Growing Up in the Atomic Age: America’s Youth Face an uncertain Future

Kacey Martin
University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa

Follow this and additional works at: https://kahualike.manoa.hawaii.edu/horizons

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://kahualike.manoa.hawaii.edu/horizons/vol2/iss1/28

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Kahualike. It has been accepted for inclusion in Mānoa Horizons by an authorized editor of Kahualike. For more information, please contact sheila.yeh@hawaii.edu.
Growing Up In The Atomic Age
America’s Youth Face An Uncertain Future

KACEY MARTIN

History 496B (Senior Tutorial in History: United States)
Mentor: Dr. Suzanna Reiss

From the emergence of giant insects on the big screen, to the bomb tests on well-dressed mannequin families, the 1950s mark a captivating period of history and culture dominated by the presence of atomic power. However, atomic power was strongly tied to increasingly intense developments in the Cold War, disrupting the optimism Americans felt following World War II.

This project examines the experiences of Americans during this time, focusing on the youth who confronted a future that they could lose at any moment. Youth were exposed to messages from the government and larger culture inspiring both fear and captivation with atomic power. Youth also dealt with the transformation of their communities into war preparedness zones. This project thus utilizes various historical sources to reveal how youth became familiar with atomic knowledge and themes of survival. This project also looks at the different responses youth made toward this learning process to highlight their capacity to shape their own understandings about the world. In doing so, this research offers a character study of a generation in which the threat of nuclear war significantly influenced who they would become as adults.

Introduction
In the years following the Second World War, Americans increasingly bought into the prosperity they felt from being spared the devastation that the war had wrought upon their overseas counterparts. They found that they could settle into post-war life with ease and comfort, and sought to improve it by living in growing suburban communities and enjoying the new consumer items America had to offer, such as flashy cars and television.¹ Couples, both old and young, felt they could bring new children into the world, starting off America’s baby boom period. This tranquil picture did not come without its rips,

¹ Margot A. Henriksen, Dr. Strangelove’s America: Society and Culture in the Atomic Age (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997), 88–90.
However, Americans were aware of the government’s continued efforts to develop and improve its arsenal of weapons of mass destruction. In addition, news of the Soviet Union’s success in building atomic weapons, and the government’s increasing efforts at building civil defense, made Americans anxious that the safety and comfort they had could all disappear. The future no longer seemed certain, and it was in this environment that baby boomers and other older children would grow up.

America’s youth offer an interesting perspective on this tense time, in that the Cold War and the atomic bomb touched their lives in different ways than from adults. Specifically, children and adolescents were exposed as a target audience to contradictory messages from the government and larger culture about nuclear energy and weapons. They found themselves in a new landscape as their homes and communities were transformed into war preparedness zones that they learned to navigate on their own. With their newfound nuclear knowledge and experiences in hand, they were then able to shape their understandings about the war and their role in it, as well as their expectations for the future. What follows is an examination of the mixed messages children and adolescents came across during the early Cold War, after the Soviet Union detonated its first atomic bomb in 1949, and before the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty of 1963 prohibited all nuclear weapon tests above ground and under water. These messages range from those in the media inspiring fear and anxiety with their explosions and radioactivity, to those produced by the government to reassure youth of their futures through civil defense and scientific breakthroughs. Finally, this paper looks at the specific ways that youth responded to their circumstances. As Michael Scheibach argues, “without acknowledging the participants’ interaction with these narratives, much of history remains unstated, even inaccurate.”

To achieve these aims, this paper employs material from a variety of sources—from books and journal articles looking back on this strange time in America’s past, to the accounts produced by the very people who grew up then. The former provide historical context, and offer different ways to think about the latter; whereas the latter—which include government-distributed materials, and materials produced in popular culture and the media—give insight into what the physical, political, and cultural landscape looked like for America’s youth at the time. To see how these young people navigated this landscape, testimonies and reflections written by their older selves are examined.

“Don’t They Know It’s the End of the World?”

