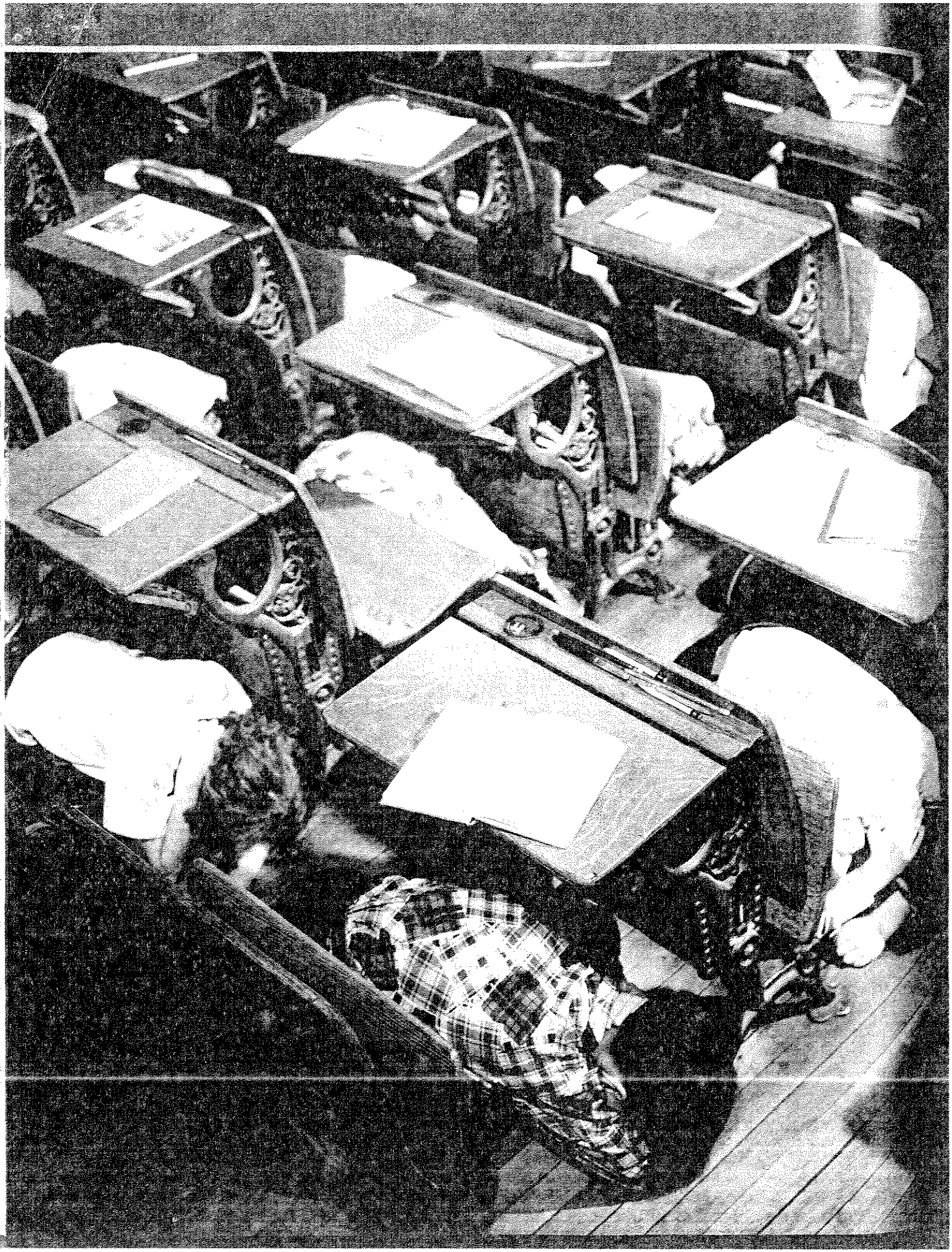


Chapter 40

Fighting the Cold War at Home

How did the anxieties raised by the Cold War affect life in the United States?

