

# Growing Up In The Atomic Age

## America's Youth Face An Uncertain Future

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*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.*

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### 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 com-

munities and enjoying the new consumer items America had to offer, such as flashy cars and television.<sup>1</sup> 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,

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<sup>1</sup> Margot A. Henriksen, *Dr. Strangelove's America: Society and Culture in the Atomic Age* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997), 88–90.



I am a recent graduate from the College of Education, and an educator in secondary level social studies. This paper was written for my senior tutorial in U.S. History with Professor Reiss in Fall 2016. I was inspired by the post-apocalyptic, retrofuture universe I encountered while playing the video game, *Fallout 4*. It led me to wonder about how Americans in the 1950s prepared themselves for the destruction of an atomic attack, and then specifically how children and teenagers felt about having to duck and cover in the classroom—because surely that would protect them, right?

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.<sup>2</sup> 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."<sup>3</sup>

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 materi-

als, 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.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> 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.”<sup>6</sup> 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

2 Ibid., 91–93.

3 Michael Scheibach, *Atomic Narratives and Atomic Youth: Coming of Age with the Atom, 1945–1955* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2003), 175.

4 Robert A. Jacobs, *The Dragon's Tail: Americans Face the Atomic Age* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2010), 7.

5 Henriksen, *Dr. Strangelove's America*, 93–95.

6 Michael J. Carey, “Psychological Fallout,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 38, no. 1 (1982): 20.

to deter foreign aggression.<sup>7</sup> News cameras increasingly captured the results of these developments for the public to witness. Children and adolescents became familiar with unnerving images of mushroom clouds rising over Bikini Atoll and Nevada, and of buildings and mannequins being annihilated. Still, public knowledge of the effects of these weapons remained minimal, as the government contained the issue of radioactive fallout, even managing to keep the obliteration of the Marshallese island of Elugelab a secret. However, as officials increased the frequency in which they tested nuclear weapons, and as incidents where people fell ill from the resulting radioactive fallout became publicized, public knowledge and concerns about fallout grew.<sup>8</sup>

These dangers fed into the imagination of popular media, adding new kinds of terrifying nuclear images and knowledge for children and adolescents to interact with. For science fiction filmmakers, the idea that radiation could spread such dangers as genetic mutation and death without being sensed by the human body was fascinating. It inspired numerous films using radiation as a device to explain otherwise impossible occurrences.<sup>9</sup> Some films envisioned terrifying worlds invaded by mutated forces. In the 1954 film, *Them!*, a series of mysterious deaths in New Mexico's desert leads investigators to a colony of eight-foot long ants, mutated by lingering radiation from the first atomic bomb test in that area.<sup>10</sup> Within months, another colony makes its nest in the storm drains beneath Los Angeles, spurring local law enforcement and military to work together to rid the city of the menace.

Other films envisioned terrifying radioactive transformations in the human body. In the 1957 film, *The Incredible Shrinking Man*, Scott Carey's life forever changes one day after being enveloped in a strange mist out at sea.<sup>11</sup> Months later, Scott discovers that his body is shrinking each passing day. His struggles increase as the world around him "grows"—his clothes no longer fit him, he can no longer do his job, and eventually, he is forced to live in a dollhouse. Quickly, Scott becomes resigned to the fact that he will continue to shrink.

Films like these left lasting impressions on children

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."<sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup>

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.<sup>14</sup> 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 targets in war due to the use of aerial military tactics. An Office of Civilian Defense (OCD) had briefly existed to provide civilians the knowledge and training 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-

<sup>7</sup> Henriksen, *Dr. Strangelove's America*, 91.

<sup>8</sup> Jacobs, *The Dragon's Tail*, 16 & 29–33.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>10</sup> *Them!* DVD, directed by Gordon Douglas (Burbank, CA: Warner Bros. Pictures, Inc., 1954).

<sup>11</sup> *The Incredible Shrinking Man*, DVD, directed by Jack Arnold (Universal City, CA: Universal-International, 1957).

<sup>12</sup> *Them!*

<sup>13</sup> *The Incredible Shrinking Man*.

<sup>14</sup> "Billy Chambers—Fallout Shelter," *YouTube* video, 2:54, posted by "BIGREDSHCHORS," April 18, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FhkiadQeX8o>.

cans now had to confront the possibility that their home could transform into the war images they had seen in the media.<sup>15</sup>

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.<sup>16</sup> 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.<sup>17</sup>

In the schools, children and teenagers received an education about nuclear preparedness and found their environment transformed as they participated in various programs.<sup>18</sup> 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*.<sup>19</sup> 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.<sup>20</sup> 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.<sup>21</sup>

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.<sup>22</sup> 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.<sup>23</sup> 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.<sup>24</sup>

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

15 JoAnne Brown, “‘A is for Atom, B is for Bomb’: Civil Defense in American Public Education, 1948–1963,” *The Journal of American History* 75, no. 1 (1988): 69; Melvin E. Matthews, *Duck and Cover: Civil Defense Images in Film and Television from the Cold War to 9/11* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2012), 4–6.