On August 6, 1945, America unleashed its new weapon on an unsuspecting Hiroshima, and again a few days later on Nagasaki, resulting in Japan’s rapid surrender during the war. Whereas many Americans had thought that the war would continue for at least another year, the war had shockingly ended within weeks at the cost of many Japanese lives. At that point, the public realized there was something radically dangerous in their midst. For several years, they co-existed tenuously with the awareness of this power while enjoying the prosperity of the postwar years. However, by September 1949 America’s monopoly over atomic power had ended in the wake of the Soviet Union’s successful detonation of an atomic weapon. Moreover, the growing conflict in Korea made the idea that the bomb could be used against the United States a real possibility. It was in this environment that the Atomic Generation would come of age.

Scheibach identified the Atomic Generation as people born between 1928 and 1942, emphasizing that “[n]o generation before or since has been as informed about the actualities and repercussions of the atomic bomb and the inherent dangers associated with its constant threat.” Children and adolescents learned about these actualities and repercussions across a variety of mediums, such as their parents, teachers, newspapers, film, and radio. Across these mediums, they kept track of recent developments in America’s nuclear program and its cold war with the Soviet Union. This exposure provided a ground for anxieties to grow.

Under Eisenhower’s administration, the United States adopted a “New Look.” This policy defined America’s military and foreign policy in the coming years, and involved the strengthening of its nuclear arsenal in order
and adolescents, opening new worlds as they projected different messages about a future in which humans continue to live with atomic weapons. In Them!, Dr. Harold Medford reflects on America’s fight against giant ants: “When Man entered the Atomic Age, he opened a door into a new world. What we’ll eventually find in that new world, nobody can predict.” In The Incredible Shrinking Man, writers toy with the concept of existence, as Scott realizes that he will not disappear, that he will continue to mean something even as he shrinks.

In addition to the big screen, children were introduced to atomic themes via radio waves. Youth were often exposed to music whose lyrics captured the anxieties felt by the public over the threat of nuclear war. This was the case in popular teenage “death” songs, such as Billy Chambers’ 1962 hit, “Fallout Shelter.” In the song, the bomb strikes, and Chambers refuses to go with his parents to safety, instead running out to meet his girlfriend, because he would rather die with her than live without her. The lyrics of a song like this added a personal element to the nuclear knowledge and images that youth came across in the other media.

“Civil Defense, An American Tradition!”

Recognizing the need to address the public’s concerns about the growing threat of nuclear attack following the news of the Soviet Union’s development of its own atomic weapons, President Truman made the push in the last days of 1950 to establish a governmental agency that would do just that, and in January 1951, the Federal Civil Defense Administration (FCDA) officially launched. Civil defense was not a new concept. Before the introduction of nuclear warfare, civilians had already become expected to defend themselves against this through blackout drills, resource conservation, and refugee relief. Until the attacks on Japan, civilians believed that was enough. Mobilization strategy and morale on the home front shifted in the years following the onset of the Atomic Age as Ameri-
cans now had to confront the possibility that their home could transform into the war images they had seen in the media. On the surface, the FCDA promoted civil defense in educational products like This is Civil Defense as a way to cut war casualties and encourage civilians to keep working in the face of an attack, to quicken the recovery process and enable America to retaliate. It emphasized that Hiroshima and Nagasaki did not have the civil defense it needed to have softened the blow they received. The expectation was that by producing these products and other propaganda, state and local agencies would spend the funds needed to implement civil defense programs in their cities. Without federal funding, those agencies found in existing institutions, such as the public schools, opportunities to kick off a massive informational campaign to promote civil defense.

In the schools, children and teenagers received an education about nuclear preparedness and found their environment transformed as they participated in various programs. This education included the showing of government-produced films, in which students learned about the effects of effects of the bomb, and what they needed to do to protect themselves. Perhaps the most famous was the 1951 film, Duck and Cover. The film starts off with the introduction of the cartoon character Bert the Turtle, who is casually walking down the road when he comes across a monkey holding a dynamite. As the theme song goes: “When danger threatened him he never got hurt, he knew just what to do… He’d duck! And cover!” Bert drops to the ground and hides in his shell, saving him from the blast. The film repeatedly tells its young audience that this was what they needed to do, when they heard the siren or saw the flash, whether they were in the classroom or out in the schoolyard. It forced them to think about the possibility of being attacked with no grown-ups around to help them. All they needed to do was practice, and have faith that these procedures would help them survive a nuclear attack.