40.1 Introduction

Norman Finkelstein wore the "dog tag" that hung around his neck proudly. It was similar to the identification tags that members of the military wore—if soldiers were killed or injured, their dog tags revealed their name and which military outfit they belonged to. However, Finkelstein was no soldier. "I was in the fifth grade and had no intention at that time of joining the army," he remembers.

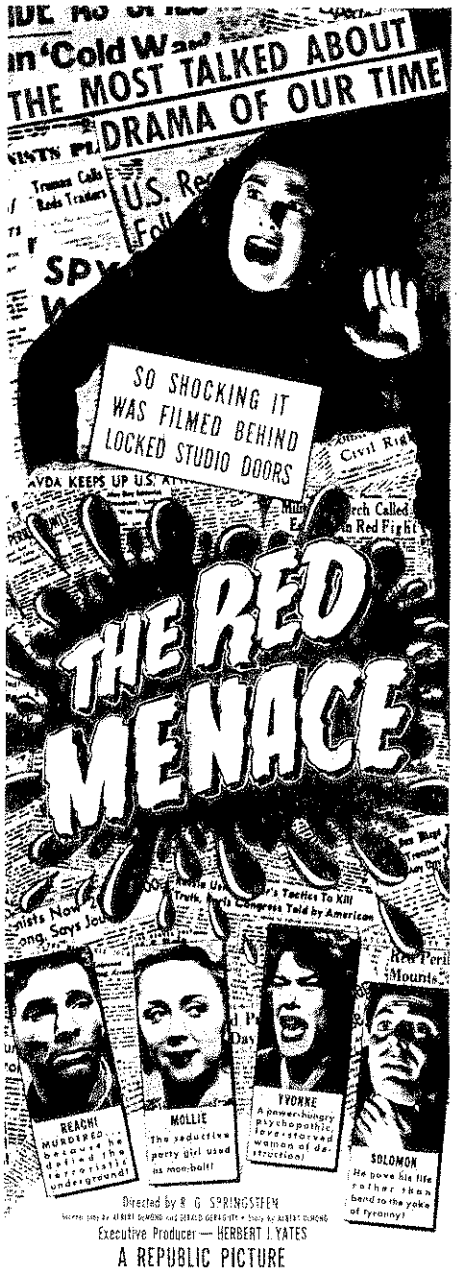
In many towns and cities during the early Cold War years, children wore dog tags like Finkelstein's, with their name and address imprinted on them. Some tags also carried their birth date, religion, and blood type. Authorities hoped the tags would help them deal with a nuclear attack if one took place. Finkelstein recalls, "In case of a nuclear attack, my body could be easily identified—that is, if the dog tag survived and there were others still alive to receive the information. It all seemed very strange at the time and even stranger today."

Children growing up during the Cold War lived with the fear that Soviet bombers—and later guided missiles—armed with nuclear weapons could attack the United States at any moment. No one could predict when a nuclear attack would occur, so people tried to remain constantly prepared. In addition to wearing dog tags, children practiced duck-and-cover drills at school. During these drills, when their teachers gave a signal, students ducked under their desks and covered their heads with their hands. Historian Doris Kearns Goodwin confesses, "I could never figure out how my flimsy desk, with its worn inkwell and its years of name-scratching, could protect me from the atomic bomb."

For Americans, the Cold War was a new and unfamiliar type of war. Like earlier conflicts, it caused fear and anxiety on the home front. It also raised concerns about how to keep the nation secure from external threats and unseen enemies within the country while also maintaining civil liberties. As in past wars, finding the right balance between freedom and security posed a challenge.

Many schoolchildren wore dog tags during the Cold War. These tags were designed to identify children in the aftermath of a nuclear attack. Americans also took other precautions, such as holding emergency drills and stockpiling goods, out of fear of nuclear war.

