

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

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

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

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

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.

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

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

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

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.

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.

Bibliography

- Brown, JoAnne. "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): 68-90.
- Boyer, Paul. *By the Bomb's Early Light: American Thought and Culture and the Dawn of the Atomic Age*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1985.
- Cahn, Robert. "A is for Atom." *Collier's Weekly* 129, no. 5 (June 21, 1952): 15-17.
- Commager, Henry Steele. "Who is Loyal to America?" *Harper's Magazine* 195, no. 1168 (September 1947): 193-199.
- Davis, Tracy C. *Stages of Emergency: Cold War Nuclear Civil Defense*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2007.
- Duck and Cover*. Directed by Anthony Rizzo. New York: Archer Productions, 1951.
- Federal Civil Defense Administration. *Interim Civil Defense Instructions for Schools and Colleges*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1951.
- Foner, Eric. *Give Me Liberty: An American History*, 4th ed. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2014.
- 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
- Jacobs, Bo. "Atomic Kids: *Duck and Cover* and *Atomic Alert* Teach American Children How to Survive Atomic Attack." *Film & History* 40, no. 1 (Spring 2010): 25-44.
- La Farge, Phyllis. *The Strangelove Legacy: Children, Parents, and Teachers in the Nuclear Age*. New York: Harper & Row, 1987.
- McEnaney, Laura. *Civil Defense Begins at Home: Militarization Meets Everyday Life in the Fifties*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000.
- Ringstad, Arnold. "The Evolution of American Civil Defense Film Rhetoric." *Journal of Cold War Studies* 14, no. 4 (Fall 2012): 93-121.
- 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.
- State Superintendent of Public Instruction. *Publication No. 290: The Schools and Civil Defense*. Raleigh, N.C.: State of North Carolina, 1953.