If these films did not convince children and adolescents of the importance of civil defense, then the practices and programs they engaged in may have. Practice came in a variety of ways, and it meant experiencing life as if their communities could turn into a warzone instantaneously. In cities that officials believed enemy planes would target, such as New York City, Los Angeles, and Chicago, schools began conducting regular air raid drills. The teacher would shout “Drop!” without warning, and the children would drop face down to the ground and clasp their hands behind their necks. In other drills designed for situations where officials had detected enemy aircraft early enough for people to take cover, students followed their teachers to the designated shelter areas in the school.

To make matters more real, children and teenagers in many of these cities received military-style dog tags from their schools containing their names and addresses that would help civil defense officials identify them. Over 2.5 million tags had been distributed in both public and private schools in San Francisco, Seattle, Philadelphia, and New York City. Children were told that it was important to wear these tags so that if they happened to get hurt during an atomic attack, real soldiers could identify them and bring them to their families, as one boy in Las Vegas relayed to reporters in a new broadcast while his school received their dog tags. Less emphasized, however, was the fact that these tags were chosen particularly because they had higher chances of surviving such an attack than the people who wore them, thus allowing officials to identify the bodies.

Civil defense permeated other parts of children’s and teenagers’ lives as well. At home, the expectation was that families would be prepared for an attack. The government sponsored many civil defense programs to motivate families and individuals to act. Families received

17 Brown, “A is for Atom, B is for Bomb,” 70.
18 Ibid., 71.
20 Brown, “A is for Atom, B is for Bomb,” 80.
22 Jacobs, The Dragon’s Tail, 106.
24 Jacobs, The Dragon’s Tail, 106.
home civil defense instructions in publications like *Six Steps to Survival*, and films like *Survival under Atomic Attack*. Each emphasized a need for shelter, offering procedures for selecting or building shelter spaces, and for fortifying those spaces with survival necessities. Many children would have become familiar with the term, “Grandma’s Pantry,” as a civil defense measure. Grandma’s pantry was always stocked with food for any unexpected visitor; likewise, radio announcers told families that “[n]o matter what unexpected disaster, your family should have a seven-day supply of food on hand,” as part of the six steps to survival.

In 1951, President Truman established CONELRAD (CONtrol for ELectromagnetic RADiation), an emergency broadcasting network intended to be used in case of an attack. The FCDA stressed the importance of tuning the radio AM to 640 or 1240, where official civil defense instructions and reports would play during an emergency. Hypothetically, CONELRAD would start when the alert for an attack sounded, and all regular radio or television would stop to inform listeners or viewers to “[t]une your standard radio receiver to 640 or 1240 kilocycles for official instructions, news, and official information.” Fortunately, CONELRAD was never used for its intended purpose. However, it would routinely interrupt broadcasts with warnings. CONELRAD, as well as the air-raid sirens tests that punctuated Americans’ routines at least once a month, served to remind Americans of their dire situation.

The intensity of such punctuations in the normal lives of American youth was perhaps most felt starting in 1954, when the federal government began its annual Operation Alert. In this exercise, Washington D.C. and fifty-four other cities around the country underwent an atomic attack simulation where Americans scurried underground bomb shelter. Moreover, Operation Alert provided civil defense and emergency workers with an opportunity to test their response training.

### The Friendly Atom

Civil defense was not the only approach that the government took to reassure the public. The future as American youth knew it depended on how the adults handled nuclear energy and its power. Thus, the government and culture at large worked together in promoting the positive aspects of harnessing nuclear energy and power, as well as in normalizing its presence.