◀ Schoolchildren involved in a duck-and-cover nuclear attack drill, 1951



In response to HUAC investigations, film studios produced a series of anticommunist movies, such as *The Red Menace* and *I Was a Communist for the FBI*. The movies were usually box-office failures.

40.2 Searching for Communists on the Home Front

In 1951, the federal government published a pamphlet that listed 100 questions and answers about communism in the United States. Here are three examples:

> *What is communism?*
> A system by which one small group seeks to rule the world.
>
> *What do communists want?*
> To rule your mind and your body from cradle to grave.
>
> *Where can a communist be found in everyday life?*
> Look for him in your school, your labor union, your church, or your civic club.
>
> —"100 Things You Should Know About Communism in the U.S.A.," 1951

This publication revealed that the United States fought the Cold War not only against communists in foreign countries—it also fought communism at home.

Communists Come Under Suspicion at Home Not all Americans agreed with the government's definition of communism. Some people believed that communism offered a much fairer way of organizing a society than capitalism did. Under communism, everyone would share equally in what society produced. Extremes of wealth and poverty would fade away. The result, supporters maintained, would be a great increase in human happiness.

During the Depression, this vision had attracted many followers in the United States. Some had joined the Communist Party. Others became communist sympathizers, or people who believed in communist ideology but did not join the party. By 1950, Communist Party membership in the United States had dwindled to just 43,000. Still, as the Cold War heated up, so did fears of communist **subversion,** or plots to overthrow the government and replace it with a communist dictatorship.

To calm public anxiety, in 1947 President Truman established the Federal Employee Loyalty Program. It required government employers to take **loyalty oaths,** or pledges of loyalty to the United States. It also called for background investigations of employees who had possible connections to subversive groups. After 5 million investigations, hundreds of government workers lost their jobs for being "potentially" disloyal. Several thousand others were forced to resign.

HUAC Hunts for Communists in Hollywood and Beyond Meanwhile, Congress began its own investigation. It was led by the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), which had been formed in 1938 to investigate subversive organizations. In 1947, HUAC turned its attention to communist influence in the film industry. "Large numbers of moving pictures that come out of Hollywood," charged one committee member, "carry the Communist line." The committee called on writers, actors, and directors to testify about their political beliefs.

Ten witnesses refused to answer the committee's questions. Called the Hollywood Ten, they argued that the Fifth Amendment gave them the right to

refuse to answer on the grounds that their testimony might **incriminate** them, or cause them to look guilty. The committee disagreed and charged them with **contempt of Congress,** or willful failure to obey the authority of Congress. When the House of Representatives voted to convict the Hollywood Ten of that crime, the group issued a joint statement that warned, "The United States can keep its constitutional liberties, or it can keep the [HUAC]. It can't keep both."

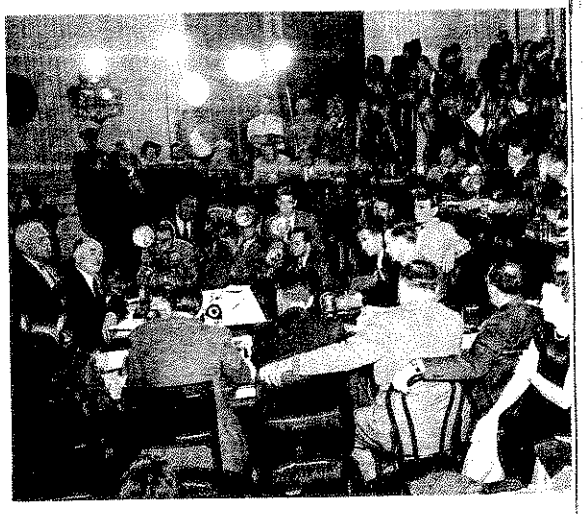
The heads of Hollywood movie studios grew concerned about the impact the HUAC investigation would have on their industry. They stated that they would not hire anyone with communist sympathies. To carry out this pledge, they created a **blacklist** of people thought to be Communist Party members or communist sympathizers. Anyone whose name appeared on this blacklist could no longer find work making films.

