attack anticipated by adults was so grim as to warrant the encroachment of civil defense into their children's classrooms and lives. Here and elsewhere, the school curriculum is never just about the children. In fact, it is inherently political and powerfully shaped by the historical context from which it emerges and by the concerns and agenda of parents, politicians, and authorities.

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⁵² Paul Boyer examines the vacillating public awareness of nuclear weapons in the second half of the 20th century, from apathy and neglect to fear and activism and back again, in *By the Bomb's Early Light*, 352-366.

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