Two narratives were at play in the media. One involved nuclear weapons and the horrifying images associated with them. “This is atomic energy,” a news report stated over footage of a rising mushroom cloud. However, another narrative emphasized a different phase of atomic research, in which scientists harnessed atomic energy to benefit mankind, rather than destroy it. “This, too, is atomic energy,” the report continued, capturing scientists making breakthroughs in the fields of industry, agriculture, biology, and medicine by experimenting with radioactive materials. The key to convincing the public to trust in atomic experiments involving metal-making, understanding animal physiology, and cancer detection, it seemed, was to gradually expose mankind to nonharmful amounts of radiation and make radiation useful.

Children and adolescents became familiar with this narrative through Walt Disney as well. On one January night in 1957, families tuned in to their television sets to watch the latest episode of *Disneyland*. In this episode titled “Our Friend the Atom,” amidst a backdrop of colorful cartoon imagery, German physicist Heinz Haber tells the story of the atom’s discovery and usage as a story of mankind—one in which man has been searching for some sort of knowledge that could benefit the common

---


26 “Take The Step (Grandma’s Pantry) by Unknown Announcer and Cast [1953],” CONELRAD, accessed October 20, 2016, http://www.atomicplatters.com/more.php?id=8_0_1_0_M.


Confessions from the Atomic Generation

In examining youth culture in the Atomic Age, everything can be boiled down to one question: What unique experiences did American youth face growing up against the backdrop of atmospheric atomic testing and the Cold War? Images of the mushroom cloud, knowledge of radiation, and civil defense films like Duck and Cover! presented anxious children and teenagers with conflicting visions of the future. On the one hand, they realized that nuclear energy had the power to potentially cut their futures short. On the other, the adults in their communities went to great lengths to reassure them of their chances of survival, as well as to remind them of nuclear energy’s potential to do good. How did children and teenagers make sense of and respond to these different atomic narratives?

While collectively called the Atomic Generation, by no means did these children and teenagers generate a unified response. In a series of 55 interviews with Americans born in the 1940s, Carey unraveled what he called the “bomb’s psychological fallout.” As his subjects recalled their experiences under the threat of nuclear attack, Carey identified several themes in which his subjects’ recollections and responses overlapped. For one thing, the bomb was a dangerous mystery to many. Two respondents recalled being confused by the technical aspects of nuclear weapons. It had not helped that there was a wall of secrecy surrounding these weapons. This resulted in the bomb having an almost surreal presence in these people’s lives. One respondent described seeing houses destroyed in films capturing the Nevada tests of the mid-1950s as “kind of startling” and a “sort of magic,” because for him, buildings were something he could count on being relatively stable, even in a fire or an earthquake.

Despite their uncertainty revolving around the nature of the bomb, Carey’s respondents were certain that their chances of survival within the immediate ring of the bomb’s impact were extremely low, and they could only guess how their bodies would react to being exposed to radiation, making participation in civil defense exercises seem almost absurd. One respondent stated, “No desk is going to stop me from getting completely wiped out, and the people they sent around from Civil Defense to lecture us confirmed my worst doubts.” Other respondents recalled feeling embarrassed to express their fears when the sirens sounded and there was clearly no real attack. A priest remembered thinking, “I’m not going to be the first one to run [to the shelter]. If I see somebody else running for cover, then I’ll run.” Author Bill Bryson chose not to participate in the civil defense drills at his

36 Ibid., 21.
38 Ibid., 22.
39 Ibid., 22.
school at all, writing in his memoir, *The Life and Times of the Thunderbolt Kid*, that “nuclear drills were pointless.” Instead, he opted to read comics at his desk while his classmates and teacher ducked for cover under their desks.40

Some youth made a “tenuous peace” with the bomb, refusing to let it run their lives.41 Teacher Laura Graff and Historian Doris Kearns Goodwin seem to fall within this category. Graff recalls obediently following her teachers’ instructions at her elementary school, despite not fully understanding the ramifications of the bomb and the drills she and her was experiencing. To her, duck and cover was a normal part of the school day, though that did not stop her from feeling terrified at the blaring of the air raid sirens. “In spite of all this,” she writes, “I had a relatively normal childhood.”42 Goodwin concentrated on finding a safe and pleasant alternative shelter in her community because her family’s basement was inadequate. However, like Graff, Goodwin did her best to live a normal life as a child in the early 1950s, focusing more on listening to her favorite baseball team’s games on the radio and less on the events surrounding the Korean War.43