16 Federal Civil Defense Administration, “This is Civil Defense,” 1951, in “*In Case Atom Bombs Fall*”—*An Anthology of Governmental Explanations, Instructions and Warnings from the 1940s to the 1960s*, ed. Michael Scheibach (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2009), 7–9.

17 Brown, “A is for Atom, B is for Bomb,” 70.

18 *Ibid.*, 71.

19 “Duck and Cover (1951) Bert the Turtle,” *YouTube* video, 9:14, posted by “Nuclear Vault,” July 11, 2009, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IKqXu-5jw6o>.

20 Brown, “A is for Atom, B is for Bomb,” 80.

21 Doris Kearns Goodwin, *Wait Till Next Year: A Memoir* (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 1997), chapter 5, Kindle edition.

22 Jacobs, *The Dragon’s Tail*, 106.

23 “School Kids Get Their Civil Defense Dog Tags,” *YouTube* video, 1:04, posted by “CONELRAD6401240,” September 17, 2010, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZmYoJQUyhuE>.

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.<sup>25</sup> 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.<sup>26</sup>

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.<sup>27</sup> 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.”<sup>28</sup> Fortunately, CONELRAD was never used for its intended purpose. However, it would routinely interrupt broadcasts with warnings. CONELRAD, as well as the air-raid siren tests that punctuated Americans’ routines at least once a month, served to remind Americans of their dire situation.<sup>29</sup>

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 for shelter as Russian bombers “approached,” leaving

the streets devoid of activity. President Eisenhower also participated in the exercise, leading his staff to an underground bomb shelter. Moreover, Operation Alert provided civil defense and emergency workers with an opportunity to test their response training.<sup>30</sup>

## 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.<sup>31</sup> 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

25 FCDA, *Six Steps to Survival*, Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1955, <http://web.ncf.ca/jim/misc/civilDefense/atomicSurvival.pdf>; U.S. Office of Civil Defense, “Survival under Atomic Attack,” *Internet Archive* video, 8:45, 1951, <https://archive.org/details/Survival1951>.

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](http://www.atomicplatters.com/more.php?id=8_0_1_0_M).

27 Michael Scheibach, *Atomic Narratives and Atomic Youth: Coming of Age with the Atom, 1945–1955* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2003), 48.

28 Federal Civil Defense Administration, “In Case of Attack!” in *In Case Atom Bombs Fall*, ed. Michael Scheibach, 83–85.

29 Scheibach, *Atomic Narratives and American Youth*, 48.

30 *Ibid.*, 48–49; “Nationwide Atom Bomb Drill (1954),” *YouTube* video, 1:18, posted by “British Pathé,” April 13, 2014, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f6zO\\_gdRQ9I](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f6zO_gdRQ9I); “US Nationwide Civil Defense Drill—1954 | Today in History | 14 June 16,” *YouTube* video, 1:08, posted by “AP Archive,” June 14, 2016, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pPOfEDtB\\_GU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pPOfEDtB_GU).

31 Warner Pathé News, “News Magazine of the Screen,” *Internet Archive* video, 22:49, 1950s, <https://archive.org/details/NewsMagar1950-2>.

good. Man's story, Haber emphasizes, is best told in conjunction with that of "The Fisherman and the Genie," wherein a poor fisherman discovers a vessel containing a wish-granting genie. For man, the atom is their genie, and Haber tells viewers that new technology has "[made] the atomic genie our friend," allowing man to use its magic to benefit the world.<sup>32</sup>

These reassurances manifested physically in American homes in the form of atomic toys. Inspired by the technologies that allowed scientists to study radioactive elements, some toymakers enabled children to bring the lab to their homes, by selling atomic energy lab kits of varying sophistication. Children could also simulate the detection of radioactivity with toy Geiger Counters, and experience the atomic blast in their mouths by eating Atomic Fire Balls.<sup>33</sup> In this sense, not only was nuclear power something that adults believed children should learn to celebrate, but it was also something they encouraged children to play with.

Atomic energy held a certain appeal in the wider culture as well. While some popular songs in the Atomic Age may have expressed fears about life in a nuclear future, many others seemed to embrace it as a metaphor for more positive feelings, especially love. In their song, "Atom Bomb Baby," the Five Stars describes a woman as "a regular pint sized atom bomb" who is "a million times hotter than TNT."<sup>34</sup> Rather than focus on the atom's potential to destroy, songs like this use radioactivity and explosions to describe a more exciting and wonderful world.