From the film industry, HUAC moved on to other groups. In 1954, it called on labor organizer John Watkins to testify about communist influence in labor unions. When Watkins refused to answer certain questions, HUAC convicted him of contempt of Congress. Watkins appealed his conviction, arguing that the Constitution does not give Congress unlimited power to investigate the private lives of citizens. The Supreme Court agreed with him. Writing for the majority, Chief Justice Earl Warren ruled that Congress's power to investigate must be related to its business of making laws:

> There is no general authority to expose the private affairs of individuals without justification in terms of the functions of the Congress . . . Investigations conducted solely for the personal aggrandizement [glorification] of the investigators or to "punish" those investigated are indefensible.
>
> —*Watkins v. United States,* 1957

Spy Cases Raise New Fears Public worries about subversion deepened with news that Americans in important government posts had been charged with working as spies for the Soviet Union. The Alger Hiss case involved a State Department official who had served as an adviser to President Roosevelt at the Yalta Conference. A former Communist named Whittaker Chambers accused Hiss of passing secrets to the Soviet Union. In 1950, a federal grand jury convicted Hiss of **perjury,** or lying under oath. Still, he continued to proclaim his innocence. However, secret documents made public in 1995 indicate that Hiss probably had spied for the Soviet Union.

Just as shocking were charges that Americans had helped the Soviet Union test its first atomic bomb in 1949. A year later, a German-born British physicist named Klaus Fuchs confessed that he had spied for the Soviet Union while he was working on the Manhattan Project for Britain during World War II. The information Fuchs passed along to Soviet scientists may well have helped to speed their development of atomic weapons. From Fuchs, a trail of espionage led investigators to Ethel and Julius Rosenberg, whom the United States charged with passing atomic secrets to the Soviet Union. The Rosenberg trial concluded with death sentences for both defendants. At the time, many people protested the verdict and sentences, arguing that the evidence against the suspects was inconclusive. Nonetheless, the Rosenbergs were executed in 1953, becoming the only American civilians to be put to death for spying during the Cold War.



The House Un-American Activities Committee held thousands of hearings in its hunt for subversives in American society. Here the committee questions a Hollywood executive about alleged communist influence in the film industry.

Ethel and Julius Rosenberg were tried, convicted, and executed for passing atomic secrets to the Soviet Union. Such well-publicized spy cases raised fears that the federal government was riddled with traitors. Soviet documents opened in the 1990s indicate that Julius had spied for the Soviet Union. Ethel was probably guilty only of keeping quiet about her husband's activities.

Senator Joseph McCarthy gained fame and power by launching a one-man crusade against communist sympathizers in government agencies. Some people praised him as a dedicated patriot. Others condemned him for publicly accusing people of disloyalty without much, if any, evidence.

The Rise and Fall of Joseph McCarthy About two weeks after Fuchs confessed to spying, Senator Joseph McCarthy of Wisconsin was speaking in West Virginia. He asked his audience how communists had been so successful in taking over Eastern Europe and China. The answer, he said, could be found in "the traitorous actions" of Americans working in high government posts. Then he added, "I have here in my hand a list of 205 . . . names that were made known to the Secretary of State as being members of the Communist Party and who nevertheless are still working and shaping policy in the State Department."

McCarthy never produced this list of names. Nor did he offer evidence to back up his charges. Still, he launched a crusade against subversives that rapidly gained momentum. Widespread public support for his investigations helped the Republican Party win control of the Senate in 1952. As a result, McCarthy was named head of the Government Committee on Operations of the Senate.