Still yet, others tried not to be concerned with nuclear weapons at all, taking on a more “if it happens, it happens” attitude.44 According to Scheibach, these were the “apathetic, alienated, defeated, fatalistic members of the Atomic Generation who adopted the persona of helpless victims to the whim of fate.”45 Robert B. Kwit, a high school student from the Bronx, wrote a poem entitled “I Am Going Away” exemplifying this:

I am going away soon
   a long, long way,
To a land of misty sea green shapeless forms,
   in the faraway longaway.

There is no present in this land,
Memory does not exist here.
Once a thing is done, it passes into senseless oblivion.

Future is not known.
Vague desires float away on a milky mist of dreams before
   they are thought of here.
I am going away to join the shadows,
   soon, soon, soon…46

Many children and teenagers found the knowledge that no one was safe from an atomic attack alarming. In his article, “Growing Up Nuclear,” Robert Musil expressed that because of this knowledge, he “developed an early disillusionment with, even disdain for, authority.”47 Bryson shared a similar sentiment in his memoir realizing as a ten-year-old that “adults [were] not entirely to be trusted.” It was the year 1962 when he first felt a genuine fear by events occurring outside of Kid World. He vividly recalled feeling his blood run cold as President Kennedy addressed the nation that autumn. Bryson understood that had events occurring off the coast of Cuba escalated to violence, World War III would have unleashed. Of course, as his parents reassured him, everything ended up being all right; however, he realized “how close [they] all came to dying” when it was later revealed that the CIA was unaware of the 170 missiles the Soviets placed in Cuba that could have wiped America’s largest cities off the map.48

This sense of disillusionment with adults increased with films like *Duck and Cover* as they presented scenarios in which adults were not present to protect the children, emphasizing the belief that it was ultimately children’s job to save themselves.49 With this understanding many youth felt that they had a responsibility to “safeguard America and save the world from atomic destruction,” and thus become involved by writing letters, essays, and poems reacting to the realities of the Cold War.50 For example, high school student Carrie Lee Bates wrote:

I don’t advocate communism. I don’t advocate capitalism either. In some parts of the world one might work where the other wouldn’t. But how can we ever hope to solve any world problems, in the U.N. or otherwise, if people don’t realize that there are two sides to every question?

---

41 Carey, “Psychological Fallout,” 23.
44 Carey, “Psychological Fallout,” 23.
48 Bryson, *The Life and Times of the Thunderbolt Kid*, 201–203.
To avoid war, many students like Carrie advocated world cooperation with the hope that a strong international organization like the United Nations would facilitate efforts to maintain peace.

These students refused to accept nuclear war as the inevitable end to their futures, as some of their peers had. In the 1960s the Atomic Generation began acting to ensure that the world would still be there when they grew up by taking a stance against American militarism and imperialism. This sentiment was embodied in the Port Huron Statement, written by a group of college students known as the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) in 1962 as a call to end the Cold War and to promote civil rights. In its introduction, the SDS wrote, “We are people of this generation, bred in at least modest comfort, housed on in universities, looking uncomfortable to the world we inherit. [W]e began to sense that what had originally been seen as the American Golden Age was actually the decline of an era.” College students around the nation felt a sense of urgency to change the fatalistic attitude of their society. Musil, a long-time leader in the movement for nuclear arms control, recalled attending rallies protesting war and the ABM missile as a graduate student. This urgency carried on even after college. Albert Furtwangler, an English professor and scholar, wrote, “I have survived and gone on to touch another generation, just as my teacher did, with a hope that new children would do the same.”

Growing up nuclear, many Americans received contradictory messages about their futures. However, they did not accept these messages without question or without putting up some challenge.
Growing Up In The Atomic Age

157


Jacobs, Robert A. *The Dragon’s Tail: Americans Face the Atomic Age.* Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2010.