## 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."<sup>35</sup> 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.<sup>36</sup>

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.<sup>37</sup> 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."<sup>38</sup> 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."<sup>39</sup> Author Bill Bryson chose not to participate in the civil defense drills at his

32 Disneyland, "Our Friend the Atom," *YouTube* video, 49:44, January 23, 1957, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QDcjW1XSXNo>.

33 Paul Frame, "Atomic Toys," Oak Ridge Associated Universities, accessed November 2, 2016, <http://www.ornl.gov/ptp/collection/atomic toys/atomic toys.htm>.

34 "Five Stars—Atom Bomb Baby," *YouTube* video, 2:17, posted by "CivilDefenseSpot," November 22, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KXSUEU7ISfQ>.

35 Carey, "Psychological Fallout," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 38, no. 1 (1982): 20.

36 *Ibid.*, 21.

37 Carey, "Psychological Fallout," 21–22.

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.<sup>40</sup>

Some youth made a “tenuous peace” with the bomb, refusing to let it run their lives.<sup>41</sup> 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.”<sup>42</sup> 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.<sup>43</sup>

Still yet, others tried not to be concerned with nuclear weapons at all, taking on a more “if it happens, it happens” attitude.<sup>44</sup> 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.”<sup>45</sup> 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.

40 Bill Bryson, *The Life and Times of the Thunderbolt Kid* (New York: Broadway Books, 2006), 149–151.

41 Carey, “Psychological Fallout,” 23.

42 Laura K. Graff, “Sirens, Dog Tags, & P.S. II: A Brief Cold War Remembrance,” *CONELRAD*, published July 21, 2003, <http://conelrad.com/testimony/lauragraff.html>.

43 Goodwin, *Wait Till Next Year*, chapter 5.

44 Carey, “Psychological Fallout,” 23.

45 Scheibach, *Atomic Narratives and Atomic Youth*, 191.

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...<sup>46</sup>

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.”<sup>47</sup> 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.<sup>48</sup>

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.<sup>49</sup> 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.<sup>50</sup> 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?

46 Robert B. Kwit, “I Am Going Away,” *Senior Scholastic*, 1949, quoted in Scheibach, *Atomic Narratives and Atomic Youth*, 191–192.

47 Robert K. Musil, “Growing Up Nuclear,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 38, no. 1 (1982): 19.

48 Bryson, *The Life and Times of the Thunderbolt Kid*, 201–203.

49 Jacobs, *A Dragon’s Tail*, 105–106.

50 Scheibach, *Atomic Narratives and Atomic Youth*, 175–176.

[...] I—and other boys and girls like me—will have to live tomorrow in the world that our elders are making today. And we don't want war, cold war or otherwise. We want "peace on earth and good will to men" whether we happen to agree on forms of government or not.<sup>51</sup>

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.<sup>52</sup> 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."<sup>53</sup> 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.<sup>54</sup> 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."<sup>55</sup> 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.

51 Carrie Lee Bates, letter to the editor, *Senior Scholastic* (1951), quoted in Scheibach, *Atomic Narratives and Atomic Youth*, 190.

52 Jacobs, *The Dragon's Tail*, 116–117.

53 Students for a Democratic Society. *The Port Huron Statement of the Students for a Democratic Society, 1962*. New York: Students for a Democratic Society, 1962.

54 Musil, "Growing Up Nuclear," 19.

55 Albert Furtwangler, "Growing Up Nuclear," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 37, no. 1 (1981): 48.

## Conclusion

The Atomic Age forced American youth to confront an uncertain future as it placed confusing and intense psychological demands on their shoulders. On the one hand, from what they had seen and heard in the news and popular media about nuclear weapon testing and their devastating effects—real or otherwise—children and adolescents came across a narrative that frighteningly forecasted the end of the world as they knew it. On the other, they were exposed to messages from the government and media that were intended to calm their anxieties and fears. Civil defense, they were told, could improve their chances at surviving a nuclear attack, and thus they participated in a nationwide effort to arm themselves with knowledge of various preparedness procedures. Moreover, through authority figures such as Walt Disney and toy companies, children and adolescents learned that nuclear power was not all bad if harnessed properly, and that it offered promises for a more exciting future.

Of course, America's youth did not passively receive these reassurances as many struggled to see how ducking under a desk could save them from the blast of an atom bomb, or to even see the point of the Cold War. They shaped their own understandings of the war and of their role in it, and responded accordingly, whether that meant moving on with their daily lives, or taking informed action. Nevertheless, the experiences they faced during these early years of the Cold War would significantly influence who they became as adults, and many of them would kick start the counterculture of the 1960s and the anti-nuclear movement of the 1980s. To them, leaving the government to its own devices was not an option.

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