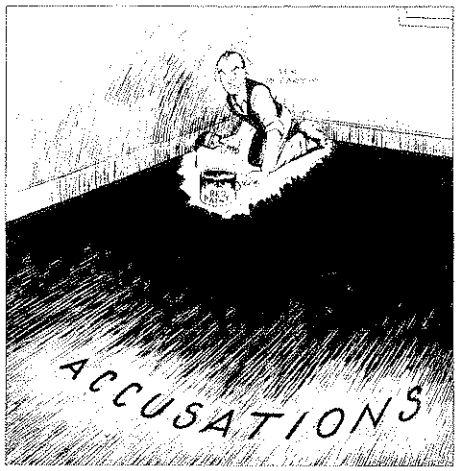
Over the next two years, McCarthy used his newfound power to search for subversives. Although he never made a solid case against anyone, his accusations drove some people out of their jobs. For example, under hostile questioning by McCarthy's chief lawyer, Roy Cohn, Army Signal Corps employee Carl Greenblum broke down and cried. As Greenblum collected himself, McCarthy announced, "the witness admits he was lying." Greenblum had admitted no such thing, yet he was still fired. Such reckless persecution of innocent people became known as McCarthyism. Today, this term signifies the practice of publicly accusing someone of subversive activities without evidence to back up the charges.

McCarthyism made people even more fearful. Lawmakers refused to enact reforms that might be viewed as moving the country toward communism. Schools asked teachers to sign loyalty oaths, and those who objected to doing so lost their jobs. Citizens became reluctant to speak out about injustices for fear of being labeled subversive. This anxiety was often carried to extremes. When graduate students at a university circulated a petition asking for a vending machine in the physics department, some students refused to sign. They feared having their names on a list with other allegedly radical students.

Finally, McCarthy went too far. In 1954, he accused both the Army and President Dwight D. Eisenhower of being "soft on Communism." In the nationally televised Army-McCarthy hearings, spellbound Americans watched as McCarthy's brutal tactics were exposed for all to see. The climax of the hearings came when McCarthy attacked a young man who worked for Joseph Welch, the lawyer who represented the Army. An emotional Welch responded,

> Little did I dream you could be so reckless and so cruel as to do an injury to that lad. It is, I regret to say, equally true that I fear he shall always bear a scar needlessly inflicted by you. If it were in my power to forgive you for your reckless cruelty, I would do so. I like to think I'm a gentle man, but your forgiveness will have to come from someone other than me.
>
> —Joseph Welch, addressing Senator Joseph McCarthy, June 9, 1954

Public opinion quickly turned against McCarthy. Late in 1954, the Senate passed Resolution 301, which **censured,** or formally scolded, McCarthy for his destructive actions. His behavior, it stated, had "tended to bring the Senate into dishonor and disrepute." McCarthy soon faded from the national scene.



The more reckless Senator McCarthy's accusations became, the less believable they were. When McCarthy made false charges against a young lawyer working for Joseph Welch during the Army-McCarthy hearings, a disgusted Welch replied, "Have you no sense of decency, sir, at long last? Have you left no sense of decency?"

In addition to fear, the Atomic Age inspired excitement. In 1946, a cereal company offered children an "atomic bomb" ring for the price of 15 cents and a cereal box top. "See real atoms split to smithereens!" the advertisement gleefully claimed. About 750,000 children ordered the ring.

40.3 Living with Nuclear Anxiety

> A stark white flash enveloped their world. Randy felt the heat on his neck. Peyton cried out and covered her face with her hands. In the southwest, in the direction of Tampa, St. Petersburg, and Sarasota, another unnatural sun was born, much larger and infinitely fiercer than the sun in the east . . . Peyton screamed, "I can't see! I can't see, Mommy. Mommy, where are you?"
>
> —Pat Frank, *Alas, Babylon,* 1959

Like many novels written in the 1950s, Pat Frank's *Alas, Babylon* portrayed a world engulfed in World War III—an imagined conflict fought with weapons powerful enough to destroy all life on Earth.

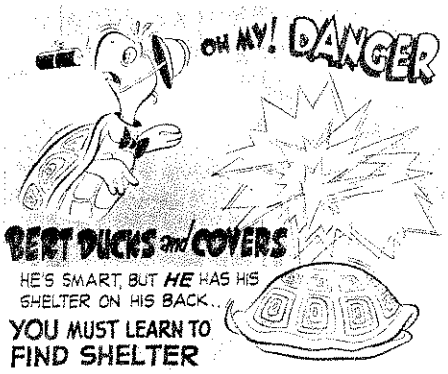
The Perils and Promise of the Atomic Age Books like *Alas, Babylon* explored the perils of the Atomic Age. During these early Cold War years, the destruction caused by the atomic bombs dropped on Japan remained fresh in Americans' minds. People were terrified to think of such bombs raining down on American cities—yet by 1949, such an attack seemed all too possible.

Despite such fears, the promise of atomic power also excited Americans. The media ran glowing stories predicting atomic-powered cars, ships, airplanes, and power plants. One newspaper reported,

> Atoms in an amount of matter spread out the size of a fingernail, say the scientists, could supply sufficient energy to propel an ocean liner across the sea and back. An automobile, with a microscopic amount of matter from which atomic energy could be released, could be driven around for a lifetime if it didn't wear out, never stopping at a gas station.
>
> —*Milwaukee Journal,* August 7, 1945

Businesses jumped on the atomic bandwagon as well. The bar at the Washington Press Club marked the arrival of the Atomic Age with the "Atomic Cocktail." Department stores advertised "Atomic Sales." Musicians recorded songs with titles like "Atom Buster" and "Atom Polka." A French fashion designer named his new two-piece bathing suit the "bikini" in honor of the testing of an atom bomb on Bikini Atoll in the Central Pacific.

The mushroom cloud produced by an atomic blast became a popular symbol during the Atomic Age. Las Vegas, Nevada, adopted the mushroom cloud as its symbol. It appeared on postcards, candy, and toys. Here a U.S. Navy admiral and his wife cut an "atomic cake" at a party in Washington, D.C.



Schools used a civil defense film, *Duck and Cover,* to teach children how to respond to a nuclear attack. This image from the film shows Bert the Turtle hiding in his shell from a dynamite blast. The film compares this situation to how children should react to an atomic bomb explosion.

In the 1950s, atomic bomb tests moved to the Nevada desert. In Las Vegas, the Chamber of Commerce promoted atomic tourism, publishing a schedule of tests and the best places to view them. Armed with "atomic box lunches," tourists hoping to feel and see an atomic bomb's power flocked as close to ground zero—the point of a bomb's impact—as the government allowed.

Creating a Civil Defense System As the atomic arms race took off, the federal government began planning for **civil defense**—the organization and training of citizens to work with the armed forces and emergency services during a war or natural disaster. In 1951, Congress established the Federal Civil Defense Administration (FCDA). The head of FCDA warned Americans that the "back yard may be the next front line." The agency distributed millions of civil defense manuals to help people prepare for a nuclear attack. These publications made it clear that Americans could not rely on the military to protect them from a surprise attack. People would have to be prepared to protect themselves as best they could.

Civil defense preparedness soon became part of daily life. Many communities set up bomb shelters in public buildings. Stocked with emergency food and water supplies, these shelters offered people refuge during an attack. Across the country, tests of warning sirens and emergency radio stations were carried out every week. Civil defense workers called block wardens trained their neighbors on how to fight fires and provide first aid after an attack.

Children also took part in civil defense training. The FCDA developed a film and booklet featuring a character called Bert the Turtle, who taught children how to survive an atomic explosion. Bert led the children through duck-and-cover drills to prepare them for how to react if they ever heard an emergency siren.

Some families took preparedness a step further by burying an underground shelter in their backyard. Several companies sold prefabricated "fallout shelters" for single-family use. The shelters were designed to shield families not only from an atomic explosion, but also from the radioactive dust that "falls out" of the sky afterward. Authorities advised families to remain sealed in their fallout shelters for several weeks after an attack to let this toxic dust settle.

Preparedness Versus Peace These early civil defense preparations were based on the expected impact of an atomic bomb attack. By the mid-1950s, the development of far more powerful H-bombs raised questions about the effectiveness

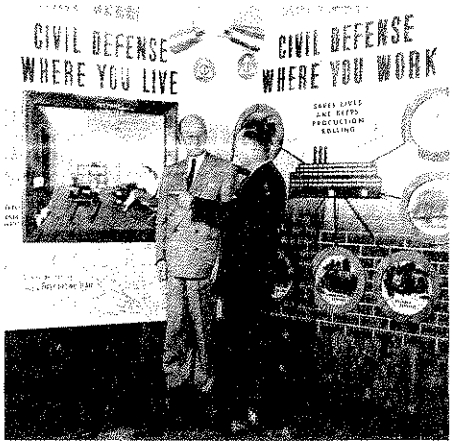
Many Americans built fallout shelters to shield themselves in the event of a nuclear attack. A family installed this one in Garden City, New York, in 1955. Notice the canned food, canned water, and other items the family thought it might need while living in the shelter for a period of weeks.

of such methods. Faced with this new threat, the FCDA concluded that the only practical way to protect large numbers of people during an attack was to evacuate them from target cities. "It's much better to get people out, even if in the process you may kill some," said a civil defense planner, "than to have millions of Americans just stay there and be killed."

The FCDA created a large-scale civil defense drill called Operation Alert to test how quickly cities could be evacuated. On June 15, 1955, sirens began to wail across the country. The results were mixed. Some people ducked into bomb shelters. Others headed out of town. Many paid little or no attention to the drill. Had the attack been real, observed the *New York Times* in an editorial, millions of people would have died. The editorial concluded that

> This demonstration gives new emphasis to President Eisenhower's dictum [observation] that war no longer presents the possibility of victory or defeat, but only . . . varying degrees of destruction, and that there is no substitute for a just and lasting peace.
>
> —*New York Times,* June 16, 1955

The FCDA repeated Operation Alert drills throughout the 1950s. However, for a growing number of Americans, the drills became an opportunity to speak out against the nuclear arms race. In 1960, a group of young mothers in New York City organized hundreds of protesters around this simple idea: "Peace is the only defense against nuclear war."



The Federal Civil Defense Administration worked to protect the country from the effects of a nuclear attack. Its efforts included public exhibits on civil defense, like this one in New York. But such efforts would probably have made little difference in an actual attack.

Summary

Like earlier wars, the Cold War created fright and anxiety on the home front. Fearful of attacks from within, the government sought to root out communist subversion. Faced with the threat of nuclear attack from the Soviet Union, it promoted civil defense and preparedness planning.

House Un-American Activities Committee HUAC investigated the loyalty of people in many areas of life. Its probe of the movie industry led movie studio heads to blacklist anyone thought to be a communist or communist sympathizer.

Spy trials Fears of subversion deepened with the Alger Hiss case and the Rosenberg trial. Hiss served a prison term, and the Rosenbergs were executed for selling atomic secrets to the USSR.

McCarthyism Senator Joseph McCarthy launched a well-publicized crusade against subversives in government. The term McCarthyism came to refer to personal attacks against innocent people with little or no evidence to support the charges.

Atomic Age Americans greeted the Atomic Age with a mixture of fear and excitement. Many people had high hopes for peaceful uses of atomic power.

Federal Civil Defense Administration Congress established the FCDA to help Americans survive a nuclear attack. The FCDA published civil defense manuals and promoted drills and other measures to protect Americans from harm. As the power of nuclear weapons increased, however, the usefulness of such precautions came into question.